



Nexus Arts GALLERY

(Be)Longing FRUZZSI KENEZ

Who gets to be Australian? Fruzzi Kenez’s new body of work asks us a simple question that does not have a simple answer. Is the answer buried in a citizenship test or performed at a naturalization ceremony? Do Australians look a certain way? Dress a certain way? Act a certain way? Or do they simply speak ‘without’ an accent?

Around the gallery, Kenez’s chimerical works: paintings and clay sculptures, are organized as a series of vignettes that question the predominant myth that defines Australia within the confines of its colonial history. When do people stop asking you where you’re really from? The question isn’t often meant with malice, but for the migrant, it reminds us that we have to shed our own identities and our ideas of ‘home’ in order to be really Australian (and sometimes, even that is not enough). A condition of citizenship is this forced evolution, an acculturation we need to perform in order to survive. Kenez’s characters lovingly demonstrate these processes, asking for compassion, instead of questions.

Using communities as sources of care and mutual aid is a central theme in Kenez’s work. There is a hurried throng of fantastical characters that swirl around the vibrant painting on panel titled, Why do you all look away?. This is not a community but a crowd of individuals in close proximity to one another. A lonely hand, ignored by the mass, begs for help, but, alas, no one is paying attention. The figures are distracted, allowing the cry for help to be ignored, pushing the little hand further into the abyss. The work interrogates the disjunction between ‘seen’ and ‘unseen’ and repositions it as an active choice to either ignore or acknowledge the struggles of others.

While migration has been a political battleground from the beginning of Anglo-Australia’s history, on a personal level, it is full of hope as well as sorrow. Migrants often arrive in this new land with tentative optimism, inspired by images of sunny beaches, cuddly koalas, and endless eucalyptus forests. Arriving migrants are rarely portrayed this way to the rest of the country. I’m the Big, Bad Migrant They Warned You About challenges the fear perpetuated by media and politicians that pits Australian-born locals and arriving migrants against each other. The ‘big bad migrant’ is wide-eyed and full of hope, searching for community and not conflict. After all, once we look past languages, accents, skin colors, we are similar in more ways than we are different. It is only through this realisation that we are able to build the community structures that will save us.

A deeply personal work that touches on Kenez’s Eastern European roots, The New Frontier shows a weary migrant, disheveled and dressed for warmth. Like other works in (Be)longing, The New Frontier articulates the disparity between speculative hope and wistful sorrows. Staring straight out of the painted panel, Kenez’s migrant ventures into a new world. She is burdened

with nostalgic connections to home and the immediate need to find a new place where she can be free. In stark contrast to La-la-la-la-local, where an exaggerated hood allows the wearer to ignore the plight of their community, the trepidatious migrant confronts us and the world, not having the privilege of looking away.

Kenez’s work highlights the beautiful and painful disjunctures of our world. The dichotomy of ‘seen’ and ‘unseen’ reaches a crescendo in The Imbalance of Justice. This work expands personal narratives into wider, national concerns. An anthropomorphic blackbird is trapped in a cage, which is chained by a white figure who also looks away, unable to see his own role through the thick glaze covering his eyes. The restraint distorts our ability to see and connect with the bird. It is an interrogation of the institutions we live with that perpetuate colonialist ideas. Aboriginal people are incarcerated at an alarmingly high rate, which is even more pronounced in the incarceration rate of Aboriginal children. When considered alongside the Australian government’s continued policies of off-shore detention for asylum seekers, it is clear that our national institutions thrive on denying freedom to people of color. Through remote detention centres and prisons, the suffering of others also takes places where we cannot see it.

While most of the works in (Be)longing are wistful, personal, and filled with longing, Kenez also includes moments of comic relief. The large-scale issues addressed through delightfully subtle works are underlined with tongue-in-cheek titles, such as Scotty, We’re Burning Up!. This work is another juncture between personal, national, and global concerns. Addressing the overwhelming climate anxiety and Australia’s lackadaisical climate policies, Kenez’s stoneware portrait screams while industrial scorch marks appear in the glaze. The face is shouting to an absent and indifferent bureaucrat. Without the community that (Be)longing urges us to create, we are all just solitary faces screaming into the void.

Fruzzi Kenez’s work demonstrates to us that ‘community’ is the only way to negotiate personal and large-scale concerns. We no longer have the privilege to look away and exclude those who we are told are different from us. Through her work, Kenez interrogates her own identity as a migrant and a queer woman existing, working, and creating in a country built on colonial systems of exclusion. As we walk through the exhibition, we are asked to consider what are the limits to belonging and who can and cannot be welcomed into our community.

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