

George Raftopoulos

A memory written by Geordie Williamson 2012

The small town in rural NSW where I grew up in the 1970s and 80s boasted a single milk bar, owned and operated by the only Greek family for 100 miles.

I remember it as an exemplary instance of that hallowed antipodean space: entered via a blowfly-baffling swish of plastic strips, beyond which ran counters of speckled laminate, generously stocked with Smiths chips and rolls of Lifesavers. Bevelled milkshake cups were stacked on one corner, beneath posters for Chiko Rolls and flavoured Moove faded to a palette of orange and brown by the heat.

The son of the owner, George Raftopolous, was in my year at the local public school. He was a lively boy who made friends easily, despite the overwhelmingly Anglo cast of the school community. His popularity was enhanced by the fact the family shop had the only video games in town. The boy's father would load credits into Frogger for those mates of his son who called in of an afternoon.

Later, my family moved away. I was sent to boarding school and lost touch with my friend. It was only decades later, with the aid of Facebook, that we reconnected. The boy had grown up to become one this country's most talented younger painters, and his abstract canvases, which made reference to Greek myth and graffiti with equal brio, woke my curiosity. When I Googled him, however, certain statements made a lie of my complacent memories. In interviews, the artist spoke of the sense of exile he felt in our country town. He recalled instances of overt racism. During four years in New York, the artist was considered "an Aussie", he said in an online interview, but back in the central west "we were wogs".

The disjunction between that Greek boy's easy accommodation to the cultural norms of the country Australia of our childhood and his mature retrospection was inexplicable to me until I began to read other stories by migrants relating their experiences of arrival on these shores. His story turned out to be a familiar one, in which private hurt and confusion are hidden behind a mask of conformity. It turns out that the child who arrives from the global Elsewhere knows instinctively the deformations of self that will be required of them to fit in.

I am not a trained art critic but I acknowledge the 'expressionistic fierceness' that others have identified in his work. George's paintings, vivid and monumental in the spirit of Picasso's neoclassical mode, blend two registers: the Greek past, whether the archaic past or the the near-present Corfu from which his family emigrated; and a use of colour and line that recalls Australia's monochrome emptiness, as well as the fluid lines of John Olsen. The result is once familiar and alien, elegant and disquieting, rigorous and anarchic.

His work, in short, dissolves the complexities and crudities of Anglo-Australian culture by embracing its contradictions. The Lebanese writer Ghassan Hage has written of returning to to his grandparents' former home in Bathurst, NSW, not far from where George and I grew up. In the overgrown backyard he discovers a fig, a pomegranate and an olive tree - "the holy Mediterranean trinity, or one of them, at least" - that his homesick forebears planted decades before.

For Hage, these fruit trees don't merely partake of a quintessentially Anglo obsession with backyards, a "marking and shaping and rooting oneself" in space. Rather it is the knowledge that these trees were planted by his grandfather's hand that makes Hage feel, after long estrangement, "Australian". The original act of planting is a historical rhyme that allows the author to embrace a paradox: a sense of rootedness that 'does not mean a sense of being locked to the ground, unable to move' but instead makes the author feel as if he suddenly sprouted wings.

Hage's arboreal epiphany, with its sense of the importance of gesture and cultural recombination, reminded me of my schoolfriend's paintings. Raftopolous's art does not fetishise what Hage calls an "anti-colonial belonging, which pits the belonging of the colonised against that of coloniser while conserving colonialism's either/or logic.' Nor are these works explicitly postcolonial, prematurely judging colonial culture as something already superseded. Instead, Raftopolous counters 'colonial culture from a space beyond it, showing that another mode of belonging is possible'.