



sydney pen magazine



Painting the empty chairs

- Book banning continues in Indonesia ● A poet reflects on Vietnam
- PEN supports Moorhouse China boycott

'Many determined ants, gently yelling'



It's with an odd mixture of regret and optimism that I report on our busy six months past: regret, because that time has measured a steady stream of new and languishing Writers In Prison cases; and optimism, because our centre has made some small but incremental achievements locally and in our region. I have faith that we will continue to do so throughout the year, and find an apt image in Zhang Jianhong's poem, "Mother Earth": 'an ant has climbed up the bridge of my nose, gently / yelling.'

I would like to welcome our new members to this challenge, and thank those who have recently offered voluntary assistance, in-kind support, and great ideas toward spreading PEN's message around Australia, and beyond. I am coming to appreciate how massive indeed are the networks, skills and people power of our Sydney PEN family; and I think it's precisely in the scale and force of this community that our optimism should lie. While we cannot often rely on problematic foreign governments or law courts, we can certainly rely on the goodwill, time, empathy and determination of one another in pursuing a shared cause.

The Painted Chairs project, featured in this issue, is a terrifically empowering and reassuring example of this togetherness. The project reminds us of how close the communities and fates of the visual and literary arts are, and always have been, and not just within Australia. Here we have fifteen artists not only offering us images of expressive freedom, but also showing their solidarity with the risk and vigilance surrounding the use of creative language in its broadest sense.

Our events at the Sydney Writers' Festival this year

highlight just how many writers in our region continue to be oppressed. We congratulate Festival Director and former Sydney PEN Award winner, Chip Rolley, on his creation of a bold festival program that gives participants access to more literary talent flourishing in the Asian and Pacific region; and arenas to discuss tough issues around the freedom to write, publish, read, listen and speak.

For the first time, we have commissioned and published here a parallel translation of Australian work from English into one of the languages of the region, with Libby Hathorn's *Study 4 Nui Dat Australian Task Force Headquarters*. This begins as a symbolic act, representing our desire to create a publication that speaks to the many neighbouring PEN centres that receive this magazine twice a year. We hope the symbolism of one poem in Vietnamese will gradually grow into a regular presence of linguistic exchange in these pages.

The exchange of translation between Australia and China, Japan, Vietnam, Bangladesh and Pakistan, is one of the objectives driving our major fundraiser on June 3, 2010, at the Ken Done Gallery. Details are provided in The Painted Chairs brochure, enclosed. With the funds from this entertaining event we will be working to establish a new three-year project, facilitating the cross-exchange of two translators per year between Sydney and partner cities in these countries. The aim of this initiative is to share new Australian writing with new audiences, and to encourage translators with an interest in Asian and Pacific languages.

My thanks to fellow members of the Sydney PEN Management Committee for their ongoing energy, and to our administrative and project partners for their investment of time and resources. We are not one but many determined ants, gently yelling.

Bonny Cassidy

Frank Moorhouse boycotts China tour with PEN's support

Award winning writer Frank Moorhouse made a tough decision earlier this year when he was scheduled to visit China with a group of fellow Australian writers.

Moorhouse, a member of Sydney PEN's eminent Writers Advisory Panel, withdrew from the tour arranged by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade as a protest against the 11-year sentence handed down to Chinese writer and Honorary Member of Sydney PEN, Liu Xiaobo, on Christmas Day 2009. Liu Xiaobo's detention and sentence – and in February, his quashed appeal – have been loudly condemned by the United Nations, the US government and activists worldwide. Announcing his boycott in an open letter in January Moorhouse said he felt an "unusual demand on [his] conscience" in response to these events.

"I have been vocal about freedom of expression in my own country and have been recognised for it," he said, "and have special reasons to act."

Moorhouse wrote an extensive letter to Australia's Ambassador to China, Dr Geoff Raby, explaining the reasons for his decision, and then opened this letter as a public statement released by Sydney PEN. The impact of the letter was twofold: a statement of boycott, as well as a statement of solidarity with Liu Xiaobo. It was immediately splashed over national and international media via radio, press and web, informing and reminding the public about Liu's case and its context within China's treatment of dissidence. Sydney PEN's sources indicate that the message was received within China through alternative channels of media and information.

For a few reasons, Liu Xiaobo's case is unique among the thirty-eight main cases of imprisoned writers in China reported by International PEN in July 2009. Firstly, the length of his sentence is unusual, as the charge of subverting state power generally carries a sentence of five years. This suggests that the Chinese court has treated Liu as an example to fellow writers, local democratic activists, and international governments and protestors. Its seemingly perverse brutality is evidenced by an open letter to Party leaders, released in January by four Party officials, criticising the use of the constitution to incarcerate Liu Xiaobo.

Secondly, Liu's case has come at an opportune time, after an accumulation of tension around instances of freedom of expression in China. It follows the National People's Congress's inscription of human rights into the Party's constitution in 2004. Liu's sentence follows widespread criticism of Google's 2006 launch in China, while in February Google announced its withdrawal of operations there. It follows poet Shi Tao's high-profile imprisonment and a surge of international protest including the 2007 PEN Poem Relay, an online international translation of his poem "June", virtually hosted by Sydney PEN. It follows

the 2008 Beijing Olympics, a time when the West might have been led to believe that China was indeed "opening up" diplomatically. To the Beijing People's Court where he was tried, these factors may have lent Liu's case a climactic position in the legal precedents of twenty-first century China.

Finally, the reason for Liu's arrest, his co-authoring of Charter 08, was an act of dissident authorship as well as the promotion of a mainstream democratic charter, signed by numerous Chinese intellectuals, academics and business people. Liu was a scholar who visited the US and Europe. He had been jailed twice before following his supporting role in the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising. Since his detention, Charter 08 has gained hundreds of online signatories. Plainly, the Charter was a climactic point in Liu's own, well-known history of promoting freedom of expression.

The outstanding level of protest against Liu's imprisonment does not detract from the urgency of the cases of other writers imprisoned in China, like Shi Tao, Nurmuhemmet Yasin or Hada. On the contrary, it serves to illuminate them in the public eye.

Moorhouse's boycott of the China tour expands the parameters of Australia's implication in censored expression. China is now closely linked to Australia's domestic identity and existence, and we have a responsibility to attend to human rights in China, not only as fellow humans but also as neighbours and partners.

Moorhouse's decision generated understandable questions for some of his fellow touring writers: should they stay; should they go? He outlined these questions and his own doubt in a recent essay for the May issue of *The Australian Literary Review*. There is no resolution in PEN's Charter that calls for writers or members to boycott countries that feature in our WiP campaigns. International PEN describes a continuing dialogue on this issue, regularly broadened by different writers' and centres' international experiences. PEN takes the stance that writers' engagement with such countries can be as effective as boycotting, depending on the approach taken and the reasons for it.

As Moorhouse himself explained in his letter of withdrawal: "Writers sometimes accept invitations to go into places where governments infringe basic freedoms. They do so for diverse motives: to investigate or to passively observe so as to incorporate their experiences into their future writing; sometimes they remain neutral or silent so as to further their understanding of these societies; and sometimes these visits can be justified as soft diplomacy – as a way of representing liberal values in illiberal countries through informal conversations and by the work they choose to read publicly while in that country. Sometimes, just being a writer is sufficient justification."

Bonny Cassidy

sydney PEN

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Book bannings spur struggle for free speech in Indonesia

On Monday May 10, the court case resumed in Jakarta to hear a challenge to the banning of *Dalih Pembunuhan Massa Gerakan 30 September dan Kudeta Soeharto* (Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30 Movement and Suharto's Coup) by Canadian academic John Roosa. The court would hear expert witnesses from the plaintiff, the Indonesian Social History Institute (ISSI), a non-profit group that published the book. Opponents of the ban have regularly attended the hearings and sometimes picketed outside the court.

On December 23, 2009, the Indonesian Attorney General's Department announced the banning of five books. Roosa's was one of them and the book has been the subject of most of the public discussion. It provides the most convincing explanation to date of who was behind the September 30 Movement, the organization of young officers that allegedly attempted a "communist" coup in 1965, providing the pretext for General Suharto's seizure of power and the slaughter within months of at least on million members of the Indonesia left.

Roosa argues that the junior officers' coup plot was masterminded by Dipa Nusantara Aidit, central leader of the Indonesian Communist Party, but without him telling the party leadership of his involvement in the plot. The book's political analysis of the events leading up to Aidit's actions, while throwing more light on the anti-democratic machinations of the army commanders, remains within existing parameters of liberal scholarship.

Soon after the banning of the five books in December, it became known that the Attorney General is looking at possibly banning another 20 titles. This follows the banning of the film *Balibo*, which tells the story of Suharto's invasion of East Timor and the suppression of history textbooks in 2007. There has been no repeal since Suharto's ouster of any of the book bans imposed during the dictator's rule.

The five banned books are: *Suara Gereja bagi Umat Tertindas Penderitaan Tetesan Darah dan Cucuran Air Mata Umat Tuhan di Papua Barat Harus Diakhiri* (The Voice of the Church for the Suffering of the Oppressed: The Spilling of Blood and Tears of God's People in Papua Must Be Ended) by Cocratez Sofyan Yoman, *Enam Jalan Menuju Tuhan* (Six Roads to God) by Darmawan, *Mengungkap Misteri Keberagaman Agama* (Explaining the Mysteries of Religious Diversity) by Syahrudin Ahmad, and *Lekra Tak Membakar Buku: Suara Senyap Lembar Kebudayaan Harian Rakjat 1950-1965* (Lekra Did Not Burn Books: The Silent Voice of the Cultural Pages of the *Peoples Daily*, 1950-65) by Rhoma Dwi Aria Yuliantri and Muhidin M. Dahlan and Roosa's *Dalih Pembunuhan Massa Gerakan 30 September dan Kudeta Soeharto* (Pretext for Mass Murder:

The September 30 Movement and Suharto's Coup).

