

## PHOTOESSAY

# Refugee migration

## Turning the lens on middle Australia

**Abstract:** This non-traditional research paper explores the role of photojournalism and documentary photography in shifting the power dynamic inherent in photographing refugee migrants in Australia—the refugee as an object of photographic scrutiny. It draws on visual politics literature which argues refugees have been subjected to a particular ‘gaze’, where their migration narratives are mediated, mediatised, dissected and weaponised against them in the name of journalistic public accountability in and for the Global North. This photo-documentary praxis project subverts this ‘gaze’ of the Global North and decolonises the power dynamics of the visual politics of refugee migration, by turning the lens on middle Australia. Instead of questioning refugees, this project asks what is our moral responsibility to support them? These images are drawn from three years of photographically documenting the Meanjin (Brisbane) community that rallied around and eventually triggered the release of about 120 medevaced refugee men locked up in an urban motel in Brisbane for more than a year in 2020-21. In these images taken outside the detention centre, community members go ‘on the record’ to articulate their motivations for taking a stand—an enduring Fourth Estate record of their social and political stance as active participants within the mediated democratic process of holding power accountable in the refugee migration space. The refugees central to this project have now been released into the community but as they continue to languish in an immigration purgatory, the project is ongoing and continues to manifest through an activist journalism framework, drawing on human rights-based photojournalism practice.

**Keywords:** Australia, human rights journalism, photojournalism, photoessay, refugees, refugee migration, visual politics

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### Introduction

**F**OR MORE than two decades successive Australian governments have re-defined, unpicked, and frayed global protocols and conventions on human rights-based refugee migration—the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol. In doing so, Australia has replaced these human rights-based refugee

migration processes with mandatory detention and an offshore processing-based regime that has come to be known internationally as the ‘Australian solution’—a global ‘worst practice’ model shaping refugee processing strategies in much of the global North. Indefinite mandatory detention, ‘pioneered’ through offshore processing on Manus Island and Nauru, are shaping controversial British and Danish refugee processing strategies that propose to send people seeking asylum to Rwanda, while the EU refugee deterrence strategy is increasingly relying on offshoring refugee processing in Asian, African, and Balkan countries which have less stringent human rights monitoring mechanisms. Such outsourcing not only shifts the responsibility of processing refugees away from the democracies of the Global North, but it also shifts the scrutiny of their treatment, review of their claims, and more importantly the fallout of inhumane treatment away from the mechanisms of democratic accountability.

The strategy is simple. It relies on subjecting refugees to invisible, slow violence as a deterrence to refugees in distant geographies, while preventing highly visual refugee migration events unfolding within the Global North’s line of vision. Spurious it may be, but the ultimate narrative is that the government is doing this fulfil its primary obligation of keeping its citizens safe in a highly securitised post-September 11 world where threats to national security are presumed to be imminent and omnipresent. The subtext is ‘this is being done to keep the population safe by keeping our borders secure’. However, this supposed national interest appears to be misaligned with public sentiment. A 2022 attitudes survey carried out by IPSOS in 28 countries showed 83 percent of Australians agree people should be able to take refuge in other countries, including Australia (IPSOS, 2022).

However, public sentiment abstracted to statistics provides little or no voice to the individual perspectives and motivations needed to animate discourses in the democratic space. The individuals making up those statistical surveys themselves are invisible in the mediated narratives of the Australian refugee debate, like the refugees they support. Turning the focus on the supporter cohort humanises them, makes them visible and visibilises the sentiments, interrogates their motivations and offers a record beyond numerical data.

### **‘The Australian solution’ and its global legacy**

In April 2022, the British Home Office announced a new ‘Migration and Economic Development Partnership’ with Rwanda to relocate people seeking asylum in the UK through irregular migration routes, to Rwanda to have their asylum claim processed and decided. The Home Office boldly claimed their ‘innovative, ambitious, and long-term agreement sets a new international standard...’ (Home Office News Team, 2022). On 29 June 2023, the Court of Appeal ruled that the plan was unlawful, reversing a previous High Court decision on

