

Margaret Olley Art Trust Collection Room Residency

Artist in Residence Written Reflection

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As a migrant artist from a different ethnic background, this art residency has been a valuable opportunity to develop and diversify my art practice. To have access to the nationally significant collection held by Rockhampton Museum of Art, to select works of legendary Australian artists, explore their art practices, and try to connect with the selected artworks in terms of my own art practice have been a wonderful experience.

My still life works have reference to the themes of domesticity and home maker identity with an element of loss. I also do sketches of faceless women who, I consider, are an extension of my still life 'self-portraits'. As a migrant homemaker who has shuttled between three continents, I further explore the ideas of identity, belonging and nostalgia through my art.

I approached this residency with a goal to explore the presence of transnational identities and the portrayal of migrant lived experiences in my works. Subsequently, I have been reading a couple of articles – a journal called 'Transnational Belonging and Female Agency in Arts' that deal with the need for articulating the 'in-between spaces' of migrant experiences in art, and an article called 'Affect, Creativity and Migrant Belonging' by Raelene Wilding and Monika Winarnita, which talk about the different facets of migrant belonging and their need to 'safely share, consider and reframe their emotions' in another land. These thought processes connected with the emotions behind the materiality of my still life works and the gesture in my figure works.

When I started the residency, I began exploring my specific goals in relation to the collection works I chose. I chose works by Katthy Cavalier, Margaret Olley, Grace Cossington Smith, Vida Lahey, Jean Appleton and Brian Blanchard. I felt I would be able to relate to their works in terms of my art practice.

During the selection process, the photographic works of artist Katthy Cavalier resonated with me in a big way, in terms of the symbolism, self-documentation and personal possessions that feature as subject matter in all her works. Her works called 'Silent Trace' speak about the sense of loss and displacement her family and, in the long run, herself experienced while moving from Italy to Australia and starting a life here.

The eminent artists of the twentieth century such as Olley, Appleton, Smith, Lahey and Blanchard chose to paint the interiors, domesticity, drapery, curios and still life as their subjects. I could relate to these subjects in their paintings as I have been using similar subjects in mine too. I liked the play of light in Brian Blanchard's still

life painting called 'Kitchen Interior' as it reminded me of old European-style paintings. Appleton's 'Window at Mossvale' and Smith's 'Drapery in the studio' also fascinated me with the way light was used in a non-literal fashion.

My initial exploration in the residency involved pen sketches and graphite drawings. The sketches were faceless pen portraits on paper while the graphite drawings were my response to the collection works I had chosen. I also interacted with other migrant women, including homemakers, to have a broader perspective of the sense of belonging.

My Collection response started with Katthy Cavalier's works as they inspired me to navigate my own relationship with the past and present, old and new and displacement. Margaret Olley's 'Pots and objects' has curios laid out on a table space. It reminded me of my own home kitchen space where I have a habit of arranging objects for my painting projects. In the book 'The Mystery of Things: Margaret Olley and David Strachan', Olley's relationship (spiritual?) with the objects in her paintings was an interesting read for me. That prompted me to investigate my equation with domesticity in my paintings.

I was also intrigued by the identity of the female figure in Brian Blanchard's still life and this curiosity prompted me to investigate the invisible presence of a homemaker in my still life works. Vida Lahey's 'Monday Morning' is one of my favourite paintings for the 'heroic' portrayal of domestic chores in the days when such themes were considered insignificant in art. I resonated with this factor as I responded to her work 'Daisies and Geraldton wax flowers' during the residency.

My intention was to establish a connection between my collection response and the figure sketches. Over the next two weeks, I further responded to the Collection through a couple of small still life oil paintings. I developed an idea from one of my graphite drawings into a painting and titled it 'The room'. I did another still life painting, bringing in the objects from my home, and titled it as 'Flowers, asafetida etc.'

I also experimented with technology and merchandise during the residency. Through video conversations I interacted with the migrant community - did a short interview with Dr Sonia Saluja, Associate Professor of Medical Science in Central Queensland University, Rockhampton, and her mum Mrs Ramesh Saluja, a homemaker and an artist. This interview, where they shared experiences about living in four different continents, was my attempt to speak from my agentic space while listening to other shared experiences from similar in-between spaces. My sketches were made into objects of merchandise and displayed, though they were not for sale. These attempts at opening spaces for conversations, I hope, will inform my future art practice with similar possibilities.

My collection response involved investigating the presence of in-between spaces in my lived experiences as a migrant homemaker. In the sketches, drawings, and paintings that I did during the residency, there is a constant search for identity and belonging. Making a connection with the past and present through a juxtaposition of new and old, objects and emotions has been the essence of my response and every collection work that I selected has contributed to the outcomes in different

intensities. I saw a mingling of my specific goals in relation to my art practice with the collection response that I was giving during this residency. To me, one complements the other by being visibly invisible or vice versa, a factor that is present in my still life works and sketches from the start of my art practice. I intend to carry forward my visual exploration of migrant belonging and identity through the lens of transnationalism and subsequent ideas that may arise in the process.

This residency has given me the time and space to focus on the direction my art practice needs to take in future. Along with showcasing the cross-cultural and regional ties in my art, I believe the residency has been a valuable representation of diversity in the regional Queensland community.

References

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