Attorney-General Hendarman Supandji said that these books could "erode public confidence in the government, cause moral decadence or disturb the national ideology, economy, culture and security". Of course, he didn't explain how the books could do these things.

Regarding one book, *Pretext for Mass Murder*, the Attorney General's spokesperson claimed, without any details, that they had identified 143 objectionable passages. On April 27, the Attorney general's representatives did present a statement to the court claiming it had the right to ban the book because the book accused the Indonesian Army and government of working with the United States to plot the mutiny events of 30 September, 1965. The documents give several of examples of what it sees as examples of such accusations.

Establishment fears

Critics of the bans have tended to belittle the Attorney-General's statements, asking how such books could really "disturb the national ideology, economy, culture and security". The reality is, however, that to let such books, and others like them, continue to be published is indeed dangerous for the Indonesian political establishment.

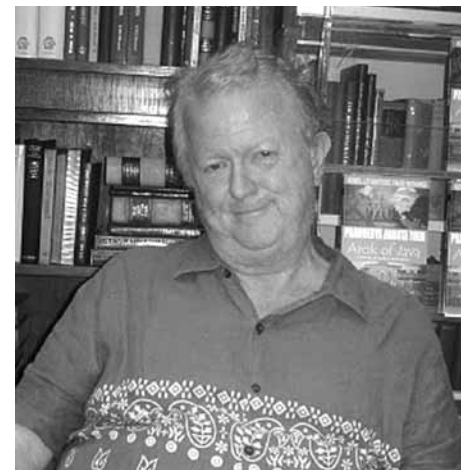
The five books banned on December 23 deal with a representative range of taboo subjects that, if allowed to be debated openly, can let loose ideas that will challenge the myths upon which the Indonesian ruling class relies to achieve the political acquiescence of the rest of the country's population.

The five books cover the plight of the Melanesian people in West Papua, religious pluralism and the history of the Indonesian left. These are key issues which the Indonesian political elite — a creation of 33 years of Suharto's New Order regime — wish to keep under their tight control. There is little in any of the books which is ideologically radical or politically threatening in its own right.

Monopoly threatened

The threat that all of these books pose is that the continued publication and public discussion of the material in them will end the state's 40-year monopoly on interpreting matters relating to the history of the Indonesian class struggle, the history of the people of West Papua and of religious doctrine.

This monopoly has been undergoing steady erosion over the last 10 years. In Indonesia today books on all these subjects can be purchased in most mainstream bookshops. Even books by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, as well as Indonesian leftists, can be easily purchased.



Max Lane, left and George Aditjondro, above.

The novels of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, still officially banned as far as anybody knows, often occupy a whole table or section in these bookshops. Many smaller publishers are becoming increasingly daring in the titles they produce, and there is a steady growth in the number of such publishers.

The action of the Attorney General, so far silently backed by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, no doubt reflects an increasing fear that this process may get out of hand. Adding to the political elite's nervousness has been the appearance on Facebook of two openly pro-communist sites *Komunis Indonesia* and *Partai Komunis Indonesia 2010*. Between them they have accumulated around 1500 members in just a few weeks.

The threat to the elite is that a jump may be made from selling books flouting the state's past monopoly on taboo subjects to open campaigning and political organising around banned ideas. Spreading Marxism-Leninism is a capital crime. Campaigning for secession from Indonesia is still banned — there are people still in jail in Papua for raising the Papuan flag. Public advocacy of atheism or "unauthorised" religious views is also illegal.

Those in power will have noticed that there is also a Facebook campaign demanding the repeal of the ban on spreading Marxism-Leninism which is also attracting support.

Protests

ISSI's court case is part of several protests and legal challenges. Civil liberties lawyers are also challenging the government's right to ban any books at all in the Constitutional Court. A number of public protest forums have been held. Eighty-three prominent intellectuals, lawyers, artists and others have also signed a public petition demanding the bans be lifted and that there be no more.

Liberal democratic as well as radical left-wing groups have been organising these protests. The Independent Journalists Alliance is also launching legal challenges to the banning of *Balibo*. There are two separate Facebook campaigns against the bans, with almost 3000 signatories.

The voluntary withdrawal in December by bookshop chain Gramedia of another book, *Uncovering the Cikeas Octopus*, by dissident academic and journalist George Aditjondro, also provoked widespread protest. Aditjondro's book reported on the election and fundraising activities of foundations and other entities alleged to be close to Yudhoyono. The book was not formally banned, and in fact has now become a bestseller. Yudhoyono and his Democratic Party have gone out of their way to indicate they were not interested in having the book banned. Yudhoyono supporters have since issued a book countering Aditjondro's work. However, there are reports that the Attorney General is now considering banning both books.

As the current intellectual ferment extends and the radical left-wing current grows within it, it will not only be reflected in the continued publication of books threatening the state's monopoly on public opinion. A critical mass will develop and the jump will occur: from new and radical ideas as commodities to be sold in a bookshop or on an activists' book stall, to the banner under which political campaigning and organisation occurs.

From the point of view of their interests (which of course they are well aware of), the Indonesian political elites will be looking for ways to maintain their old monopoly through the state's banning power, laws governing the recognition of religions and the ban on the spreading of Marxism-Leninism. This is also why they usually also take no action against, or do so very tardily or only where there is a huge outcry, every time one of the few reactionary groups attacks civil liberties activities.

The book and the right to write and publish them freely will surely be at the spearhead of the unfinished struggle to win political liberty in Indonesia.

Max Lane

Max Lane is the author of *Unfinished Nation: Indonesia before and after Suharto*, Verso, 2008.



**Pointing out their
connectedness as
young people in the
accident of a war
not of their doing**

If moments define our lives, for Libby Hathorn there was one defining moment that left her feeling “more than usually powerless”.

It was the early 90s and Libby was researching her novel, *Valley Under the Rock* (Hodder Headline, 1994). In the story, the mother of the protagonist was hiding something from her daughter about her relationship with someone who went to war. Needing to know about the period Libby started to research Vietnam, delving into books, poems and photos. As it turned out, what she found would affect her so much that she left the book and began instead to write poetry about the Vietnam War.

She remembers she was looking for numbers, “looking up statistics; how many Australians had been killed, soldiers, nurses, war correspondents and so on.” What stopped her in her tracks was a series of graphic photographs she came across that slammed home the horror and waste of war. It was a moment that marked the beginning of the series of poems she would ultimately publish as *Vietnam Reflections*.

“The starkness of the photographs was the background for my poems,” she recalls. Having turned away from the images, she forced herself to look closely, to examine the unsettling photos. There were scenes of interrogation, injury and death. They were “searing in their depiction of the impact of war,” she says. “I had to write about those images that stayed in my mind.”

“Who were these people? Yevtushenko’s poem *People* says it exquisitely, which is why I used a line from it in *Vietnam Reflections*: ‘Not people die but worlds die in them.’

Libby’s Vietnam collection may come as a surprise to readers familiar with her as a prolific children’s writer. But poetry is inextricably linked with her storytelling. “Poetry

has always informed my life, both the reading and the writing of it,” she says.

She has in fact written over 50 books for young people and had her work adapted to stage and screen. Her latest novels are *Fire Song* (ABC Books 2009) and *Zahara’s Rose* (IP Kidz, 2009). This year will see the launch of her poetry compilation *The ABC Book of Australian Poetry: A treasury of poetry for young people* and a new picture book in verse, *I Love You Book*.

“Many of my young adult novels began from a line or two of poetry,” she explains, “for example my novel *Thunderwith* (Hachette) began from a scrap of poetry in the Australian bush and resulted in a novel still in print which became a movie *The Echo of Thunder* that starred Judy Davis.” She has also written a verse novel *Volcano Boy* (Lothian) and many of the books for younger children, like the forthcoming *I Love You Book*, are also written in verse.

Libby comes from a storytelling background. Her parents were Irish and her father, a great reader, would recite poetry aloud to the family. “I didn’t understand the words, but the rhythm and richness was so melodious, it was wonderful and special.”

As a child she also heard many stories about war and keenly remembers when her brother was drafted. “Like many young people he’d decided to be a conscientious objector to what we all saw as an unjust war,” she said.

Although her interest in the war was triggered by that early research, it was a visit to Vietnam in 2005 that cemented her feelings and deepened her understanding of the country. The journey was bitter sweet. She remembers the grace with which the Vietnamese people greeted them. “It was a pleasurable trip, but it was easy to see after 40 years, the country still showed the effect of the 10 year war.”

During that trip she learnt of the work of veterans who had formed an organisation to carry out humanitarian work in rural areas of Vietnam. It was work that celebrated the survival of the people but also acknowledged the heart-rending loss of family members. These people “were the helpless playthings of enormous forces,” Libby says.

After her journey, she returned to her reflections series and the completed cycle of poems has now been accepted by the Australian War Memorial collection.

The powerful poem *Study 4 Nui Dat Australian Task Force Headquarters*, which has just been translated into Vietnamese as part of a Sydney PEN initiative to enhance linguistic exchange, is about a young Vietnamese woman being taken away for interrogation by a young man. (‘Who

holds her arm so lightly’.) The contemporary notion in the poem: (‘looks like an old school friend’), is both moving and heartfelt: ‘What would they do to her?’

By concentrating on the pair, says Libby, she was “pointing out their ‘connectedness’ as young people in the accident of a war not of their doing. The tragedy of it.”

