

Visualising Home in Australia

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ABSTRACT

In Visualizing home in Australia, I describe my studio research and how I develop my artworks in relation to my experience of migration, displacement and my idea of home. Being an Iranian in Australia, my experience of displacement does not cause me to think of returning to my homeland in the future. Instead, being a migrant here evokes the idea of home, and brings my attention to my everyday life and how repetition in daily household tasks can bring the idea of home into practice.

I refer to the use of handwriting and screen-printing in my artworks to reflect my idea of the physical impact of displacement on my ideas and personality. Through analyzing my artworks, I explain that my engagement with the process of screen- printing and handwriting reminds me of the early days of settling into life in Australia and learning English, and how these two expressive tools brought my attention to something still, a personal silence, determination and satisfaction in exploring and finding my ideas.

"Home is where one starts from"
(T. S. Eliot cited in Casey 1993, p.274)

There are many social, political and economic reasons that push people to move to a new country. However, for me, coming to Australia was my father's decision. In 1995, I was eighteen years old and had just started studying Fine Arts at Islamic Azad University in Tehran. Growing up in an Iranian family, still living with my parents, and under the influence of many cultural and ethical traditions, I had no choice but to join them. I had no plans for my future, no idea how to learn English, nor what I was going to do with my career when I arrived in Perth in late December 1999.

This article talks of personal and emotional experiences of migration and displacement, their impact on my studio research, and the way I

approach screen-printing to reflect and explore the idea of home and everyday life. I suggest that physical engagement with the process of screen-printing can be a parallel to repetition in everyday domestic household tasks. I explain that my engagement with the process of screen-printing and handwriting reminds me of the early days of settling into life in Australia and learning English. I explore how these two expressive tools bring my attention to something still, a personal silence, determination and satisfaction in exploring and finding my idea of home.

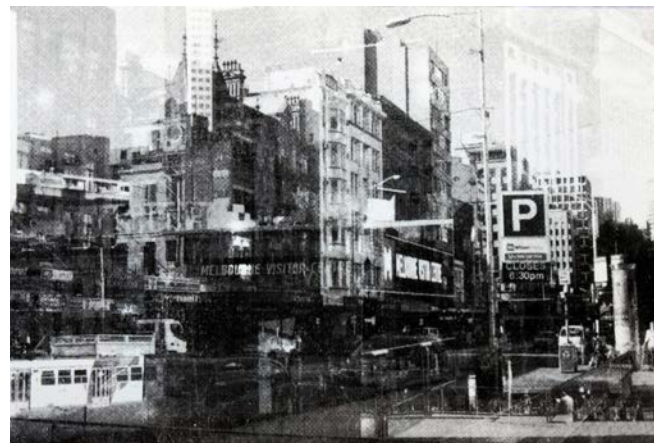


Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1: Visible Cities, 2019 Analogue Photograph exposed on silk screen in the sunlight, screen print on paper. 18.5 x 28.5 cm
Figure 2: At 7:30 pm (2015). Four colour separation silkscreen print on paper, 560x 760 mm

MIGRATION

In Home and identity, the author Madan Sarup claims,

A migrant is a person who has crossed the border. S/he seeks a place to make 'a new beginning', to start again, to make a better life. The newly arrived have to learn the new language and culture. They have to cope not only with the pain of separation but often with the resentments of a hostile population.

Sarup 1994, p.94

The concept of migration is associated with the process of settling, adjusting, building a new life, and social and cultural relationships in this new place. This aligns with the concept of displacement suggested by author Oliver Bakewell:

'Displacement can be understood as a process which brings about changes in both people's physical locations and as a result transform social relationships'

Oliver Bakewell (2011, 19).

Thus, displacement also brings social and cultural changes to the new place. Depending on the reason for displacement, such changes can in turn have different social and cultural impacts on the migrant.