19 December 2022 that ruled it was lawful (British Red Cross, 2023).

In Denmark, the Danish version of the multi-regional, European, English language digital news platform, *The Local*, reported that ‘2020 saw a total of 1,547 asylum seekers registered in Denmark, the lowest number since records began in their current form in 1998’ (*The Local*, 2021). The article reported Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen telling the country’s Parliament ‘she wanted to reduce asylum applications in Denmark to zero’ (*The Local*, 2021). A 2021 Border Wars Briefing report alleges the European Union has adopted the ‘Australian Model’ which relies on more than 22 countries in Africa, Eastern Europe, the Balkans and West Asia as quasi border outposts keeping refugees from reaching the EU borders (Akkerman, 2021). The report notes the Europeans rely on ‘outsourcing oppression’ and gross human rights violations against these refugee migrants on to the transit countries, shielded from public and news media scrutiny.

The British, Danish and the EU refugee migration policies, build on Australia’s draconian refugee processing system, sometimes openly referred to as the ‘Australian solution’ that relies on mandatory detention, offshore processing, a ‘tighter borders’ rhetoric and oppressive deterrence policies. Since 1992, Australia has employed a policy of mandatory detention for asylum seekers arriving by boat, under the *Migration Act 1958*. Under this policy, individuals who arrive without valid visas are detained in immigration detention centres while their claims for protection are processed.

Until 1992, detention of unauthorised arrivals was a discretionary power. But in May 1992, when Keating was prime minister and Gerry Hand his immigration minister, Hand gave the Second Reading Speech of the *Migration Amendment Bill 1992*, which made the practice of detention mandatory. Mr Hand said this, about what was then termed ‘migration custody’.... But back in May 1992, ‘migration custody’ was limited within the same Bill to 273 days... (O’Brien, 2011)

Despite their initial assurances, the Keating government removed the time restriction from section 54ZD of the *Migration Act*, which came into force in 1994, paving the way for Howard to famously claim on 28 October 2001 when he told the Liberal Party’s official election campaign launch in Sydney: ‘We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come’ (Howard, 2001). Prime Minister Rudd would further strengthen the indefinite nature of detention when he decreed on July 19, 2013 ‘...asylum seekers who come here by boat without a visa will never be settled in Australia’, effectively condemning a large number of refugees to an immigration purgatory that has lasted a decade, with no real hope of ending (Hall & Swan, 2013).

Successive governments since Howard have also legislatively pushed and

manipulated the definition and physicality of the Australian border making it legislatively impossible for refugees to reach the Australian border. The Howard government's *Migration Amendment (Excision from the Migration Zone) Bill 2001* introduced in September 2001 excised Christmas, Ashmore, Cartier and Cocos (Keeling) islands from the migration zone for asylum seekers arriving by boat. The Gillard government extended the excision policy to include the mainland through the *Migration Amendment (Unauthorised Maritime Arrivals and Other Measures) Bill 2012*. In addition to removing the border from the refugee's reach, Australian governments also have a history of turning to Pacific and Southeast Asian neighbours to outsource refugee processing. Along with boat turn backs, Howard initially introduced the option of third country processing which led to indefinite detention on Nauru and Manus Island in Papua New Guinea. Gillard explored third country options with Timor-Leste, PNG and Malaysia, eventually signing memoranda of understanding with Malaysia in July 2011 and PNG in August 2011. When the High Court ruled against the 'Malaysian solution' because Malaysia was not a party to the 1951 Refugees Convention, Gillard, like Howard, turned once more to Nauru and Manus Island. The Gillard government signed MoUs with the Government of Nauru on 29 August 2012, and the PNG government on 8 September 2012. 'The first transfer to Nauru was on 14 September 2012 and the first transfer to PNG was on 21 November 2012' (Phillips, 2014).

### **Militarisation of a humane response**

The mandatory offshore detention and exclusion of Australia from the Migration Zone for asylum seekers removed both refugees, and the systematic slow violence they were subjected to, from beyond the Australian public's line of vision, enabling the government to curate a particular type of gaze that presented refugees within a government narrative of securitisation and pseudo-compassion—i.e., the need for stronger borders in a post September 11 security environment and the pseudo-compassion of replacing highly visible drowning in our waters with a less visible slow death hidden away elsewhere. Howard's October 2001 election speech is arguably the playbook for this hegemonic narrative that has been repeated by successive governments and, all too often, by the popular media. Howard told the audience:

National security is . . . about a proper response to terrorism. It's also about having a far sighted, strong, well thought out defence policy. It is also about having an uncompromising view about the fundamental right of this country to protect its borders . . . we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come.