Her hope is that “by being immersed in these poems of a particular time and a particular place, readers gain something of the personal feelings I experienced when face to face with only pictorial depictions of the war; and may think about what it may have been like to be there and experience it. And in the humanity of the couple I write about, realise the inhumanity of war.”

Leah Greengarten

Study 4 Nui Dat Australian Task Force Headquarters

The young woman
being led away for interrogation
with her heart-shaped face
and sweep of dark hair,
looks like an old school friend.

What would they do to her?
How would they make her,
captive as she is in that place
that is her country,
Captive, say what it is they
want to hear her say?

The young man beside her
except for the glaze
in his young soldier eyes,
who holds her arm so lightly,
could be leading her somewhere
kindly.
It’s permissible to think,
in some other time, soon,
could be bending to embrace
the girl with the heart-shaped face,
familiar like a school friend.
But something is shining in his eyes,
Anticipation, victory, duty,
and in hers,
and there is something terrible
not of their doing
between them.

Libby Hathorn, *Vietnam Reflections*, illustrations by
Leon Coward (Sydney: Pax Press, 2010).

Tổng Hành Dinh lực lượng đặc nhiệm Úc tại Núi Đất

Người thiếu nữ trẻ
bị dắt đi khảo tra
khuôn mặt trái xoan
làn tóc đen xoã
giống người bạn học cũ.

Họ sẽ làm gì với cô ấy?
Làm sao họ khiến cô,
thân tù tội nơi chính cô đang ở,
quê hương của cô,
Bị giam cầm, nói những gì họ
muốn nghe cô nói.

Người đàn ông trẻ bên cạnh cô,
ngoại trừ vẻ dờ dẩn
trong đôi mắt người lính trẻ,
đang nhẹ nhàng cầm tay cô,
lẽ ra anh đã có thể dẫn cô đến một nơi khác
tử tế hơn nhiều.
Liệu chẳng có thể nghĩ rằng
một ngày gần đây, vào một thời gian khác,
anh lính có thể nghiêng mình muốn ôm
cô gái với khuôn mặt trái xoan,
thân quen như người bạn học cũ.
Nhưng có gì ánh lên trong mắt anh.
Sự mong chờ, chiến thắng, bốn phận,
và trong mắt cô gái,
và có điều gì thật khủng khiếp
không đến từ hành động
giữa họ.

Libby Hathorn, *Vietnam Reflections*, minh họa bởi
Translation by Custard Apple © 2010 Sydney PEN

The Vietnamese are great readers, with one of the highest literacy rates in South East Asia. Hundreds of newspapers and magazines, every week, every month, publish a poem or short story.



Jane Gibian

Sydney based poet Jane Gibian's most recent collection is *Ardent*, published in 2007. It features work from an Asialink Literature Residency spent in Hanoi, Vietnam, in 2002. Jane spoke to Sydney PEN President Bonny Cassidy about her experiences of contemporary literary culture in Vietnam and the tensions within it.

Bonny Cassidy: How did you come to visit and write in Vietnam?

Jane Gibian: I was lucky enough to get the residency in 2002, and I wanted to go to Vietnam to improve my language skills. I had studied German, and wanted to learn an Asian language so I chose Vietnamese. It was difficult to learn, because it's tonal and there aren't many language teachers in Australia; so it feels like a really worthwhile thing to have done. It's quite interesting that Chinese has taken off here through Australia's relations with China, and in business: in a way Vietnam is in that situation, too, of opening up, sharing a lot of links with Australia, and having a diaspora here.

I knew a little bit about Vietnamese poetry, not much, but I knew that poetry was important in the general culture there and not just an educated, rarified thing. My host organization was a publishing company called The World, which publishes in about eight different languages. I was in their English section, which publishes a magazine called *Vietnam Cultural Window*.

In early 2007 I went back to Vietnam. I noticed that the city and lifestyle of Hanoi had changed a great deal. A lot of people had mobile phones, more people had internet access at home, and so a lot had changed in terms of communication.

BC: You selected a contemporary female poet from *Vietnam Cultural Window* you wanted to meet. What drew you to her?

JG: The magazine's issue on women poets had some poems printed with essays, and there was a poet who interested me named Vi Thùy Linh who was about 21 when I met her and really just starting. I also spoke to an older woman poet, through the Vietnamese Writers Association whose meetings I went to. She is Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Hà, in her fifties and quite well known. These two poets had very different concerns and writing.

The poetry section of the Vietnamese Writers Association is the writing establishment, mostly middle aged. At their meetings they read their work to each other and swap books. Compared to Australia, in Vietnam it seems much easier to get a book of poems published, but the poet has to pay for the printing and publishers are happy as long as it passes approval from the Ministry of Culture. Writers don't necessarily sell a lot of their books, but tend to give them to each other. Not many bookshops seemed to have a large range of poetry available. Mrs Ha said poets can also sell their books personally, rather than only having them stocked in a book shop.

Publishing in Vietnam is about sharing your work. The amazing thing to us is that the Vietnamese are great readers, with one of the highest literacy rates in South East Asia. Hundreds of newspapers and magazines, every week, every month, publish a poem or short story. It's something that is normal to have in a daily publication. Probably, that means more people in Vietnam than in Australia are reading poems – even those Vietnamese who wouldn't say that they are particularly interested in poetry. Of course, Vietnamese people who are not writers are more likely than Australians to say they *are* interested in poetry simply because they are reading it more often. It's an everyday part of things.

Mrs Hà, who belongs to this establishment, uses traditional forms like lục bát, which is made up of 6/8 syllable lines. A lot of younger poets write in that, too. It's hard to write a poem in that form, but certainly younger poets are more willing to experiment with free verse. Ms Linh does not use traditional form, she finds it restrictive and believes she can express her feelings better in free verse. She said that "the phrases in my work are like my breaths: some are long, some are short; they are also like our looks, some are short and some are long". Her poetry is emotional, but different to a lot of other Vietnamese poetry about feelings. Hers is more passionate.

At the time, in 2002, there had been a delay in getting permission to publish her third book. The authorities asked her to change a poem titled, "I want you to make me pregnant". She thinks that's a fine wish from a woman for a man, and only a woman that has a really strong love wants to be pregnant with the man she loves. And Ms Linh doesn't just want to write about the man she loves, she wants to honour the right to be a mother. These are not very controversial statements, but the way she expresses them is very different to the way Vietnamese women have written about them. When she writes in a poem "I want my man, I desire my husband", the authorities say, "you shouldn't say 'desire', you should just say, 'I want to hold you'". She feels that to be a writer you do not need to be a part of the writers' groups of the Vietnamese literary establishment, and she actively distances herself from the establishment.

BC: The cases of incarcerated Vietnamese writers encountered by PEN are generally to do with actions or statements of protest against the government that are deliberately uncensored. Did you get a sense of how much censorship of writing goes on as a normal practice?

JG: There is so much you can't be witness to as a foreigner, especially if you're not fluent in the language. We tried to organize a poetry reading with two Vietnamese poets, one of them Vi Thùy Linh and the other a young man whose work was also experimental. I didn't think that would be an issue at all, so I was surprised to find that poetry readings are not very common in Vietnam despite the wide publication and readership of poetry. The issue with our event was partly to do with it being a public event and these things having to be approved. I had been in contact with the Australian embassy, which was happy to help with providing for the event, and Thế Giới did some basic cribs of our poems to hand out. But we didn't account for the time needed for the Ministry of Culture to approve anything that will be performed in public; I took that to mean that the Ministry wanted to read the poems and pass them. We also had trouble finding an appropriate venue, so the Australian embassy was a bit pessimistic

about the chances of everything being approved in the timeframe. In the end we had to give the reading up. I suspect handing over some money might have facilitated the approval process, but I don't know that with certainty.

Ms Linh said she had done two or three readings in Saigon, so that procedure of approval may be more to do with Hanoi, which is more conservative and where the government is based. There was an English language bookshop in Hanoi that I visited a few times. They had had problems with importing books, because every box had to be checked and would take a very long time. I'm sure it would have been an issue with our event that there were Western poets involved and that it wasn't just in English for English speakers. My impression of Saigon, on the other hand, was that it is much more of a global Asian city.

The older female poet I met in Hanoi, Mrs Hà, did not see approval as an issue at all, and said it was not difficult for her to get published. She explained that if the censors think the poems have no social or political problems and the publisher thinks the work is good enough, it is easy; and if you're a member of the Writers' Association it's easier. I asked her if she ever felt constrained by censorship; if it affected what she writes about. Mrs Hà had a completely different perspective from what I was trying to ask. She said that for her it's not a problem because she knows what she should and should not write. She writes about people and the country, and that's okay. She probably wouldn't see that as censorship – it's what she likes to write about and she knows it will be published.

It's mostly political issues in Vietnamese literature that cause problems, but as with Ms Linh it's also social, like ideas of gender. During and after "the American War", a lot of poetry was written about the loss of men and women. The post-war generation seems to care mostly about love and emotion, whereas before there was a tradition of focusing on landscape, seasons and the homeland region, and still school children are taught the folk poems and songs that everybody knows.

BC: I'm very interested that Australians have such liberty with the use of language, and yet we have tended to cast readers and writers as a "literati" divided from the rest of society; whereas contemporary Vietnam experiences self-censorship and external censorship of expression, yet it seems literature and song are owned by the people.

JG: I think the restrictions on Vietnamese expression are changing. The younger generation of Vietnamese poets is using language in a different way than would have been acceptable a decade ago; and readers have gradually come to appreciate this diversity. In the end, Ms Linh argued for the title of her poem and it was published.