For people in the new country, preserving identity and practicing their culture and tradition may help them feel close to the homeland and express their feelings of being in the new place. Also, depending on the person, the reason for migration, and the migratory situation, the migrant may take different approaches to the new place, culture and society. Becoming a migrant involves social, cultural and even personal changes. One might seek freedom, refuge, or a new life, and one might find new paths towards goals. For me, learning the new language was a huge task; it emotionally impacted on my personality and ideas, and socially bounded my communications at the beginning of life in Australia.

As an Iranian migrant living in Australia for almost 20 years, I still feel that I have two places which I see myself part of. At the same time, I am part of neither of them. One is Tehran and the other is Perth. Rather than a physical attachment to them, I feel that I am emotionally attached to both. Although I do not see myself culturally attached to Perth, it is the place where I live now, where I make my everyday life, social relations and communications. It has been a place of opportunities for me. Practicing Iranian/Persian culture in my house and ongoing conscious and deliberate comparison of the two places and cultures put me in a fascinating process of adjusting, revealing, and hiding my feelings and desires. This is the process that affects my ideas and influences the way I think, my art practice and studio research.



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

Figure 3: Between Places, 2019 Analogue Photograph exposed on silk screen in the sunlight, watercolour, screen print on hand-coloured paper 19 x 18 cm each 43 x 289 cm

Figure 4: Study of home - nostalgia in the present (2015) by Layli Rakhsha. Four colour separation silkscreen print on paper, 760 x 560 mm.

Figure 5: Coloured land (2013) by Layli Rakhsha. Multi layers of screen-printing and handwriting on paper, 530 x 350 mm.

INFLUENCES

My early studio research and investigation into migration and the impact of displacement on my everyday life started when I saw three influential artworks by artists whose works investigate themes of displacement in both local and global contexts. One of these inspiring artworks was *Proyecto para un memorial* (2007) by Colombian artist Oscar Munoz, which I saw at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts for the first time in 2009. *Proyecto para un memorial* shows five separate videos of drawings of faces being traced with a brush and then fading away. While this work refers to the political and social issues in Colombia, *Proyecto Para un Memorial* also stimulated my ideas about my own migration and displacement; to consider what was disappearing in my life, what I might achieve in this new place, and whether my memories of the past would disappear after living in Australia. The relationship and association between the images (drawings of faces) and time in Munoz's work visually guided me to think of what a migrant would be left with after experiencing displacement and settling, and what the physical and emotional impacts of that might be.

Another influential artwork was *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002) by Mexico-based artist Francis Alÿs. In this work, Alÿs recruits "500 volunteers in Peru to move a sand dune a few inches by shovel" (Potts 2012, para. 5). By shifting a sand dune from its original position to another, the artist reflects the idea of the process of moving and displacing, deconstructing and reconstructing, as well as his faith in losing something or moving to gain something new, and his concerns about social and global changes. According to Alÿs, "*When Faith Moves Mountains* evokes the idea that a memory will be built up of an event that only last a day but will live on for who knows how long?" (Alÿs 2002, n.p.).

The other artwork is the installation *Sunflower Seeds* (2010) by Ai Weiwei, which features 100 million sunflower seeds, handcrafted in porcelain, covering the gallery floor at the Tate Modern in London, UK. In addition to the representation of mass production and the obvious message of 'Made in China', this installation invites the audience to share their stories and experiences while walking in the gallery. *Sunflower Seeds* reflects the artist's memories of his childhood, and evokes my own nostalgic memories of the past in Iran. I remember my childhood in Iran when the women in my family gathered together, eating sunflower seeds, laughing and sharing their secrets, and the times when all my female relatives used to gather in summer to make pickles or dry herbs to store for winter days.

These three artworks reveal the relationship between the artist's communities and society. Whether displacement occurs in a fading drawing, moving a sand dune or by placing thousands of individual memories and stories in another place, all resonate with the role of migration and displacement as well as both individual and group experiences in contemporary art. Although these three artworks are

not related to the screen-printing technique that I mostly use in my work, these three inspiring artworks made me think further about displacement and migration and raised many questions about the idea of home. The questions that led me to conduct further research and study the relationship between displacement and the search for home.