I want to place on record my gratitude . . . to the men and women of the Royal Australian Navy who have not only been protecting our



borders but saving lives in the process of doing it. Now that's the face of Australia to the world. We will be compassionate, we will save lives, we will care for people, but we will decide and nobody else who comes to this country. (Howard, 2001)

Rudd would echo Howard when he said in July 2013 ‘. . . our responsibility as a government is to ensure that we have a robust system of border security and orderly migration, on the one hand, as well as fulfilling our legal and compassionate obligations under the refugee convention on the other’, (Hall & Swan, 2013) while condemning refugees to an indefinite detention purgatory that has lasted more than a decade. Such political rhetoric has not only intrinsically linked securitisation of the border with a purported humane response but has made even that spuriously humane response subservient to ‘national interest’ manifesting through securitisation and militarisation of migration.

University of Sydney researcher Andonea Dickson (2015) argues ‘Australia’s border enforcement strategies and immigration control policies operate in distant geographies, concealed from human rights groups, media and the public’ (p. 437). In her exploration of the militarisation of asylum seeker news on television, Stewart (2016) argues ‘As policies regarding the treatment and processing of people seeking asylum in Australia have become increasingly punitive across successive governments, similarly the visual presence of military artefacts and personnel at the borderline, and linguistic uses of militarist language in media reports of people seeking asylum have increased’ (p. 1). Such observations align with the name change and rebranding of Australia’s border control authorities—Customs or Customs Service (1991-2009), the inclusion of Border Protection Command into Customs in 2005, the rebranding of Customs as the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service (2009-14) and eventually Border Force in 2014.

This militarisation of the border has shifted the Fourth Estate scrutiny of border regimes from a democratic accountability space to a national security space, where the mediated narrative itself plays out, with some notable exceptions, within this predetermined narrative framework between securitisation and a pseudo-compassionate humane response uber-concerned with drownings and little else.

### **Dehumanisation and the slow violence of invisibility**

In her seminal text *On Photography*, Sontag (1977) explores how the act of photographing involves a particular kind of seeing, a particular gaze. She argues that the act of looking through the camera lens and capturing an image involves a power dynamic between the photographer and the subject being photographed. This concept of a ‘photographic gaze’ explores the representation and portrayal of refugees in photography, particularly in relation to power dynamics, empathy, and ethical considerations.

Wilmott (2017) argues ‘news images of refugees have become increasingly negative, often portraying them as either innocent victims, who lack political agency, or as security threats, with the potential to threaten the host country’s national security and identity’ (p. 67), a perspective supported by a large volume of literature suggesting such portrayals fall within that established hegemonic narrative of refugees (Berry et al., 2015; Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2016; Wilmott, 2017). Rettberg and Gajjala (2016) note this socially mediated representation is even more insidious for particular groups of refugees, particularly men. Based on their analysis of images and words associated with the Twitter hashtag #refugeesNOTwelcome in the aftermath of the 2015 Syrian refugee migration to Europe they note refugee men are often vilified and cast as either terrorist and rapists, or as cowards (pp. 178-181). Bleiker et al. argue the Australian press mediatisation of refugees has primarily represented asylum seekers as ‘medium or large groups and through a focus on boats . . . this visual framing, and in particular the relative absence of images that depict individual asylum seekers with recognisable facial features, associates refugees not with a humanitarian challenge, but with threats to sovereignty and security’ (2013, p. 398). Lydon notes that ‘Visual strategies that define and contest the place of . . . refugees seeking to come to Australia have been criticised for depicting their subjects as abject victims who lack agency or history, or simply rendering them invisible. Some have been critical of the visual discourse of spectacular violence that has been created and promoted by the Australian government in its pursuit of policies of “deterrence”,’ (Lydon, 2022, p. 100). Bleiker et. al. further note ‘These dehumanising visual patterns reinforce a politics of fear that explains why refugees are publicly framed as people whose plight, dire as it is, nevertheless does not generate a compassionate political response’ (2013, p. 398).

