

The Fabric of my Homeland - An Essay by Filomena Coppola

I was eight years old when one of my classmates asked me “Are you Italian or Australian?” What appeared to be a simple question requiring a yes/no answer took me by surprise and it caused immediate confusion. Not used to feeling so conflicted at that age, I was silent. I did not know how to respond. This was the first time I remember my cultural background coming into question.

My mother and father had migrated to Australia from Italy separately in 1961 and 1955. Like many at this time, they met and married in Australia. This was a time of turmoil and change for many after WWII. The notion and boundaries of homeland, place and the need for safety created many changes in Europe, and also for the relatively isolated population of Australia. The news of the holocaust in Europe and the other ravages of war meant that the stringent White Australia Policy that existed at that time became less acceptable and Australia opened its doors to wider European immigration. This was the first significant migration of non-English speaking immigrants to enter Australian shores since the early days of white settlement. Old and new cultural conflicts increased and being asked if I was either Australian or Italian was minor compared to the levels of verbal racism experienced by immigrants and their children.

My sister is six years older than me and she went to school speaking only Italian, the taunts of children and the frustration of teachers was excruciating for her, especially once she came to understand the English language. Wog, dago and “go home” were derogatory terms aimed at immigrants of Latin ethnic origin. These were words she often heard and six years later I heard them too, but through her I was able to deflect them. My sister taught me how to speak English and this enable me to go to school with a huge advantage.

As an eight year old, I felt I was being asked a trick question, the answer would require me to deny one of the cultures that I experienced daily – Italian and Australian. At home I was the daughter of Italian speaking immigrants, with very strong Roman Catholic morals, and I was part of a large community of Italians who had managed to recreate Italy of the 1950’s in a small rural community in Australia. When I was at home I felt as Italian as my cousins did in Italy; but when I stepped out the door I was in Australia – a country that had offered my parents prosperity, me a complete education and a new language, friends and community.



Identity 1992
Rubber Stamp and fingerprint
12h x 8w cm

Fortunately for me that young boy, rephrased his question and asked me, “Where were you born – Australia or Italy?” Well that was easy, “Australia”, I answered. “Well you’re Australian then!” And he walked off to the play ground relieved and satisfied with his answer and I was left feeling that it is not so simple. Where did my Italianess belong in all of this? How could I be Australian if I did not understand this new culture, its food, traditions and it seemed that Australia was not ready to accept me and my Italian baggage. My world was not so black and white and my answers could not be contained in a mono syllabic yes or no.

As an adult I continued to carry this question with me, I hadn’t resolved the answer then and I still find it difficult now. At the age of twenty four I found an image of my mother when she was the same age. The Italian Identity Card profiled my mother when she was twenty four. I remember looking at her image and it was the first time I felt a tangible connection through her to Italy, my heritage and my place within it. My place existed through her journey. Looking at her image was like looking into a mirror that reflected images through time. It connected me to her journey of migration and the decisions that she had made at this age. I began to understand the enormity of her decision to migrate, leave her family and

search for a different homeland. She had made her decision decisively; it was up to me to find my own place as a result of her migration.

Growing up in Australia I never felt that I belonged. The “lucky” country had given my parents extraordinary opportunities that would never have been available to them in their villages: prosperity, stability and education for their children. Even though intellectually I understood this, emotionally I still had a sense of homelessness, of not being Italian enough or Australian enough. I couldn’t successfully assimilate into either culture.

Through my mother’s identity card I began the search for my own identity. I reproduced this image and replaced her thumb print with my own. *Identity*, represents a combined identity and a collaborative decision to migrate to Australia. I had studied fine art and it was through this medium that I was going to explore my own identity and find my place within Australia. Even though I was using her image it represented my own cultural instability at the same age that she was defining hers. I was trying to define my place in this dialectic. Initially this representation was figurative - distinctly hers – however, I also included family photos to recreate my family tree. I was visually tracing my origins back to Italy, my grand parents (who I never knew), her migration and her marriage in Australia. The remaining journey was to establish my sense of place.

Eventually this figurative representation developed into a cultural dialectic, that for me one culture cannot exist without the other. I cannot be either Australian or Italian – the commonly used terminology is Italo-Australia, the culture of origin precedes the culture that I live in. My artwork began to explore the point of intersection between two opposing elements and the interdependence of Australian and Italian. It contrasted the differences and similarities, the points of convergence and divergence as the opposites either merged or functioned as separate entities. I had to delve into this space in-between where my Italianess merged into my Australianess, where one culture became the other, at this point the similarities of each culture existed simultaneously.