KHANEH

My studio research explores how to visualize the concept of home in Australia by making screenprinted photographs of Australian landscapes, ordinary objects and my kitchen, and placing my handwriting on top of the image. I repeat the single word khaneh (which means home in the Persian language).

The use of the word khaneh (home) can have two different interpretations in Persian culture and language. One interpretation is khaneh as a physical place or house. The other is khaneh as homeland. My use and interpretation of khaneh resonate with what authors Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling describe as home. They suggest that

"Home provides shelter, and also provides a setting in which people feel secure and centred. People's sense of self is also expressed through home"
Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling (2006, p.9).

They also claim,

"Home is an idea and an imaginary that is imbued with feelings. These may be feelings of belonging, desire, and intimacy. Home is a place, a set of feelings and cultural meanings, and the relations between the two"
Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling (2006, p.2).

Whether it is an idea or an imaginary place, home is associated with feelings, memories, and personal and social experiences. For me, as a migrant, the idea of home can be shaped by the remembrance of homeland. A hot, sunny and quiet afternoon in my house in Perth reminds me of a quiet and hot day in my house in Tehran while my mum and grandmother were having an afternoon nap, and I was reading a book or drawing. The memory of the silence of that afternoon in Tehran exists in my present. It is becoming a cultural motif or symbol for my creativity, manifesting as a visualization of my idea of home in Australia.

My physical engagement with the process of screen-printing has become a significant part of my work; it evokes my memories of displacement and leaves traces of my thoughts and feelings in my works. Through the creative process, I feel silences and pauses that also remind me of the process of learning English and settling in Australia.

To release and unfold my feelings about the impact of my engagement with the process of printing, I decided to add another layer to my work by handwriting the word khaneh on top of the printed image of the Australian landscape. By sitting in my studio and writing 'home', I could

delve into my work and discover what is hidden or unsaid. I gradually discovered that while I am learning how to use screen-printing, I am constantly thinking of when I left Tehran for Perth and how I tried to connect myself to the new place.

In this work, *Coloured land* (2013), I printed one image three times on top of each other. The first layer is a digital print while the second layer is an upside-down silkscreen print of the same image in black ink, and the third layer is the same printing technique using white ink. The fourth and the last layer is my handwriting of the word *khaneh* on top of the printed images. All these layers share the same space. The word *khaneh* and the printed images of the landscape intertwine and overlap each other in order to manifest an expression.

Coloured land represents a kind of visual material about a certain place, while the handwritten word *khaneh* seems to offer verbal information about another place. The image and the word depend on each other to complete my representation of the idea of home in this work. The image of Australian landscape is not very clear or related to a particular place, and the word 'home' is in Persian language, so the combination of these two speak of my determination to make a dialogue between two different places. *Coloured land* not only represents vagueness that is related to the absence of something certain, but also manifests movement, displacement and a haziness in my memory of the past. In this work, the word *khaneh* is still readable, although there is a shadow of it under the image of the Australian landscape, alluding to the significance of memory and the source of my inspiration.

As I keep calling for *khaneh* and looking at my printed images of the Australian landscape, I am searching for my attachment to perhaps more than one place. *Coloured land* characterizes an abstract image that may provoke the idea of an imaginary place. The repetition of the word *khaneh* not only refers to documenting events, affective moments and desires, but also tells or hints at my search for a place that can be called home. This resonates with what curator Jasmin Stephens says:

'Rakhsha's painstaking application of Persian script built up a layered partition-like surface in which her gouache markings mingled with the shadow of landscape. This surface – with its shifting foreground and background and movement between detail and whole – proffered some insight into the tenor of identity'

Jasmin Stephens (2012, n.p.).

My physical engagement in the process of screen-printing has not yet left me satisfied. I often question whether there is any final work, how many prints I can make of one image and whether there is a limit to how many times I can write the word *khaneh*.

SILENCE

I am not able to describe or speak in English about where my feelings of silence or hesitation come from. Neither does my fluency in Persian language alleviate my confidence in speaking about it. These limitations constantly creates a feeling of something unfinished or unexpressed that unfolds into silence. These responses have led me to explore and reflect on silence in my works.

