Pat Waters
FACE TO FACE WITH ASYLUM SEEKERS

INVITATION

OPENING
Friday 12 September 6.00pm
To be opened by
Simon Gregg
Curator, Gippsland Art Gallery

EXHIBITION
13 September to 16 November 2014

ARTIST TALK
Friday 12 September 5.00pm
with Pat Waters,
Jeanette Gibson, Psychologist and
Qasemy Nasim, former Afghan refugee

In her most recent series of works, Briagolong-based artist Pat Waters brings viewers FACE TO FACE WITH ASYLUM SEEKERS.

This poignant collection of works, executed through a range of media, expresses the humanitarian issues of asylum seekers as they seek refuge in Australia.

Permeated by the themes of loss and tragedy, Waters presents the human face of the refugee disaster being enacted off the shores of Australia.
The dehumanisation of refugees, who become faceless, nameless and rightless, is our greatest moral stain since the campaigns to hunt down and kill Aborigines.

HON. DR. BARRY JONES OA., AC.

The Christmas Island boat tragedy in December 2010 was the impetus for this body of work. As with many refugee disasters over the past decade this calamity affected Pat Waters deeply. The number of people drowned distressed her as did the anonymity of those lost and the sad belief that such deaths are as much the result of political expediency as leaking boats and monstrous seas. Waters believes Australia’s refugee policies are dehumanising thousands of individuals and causing the deaths of fearful people seeking exactly the opposite, safe haven and a new life.

Susan Sontag (2003) argues that ‘torment… is often represented in painting as a spectacle, something being watched (or ignored) by other people’. The challenge for the artist is to eliminate ‘all the trappings of the spectacular’ and to produce authentic works. Waters’ artistic commitment to honouring refugees who fall victim to these disasters reflects Sontag’s view. Her aim is to bear witness and respond to events happening in her country at this time in history.

The artist struggled to find the right images and techniques to portray her feelings about what is happening to refugees. Nigel Spivey asks ‘How do you turn catastrophe into art?’ Waters found the solutions of Turner’s Slave Ship (1840), and Gericault’s The Raft of the Medusa (1818-19), described by Spivey, monumental in their depiction of horror. However it was Goya’s uncompromising works, The Disasters of War (1810-20) which moved and inspired her.

To communicate the tragedy of the sinking boats and the factual drowning of a mother and her eight month old baby, Waters uses enlarged reproductions of her original drawings to describe the force of water overtaking boats and people. Whilst the artist’s hand consciously constructed the original pictures, the act of reproduction and enlargement draws attention to the ubiquitous nature of such images in contemporary society. Text also appears loudly throughout the exhibition to accompany images and to underline propaganda she sees as demonising refugees. Hard political pronouncements such as ‘…they will be risking their lives at sea for no advantage’ (Chris Bowen, Immigration Minister, 2012), accompany graphic imagery responding to the gruelling inhumanity of long-term detention.

The many portraits in the exhibition are anonymous, they are not representative of real people. There are precedents in art history where imagined faces are so transporting they have been accepted for centuries as worthy representations of religious and historical figures. Waters’ difficult task has been to give the portraits in this exhibition presence, a presence that respectfully acknowledges unknown people lost at sea and others confined for years in detention centres.

The theme of loss permeates the exhibition. The Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko wrote People, in which he talks about the value of each individual. Waters found the poem so beautiful she appropriated words into a suite of prints strongly conveying the idea of absence, ‘Not people die worlds die in them’.

LOUISA WATERS

Louisa Waters is Education Coordinator, Gippsland Art Gallery and is the daughter of Pat Waters.

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