### **Subverting the gaze**

There is a long and rich history of visually documenting refugee migration—from Robert Capa’s coverage of Republican refugees fleeing Franco’s army (1939) and Jewish refugees arriving in Israel (1948-50), and Henri Cartier-Bresson’s coverage of refugee migration following the partition of India (1947) to Paolo Pellegrin’s ‘Desperate Crossings’ series and Jérôme Sessini’s studies of the Calais Jungle. Magnum’s Mark Power, who photographed the Azraq and Zaatari refugee camps in Jordan in 2015, says ‘I believe strongly in photography as a mark of history to carry forward to future generations to learn from’ (Magnum Photos, 2016). These narratives, while seminal in their own right, tend to belie more subterranean structures that facilitate the slow violence they highlight within these refugee migration scapes—such as that of militarisation and securitisation within national security paradigm.

But there has been attempts to break away from this traditional photo-

journalistic framing of refugee migration. Richard Mosse's *'Heat Maps'* series uses military thermal radiation cameras to create detailed panoramas of refugee camps, and he also used Kodak Aerochrome, a Cold War-era infrared satellite film, to document the war in Congo (Locke, 2017)—using techniques and material that deliberately draws attention to militarised, surveillance to which the refugees are subjected to. Bouchra Khalili's video work *'The Mapping Journey Project'* (Kennedy, 2016) explores refugee migration as a journey with multiple push and pull factors as opposed to an end-country 'problem'.

But all this work still focuses on the refugees themselves, and not on the citizens of the Global North that wield the ultimate power of electing political leaders and supporting rights based legislative reforms that can usher in more humane refugee processing regimes. Zaborowski and Georgiou's analysis of the visual mediation of citizen/noncitizen encounters in Europe's 2015 'refugee crisis' note that 'On the one hand, many news media simulated zombies' threatening strangeness in images of refugee massification; on the other, many news media images reaffirmed the decisive power of the national subject over refugees' fate,' (2019, p. 92)—suggesting a power dynamic between citizens and noncitizen refugees that tilts in favour of the former.

Considering the refugees have been subjected to a particular mediated gaze designed to 'explain' and scrutinise refugee migration for media consuming citizens in the global North, this photo-documentary project posits that this gaze can be subverted by turning the mediated scrutiny of the camera lens on the 'citizens' and on their perceived moral responsibility in engaging with the refugee 'crisis'. It is this 'moral responsibility' that prompted Meanjin (Brisbane) community members to rally around and eventually trigger the release of a group of medevaced refugee men who were locked up in an urban motel on Brisbane's Main Street at Kangaroo Point for more than a year in 2020-21—their latest confinement location in more than eight years of continuous mandatory detention.

While hundreds of people joined the solidarity protests outside the perimeter wall of the Kangaroo Point Alternative Place of Detention (APoD), there is little public record of their motivations for joining the protest, with the exception of a few 'event organisers'. As such, this non-traditional visual project argues it is not only the refugees who have been silenced and invisibilised in state sponsored refugee rhetoric and indeed mediated discourse, but also those who challenge the political narrative. In these images taken of community members outside the KPAPoD, community members go 'on the record' to articulate their motivations for taking a stand—an enduring Fourth Estate record of their social and political stance as active participants within the mediated democratic process of holding power accountable in Australia's heavily politicised refugee migration debate.

The refugees they stood in solidarity with have since been released into the wider Brisbane community, however they remain unsettled and unanchored,

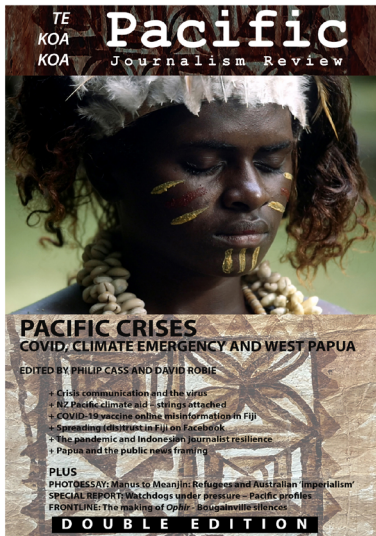
living precariously in yet another version of an all too familiar immigration limbo. The unresolved nature of their residency and the continued solidarity of the public means this photojournalistic project is ongoing, as it continues to document and visualise the complex motivations and interactions of individuals within this space. In subverting the gaze, and by turning the lens on the Meanjin (Brisbane) community, this work enters this public sphere discourse challenging the hegemonic visualisation of refugee migration that dominates mediated discourse. In doing so, it is undeniable that it manifests through an activist journalism framework (Russell, 2017; Ward, 2019), drawing on human rights-based journalism (Shaw 2012) and investigative photojournalism practice (Dean, 2006; Bohane, 2007; Bohane, 2014; and Robie, 2017)—the activism being practised here then, is a community’s right to be heard within an open and transparent mediated space.