At 7:30 pm (2015) is a four-colour separation screen-printed work that represents the differences and relationships between time, physical home, and the individual in Perth and Beijing[1]. In this work, I printed two photographs next to each other; one of my living room in Perth and another of a friend's lounge room in Beijing in order to explore the idea of 'here' and 'there', and what we do at certain times of the day in different places. Both photographs were taken at the same time (7:30 pm), and work together to generate a dialogue about cultural differences and when a particular or selected place becomes private and personal.

While the work At 7:30 pm evokes stillness or a calm moment, the image of my empty room simultaneously reflects a sense of absence and emptiness. These latter feelings, which are embedded in silence, can also be considered as constitutive of the emotional impacts of displacement. Absence and emptiness echo the silence that editor Lynn Thiesmeyer defines as 'the personal choice to hold meanings, expressions and secrets' (2003, p.2). I do not aim to analyse the definitions of absence and emptiness, rather I speak of these feelings to consider my personal experience and feelings.

NOSTALGIA IN THE PRESENT

Study of home – nostalgia in the present shows a carefully selected corner of my house. Like At 7:30 pm, Study of home – nostalgia in the present represents how a domestic place and very ordinary objects in my room or a corner of my kitchen create my idea of a home. As the author Richard Eldridge states, 'the office of art is rather to call our attention to ordinary life, real life, and how it is appropriate to feel about it' (2003, p.72).

My obsession in my responsibilities as a mother, a female artist and a wife who mostly spends time in a domestic place or inside the house, caused me to pay attention to my everyday routine and to the objects that I use repeatedly. I often find myself hiding what I want to say or express or show. This is not irrelevant to the impact of displacement and being a female. I find that I can be still, hide my voice, and let objects unfold my feelings instead. By using ordinary objects such as cooking pots or fruit, I refer to what I constantly need and use in my daily routine. However, the moment that I choose to set up these everyday objects is a very quiet time in a long working day, the moment that I expose my physical exhaustion and repetition in daily life. It is

a moment that I only think of myself and my artistic ideas without thinking of tomorrow.

The natural light, arranged composition and the taking of each photograph precisely at 7:30 pm in Study of home – nostalgia in the present all work together to reflect a sense of hesitation, absence and silence associated with the time when I withdraw from speaking of my feelings. Like the previous work, At 7:30 pm, Study of home – nostalgia in the present shows set up objects or a selected part of my domestic place at 7:30 pm when that particular corner or place becomes intimate and private. This resonates what the author Clare Marcus calls 'a place of self-expression' and a representation of the relationship between the individual and a physical home (Marcus 1995, p.4).

In addition, the author Gaston Bachelard suggests, 'In one's corner one does not talk to oneself. When we recall hours we have spent in our corners, we remember above all silence, the silence of our thoughts' (1994, p.136). The selected corner in a house is not only a place for making images of thoughts, but also it is a symbol of solitude. The images of the compact composition of fruits and a pot in a corner of the kitchen in Study of home – nostalgia in the present are about an impression of my inner silence. Images of my living room represent domestic places and corners in which I sit. Every single print reflects something hesitantly unsaid, but all seven images simultaneously work to manifest peace in my personal nostalgia.

STILLNESS

In their book Stillness in a Mobile World, the editors David Bissell and Gillian Fuller discuss stillness in relation to movement and mobility. They suggest,

Stillness is not a gesture of refusal. Stillness punctuates the flow of all things: a queuer in line at the bank; a moment of focus; a passenger in the departure lounge; a suspension before a sneeze; a stability of material forms that assemble; a passport photo
David Bissell and Gillian Fuller (2011, p.3).

Stillness means a moment that breaks a process or an active action, and then makes and leaves an impact of that process. Stillness does not reflect emptiness. Rather it reveals silence and holds a moment in a movement or process, in order to transform it into another process, or to make the process go again. Likewise, the definition of being still refers to a fixed moment in the present; it creates a moment of silence in the present. Stillness can then be an echo of a hidden feeling, or desire, or emotion.

