

The Adelaide Review 2011 March Neylon Home Stories

Home Stories
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Some museums are beginning to look closer at this thing called 'audience', not as some market-driven concept but as a community which feels that it 'owns' bits of history that museums have on offer. In this process of building and retaining audiences artists are beginning to play an expanded and valued role. *Home Stories* is a case in point. It is collaboration between the Migration Museum and the Adelaide Central School of Art. The concept came from the exhibition's curator Vivonne Thwaites who invited a group of South Australian artists from different ethnic backgrounds to select objects from the Museum's historical collections and to create artworks in response to these objects. In choosing objects five artists in *Home Stories*; Chris Aerfeldt, Roy Ananada, Carolina Facelli, Lee Salomone, Kylie Waters and Sera Waters drew down on personal family history as a starting point. The sixth artist, Irmina van Niele found a connection between her studio practice, collecting thread-bare household linen from charity shops, and hand stitched items of clothing in the Museum's collection. Van Niele's *Crude Comfort* textile panels made from found stitched-together sections of linen which have been dyed (using plants from the artist's garden and street) feed off the haunting resonances of a worn patchwork shirt and folk pattern-stitched mittens from northern Europe. The shirt in this context is re-animated to become a rolled-up haiku of cobbled memories.

Aerfeldt's paintings take some of the heroic starch out of the Estonian banner alongside by setting mementos a distant homeland against a post-war red-brick suburban Adelaide home. Her full-size Viking boat as substitute for the ubiquitous Holden in the driveway strikes an ambiguous note of affectionate satire tinged with a heartfelt sense of loss and displacement. Sounds mawkish but the art stands on its own two feet. Ananda's moment of truth in front of a false beard in the Museum's collection was enough to trigger a free-wheeling gallery of beard images and objects. A childhood curiosity about disguised fictional comic characters was a driving force. So too the remembrance of coming for a family of mostly bearded blokes. The fact that the Museum's beard was a falsie, worn by a boy in the 1930s, in a public parade commemorating "the majesty of the British Empire" hot-wired it to the artist's consciousness of his Tamil relatives growing up under British jurisdiction in Malaysia in the 1940s to 1960s. But lessons of history fortunately haven't stopped Ananda plying his trademark absurdist humour. Carolina Facelli and Lee Salomone rotate elegantly around the central facts of coffee and wine as signifiers of homeland culture. A 1940s Italian espresso coffee machine was the trigger for Facelli's journey into the world of coffee customs across the world. The art in Facelli's response holds surprises best encountered at first hand. Family history explains Salomone's selection of his Italian grandfather's handmade wine press (acquired by the Museum in 2008). Shared family predilections for 'this might be of use someday' found objects appear to be on display in the artist's poetically calibrated sculptures. Kylie Waters has also dipped into the family well. Her Museum objects are a 19th century black fabric ladies blouse and cape which once belonged to the artist's great great grandmother. The artist has used the old colonial-period favourite of decoupage to fix family-historical source text and images onto items of crockery. It might prove a novel way of formatting a thesis – see plate 37. Sera Waters also has colonial form. A descendant, George McKay, arrived at Port Misery in 1838 and did it hard. Hardship was on her mind when she selected three meat-related objects from the Museum collection as a departure point for works examining human and animal life taken to the extreme in the arid inland of barely-explored Australia. I could barely contain my pleasure at seeing again Billy's (Robert O'Hara Burke's nag) hoof. The clip or the clop one. I'm never too sure. Blow up the pompous Burke and Wills monument in Melbourne I say and put a statue of Billy and other flogged (and occasionally eaten) beasts of burden that carried our colonial explorers to glory, in its place. Water's delightfully quirky and effort-intense tribute to Billy and to John McDouall Stuart's remarkable horse, Polly has creative true grit stitched all over it. With 100s of Migration Museum objects still slumbering in archive land the lessons that *Home Stories* offers in terms of creating fresh provenance, suggest that this series should be continued.