Ardent, Jane Gibian, 2007, Giramondo

Painting the 'empty chairs'

Fifteen empty chairs. Fifteen artists. The Painted Chairs project was conceived as a showcase of free expression by Australian artists who support PEN's mission, and as a creative way of engaging a broad audience with the plight of oppressed and detained writers throughout the world. The task was to take an empty chair - the powerful symbol PEN uses to represent writers who are silenced - and to invest that chair with images that resonate with concern. The artists were asked to consider a brief based on PEN's objectives: that freedom of expression is a human right that requires the vigilance of every human being, including those living in a democracy like Australia; and that freedom of expression affects not only writers and their readers but all artists, all people. The exhibition was curated by Bonny Cassidy and Sandy Symons. Photographs for the exhibition and PEN magazine were taken by Stu Spence. The profiles of the painters were written by student journalists from UTS.



Stu Spence

Reg Mombassa, aka Chris O'Doherty, has been a major presence on the Australian cultural scene for more than 30 years with his unique, candid and at times controversial view of the world. His sharp wit and playful sense of mischief resonate throughout his extensive body of work as an artist and musician, his idiosyncratic pop art and intricate landscapes instantly recognisable and highly sought after by collectors and fans around the world.

As a member of the beloved and influential band Mental As Anything, Mombassa's larrikin energy quickly drew the public's attention, but it was his irreverent and often macabre designs for the Mambo label that captured the imagination of a generation.

It was writer and journalist Murray Waldren, whose biography *The Mind and Times of Reg Mombassa* was released last year, who suggested that Reg should take part in the Painted Chairs project. "I didn't need much convincing", says Mombassa, "it sounded like a great project and I was really happy to be involved."

It took a few weeks of careful consideration and numerous sketches before settling on a final design for his chair. He wanted to convey a "vaguely post-apocalyptic sort of tone", reflecting the detrimental effects of industry and agriculture on communities and the natural environment. "It's a little bit gloomy but still prettier than a monkey with

Those people are so hugely brave you can't help but admire them...

its mouth stitched up," he says, citing one of the images he discarded early.

As an artist he understands the importance of freedom of expression as a force for change. "Allowing other viewpoints to be heard and accepting that other viewpoints are viable is essential," he says. Although he considers Australia to be relatively free, he believes there is a general apathy towards our democratic freedoms that could easily slip out of hand. "Unless people are directly threatened by the government or groups then they are pretty happy to go about their lives and ignore the world as much as they can."

Born in New Zealand in 1951, Mombassa moved to Australia with his parents at the age of 18. He had always drawn obsessively and decided to enrol at the National Art School in Sydney, supporting himself with jobs as a builder's labourer, cleaner, house painter and railway worker. He admired the conceptual art produced by his friends but felt compelled to make images.

Using Mambo as his conduit, he succeeded in creating his own distinctive world, drawing upon the absurdity of everyday life. "Absurdist humour is a big part of everything I do and always has been," he says. "That's because the world and all human activity has always appeared so ridiculous and so hideously violent and often very unfair."

Humour is a way of putting that violence in perspective and lessening its impact. "Violence has always been a part of human nature but it seems to me that unless we can somehow control it or transform our consciousness we are doomed to extinction," he says.

Not everyone has always seen the humour in Mombassa's work. In 2002, the federal Science Minister publicly criticised him over a T-shirt design protesting the Lucas Heights nuclear reactor, calling Mombassa a 'commercial opportunist' even though the profits were going to an anti-nuclear campaign and he had donated his own design.

Despite the political nature of much of Mombassa's work, he is far too self-critical to see himself as an activist. "I don't consider myself overly informed about anything really. I have opinions about some things, which I occasionally express," he says.

No stranger to worthy causes, Mombassa is patron of A Just Australia, and has worked with a range of human rights and environmental organizations. He is quick to express his admiration for writers facing persecution around the world. "Those people are so hugely brave you can't help but admire them, because they risk such huge punishment."

Michael Walker



A chair that makes people think of the great joy of reading

The design is in the familiar style of his distinctive paintings – bold, bright, and even alluding to the symbol that is most ubiquitous in his work, Sydney Harbour.

The choice of the deck chair, Done explains, solves the problem of translating canvas art to object, although it is arguable that this is a challenge he has already taken on – and won – having painted an Art Car for BMW, a project that was undertaken by the legendary Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein before him.

You might think that an artist as established as Ken Done, whose style has garnered international praise, would relish the creative license that comes with success, happy to never work to a brief again. (Not that some of the briefs haven't been fascinating – his time in advertising included working on the Beatles *White Album*.)

"Every now and then I'll do something that has a deadline... If you want to have something published you've got to keep in mind the audience you're publishing for."

This is the kind of attitude that is sometimes set upon by his critics, who say his works are strictly about adorning – colourful designs not really befitting of hallowed halls of art.

Done's response is that he sees nothing wrong with joy, whatever the setting. Take the Barrier Reef for example.

"I don't make pictures about what it looks like when it's polluted," he says. "I make pictures that show people how wonderful it is."

He doesn't take offence that his works might be considered as decorative, which he sees as commensurate with bringing people pleasure.

In fact he sees his work as having an entirely different intention to that of the writers he has raised his brush to defend. By putting the focus on what he calls "the opposite" – the joy of reading as opposed to the endangerment of freedom of expression – his intention is to "personalise" the cause for those of us in the lucky country who might take this gift for granted.

The image on the Ken Done chair turns out to be an explicit representation of his own connection to writing, a painting of his favourite reading spot, overlooking the harbour from his Rocks gallery.

Ever the advertiser, he has also positioned a program for "The Sydney Writers Festival" on the chair's seat, complemented by a sketch of the Opera House and the bridge.

Jesse Black



The author reaches toward a laptop, but to no avail

3D modelling, has chosen to paint in the style of traditional newspaper illustration.

"It's quite cartoony. I guess I just thought it needed a bit of a light touch rather than being too heavy."

In addressing the issue of imprisoned writers, Shakespeare, who began his working life as a photocopier mechanic, says he approached the project the same as he would a newspaper brief.

"In a way it's still doing what we [illustrators] are doing – it's illustrating a story, so the same sort of procedure applies. You're trying to visualise people being deprived of freedom of speech."

As it turns out, the chair, to be displayed alongside those of other prominent Australian artists, will be doing good on two counts. As well as being auctioned off to raise funds to help jailed writers, the chair in question, Shakespeare reveals, was purchased at a Waverly charity store.

"I just got it from Vinnies so I guess I'm helping another good cause there."

Apart from the art on the chair's back, it remains as it was when Shakespeare bought it. The red of the tired upholstery that covers its seat is picked up by the red of the prisoner's shirt and the red text of 'Press'.

Unlike the unlucky authors who find themselves with nowhere to go but no-go zones, Shakespeare sees few red flags. "I guess it's the polar opposite of how it is here [in Australia], because you have a lot of freedom and there's not a lot of intervention in what you want to do."

Those topics that may lead to shaky ground are obvious, he says, and hinge on the contentiousness of the issue in question. Religion is one such topic, he says.

"I'm always cautious to criticise religion. I think the things you can satirise are the way they [people] interpret religion with their actions...you can probably satirise that safely."

He speaks in particular of what he calls "the Mohammed thing", a sensitivity surrounding the subject of religion that has made some matters risky to discuss – whether in writing or pictures.

In Shakespeare's eyes, these restrictions pale by comparison to the injurious censorship suffered by those artists for whom PEN is seeking support.

Unlike the besieged writer on his chair, from the time of Shakespeare's cadetship with the *Brisbane Courier Mail* at age 19, the laptop (in its various forms) has always remained safely within his grasp. But his awareness of the issues that surround freedom of speech has ensured a desire that he assist "in my own little way."

"I'm not risking my life or anything," he says.

Jesse Black

As to why the case of imprisoned authors caught his eye, John Shakespeare explains, "It's a really good cause and I'm a big believer in freedom of speech."

Here in the land of golden sands, says the Walkley Award winning illustrator and cartoonist, "We have more moderate bastards to deal with."

While Shakespeare may poise his cartoonist's pen with a clear idea of what might cause him to step over the line, he says his greatest concern when depicting politicians and public figures is litigation.

"The only restrictions [in Australia] are when you're doing something where you're liable," he says.

On his Painted Chair, Shakespeare depicts an author whose constraints outstrip the mere red tape of bureaucracy.

Stretching through the bars of his cell, the author reaches toward a laptop, but to no avail. The screen illuminates the cell, casting light over the prisoner whose unkempt appearance reflects the squalor of his conditions. A press sticker adorns the back of the laptop.

Shakespeare, whose mediums range from caricature to



Stu Spence

In 1980, while hitchhiking across the United States and Canada, Matthew Martin packed up his camera and mailed it back home to Australia. Since that day, he has never travelled with a camera but rarely goes anywhere without his sketchbooks.

"I've become a compulsive drawer," he says. "If I was lying on the psychiatrist's couch, I'm sure they would tell me that drawing is quite obviously a huge need in my life, but it's relaxing and it's what I enjoy doing more than anything else," he says. As rare as it is to forge a successful career doing precisely what you love, after 28 years as a professional cartoonist there is still nothing that gives him greater pleasure.

Since 1982, Martin's laconic illustrations have made their mark on the pages of some of the world's most prominent publications including *The New York Times*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *Time* magazine, *The Village Voice*, *Rolling Stone* and *The Times of London*. He has also designed posters, illustrated books and contributed over 150 designs for the iconic Mambo label.