Study of home – nostalgia in the present also shows my study of still life, a harmony between colour, natural light, and composition. Gail Davey considers still life in painting is 'an attempt to capture a perfect, timeless moment within the effects and strivings of living' (1998,

p.1544). Thus, still life reflects stillness; something that is not mobile but fixed. My aim in selecting fruits and everyday household objects such as cooking pots is to give new meanings to them.

By focusing on the ordinary objects and the study of still life, I attempt to symbolize my awareness of a new circumstance and everlasting changes in my life that have both physical and emotional impacts on my art practice and the understanding of myself. In other words, the more I think of the impact of displacement on my personality and my life in Australia, the more I hold on to and expose my feelings in my intimate and private domestic places.

Study of home – nostalgia in the present was a big project for me. Using four-colour separation technique and printing over 100 prints to get 7 perfect works caused me to pay more attention to my personal silence, stillness and my engagement with my works. This work and its production technique have led me to consider my household works as part of the exploration of my idea of home and my feelings. The result of this idea is reflected in another studio research work called Everyday.

Everyday (2016) is an example of my exploration of my emotional responses to my daily physical routine and the endless ordinary jobs in my life. In this project, I took 28 photographs of my kitchen sink every day at times when no one was in the house; times that allude to solitude and emptiness. I aimed to explore the overlapping time of finishing the cleaning, and the time that I could possibly devote to myself with no interruption. Every photograph refers to different times of the day depending on when I could find the right moment to let me sink into my feelings and myself. When I am standing by my kitchen sink, I feel empty, yet filled with the idea of home and the required household tasks to be done. The empty basin and full basin of my sink work together to expose and reflect my ideas of home, and even my thoughts. I occasionally purposely slow down washing the dishes to give myself more time and to reflect on my day. By digitally printing each photograph in the size of my sink (45 x 71 cm), every single work not only speaks of embracing home in my domestic place, but also shows how far and how repeatedly I can symbolically dig into my personality, feelings and thoughts to feel at home.

Using my kitchen for multiple purposes makes me more conscious and aware of my cultural background, the language, the way I grew up and my identity shaped, being a mum and a female artist working in my house. However, I do not aim to define and make images of my Persian culture, nor do I consider ideas about non-western female artist or feminism and art. Rather, I suggest that each work of my kitchen sink holds philosophical and intellectual thoughts about my personality, my culture and tradition, and my rights for privacy.

Without a professional studio, I use my garage as my darkroom and my backyard as my exposure room, using sunlight to expose my images.