I approached both cultures individually, literally and simplistically. In my work I was representing difference. I used William Morris wallpaper and tapestries to represent the English Colonial History of Australia and the Greco/Roman columns to represent my Italian background. The combination



Under the Canopy of Eve 1995
Coloured Etching on Paper
240h x 310w cm

of imagery complemented my experience but also began to visually represent the similarities and richness of both cultures. This ambiguous space in-between oppositions was brought to life and it was dynamic. It was a place of stimulation, creativity, endless potential and importantly it was a place which had a physical presence.

Under the *Canopy of Eve*, was a culmination of my visual research on this dialectic. The stone Corinthian column has sprouted life and the William Morris wallpaper is animated as the acanthus leaves stretch upward and bear fruit. Here both elements are combined to reveal culture united and a new environment born of this experience. In looking at cultural difference I had become aware of other oppositional pairings. In this piece I also represented nature/culture, masculine/feminine, micro/macro seduction/repulsion – no opposition can exist without an area of convergence.

Under the Canopy of Eve represents my Garden of Eden, a place where all potential is acknowledged and difference exists in harmony. This image references my Roman Catholic upbringing and notion of the garden, the forbidden fruit and expulsion. Here the fleshy fig replaces the apple. The image stands at over two metres in height and the first fig is at arms length from the viewer; temptation is present.

In the same way that I tried to understand my mother's migration by reproducing the image on her identity card, I also utilised repetition in this image to clarify the environment that I have created. The top two panels of the centre are repeated on the left; a repetition of nature verdant and existing without the support of the Corinthian capital; of opposition through colour, green and red; and also to contrast micro and macro with the magnified interior of the fig represented on the right of the centre image. When I first used the fig it was with the intention of using a feminine image to represent the temptation in the Garden, however, in cutting the fruit in half and repetitively drawing it I realised how masculine and sperm like its gluey centre was – again femininity and masculinity converge. This enlarged juxtaposition also explores the opposition of masculine/feminine that one cannot exist without the other. Through this image I was beginning to understand my own cultural complexity and that it is not simply about Italian/Australian but about the intricacy of interacting and understanding both communities.

My expulsion from the controlled environment of *Under the Canopy of Eve* occurred when I went to Italy in 1997. I decided that I needed to understand where my family had migrated from and also to decide if this is where I belonged. I spent six months in Italy with family from both my mother's and father's side. It was my mother's side that had the most influence on me. My mother still owns a small plot of land which is planted with olive trees. I would visit this land often to see if I could imagine myself living in Italy and continuing my life and returning a part of hers with me. I thought that land was what would make me feel at home here. The gradient of her land ensured that I could see it all laid out before me and I would imagine how I could plan a future there.

Land can be such a powerful influence in life. I recalled the small plot of land in the village cemetery where my grandparents and relatives had been buried. I have my grandmother's name and to read her name on her gravestone and to be inextricably linked to her history was profound. Beyond my parents and uncles, I have no other extended family heritage in Australia – it was incredible to feel connected to the family name and to see images of relatives whose resemblance I carry. The temptation to stay was overwhelming, the connection tangible but the reality was blinding. To stay meant to still lose a connection with my family in Australia and I would always be the "Australian living in Italy". I was beginning to understand that for me living in a country would not define my identity, home for me was not Australia or Italy, and I needed to find it somewhere else.

In the last few days before I returned to Australia I heard my aunts speaking about a bolt of fabric and they were beginning to lay claims on who was to have certain lengths of it. In hearing more about this fabric I discovered that it actually belonged to my mother. My grandmother and other members of the family had grown the flax, spun it and woven it into a continuous bolt of

linen for her dowry. The fabric was to be sewn into mattress protectors for her marriage bed. On her identity card her status was described as nubile – marriageable when she left Italy. This fabric was a link to her as a marriageable twenty four year old woman beginning an incredible journey to Australia. I decided to returned the fabric to Australia and retrace her journey.

