

Abb, art and the immigrant journey



Abb Marzouk at home in his Warranambool studio from where he still sells his sculptures. Art has remained a defining and comforting force in his life.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"]
A[/dropcap]rtist **Abb Marzouk** represents all of the mental, physical and emotional challenges that face people who come to Australia in the hope of building a better life.

Not that 81-year-old Abb, of Warrnambool, intends to be a spokesman for the immigrant experience, far from it: he would prefer to talk about his art.

But the two cannot be separated – the art and the experience – and when Abb sits down to talk about his sculptures and paintings, he finds himself talking about growing up in Egypt,

where he was an outsider, and emigrating to Australia in the 1950s, where he was even more of an outsider.

It is a painful and difficult story that pours out of him and, even after more than 50 years in Australia, Abb still struggles with finding a firm sense of identity and belonging.



Abb prides himself on his highly detailed animal sculptures like this armadillo.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] A [dropcap]bb is a third-generation Egyptian, but he came from European ancestors who moved to Egypt when it was under colonial rule, so Egyptians of Arab descent considered his family to be Europeans.

“It didn’t matter that we had three generations born in Egypt, we were classed as European. But we weren’t considered by Europe to be European, so my family was stateless,” Abb explains.

Because of his heritage, Abb suffered constant bullying as a child, but it was as an adult, with a fine art degree under his belt and running his own tapestry design business, that the ground shifted under him.

The Egyptian revolution in 1952 saw Egypt shift from a monarchy to a republic and Abb's status as an "outsider" was confirmed as the new government introduced crippling new laws that froze bank accounts and made it almost impossible for "Europeans" like Abb to make a living.

"I had a visa to go to America, but the Ku Klux Klan was on the rise there and I didn't want to go to such a racist country. I decided to try Australia instead," Abb said.



Although he has lived in Australia for more than 50 years, Abb's Egyptian roots continue to provide inspiration for his sculptural work.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] I
[/dropcap]t took more than two years to secure an Australian

visa, but Abb and his wife Sylvia arrived in Sydney with hopes of Abb using his fine art degree to teach, as his immigration officer had suggested.

Instead, he found himself in a country that was openly hostile to “wogs” and the only jobs he could find were cleaning and labouring.

“I would cry all the time. The discrimination was terrible. I wrote 63 letters trying to get work and there was nothing, so I took whatever I could just to make money,” Abb said.

It wasn’t until many years later that Abb, who has two sons, finally secured a teaching position as an art teacher, but the subtle and not-so-subtle discrimination and bullying continued. An angry jibe by a colleague about Abb being paid more than he finally sent him over the edge.

“I had a complete breakdown. I had to leave the education department after 25 years, without my super, without any of those things,” he said.

“It took me four years to come out of that depression and I still suffer from depression occasionally now.”

Abb never worked again, but found solace in his art. His intricate animal sculptures are exquisite, as are his mosaics. And in 2011, he was awarded the Warrnambool Art Society’s Judith Watson Trophy for best painting, for a *Truck Full of Refugees*.

The painting depicts a group of African refugees fleeing with whatever possessions they can carry.

On first glance, they look like a mound of rubbish, but on closer inspection, their faces emerge: staring out into an unknown future with a heart full of hope. And that, of course, is the message.



Truck full of Refugees: the painting that took out the top prize in 2011 at the Warrnambool Artists Society annual exhibition.

[box type="bio"] If you are interested in visiting Abb's studio, please contact him on (03) 5561 2131.[/box]



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Sustaining a vital art link

The team behind Artlink Studio are doing something very special in the Warrnambool art scene that puts the city on par with a movement happening in places like New York, London and Paris...

Our quiet heroes: the Drylies



Tony and Claire Drylie with some of the St Joseph's Primary School display boxes...and the huge display board!

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"] W
[/dropcap]hat we love about our quiet hero section is that we

get to celebrate people doing things that might not always make the news: the small things, the little things that often go unnoticed or happen without much fuss.

This week our quiet heroes are **Claire** and **Tony Drylie**, who are well-known around Warrnambool for their kindness, their cheerfulness and, in recent years, their involvement in the grassroots arts scene.

While Claire is an artist, Tony is usually not far from the action, helping keep track of the finances (as he did with the former Quarry studio), or carting some piece of equipment from here to there in his four-wheel drive.

In the past few days, the pair has been involved in putting the final touches to an art project Claire has developed with art teacher **Kathryn McMeel** at **St Joseph's Primary School**, where each of the 180 children in grades five and six have created small 'portrait' boxes that they have fitted out with objects that they believe capture who they are.

Imagine a chocolate box, without the lid, and a tiny, individual world created inside: a child's world.



Capturing little lives: some of the children's work they have developed with Claire.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"] W
[dropcap]orking from an industrial shed at the back of a Warrnambool business, Tony has assembled and painted a 2-point-something metre display board in bright red, upon which Claire has been methodically gluing the boxes in preparation for their display at the school within the next fortnight.

(**Ryan's Removals** have kindly agreed to deliver the display board which simply won't fit in Tony's four-wheel drive, no matter how hard he tries).

The final display is going to look spectacular.

Artists working with children has to be one of the most mutually beneficial relationships in existence and that is why Claire and Tony, and those like them, are our quiet heroes for this week.

[box] Our Quiet Hero will receive a coffee and cake voucher from this week's sponsor [Lozzar's Lounge Cafe](#), Warrnambool – thankyou Lozzar's. [/box]



Meet some of our other quiet heroes...

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Our first quiet hero



[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #9b9b9b;"] Most artists don't make much money. Only a handful can pursue their art full-time, regardless of their talent.

Despite this, many artists remain committed not only to their work, but to encouraging other artists so that, together, they can form a vibrant and resilient community that makes our

world so much more interesting.

Megan Nicolson is such a person. The Warrnambool artist makes stunning lino cut prints and a range of quirky soft toys called 'softies' (more about those in later editions), and also donates a huge slice of her time and energy to building up the local arts community.

She has been a central figure in the collective, [The F Project](#), and this year organised two successful artists' markets that helped raise funds toward the establishment of the new [Artery](#) art space at 224 Timor St, Warrnambool.

Somewhere in there, Megan also parents four children – two still below school age – with her partner Lachlan. It is this combination of creativity and generosity of spirit that makes some artists so special and this is why Megan Nicolson has been chosen as our first quiet hero.

Bluestone Magazine is donating a voucher for coffee and cake to each of our quiet heroes. This week it will be at Wyton Events and Catering, Warrnambool.

[box type="bio"] *Do you know somebody in South-West Victoria who is worthy of recognition as a quiet hero? If so, let us know via email – in 200 words or less, plus a photo – and we will consider them for our weekly column. Email us at editor@bluestonemagazine.com.au[/box]