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Image 1: Barb Nielsen: 'Seeking asylum is not a crime'



Image 2: Jarrah Kershaw: 'Standing in solidarity with guys in Kangaroo Point . '





Image 3: Jack Shaw: 'Open when someone in danger knocks.'



Image 4: Marisol: "I have a refugee background."

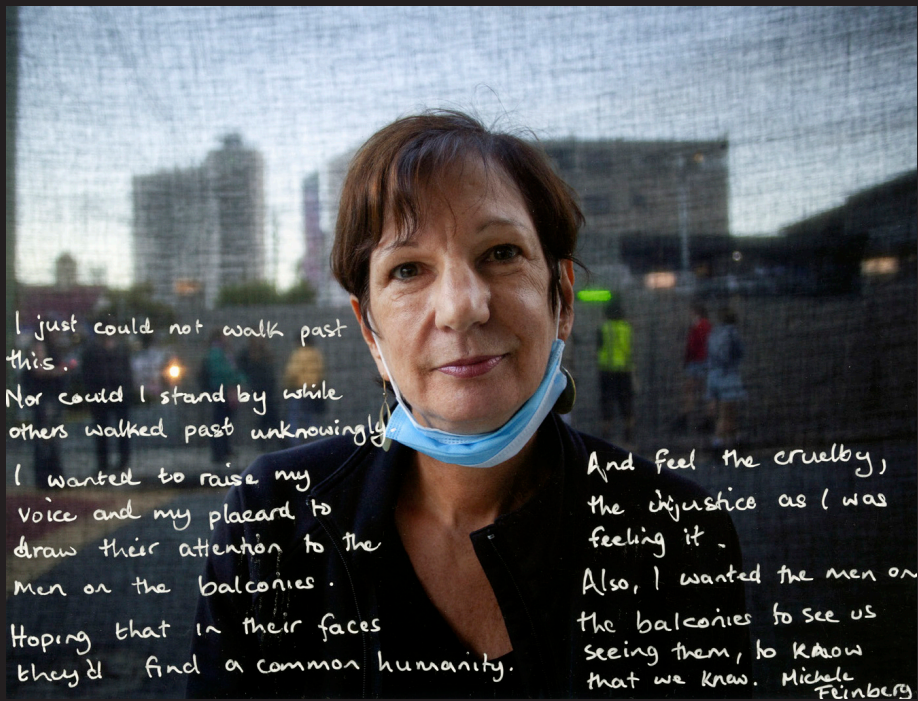


Image 5: Michele Feinberg: 'I just could not walk past this.'

