

HOSSEIN VALAMANESH

Out of nothingness

Mary Knights and Ian North



HOSSEIN

VALAMANESH

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Gallery 1 page: *Love Is*, 1981, clay, wood, straw, 51 x 41 cm, Collection of the artist.
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Last page: *NO LOVE LOST*, 2009, crown of thorn (*Euphorbia Milii*), paper, 70 x 220 x 4 cm. Private collection, Sydney.

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Christopher Rhys Jones, emerging writer and artist, is currently a student at Art, Architecture and Design, University of South Australia. He was awarded a twelve-month mentorship by Arts SA to work with Mary Knights, Ian North and Hossein Valamanesh on the development of the 2011 SALA Book. Jones's contribution included compiling a valuable database of Hossein's artwork.

HOSSEIN VALAMANESH

Out of nothingness

Mary Knights and Ian North

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Profiling Hossein:

Preamble

We like to know about artists we perceive to be significant because their work has captured us. It is natural to be curious about our captors – about these sources of innovative pleasures or discomfoting thoughts. To say otherwise is to espouse pure formalist idealism, to which few subscribe in the real world for the simple reason that it is unsustainable.

A few comments, then, on the person. Hossein Valamanesh presents as a robust, compact person physically, with fine wrists and pronounced eyebrows that can elevate up and down when he is amused or when seeking to amuse, like those of Groucho Marx. He manifests a confident, occasionally clownish demeanour as the carapace of a gently assertive persona that burgeoned in step with his artistic development: he was shy and respectful of authority when he first arrived in Australia. He dresses neatly and stylishly, often with a Middle Eastern accent, and if never flamboyant in his garb, he is rarely seen in public without smart shoes and a fedora. His self control, his warm, pleasant personality and, yes, good taste are always apparent.

Such is the outward aspect of an individual possessed by an underlying determination. This has enabled him, with his estimable artist partner Angela Valamanesh (née Burdon), to achieve something rare in the financially constricted Australian art world: survival, and latterly better than that, on the platform of their art practice. Valamanesh has known hard times, and seen them off. He is justifiably if quietly proud, in a subtle way, of achieving material security, something available only to the driven and well-disciplined on his chosen path. Not for nothing was he a corporal in the Iranian army (as a conscript, without seeing front-line service). Whatever ghosts might haunt his past, they do not seem to shake his equanimity in the present. He is obsessive, but not at all crazy. He appears as someone who has long known who he is, and what he wants. He is a person who is happy to cultivate his

own garden literally as well as metaphorically, finding within it inspiration and materials for his art.

I have come to know Valamanesh well over the last thirty years, moving beyond nodding social contact in 1980, when in an Adelaide Festival exercise for the Art Gallery of South Australia I organised the exhibition *Adelaide art alternatives*, conceived in the spirit of the Link Exhibition program I had run at the gallery as Curator of Paintings during the 1970s. *Alternatives* involved commissioning leading Adelaide artists' collectives, including Roundspace, a group to which Valamanesh belonged, to create installations and performances in various locations around and beyond the



Dwelling, 1978, clay, straw, sand, wood, PVA on plywood,
120 x 91 x 7 cm, South Australian Royal Art Society, Adelaide.

