

Practitioner's Statement

Kde Domov Můj?

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"Kde Domov Můj?" is a body of work inspired by my Grandma's struggle in her search to feel truly at home with her memories of fleeing Czechoslovakia as a young refugee. Under threat by the communists, she and 13 members of the Dubsky family left their "paradise on earth" and ran across the Czech-German border under gunfire. Eventually, they travelled from a refugee camp in Munich to Australia on the Fairsea ship. However, my Grandma found it difficult to leave behind her both painful and blissful memories in her adjustment into an overwhelmingly different country.

This piece began with a reflection of myself and how our past influences who we are today. With my interest in psychology, I researched how memories are created and altered, specifically visual memories. I found this research increasingly relevant to my Grandma, who's personality is powerfully shaped by her experiences. Her dramatic expressions and intense emotions reflect the troubles she has endured. She described her time in Czechoslovakia with love, and with tears in her eyes, she recited a Czech poem to me, "I know a crystal stream, where the deer and birds go for a drink. The birds in the day, the deer in the night, and so is the end." I felt a strong need to honour these beautiful and traumatic memories which have not only affected my Grandma but multiple generations of the family.

After experimenting with oil paints, I came to the decision that I would complete a portrait of my Grandma. I sought to convey a sense of nostalgia in her expression of deep thought, perhaps reflecting on her early life. As my first oil painting, it was a challenge to grasp how to use the oil paints, and the different mediums and solvents. I also initially struggled to mix skin colours which did not appear dirty, but local artist Jasmine Dixon gave me essential advice on how to properly mix these colours and layer the paint to achieve luminosity. Inspired by the Robert Hannaford exhibition, I contrasted a textured sepia background against my Grandma's carefully rendered face and the blue of her cardigan. This created drama, but I avoided a depressing mood in the painting by maintaining warmer hues in her skin. The spontaneous brushstrokes in the space that she seems to be gazing into represents how memories become vague over time.

Concept developments led me to be determined to somehow include my Grandma's most clear visual memories in my body of work. I took my initial sketches of her memories and merged them into a series of smaller oil paintings. With these accompanying works, my aim was to communicate the strong emotion attached to each memory. Memories of the beautiful Czech landscape were either associated with intense anxiety or joy and by using the colour of the sky or saturation of the colours I could express this. These paintings are my own interpretation of my Grandma's descriptions, signifying how memories are distorted over time as they are repeatedly accessed and retold. I also unearthed the Czech national anthem, which coincidentally described similar scenes which I have portrayed and begins with, "Kde domov můj?" or "Where is my home?". This was an exceptionally appropriate title for my body of work since my Grandma is confused with a yearning for her old home in Czechoslovakia, even though it is the source of her traumatic memories, and the fact that Australia is her home now. These smaller paintings are placed around the portrait because the memories of her homeland still preoccupy and influence my Grandma today.

As neuroscience professor Daniela Schiller of New York University described it, “Your memory is who you are now.”

Viewing the animated watercolour paintings of Fiona McMonagle in the ‘Magic Object’ exhibition made me feel compelled to add another dimension to my body of work. One of my Grandma’s most clear visual memories was when she was running across the border, and all the family photos which she had hidden in her top flew out and cascaded onto the ground. I came to the idea of creating a projection over the top of my paintings of these lost photos falling in the air. I became inspired by Shaun Tan’s photo-like illustrations in ‘The Arrival’ which told a story of a man who left his home to seek safety in a foreign country with strange customs and an indecipherable language. After discovering William Kentridge’s short film, ‘Felix in Exile’, I was excited to pursue this additional element in my body of work as it revealed how animations of photographs in the wind could signify the layering of memories. I ended up filming old photographs falling on a black background. Initially, I shot them on a white background, but to have no background projected, black must be used as projectors cannot project black. The pictures used were newly discovered family photographs of my Grandma when she was in her twenties, and they represent the photos left behind in Czechoslovakia as well as the life she had to abandon.

With the oil paintings I have completed, I have gained valuable experience painting portraits and discovered a love for oil paints. Through my research, I have expanded my knowledge of the troubles that many refugees face, how volatile memories can be, and how strongly they affect our psychological state. I am happy with the final result as all the elements come together to express deep meaning and place significance on these treasured memories. I hope that this piece not only reminds the viewer of the importance of being empathetic towards current refugees, but encourages them to reflect on themselves and examine what features of their past influence them today.