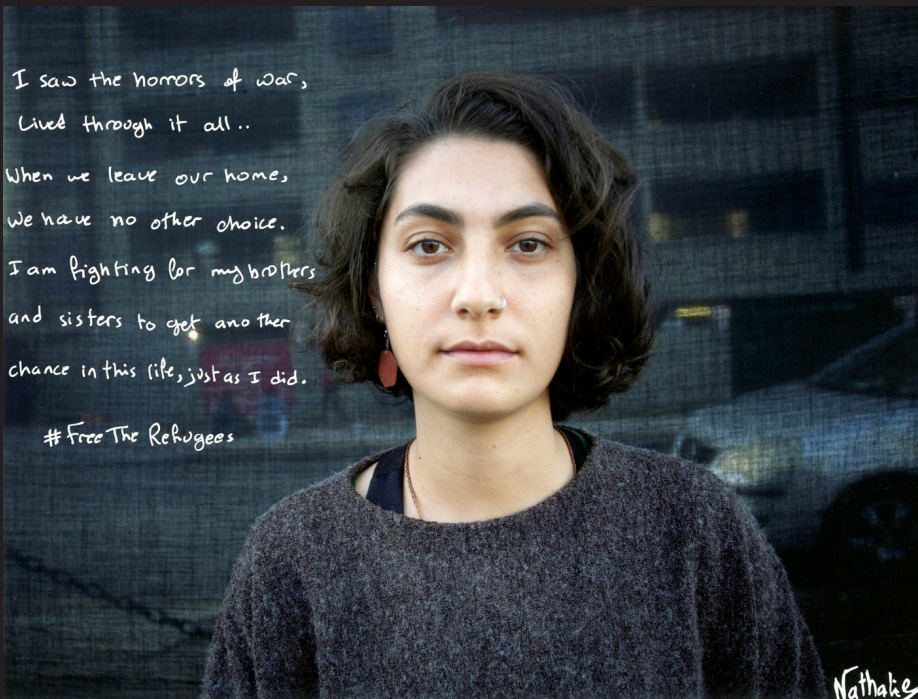


Image 6: Nathalie: 'I am fighting for my brothers and sisters.'



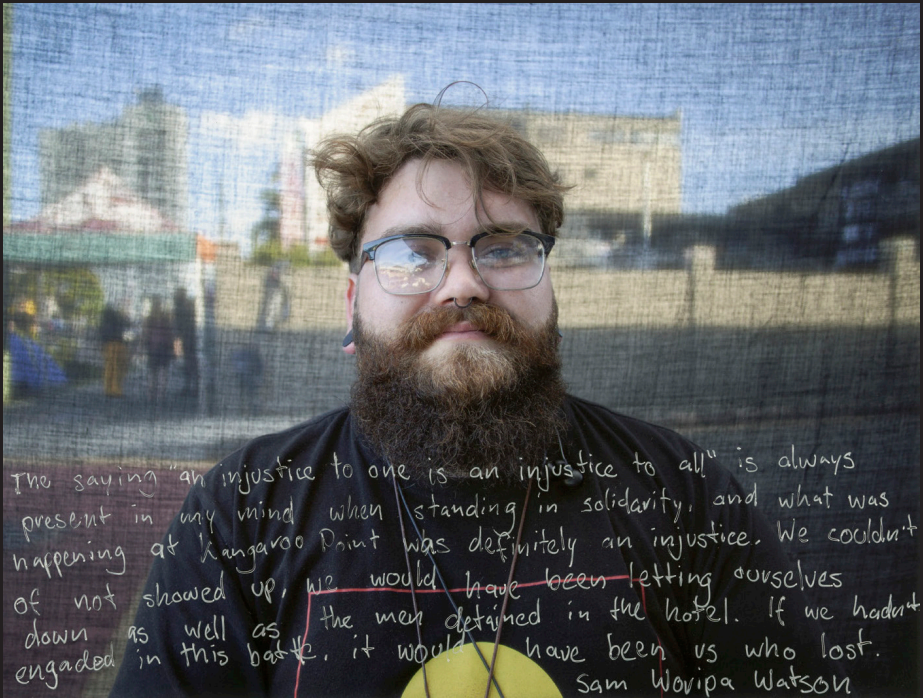


Image 7: Sam Woripa Watson: 'An injustice to one is an injustice to all.'



Image 8: Jane Beilby: 'I've seen the cruelty of the "Australian" government closeup.'





Image 9: Cal: 'If the government can do this, they can do it to any of us.'

