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Our island home: new exhibition explores racism and diversity

In the wake of World Refugee Day, the exhibition – We Bleed The Same – pays tribute to the guts and perseverance of some of our newest and oldest Australians.

Journalist and producer Liz Deep-Jones' family includes her children, Dylan, 25, sitting left, and Izabella, 19, standing right, and their cousins. They enjoy Lebanese, Australian, Irish, Chinese, Ghanaian and Chilean parentage.

By Liz Deep-Jones
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Liz Deep-Jones says her family (above) have been nicknamed "the United Nations", and have been her impetus in creating this exhibition, which includes installations, a documentary and 35 portraits, from which the following pictures have been selected. "The aim of the exhibition, *We Bleed The Same*, is to create a greater understanding of our differences in order to live in a more inclusive society," she says.

Thanush Selvarasa.

Thanush Selvarasa, 31, Sydney's north shore

As a desperate 23-year-old Tamil, Selvarasa left his home in Sri Lanka dreaming of a safer future. He didn't realise that his new life would result in almost eight years of detention – first on Christmas Island, then Manus Island – and be even more hellish than the one he'd left behind.

"I wanted to come to Australia for safety and peace but they took away my freedom," he says. "I was locked up indefinitely without being told why. Even the worst criminal has the right to know his sentence. I lost hope and tried to end it all."

Selvarasa, now recognised as a refugee, was suddenly released from detention in January. Trouble is, his six-month bridging visa, with no right to study, makes realising his dream of becoming a fitness instructor and photographer very difficult indeed. The struggle continues.

Subhi Bora.

Subhi Bora, 31, western Sydney

Born in Modbury, South Australia, in 1990, the daughter of Uyghur parents, Bora is thankful every day for the foresight of her university-graduate parents – her doctor mother and journalist father – who made the decision in 1988 to escape China's tightly controlled East Turkestan region for a freer life in Australia.

The decision meant leaving behind loved ones, to meet their fate, potentially, inside one of the notorious "vocational training centres" where human-rights violations and deaths in custody are rife. The family hasn't heard from their relatives in more than five years. "It's heart-breaking," says communications director Bora. "If my parents had stayed, we could be in one of those camps now, too."

Maryam El-Kiki.

Maryam El-Kiki, 25, Sydney's west

Born in Saudi Arabia's Jeddah, the daughter of a Muslim father and Australian convert mother, El-Kiki grew up in Sydney's west. At seven, she willingly donned the hijab and, at 21, chose to wear the niqab. Her mother, Umm Jamaal Ud-Din, teaches female adults, and El-Kiki has become a high-school teacher. (Umm Jamaal is also a Shaykha, one of Australia's first female Muslim scholars.)

El-Kiki, who is passionate about dismantling faith-based stereotypes, feels empowered by her adoption of the veil: it asserts her identity as a proud Muslim woman, she attests, and gives her control of who can and cannot see her (she removes it only in the company of other women). "It allows me to be free of any pressure to adhere to fashion trends or to look a certain way," she says.

Manmeet ("Mannie") Kaur Verma.

Manmeet ("Mannie") Kaur Verma, 28, south-east Melbourne

When, as a 21-year-old, she landed her first job as a lawyer in Melbourne, the Punjab-born graduate was told by her boss, "I suggest you shorten your name. If clients can't pronounce or remember it, we'll lose business. What about Mandy?"

In the end, Manmeet acquiesced to "Mannie". She has since gone on to establish her own practice, spending her days helping to empower young women from diverse backgrounds who want to see a new era of respectful relationships, employee entitlements and dispute resolution in the workplace.

"Nicknaming exhibits a mode of resistance to accepting the true identities of people of colour," says the mother of two. "It's as if they're saying, 'You're not worth the effort required to remember your name.' "

Lovemore Ndou.

Lovemore Ndou, 50, western Sydney

Hailing from the border between South Africa and Zimbabwe, Ndou came of age in an era of brutal apartheid. Denied a formal education, he rose to prominence as a three-time world boxing champion in two weight divisions and, in 1996, came to Australia as an ambitious 25-year-old.

He remembers the surprise he felt at being treated like a human being. “I got a shock when I saw a white person cleaning the toilet in my hotel,” he says. In the years that followed, Lovemore earned seven degrees and today runs his own law firm, specialising in family, criminal and pro bono work. His autobiography, *Tough Love: The Amazing True Story of a Boxing World Champion Turned Lawyer*, was published earlier this year.

Deng Adut.

Deng Adut, 38, inner-west Sydney

Born near Malek, a small fishing village in South Sudan near the White Nile River, Adut grew up in a family of 42 children (his father had six wives). When civil war broke out in the 1980s, four of his brothers joined the rebel forces.

At just six, Adut was forced to join the Sudan People's Liberation Army; at eight, he could use an AK-47.

Six years later, his older half-brother smuggled him out of Sudan and, once awarded refugee status, Adut was sponsored by Christian Aid to start a new life, alone, in Australia. Here, he taught himself English watching *The Wiggles*. In time, he completed a law degree at Western Sydney University and co-founded a law firm where he works as a defence lawyer.

His John Mac Foundation, named for the brother who saved his life (he died in 2014 in South Sudan), helps students from refugee backgrounds transition into the workforce. His memoir, *Songs of a War Boy*, was published in 2017. "I just want peace," says Adut. "I try to fit in and contribute, but it's hard here for Africans."

Leetona Dungay.

Leetona Dungay, 61, Kempsey, NSW

Last month it was announced that grieving Dunghutti elder and Black Lives Matter activist Dungay will be joining forces with international human-rights lawyers Geoffrey Robertson and Jennifer Robinson to bring the issue of First Nations deaths in custody to the world's attention. It's more than five years since her son, 26-year-old David Dungay jnr, suffocated to death inside Sydney's Long Bay Correctional Complex when five prison guards held him face down on a bed.

To this day, neither an individual nor an institution has been held accountable. David, a diabetic, was due to be released from prison three weeks after he died. His offence? Refusing to give up a packet of crackers he was eating. "They killed my son nearly six years ago," says Dungay. "I won't stop speaking out until I get justice."

***We Bleed The Same* will appear at the Canberra Writers' Festival at the Kanbri Cultural Centre from August 18-22. It will also be on display at the Australian National University from September 8 until February 2022.**