He was keen to participate in the Painted Chairs project. "I've never had any direct involvement with PEN, but the cause has always been front and centre in my consciousness."

It took him several rough drafts before settling on the final idea for his chair, adapting a cartoon that he once

A time and place where we don't have to think a lot about what we say

drew for *The Times*. "I liked the image and I've always thought that sometimes the more serious the issue, the more important it is that the cartoon be funny. To me, that's how a cartoon works best because it gets through under the radar," he says. "Somebody else might do something more overt in its references to the issues at hand, but this is what I do best so that's the approach I took."

For someone who usually works in pencil and the odd watercolour, Martin says he found working on the chair to be a little more involving than he had originally conceived. "I do so little painting, it was like I learning for the first time."

As to the symbolism of the piece, after so many years as a cartoonist, knowing the variety of responses any one cartoon can provoke, he is reluctant to nail down the meaning too specifically. "It's just something light hearted," he says. "I always loved the notion of the hand representing something that was naked. It's loosely based around the notion that freedom of speech is freedom of offensive speech."

Martin was 29 years old when he decided he wanted to be a cartoonist. "I realised that I had been doing it all my life," he says. "I'd been drawing these funny little things all the time without even knowing it."

Growing up in Adelaide with a love of surfing that far outweighed his scholarly ambition, he spent three years working in relatively mundane jobs before enrolling at the South Australian School of Art.

But he counts himself lucky to have had a life before settling on a career. "In those 29 years I did all sorts of things and for me that was terrific. If I had known that I was always going to be a cartoonist I would have been processing all my experiences in relation to that goal."

In 1981, Martin moved to Sydney where his unique style of pictorial humour became a regular feature in *The Sydney Morning Herald*. In 1990, he moved again, this time to New York where his illustrations regularly featured in major publications.

Now back to Sydney, enjoying the slower pace and the ease of access to the ocean, he is thankful for the freedoms we so often take for granted. "It's a luxury and we have to make an effort to keep aware that it's a luxury," he says. "We are so lucky to live in a time and a place where we don't have to think a lot about what we say. There is, I presume, a sense of responsibility in that."

Michael Walker



Stu Spence

Painted Chair artist Gria Shead has a particularly vivid memory of when she first discovered what freedom felt like.

"I must have been about seven at school, and I remember a teacher gave us this huge piece of paper – and I was just so excited!" she says.

"I remember working out that I could draw the cartoon that I'd been watching that morning on TV. And I drew the whole cartoon. It was just the greatest thing."

Her passion for freedom of expression hasn't dulled over the years. She has contributed to the Painted Chair exhibition because she thinks PEN is a good cause and as a country dweller she has always enjoyed listening to broadcasts from the Sydney Writer's Festival on the radio.

"Luke found the chair for me, my husband," she says. "It's a theatre chair, a foldable thing. It's also wood, so it's a nice surface to paint on and easier to transport."

She says she didn't find painting on a piece of furniture difficult: "I've always painted on furniture. I did it when [Luke and I] first moved to Hill End.

"We bought a house that was pretty decrepit and fixed it up. It was this very old place and it had a lot of old furniture, so I just used to decorate the furniture and the walls and the chimneys and things and make it look nicer."

Gria often turns to nature for inspiration for her art work, and her Painted Chair is no different. Her chair, overlooked

Freedom felt like just the greatest thing .

by a kindly spirit, is decorated with painted flowers, stems and leaves, which she sees as a metaphor for the personal growth and freedom of expression allowed by nature.

It's a kind of growth Gria is familiar with as a painter. "It's a bit of a journey, a spiritual journey, where your art takes you," she says. "You don't actually have complete control – well you don't have control – over what's going to inspire you."

Gria is well known for her idyllic *en plein air* (outdoor landscape) paintings of the countryside near her home in the old New South Wales goldmining town of Hill End.

She says she fell in love with the place after a brief holiday with her husband when they were first together and the couple soon moved there. "I'd just go out for the day and paint outside," she recalls.

In recent years she has focused more on the human aspect of living in the countryside. She painted interiors of an historic goldmining house in Hill End, focusing on empty spaces. But her most recent exhibition is something completely different – a collection of paintings of burlesque dancers.

"You'd stagnate if you had to do the same thing over and over again," she says. "Sometimes, you see something and you just have to paint it. That was the burlesque, I'd travelled to L.A. and I saw a magnificent show."

"The dancers were fantastic. They were very happy to pose – not strip show, not that – but being Hollywood they were very happy to be looked at!"

"I found it actually related, because burlesque started – the American burlesque started – after the goldrush, or during the goldrush."

It hasn't always been easy for Gria to make her inspiration a reality. She has had to juggle a number of jobs in the past to sustain her artistic career. She recently took a job as an underground surveyor at the Hill End goldmine because paintings weren't selling well during the global financial crisis.

But inspiration can be found anywhere: "It's just so different [underground], I think my recent paintings are reflective of that – they're quite dark," she says. "Sometimes down there, I was just like: I wish I could take some photographs!"

Daniel Pietrowski

He is not free, like you and me are free

After a lifetime of lending his incisive eye to the task of illustrating controversial issues in the media, Michael Fitzjames chose a very specific take on the term ‘imprisoned’ in tackling his entry in the Painted Chairs project.

His inspiration was the Italian writer and journalist, Roberto Saviano, author of the celebrated exposé of the Neapolitan Mafia, known as the Camorra. The book *Gomorra: Italy's Other Mafia* details the Mafia's alleged illegal activities, including shocking revelations about the illegal trade in toxic waste, the potential poisoning of food crops around Naples by chemicals leaching into water supplies, the danger from hundreds of sunken barges packed with waste at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea.

The book has been a huge bestseller, with the film version *Gomorrh* by Italian director Matteo Garrone winning the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival under the sponsorship of Martin Scorsese. Yet Saviano himself, whose plight has been compared to that of novelist Salman Rushdie, has been forced by death threats to lead the life of an imprisoned man, constantly moving between different locations in protective custody with round the clock guards.

“He is not not free, like you and me are free, he exists in exile,” Fitzjames explains.

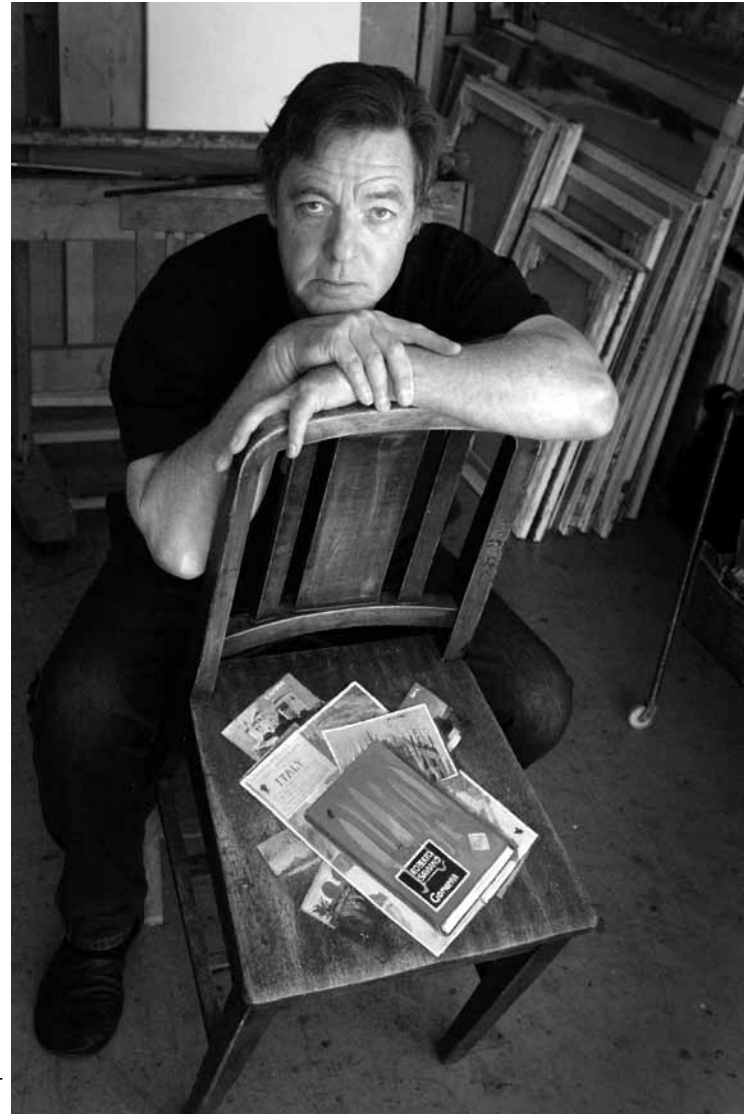
“He received death threats from the Camorra when widespread furore from the Italian public pressured the government to do something about the burying of toxic and nuclear waste by the Mafia and their associated gangs.”

Freedom of expression for writers and artists is an issue of vital concern for Fitzjames, with much of his own work involved with satirical cartoons and political commentary.

He describes freedom of expression as an essential defining characteristic of modern democracy, making the point that ‘the free flow of information that exists in Western society today has vastly contributed to the success of our cultural and economical growth.’

Born in Melbourne in 1948, Fitzjames has been exhibiting paintings and illustrating since 1968. After graduating with a Diploma of Fine Arts in 1976 from the Tasmania School of Art in Hobart, he moved to London where he began his love affair with illustrating for newsprint, working for *The Guardian* newspaper.