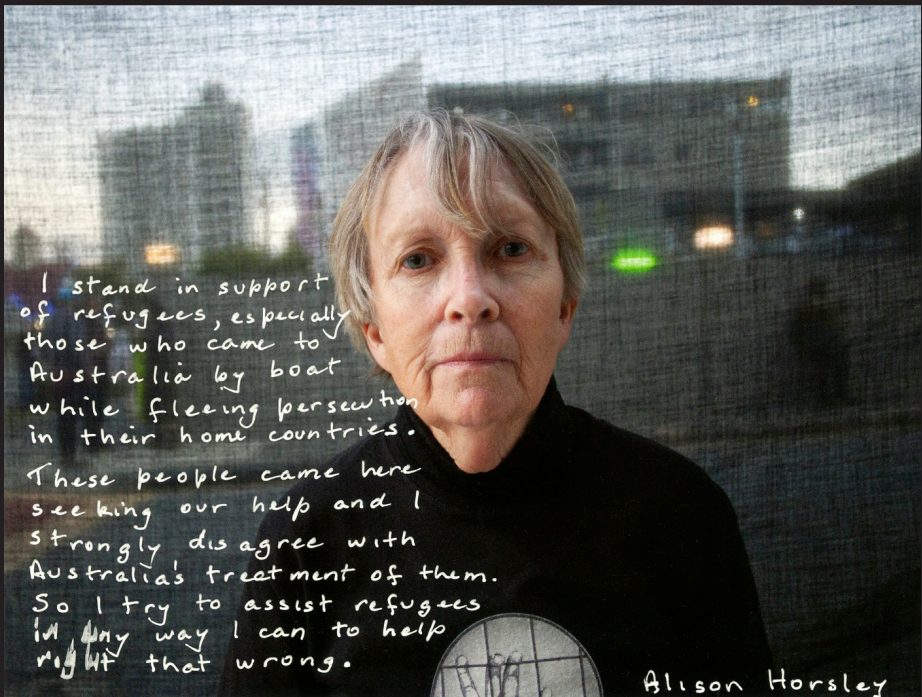


Image 10: Alison Horsley: 'I stand in support of refugees.'





Image 11: Jacqui: 'No one deserves the treatment that you have experienced. . .'

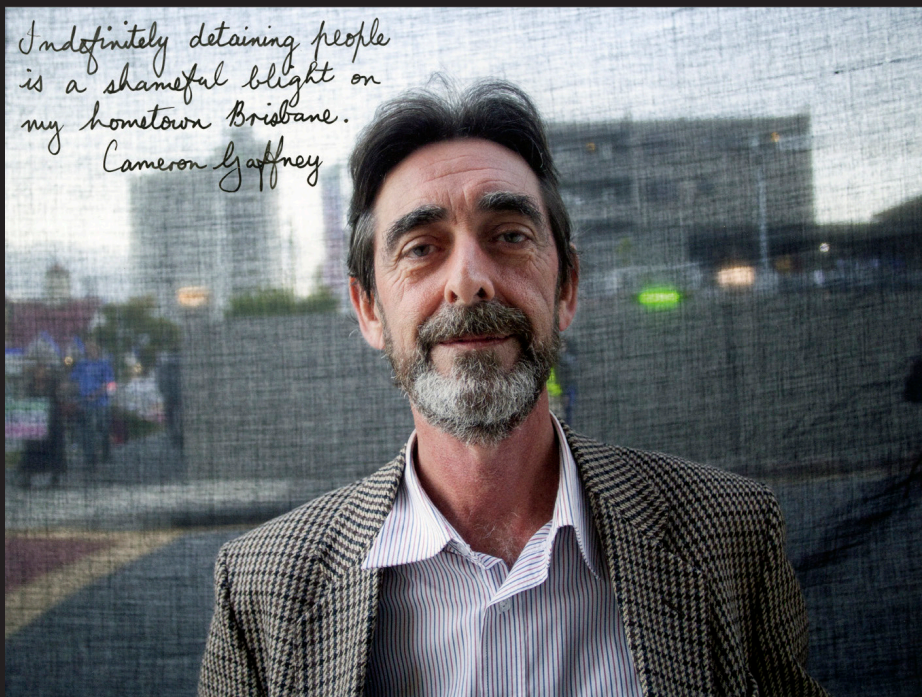


Image 12: Cameron Gaffney: 'Indefinitely detaining people is a shame.'



Image 13: Lux Adams: 'How can someone not feel compelled to protest?'



Image 14: Clancy Smith: 'Australia [has never] treated refugees with dignity.'





Image 15: Cassidy Chapman: 'Strong communities can win out over oppression.'



Image 16: Beatrice: 'It is my duty to my ancestors to be here.'



The standard you walk past is the standard you accept. And I don't accept this. It is the state sanctioned torture of human beings. This is just wrong. Fiona Carlin



Image 17: Fiona Carlin: 'I don't accept this.'



Image 18: Martha: 'I refuse to see innocent men in prison and tortured.'





**Image 19: Father Martin Arnold: 'Something there that doesn't love a wall.'**



**Image 20: Frederika Steen: 'For God's sake! Australians are better than this . . .'**