

Buon Riposo

Sailing into History, Museo Italiano, Melbourne, 2016

Linen and rag paper are my preferred materials on which to paint or draw – always have been. I made the sheets of paper displayed in this exhibition in 1986 from a worn out single bed sheet woven by my mother in the late 1940s. This is the only paper I have ever made.

As a teenager it was my mother's responsibility to weave linen, not only for herself but also for all the young girls in the village: this would eventually form the major part of their wedding trousseaus. Operating the pedal loom was an arduous task that she disliked but since she was an even less enthusiastic embroiderer, she had little choice but to do as instructed. At the time all the village girls and women worked collectively and collaboratively on the making of trousseaus. Those skilled in needlework, including my grandmother, embroidered the finer linen ware - sheets, pillowcases and fringed towels: my mother embroidered her monograph initials on some of the coarser weaves used to make tablecloths, napkins and tea-towels.

Throughout her life in Australia my mother's bi-annual ritual was to air her dowry linen, otherwise secreted in the very same travel trunk that accompanied us (my mother and I, and that contained our worldly possession) on our journey of migration from the Port of Naples to Station Pier in Melbourne. As an almost 4-year old, I remember nothing of the journey: she was 26 years old and no doubt remembered much but rarely spoke about the experience except to tell me that I was kept in an isolation ward for the duration due to a bout of measles and that I spent most of my time crying. My father had migrated to Australia 4 years earlier leaving my mother pregnant in Italy. I have no memory of meeting my father for the first time, although I'm assured he was most excited about our arrival and was at the pier to meet us.

I vividly remember the ceremonial openings of that travel trunk – our Australian arrival address in North Melbourne still writ large on its front – in spring and autumn, the unwrapping and rewrapping of linen sheets, rolls of woven fabrics, ornate satin bedspreads. For me the ritual was an exotic one: I never tired of seeing those beautiful pristine items. I suspect that for my mother the process was a nostalgic and painful one. I often questioned her on why she kept these things 'buried', unused, and instead preferred to purchase and use readymade items that were mundane and common in comparison. Her response was always a vague, off-hand one-liner designed, I presumed, to silence me. Perhaps they were an unwelcome reminder of her youthful past with its attendant aspirations and desires, her family in Italy and, I don't know what else: she never said. It is interesting to note that many of her female Italian friends, and I suspect many migrant women generally, behaved similarly.

I inherited the trunk and its contents from my father in 1991. Despite criticising my mother for her reluctance to use her trousseau items I found that I could not bring myself to do otherwise. I restaged her rituals for years from 1985 onwards. For me also, of course, that trunk had become a type of Pandora's box, the contents of which recalled her untimely death and those associated memories one tries hard to forget but

which doggedly persist and an awareness of the gradual transformation of one's own identity from 'Italian' to 'Italo-Australian' to an ultimately indefinable cultural hybrid. In 1995 I was invited to participate in a group exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria titled 'Our Parents' Children'. The focus of the exhibition was to affirm and celebrate the participating artists' Italian cultural ancestry through works that referenced personal histories relating to one's culture and migrant status. Finally, an appropriate project for the paper I had made in 1986! By placing sheets of paper over the embroidered sections of some of the linen I was able, using my printmakers burnishing tool, to methodically hand emboss traces of the stitches made by my mother and grandmother. Unlike them, I worked in quiet isolation. The process required delicate yet persistent physical contact with their original materials. I consider my work an ephemeral shadowing of theirs and one that allowed me an intimate connection to my past. For the 1995 exhibition I displayed my works in a vitrine embedded within and around their source material linen. This it seemed would reaffirm the 'collaborative' component of the collective works, albeit one that traversed time and space.

In retrospect I can say that this project was, for me, a perfectly timed cathartic experience. Since making and exhibiting this work I have been able to utilise most of the linen that constituted my mother's trousseau so that very little remains 'new'. Twenty-one years later, I now have occasion to 'unearth' the paper works from my plan drawers and display them again in a manner similar to but different from their original context. The sentiments contained within the works and those they evoke remain, for me, unchanged.

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