Returning to Australia in 1980, where his distinctive black and white images were a feature of the *National Times* for a decade, he moved after its demise in 1990 to the *Sydney Morning Herald*. He currently works for the *Australian Financial Review* in Sydney. He has participated in many group and solo exhibitions in Melbourne and Sydney, most recently ‘Pattern and Palimpsest’ at the



Stu Spence

Australian Galleries. Fitzjames has also lent his skills to teaching the next generation of artists, completing an Artist's Residency at Sydney Grammar School in 2009.

For his entry in the PEN project he used an old chair stamped with worn character from his own house, which he chose both for its large surface and the notion of a chair that was travel weary.

After rejecting initial ideas of using the chair's bars to represent the bars of a jail, he painted the chair in his distinctive allusive style, working in oils and using the technique of Trompe L'oeil. The three dimensional effect depicts postcards dropped in situ to show the constant forced relocation of the exiled writer.

A map of Italy is displayed to illustrate the areas in and around Naples where Saviano's exposé indicated that toxic waste is buried.

The idea for Fitzjames was to inspire the audience to ask question. He hopes to encourage people to seek out more information by reading *Gomorra: Italy's Other Mafia* and looking into the plight of this ‘imprisoned’ writer.

Nicole Johnston

Writers who cannot write, a chair that no one can sit on.

Born in 1933 in Queensland, Australia, Ann Thomson was nine years old when her school was shut down as a result of World War II. She started taking substitute lessons at a neighbour's house where she first began to learn how to paint, and says she has never looked back.

“What we are as children is what we become – we develop our passions. I knew I was an artist,” says the eminent painter and sculptor.

In the early 1990s Ann took a passion for collage and the idea of constructing things and began to work in sculpture. In 1992 an eleven metre tall Thomson sculpture was chosen as the centerpiece for the Australian Pavilion at World Expo in Seville, Spain.

She has studied art all over the world including periods as artist in residence in Paris and Tuscany. Her work is represented in major galleries throughout Australia, including the Art Gallery of NSW, the Australian National Gallery and Parliament House. Enthusiastic coverage of her solo exhibition in 2009 singled out the fact that she has “the extraordinary ability to construct.”

When approached by PEN Ann was excited at the challenge of bringing awareness to the plight of writers facing imprisonment. “We need the freedom to express ourselves, because any creativity comes out of freedom,” she says, “that is why I would defend these writers.”

Ann found her inspiration from a chair her builder had picked up off the street. Instead of painting over the chair, which was her original plan, she decided to recreate it by turning it into a wall sculpture.

She drew her inspiration from the idea that if she recreated the chair to be mounted on a wall – it would become a literal representation of the lack of freedom many writers have to express themselves. Writers who cannot write, a chair that no one can sit on.

Ann's approach to her work has to do with always coming from different angles. “The most important thing is for me to build a rapport between the painting and myself,” she says. “You must have an open mind whenever you are working to allow things to come in. I am not into sticking to the same one thing.”

“There is a wonderful sense of exploration about her work,” according to Edmund Capon, the director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, who describes Thomson as “one of the most interesting and intuitive artists in Australia today.”

Although she usually has no idea where her work will end up, what it will be or what it will mean, Thomson



Stu Spence

stresses the importance of being open and flexible. “When I am completing my work you try one, then you try another, until you are satisfied and think, ah yes, that is it!”

The original chair triggered her imagination because the task was all about the process of assemblage, she says. The creative process meant putting a lot of herself into the chair, including imposing her personal style. “Anyone can break up a chair and put it back together, but this really reflects an Ann Thomson chair.”

As she describes it, the work is about experimentation with different styles and different mediums. Beginning with something small on paper, moving to a bigger collage, to oil sticks and finally a wall sculpture held together by metal connections for joints – something she had never done before which, she confesses, required a little help.

As for the cause, she strongly believes that the freedom of speech and expression PEN is fighting for – freedom for creativity – has underpinned much of her success in life.

“We're not doing things to please other people, we're taking ideas and thoughts about beauty, humanity, politics and whatever and placing it another realm to take it further.”

Alex Vanny



Stu Spence

Nicholas Harding is a master of oil on canvas, ink on paper, etching and aquatint, charcoal on paper, oil on Belgian linen and more, but there's one medium the Archibald veteran hasn't perfected: the chair.

"It will definitely be a bit of a challenge, but my chair will be covered in familiar sort of imagery, imagery that lends itself to a chair really," he said, pushed early on to describe his approach to the PEN brief.

Harding jumped at the opportunity to be involved in the Painted Chairs exhibition. He cites a favourite Voltaire quote - "*I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it*" - to describe the message he hopes the exhibition will send out to the public.

"We need to raise awareness concerning the plight of writers in places less fortunate than here. Every individual deserves the chance to allow their imagination to take full flight," he says. "I'm someone who thinks it is essential for human beings to be able to express themselves without any fear of retribution, be it physical or mental."

The multi-award winning artist was initially going to build his own chair, but chanced upon the perfect chair for the bargain price of five dollars. "I was strolling the streets of Surry Hills one afternoon when I stumbled across a garage sale. The chair has a very fine metal framework with a wicker-work base and back. The

The sky is symbolic of freedom, air and possibility.

wicker-work is where my painting takes place."

Harding used Lukas, Langridge and Michael Harding (no relation) paints on his chair to create his renowned magnolias against the Australian blue sky. Although simple, he believes this theme effectively represents the freedom of speech that all writers, no matter their opinions and beliefs, have a right to.

"The sky is symbolic of freedom, air and possibility," he says. "Possibility is the big one concerning the essence of this exhibition. It should be there for a creative person even if it offends certain parts of society."

As well as its symbolism, Harding says the inherently Australian theme of his chair inspires him. Many of his paintings feature the Australian landscape and places he has visited on holidays with his family. The North Coast of New South Wales is his favourite spot and a series of oil paintings titled 'Wooli River' demonstrates his fondness for the landscape.

"It's not developed in Wooli and there is a beautiful river which I paint often. I particularly love the stretch of coast from North Coffs (Harbour) to South Yamba. It has a personality that I really respond to."

Harding painted his chair in his studio in Camperdown, where he spends a disciplined five days a week from 9.30 until 6.30 "drawing, painting, sitting and procrastinating."

Although his paintings have enthusiasts reaching for superlatives, the fourteen time Archibald nominee says that he only regards around "one out of ten" of his paintings as "hitting the nail on the head". Usually he only stops work on something because the trucks have arrived to take it away.

"Sometimes I'll have finished an artwork beforehand, there's a point where you just leave it be and know that there's nothing more you can do with it. The thing is they all look so much better in your head the way you envisioned it and sometimes you can't represent that on the canvas."

In 2001, Harding won the Archibald Prize (and the Dobell Drawing Prize) for his portrait of John Bell as King Lear. Having known the play since he was in high school and being a big John Bell supporter, the painting was a special one for him. Yet he admits he was not completely happy with the final result.

"I saw the painting at the framers and I thought 'I've really blown it, I've missed the mark'. But obviously the judges didn't agree with me on that one."

Edwina Carr



Stu Spence

In a funny way, you can argue that everything is political.

published, detailing Campbell's woodblock painting over more than 20 years from 1984 to 2008.

Born in Sydney in 1960, Campbell studied at the National Art School. In the mid-80s, having developed an interest in woodblock printing, she studied at the Yoshida Hanga Academy in Tokyo.

Working in the woodblock medium, she has been described as following in the illustrious footsteps of artists such as Margaret Preston and Thea Proctor. Her work is represented in the collections of the National Gallery of Australia, the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the University of Western Australia.

According to art critic John McDonald, "Campbell presents us with a recognisable world: orderly landscapes and street scenes, domestic interiors and still life. What lifts her work beyond the plane of everyday observation are the transformations she enacts with colour, texture and composition."

Describing her as "an artist without ulterior motives or hidden agendas," he says "she simply paints those things she finds visually engaging." And judging by the demand for her elegant artworks, there's no end to the private collectors and enthusiasts who find them visually engaging as well.

For the Painted Chairs project Campbell chose to paint and decorate a Thonet bentwood chair, preferring to allow the finished piece to stand for itself rather than tell a story within its frame.

She says she chose this particular chair because she likes the simplicity, timelessness and worldly appeal of the Thonet furniture, a range of designs that includes hatstands, settees, chaises and rocking chairs, which she sees as elegant, lightweight and relatively simple.

"Truth and beauty are the best values to aspire to, whether observing nature or man-made objects," she says.

The process of creating her chair involved making a circular woodblock, imprinting the picture, reinserting the seat and then painting and waxing the chair.

The end result may surprise those who thought the distinctive drawing room elegance of Campbell's art was an unlikely match for a chair with a mission.

Kimberley Tan



Stu Spence

There are so many voices around the world that are muffled or aren't heard.

Looking at Bruce Petty's cartoons is like peering over an elaborate map. The intricate black scribbles pinpoint social and political issues and the clever captions force us to navigate subjects that are often swept under the carpet.

So it comes as no surprise that this Academy Award winning director, animator and cartoonist was keen to embrace PEN's Painted Chairs exhibition.

"There are so many voices around the world that are muffled or aren't heard," he says. "It's an important issue and while there are so many competing messages for different causes out there, PEN has come up with an ingenious and different way to express our shared views."

Petty's keen interest in social justice and global issues flourished when he moved to the United Kingdom in the sixties. He started out doing 'joke drawings' and illustrating book covers but soon developed a passion for the political and social revolutions occurring in the world. "It was the 60's in Europe and a lot of changes were occurring, there were the women's feminist movements and 'black power', it was a wonderful time. I felt that with all of this going on, political cartooning was the place to be."