Returning to Australia after six months away I imagined to be similar to a migrant experience, I had not spoken English for so long that I was using different muscles in my face, my vocabulary had diminished as I searched for words to express my experiences and I spoke much slower as I tried to articulate words that now sounded foreign. I had returned to friends and family knowing that even though Australia wasn't were I felt I "belonged", it was where my journey had begun and where it would continue. As the country had matured, Australia has given me the opportunity to find my place within it without judgment. I know that in making my artwork I am communicating to an audience that has experiences similar to mine, the countries of origin may differ but Australia's multicultural community is extensive and still growing.

In my artwork I began to incorporate the bolt of linen that I had returned to Australia. The drawings developed into an abstract representation of what the fabric means to me. The thread that created this fabric represents the lineal connection of Italy/migration/Australia and grandmother/mother/self. This thread maps the geographical migration and is also a line of connection. All states exist together. In this way the individual states are connected like a rite of passage which encompasses the different states and their reliance on each other in order to complete the transition. This extended journey to Italy was my rite of passage; I need to experience a reverse migration of leaving Australian in order to give myself the choice of returning.

This fabric is represented in my work by a continuous thread - through repetition this thread creates a new fabric. This fabric texture is used in my work as back ground, wrapped object, grided surfaces and billowing quilted forms. The representation of the quilted fabric in *Chardin's Strawberries* refers directly to its intended purpose as part of my mother's dowry. This piece refers the intimacy of the bedroom from childhood to adulthood; the quilts that wrap our bodies and protect us from the cold; and it alludes to the comfort of a mother's bed or the seductiveness of the marriage bed. Fabric is something that we wear close to our skin it can represent intimacy, an outward layer that we project to our communities and an identity that we create to cover the body.



Chardin's Strawberries 2004
Pastel on Paper
80h x 120w cm

represent intimacy, an outward layer that we project to our communities and an identity that we create to cover the body.

This abstracted representation of fabric is also used to define my work as it identifies it as my own. In that same way that clothing is used to cover the body and creates a persona, my artwork has become my persona. It is the skin that I wear close to my body. It is the most honest representation of who I am and it is the place where I feel most comfortable. It is when I am making my artwork that I now long need to answer the question asked by that young boy – I do not need to be defined by culture but am purely enriched by it.

The process of making my artwork is my homeland. In making these works I travel to a psychological space that allows all possibilities to exist at the same time. It is where I am Australian, Italian, female, male, my mother and myself. When I am making my work I feel that I can draw from all parts of my experience and I am sure of my place within it. There is no black and white possibility when I am making artwork, no judgement, and no correct answer only an extensive expanse of options which culminates in the most exciting possibilities.

My homeland is a place that I carry with me and it is transportable and exists regardless of which country I live in. As travel has become easier and more affordable it is reassuring to know that I am grounded by and can find comfort in my homeland. It enables me to experience new environments, countries or situations with the clarity of understanding who I am. I am now grounded by the understanding that I am neither Australian nor Italian but an intersection of both and I have been enriched by experience, questioning and confusion. It means that I when I make my work I am drawing directly from a place that is enriched by my cultural experiences and it takes me on a visual journey.

Even though my psychological homeland is an individual experience and not tangible directly to others, it is mapped through my visual work. My artwork is the outcome of my experience of belonging. Through the work I can communicate my experience and illicit responses. I can make an environment that invites individuals into the work and into my experiences. In my work I am recreating the journey involved in finding that piece of fabric, and I represent it in a way that seduces the viewer. The surface of the pastel drawings looks velvety and the luscious colours draw the viewer into this comfortable space which directly references my homeland. I invite individuals to take a journey with me whether it is with one individual piece or when they are surrounded by an exhibition. I do not feel that my journey is complete until I share it with other people and share their responses and experiences. Every homeland needs a community and through my work I invite people to share in this.

Mirror, Mirror is a piece that I made to represent my situation between both cultures. In this piece the wrapped object is either mirrored by its reflection or grounded by its shadow. It visually depicts that the object cannot exist without its other and that even though a part of the object has been cut off from our view, its mirror is represented in its entirety. Solid form/empty container, reflection/shadow, part/whole, soft texture/hard edge, inside/outside, blue boy/pink girl and Italian or Australia, here they all exist simultaneously. This acknowledgement of all possibilities in my homeland and the images map the geographic changes, cultural turbulence and reconfiguring of borders that happen even in this psychological space.



Mirror Mirror IV 2005
Pastel on Paper
80h x 60w cm