

wyndham gallery art

EMERGE



Chol Deng Akuok – Migrated in with all I know 2012

The work of Chol Deng Akuok comes with an extraordinary story. It not only tells of a rich culture, harking back to the traditional ways of living in Southern Sudan for centuries but it also speaks about the struggle to survive in an environment of brutal conflict and the search for peace.

Each painting tells a specific story and in that story are embedded many layers of understanding of a way of life that is extremely different to the life Chol lives in Australia today; an understanding that is hidden from most Australians who haven't got to know people who have come here as refugees.

What **is** understood is that people from South Sudan and other African countries who have settled here, are mostly forced out of their homes as a result of war and or famine. They come with almost nothing and have had to build lives here while learning rapidly how to speak a foreign language and eat foreign foods. It seems they also benefit from having a much higher standard of living and education which makes other Australians think of them as lucky to be in what is sometimes called 'the lucky country'

What is **not** understood is the loss endured by people who have had to leave, not just their homes but infinitely more important, their culture. What is normal for them seems strange to the people who surround them. For example a Sudanese person sees money for what it actually is, *paper* that you can't eat. It has relatively no value compared to a cow which can provide milk and meat and produce more of both of those commodities in abundance. In a culture which relies on a closer relationship to the earth and subsistence, animals are much more important. In fact to have an animal as a pet is inconceivable in this context.

Cows are traded in the same way money is in the west so a comparison could be, if a person has a big herd of white cows (the most prized colour) they could be considered as important as the director of a huge corporation. If you can compare a healthy herd with a high rise tower in the CBD then you could also compare specially carved jewellery, bone necklaces and copper leg decorations with an Armani handbag. Poverty in this context takes on a whole different meaning. The man with lots of money in the bank is crushingly poor to an important Sudanese man with a big family and the cows to prove it.

How then does this translate to a migrant who has come to this country and this culture where the power lies in a conceptual wealth that nobody can see until it is cashed in for a big car or a fancy outfit.

This is what Chol's work is trying to express. See his images of cows and the size and placement of them inside this understanding and they take on a whole new meaning. Cows in the landscape don't represent the same thing in early Australian post-impressionist paintings.

I have had the privilege of working with Chol on this exhibition and in doing so, beginning to learn a little bit about his world. I am in awe of the magnitude of his families courage, and the courage of so many others, who have not only come to an unknown land with a strange language and milk that tastes horrible, but they have braved the psychological difficulty of letting go of the terror they left behind, without forgetting the culture that gave rise to it.

To maintain that culture in Australia may not be possible as cows probably aren't allowed in Wyndham back yards and a herd would cause major problems, but the underlying stories and symbols of that life will morph with the new generations who grow up here, never knowing the life of South Sudan.

I can only hope the children of people with a refugee experience don't lose their respect for the place and traditions of their origins as they shape a new identity. Let's hope Australia can one day be made up of a wonderful rich mix of the diversity that we find in Wyndham, fully expressed in art, architecture, fashion, film, literature and public life.

Australia is a place full of immigrants going right back to the early days of colonisation. The first convicts could be called migrants, forced out of their homeland. All of us are Australians and this is what unites us.

As long as we acknowledge and pay appropriate tribute to the original owners of the land we can build a nation that is a testament to the generosity of the human spirit, full of the cultural riches from all over the world. A place that proves that we can all live together as one human family and that the ideals that were at the heart of the early policies of multiculturalism weren't too far off the mark.