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.

Althought 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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