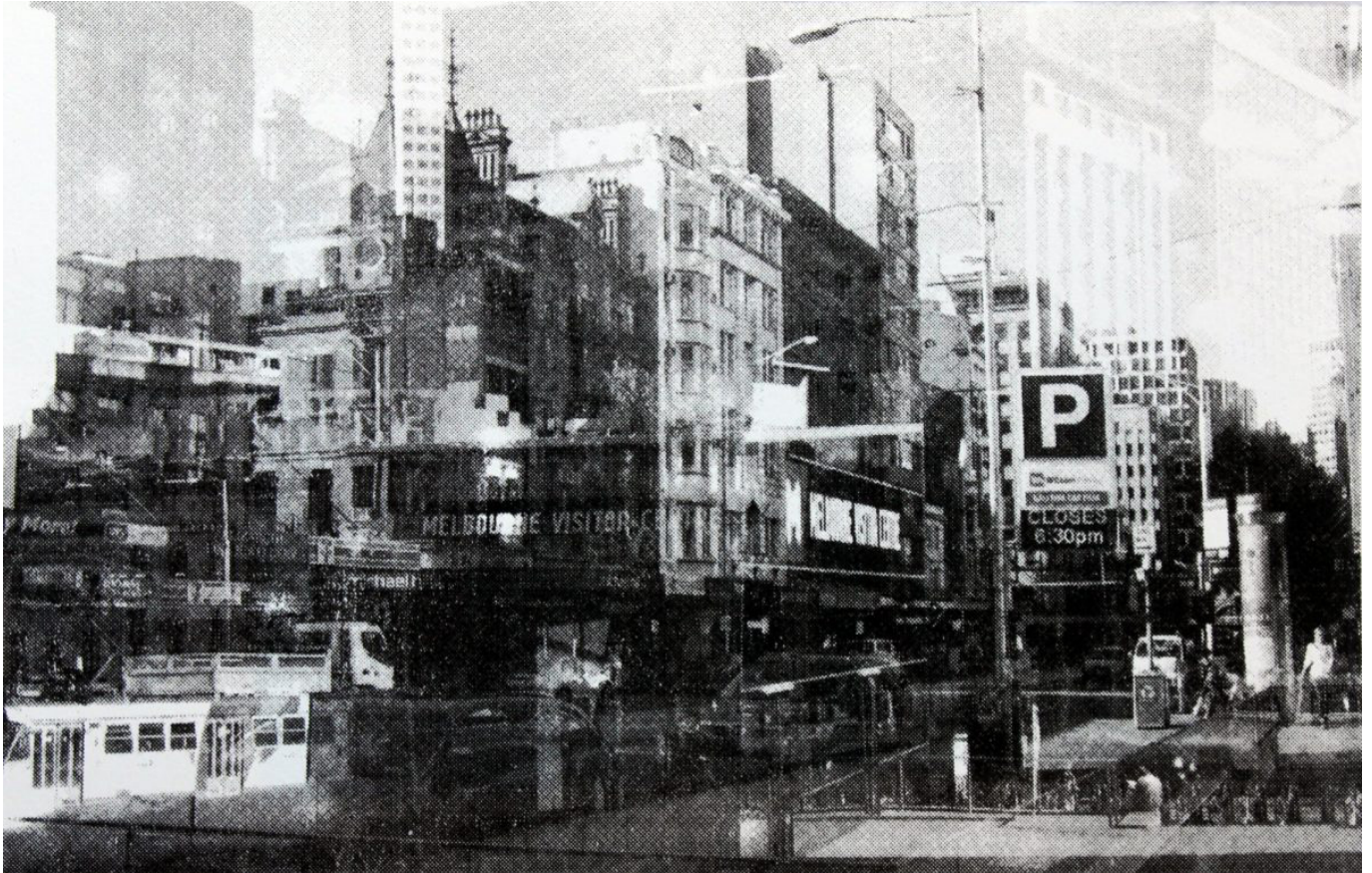
Sometimes, I have to wait for a sunny day and sometimes the screen is over- or underexposed, but I do not mind. I often clean my house and imagine the potential of the image while I am waiting for the emulsion on the screen to dry in the garage, and I print my image in the living room while dinner is on the stove. Visible Cities[3] (2019) and Between Places[4] (2019) projects are examples of using the sunlight and developing and creating them in my house.

ONGOING EXPLORATION

Exploring my idea of home, and my past and present experiences in Australia will never end. I will remain a migrant in Australia. It is where I started thinking of home; it is where I can hint at my feelings. Sometimes, I feel isolated here. The more isolated I feel, the more I uphold practicing my original culture. Australia is neither a place of home, nor is it my homeland. It is nonetheless where I continue to keep visualizing and depicting home in my art practice.

In concluding this article, the process of reciting home is where I started from, and it is an act that reminds me of the time and day I left Iran for Australia. Whenever I remember that day, I take a deep breath and start thinking of home. If I rephrase T.S. Eliot's poem, I could say home is where one takes a deep breath.

IMAGE GALLERY











FOOTNOTES

[1] At 7:30 pm was presented in the One Place, And Another exhibition at the Impact 9 conference in China in 2015.

[2] Study of home – nostalgia in the present was represented in a group exhibition called Locale at Heathcote Museum and Gallery in 2017.

[3] Visible Cities is an artist book that was represented by Gallery East in Between the sheers: the artists' books 2019 at Gallery Central in 2019.

[4] Between Places is the work that I developed during my residency at Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts in 2019.

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