In terms of freedom of expression, Australia is a lot more fortunate than other countries, says Petty, and the satirical component of cartooning has allowed him a lot more leeway to comment on sensitive issues. "I think you've got to be witty to get past a cartoon being seen as offensive or not politically correct. I think that you can say just about anything in Australia, but with any religious issue you've really got to think about it."

When it came to his chair, Petty decided to approach the issue of freedom of expression for writers by using a combination of his renowned drawings and a sculptural element. The chair itself he found stranded on a street in Sydney's Balmain and the experience of creating it was challenging and rewarding. "It's definitely an interesting and off-the-beat medium."

The Petty chair is wooden with a cane seat and was "somewhat damaged" when he first set eyes on it but an ideal base for his drawing. No stranger to sculpture, he applied his signature machinery style to convey a representation of a voice being shut down.

"I've used a small section of an old whipper snipper as a pendulum pivot and added a weight to operate a very small movement," he says of his rather Heath Robinsonesque contraption. "The slowing mechanism suggests a voice that is silenced."

Petty has been producing and writing films since he won an Oscar in 1976 for his animated film *Leisure*. He watched the awards ceremony from Sydney and despite the prestige of the award was never lured from Australia by the bright lights of Hollywood.

"I was quite happy to be on the margin of the film world and stay that way. I think you can make great films here in Australia. Hollywood is a peculiar institution."

His latest film project, *Utopia*, delves into the concept of a perfect world and explores where, as a society, we are headed.

"*Utopia* is about how we need to manage and improve things. Look around and you see that a lot of what is happening now in our world is not right: this is what PEN is about and what it brings attention to."

"It's about what we should expect from our governments... and whether we've given up on Utopia or whether we are now in Utopia."

Bruce believes that cartoons will always persevere as a great form for influencing and educating the public about important issues of social justice.

"I don't know if people will ever tire of enjoying simplistic versions of things. There is such a density of information on everything out there and we want everything simplistic and in one phrase."

Edwina Carr

A reminder of the writers who seem to disappear.

For artist Garry Shead the ability to express himself through his art is fundamental. And the same goes for any artist or creative person. He sees his participation in the Painted Chairs project as a way of highlighting the importance of freedom of speech and remembering those who have been silenced.

The plight of imprisoned writers was very much to the fore as he tackled the task of creating his own Painted Chair.

The wooden chair he selected was in a pile to be thrown out before he rescued it. He decided to pull the original seat off the chair and replace it with glass. "A glass bottomed chair is something that is very fragile," he said. "The image on the glass suggests the fragility of freedom."

The process involved taking off the back padding and using a candle to burn an image onto the chair. "When I was burning the padding away, in the process of doing this I noticed that I could draw with the flame. Leonardo mentions this technique in his notebooks. The image is a kind of Turin shroud-like impression of Christ's face. It is the face of those writers who have been imprisoned or silenced for political or other reasons."

The barely defined image is a reminder of the writers who seem to "disappear" when they are placed in prison for their work.

While he didn't have one particular writer in mind, Garry explains, at the forefront of his thoughts was the time he spent in Hungary in the early 80's. "There I learnt first hand about the effects of repressive regimes on writers and artists. Writers were forced to disseminate their work through underground networks."

During that time, as Artist in Residence at the Michael Karolyi Foundation in Vence, France, Garry met his late wife, Hungarian sculptor Judith Englert. They spent a year in Budapest together, travelling widely around Europe before returning to Australia in 1987 and settling in the small coastal community of Bundeena, south of Sydney.

One of his two daughters, Gria, has followed in her father's footsteps and is a successful artist in her own right. Gria has also contributed to the Painted Chairs project.

Born in Sydney in 1942, Garry Shead studied at the National Art School from 1961 to 1962. Early on in his career he worked as a scenic artist and a film editor at the



Stu Spence

Australian Broadcasting Corporation from 1963 to 1968, as well as editing an arts paper and drawing cartoons.

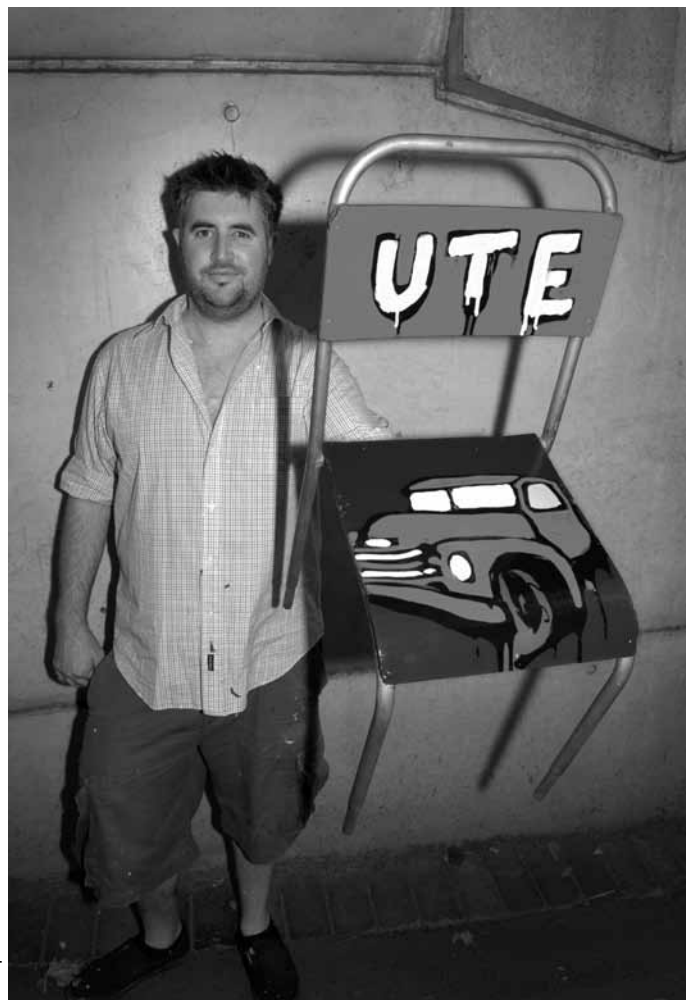
In the 80's Shead's work highlighted his love of the Australian landscape. With the 90s came what has been described as his career defining series, the paintings based on D.H Lawrence's book *Kangaroo*.

Shead was awarded the Archibald Prize in 1993 for his portrait of artist Tom Thompson. In 2004 he won the Dobell prize for drawing. He has shown in more than 70 group exhibitions and over 50 solo exhibitions and is represented in all major Australian galleries and numerous private and corporate collections.

Now one of Australia's most celebrated painters, his style is often described as lyrical and figurative, yet he retains a taste for irreverence and satire. And he likes his paintings to tell stories.

His current exhibition *Love on Mt Pleasant*, takes as its subject his uncle and mentor, the late Maurice O'Shea, a winemaker who arguably did a great deal to improve the quality and popularity of Australian table wines. At Maitland Regional Gallery until May 23, the show will head to the Australian Galleries in Sydney in November.

Melissa Wilkinson.



Stu Spence

Cityscapes, concrete pylons, bridges and buses. Jasper Knight's typical subject matter is a far cry from political or social injustice. Yet this internationally acclaimed Sydney based painter tackled the issue of freedom of speech with great enthusiasm for his contribution to the Painted Chairs exhibition.

As a young Australian artist, Jasper recognises that he enjoys freedoms many others don't.

"I really believe in freedom of speech and expression, as an artist it is essential. I see lots of parallels with freedom of expression across different art forms, and so I see what PEN stands for as critically important."

Coming from a family of writers and publishers makes the theme of imprisoned writers even more important, he says.

"My mother and my sister both work in publishing, and my brother is a writer. Coming from a family who have always been in the writing business really makes this cause significant for me."

For the Painted chairs exhibition Jasper chose to work with a 1950s elementary school chair.

"I like the size of the chair, it's really small, I like the idea that people will be really big sitting on it. I think the awkward feeling that creates really relates to the theme of this project."

I see lots of parallels with freedom of expression across different art forms.

Jaspers chair is thickly coated with enamel paint, with the classic image of a ute central to the work. The work is bright and colourful, in line with his industrial pop art style.

"The choice of the ute image on my chair is not significant. In my work I like to incorporate everyday industrial or city imagery, things which people would not consider precious or beautiful, and I like to make them bright and beautiful," he explains.

On the back of the chair he has painted the word 'UTE' in large, bright yellow text.

"What is most significant about this work in relation to PEN is my use of text. This is the first time I have incorporated text into my work. Because PEN is about writers, I wanted text to be as important as image, and I think it is, I think you read the words before you look at the actual picture."

For Jasper, the selection of the original chair for the work was as important as the work he painted on it. "I liked the idea that this chair already had history, and I was adding to it with my work."

"The chair is steel framed, with wood base and back. The chair was originally painted in maroon enamel, so I have added to that, and left a small patch of the original colour which you can see on the tyre."

The chair is a juxtaposition of new and old, of bland and bold. The original object was sterile, practical and insignificant, the images painted on it are strong and colourful.

He says the significance of a school chair carries two conflicting meanings.

"On one hand this chair stands for rules, restrictions and institutions. But on the other hand people have sat on this chair for years to learn and be educated, which I see as crucial for freedom of speech and expression. I really like the conflicting ideas which the chair adds to the work."

Satisfied with his contribution, Jasper is keen to see the audience's reaction to his chair.

"I think the work is a contradiction. It's cute and bright and fun, but what it represents is quite the opposite."

Jacqueline Andrews



Stu Spence

I hope these chairs give some help to writers that are suffering.

like describing a friend. "Painting is a large part of my life and it's been in my life for a long time," she says. She is painting less these days, "I'm not very prolific now, but in the past I have been most prolific." Yet she sees her art as "a constant in my life, a constant preoccupation."

Best known for her abstract landscapes, it's no surprise to learn that is where she found her inspiration for the Painted Chairs exhibition.

Her chair features three small scenes, the colours in the pictures winding their way in stripes down the chair legs. "It's not a photographic landscape," she explains. "It's based on some of the landscapes I've seen, like the Flinders." She says the scenes are "not absolutely precise as landscapes go."

Her description of the artistic process is by no means as complex as her paintings: "Well, first of all I painted the whole thing white," she says, "then I went back to it after a couple of days I suppose, who knows? I'd spend a morning doing one [landscape]. I had three goes at it."

While concern for the plight of imprisoned writers brought her into the PEN exhibition - "I hope that these chairs give some help to the suffering writers" - Elisabeth says her intention was never to artistically respond to the cause, but rather to give to it. She says one observer remarked that her "landscapes on the chair were like the windows through bars of a cell." She laughs. "It's interesting that he saw that."

Her contribution to the Painted Chairs is not the first time she has used her talent to help support the causes she believes in. The list is long. "Afghan widows last year...I've also been a member of Amnesty International for many years, at least 25 to 30 years." Many years, many causes. "When the Labor party was in strife they'd have fundraisers," she recalls. "I would contribute to those, but that was pre Whitlam era."

You get the sense that no matter the era, there is little that will faze Elisabeth, such is the calm she exhudes. Perhaps it was her quiet, self-effacing manner critic John McDonald had in mind when he referred to her as 'The Invisible Woman of Australian Art' in a review of her career in the *Art Collector*.

It was a title loaded with irony given that she has been painting for more than 60 years, exhibiting regularly for the past 30 and has, according to McDonald, an avid following among private collectors and fellow artists.

"More than with most artists, the works of this reclusive and dedicated painter are an acquired taste," he said. Yet he made the point that "No second viewing of one of these works is ever the same, and this helps explain their appeal to private collectors and their neglect by institutions that tend to prefer works that make an instant, albeit superficial, impact."

Hayley Hadassin

In 2002 Elisabeth Cummings was listed in the *Australian Art Collector* as one of the nation's 50 most collectable artists. But the softly spoken artist is somewhat reticent when asked about her success. "Well I'm, yes, very pleased people respond to my paintings. You never know, you paint, but you never know if people like them. It's a good thing that they do," she chuckles.

One of Australia's pre-eminent artists, she was born in Brisbane in 1934, and at 23 became a gold medal graduate from the National Art School in Sydney. She has since won numerous awards, including the NSW Travelling Art Scholarship and the coveted Le Gay Brereton prize for drawing. In Europe in the 60s she studied at the School of Vision in Salzburg under Oscar Kokoschka. A longtime teacher at the National Art School until 2001, her work is represented in major galleries including the National Gallery of Australia.

Elisabeth now lives among other artists in Wedderburn NSW, and more than anything she paints the bush that surrounds her. When she refers to her craft it is almost



Stu Spence

You hope that a chair like that could take you to freedom.

To artist Silke Raetze, flying is the ultimate freedom. So it is no surprise that her latest venture is big on wings and strongly opposed to the denial of liberty.

The 34-year-old Sydney artist explains that the bold statement for freedom of speech in her work is born of a new passion for the cause. “To be honest I didn’t know a great deal about PEN before being invited to do this,” she confesses with a laugh. “Perhaps if more artists knew about PEN, it would have struck a chord with them too, but as soon as I heard about it I thought, this is something I want to be involved in.”

As an artist, freedom of expression is core, she says, a privilege she now realises is taken for granted. “The forefront of my career choice is my desire to express what I want to say. Trying to imagine what it might be like to not have the freedom to express yourself, to have it blocked, it’s inconceivable really.”

Her fervour is obvious as she rails against the injustice of persecuting writers and journalists for the very act she has built her career on. “It seems like a basic right to be able to express yourself and if you’re not free to do so, then that’s one of your basic rights taken away.”

With this in mind she decided to give her chair - and the imprisoned writers it symbolises - the means to set their words free.

“My chair has a pair of wings on the back of it, so the idea is that you sit in the chair and it takes flight, maybe to freedom. The wings are made up of written word, so every single feather I have created is made of written text.”

The text is all her own penmanship and the wings themselves are a motif that runs through much of the work she exhibits at the Michael Reid Gallery in Sydney.

“I wanted to focus more on the freedom aspect rather than confinement or imprisonment - to approach the

positive side because that’s what they’re fighting for, freedom,” she explains.

She recalls with relish the initial task of selecting a chair to work on. “I spent hours in an auction house and as I went around, I kept pulling out all the chairs that appealed to me and lining them up. I just couldn’t get past this little child’s chair. It’s yellow and white, and it was obvious that it has a history. It’s quite an unassuming chair, bright and cheerful. It had an innocence that appealed to me.”

The innocence of childhood was an obvious link for the project and another theme common to her own artwork. “When I found the child’s chair, I liked the idea that children don’t tend to have that much restriction. They don’t have a great awareness of what they should and shouldn’t say, and so they’ve got a lot more freedom than adults. Then thinking of the writers that are imprisoned, you look at the chair and think, wouldn’t it be great if they can sit on the chair and be magically transported out of there?”

While she works in various mediums including painting, paper sculpture and needlepoint, painting a chair is not a concept she would normally have come up with, so she decided to tackle it sculpturally.

“It didn’t make a great deal of sense to me to paint all over the chair with motifs. I wanted something that would transport you; to represent the idea of imagining where it can take you - a symbol of hope,” she says. “It’s the idea of sitting down to write something, and you hope that a chair like that could take you to freedom.”

Her hope is that the chairs project will raise awareness of the plight of imprisoned writers. Her wish is that her own winged chair could pick up those writers and fly them out of their incarceration, into the realm of freedom to which creativity belongs.

Miran Hosny



Stu Spence

Mother earth is hurting as the writers held hostage are.

when people over-analyse and when there is too much political correctness...Painting is relaxing and allows self expression through quietness in a noisy world.”

Her own art making includes painting, pastel, sculpture, ceramics, mixed media and printmaking at the Bayyou Studio. Among other influences that have fed into her art education she cites learning how to spray paint cars.

After considering for some time what to paint on her chair, her solution was simple - “Just have fun with it.”

“I felt I needed to express happiness and freedom, and with that I painted my writer’s chair with bright coloured fish, symbolic scenes of nature and the national park.

“I feel fish have to have freedom to swim or they would die. Fish are born free to swim free, to travel free throughout the sea no matter what colour they may be.”

“The national park is a symbol of freedom to grow, mother earth is hurting as the writers held hostage are. The nature in the national park allows the vegetation to grow and it is shared by all those who visit it.”

Her main creative challenge was finding the right chair. She sought a chair with all the elements fit for a writer’s chair. What she found was a chair she felt “could sure tell a tale or two.”

“The chair could easily be described as a writer’s chair from days gone by and because of the age of the chair it has its own history,” she said.

“There was no need to alter the chair when I found it in an old furniture shop; it just appeared to be right for a writer’s chair.”

“All it needed was sanding to remove old varnish, and then it needed an undercoat prior painting. Apart from finding the right chair, at the end of the day, it is the chair aesthetics that make it work. Whether it was textured, what the colours symbolised and the story it would tell.”

Montesin believes art is a powerful gift and allows her spiritual peacefulness and freedom.

“People from all over the world like art. This exhibition will allow our ideas to be communicated...I believe I may be helping raise awareness not only to those overseas but to locals as well. A lot of people haven’t heard of PEN before.”

Vivian Yue

Delma Montesin is passionate about the right to free speech and believes freedom of expression is something most people take for granted. “I feel freedom of expression is a fundamental human right and enables democracy to work. People cannot exercise their right to take part in public decision making if freedom of expression is denied. It is important to realise that an individual’s dignity and liberties are being violated too.”

She committed to the Painted Chairs project because she believes it is a great idea that can be shared with people who are unaware of the plight of writers enduring repression and imprisonment; a cause best conveyed through the use of art, she says.

“Art allows people to express themselves though all different aspects of art making, painting, poetry,” she says.

“People are allowed to read into or ascertain through critical thinking what the artist is about, or what they are expressing, what they want the audience to know. Both artists and writers have a social awareness which is expressed in different mediums.”

“Art overcomes the obstacles of constrained expression

The dried eel of Indonesia

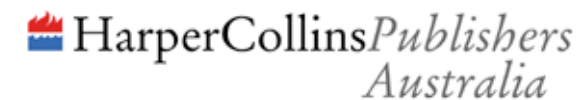
The humidity was from sweat and not the air. The sad singing was the whimpers as they dabbed alcohol on the wounds. The music was the brushing of bodies and clothes against each other in the tiny room. The percussion introduced pause was the clang of an opening gate. The crescendo followed the approach of booted footsteps. It ended as another human being was thrown to the floor. The notes were the scores left by the spikes of the dried eel across his back. Another was taken. Do not fear the pain, one said, you do not die, you do come back. For most, yes, it was true. But not for the other one million.

Written by his friend Max Lane, May, 2010, reflecting on a story of one of Joesoef's experiences)

Joesoef Isak, a journalist and journalist union leader at the time, was detained and kept in safe houses - as described above - several times during 1966 and 1967, before being detained for 10 years between 1968-1978. He was never tried. He was awarded the Sydney PEN Thomas Keneally prize in 2005 for his courage in publishing during the years of the Suharto dictatorship, after he was released. Joesoef Isak passed away on August 15, 2009



Joesoef Isak autographing a book published in his honour in 2008.



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