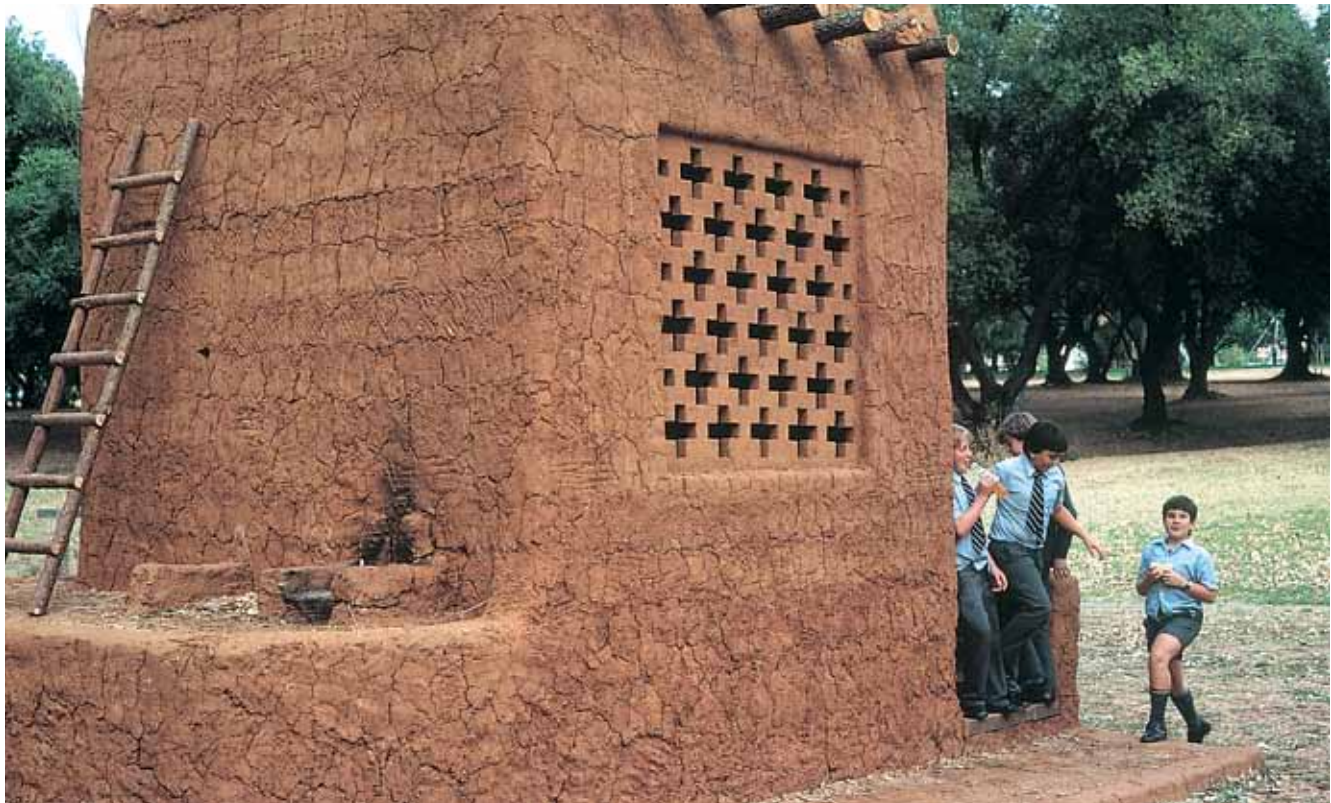
a conversation with the artist

Ian North

CBD. Under Valamanesh's guidance and due to his immediately apparent dynamism Roundspace proposed and built *Dwelling*, a Middle Eastern-style house which appeared like an apparition amid the scattered trees of the East Parklands. Its pale, hand-built mud and fabric tower was a far cry visually and conceptually from the Victorian buildings and fluorescent lights of the city's then raffish eastern precinct. *Dwelling*'s evocation of a spirit house or place of retreat markedly distinguished it from the overt politics or attempted avant-gardism of the other offerings in *Alternatives*.

Dwelling is worth emphasising not only as being, in effect, Valamanesh's first major public sculpture,

but because of its oddity. It made no concessions to ameliorate its out-of-placeness or its unabashed multiculturalism, a term then coming confusedly into Australian currency. Remarkably, Valamanesh has persuaded his audience over the last three decades to accept the appurtenances and signifiers of Iranian visual culture in his work as he established his vision ever more firmly, operating not from ethnic ghettos but within the mainstream of Australian art. What follows is an amalgam of an email exchange plus *viva voce* questions I put to the artist in late 2010 in an attempt to track vectors of his accomplishments.



Dwelling, 1980, earth, wood, 700 x 500 x 500 cm. Temporary installation, Eastern Parklands, Adelaide.

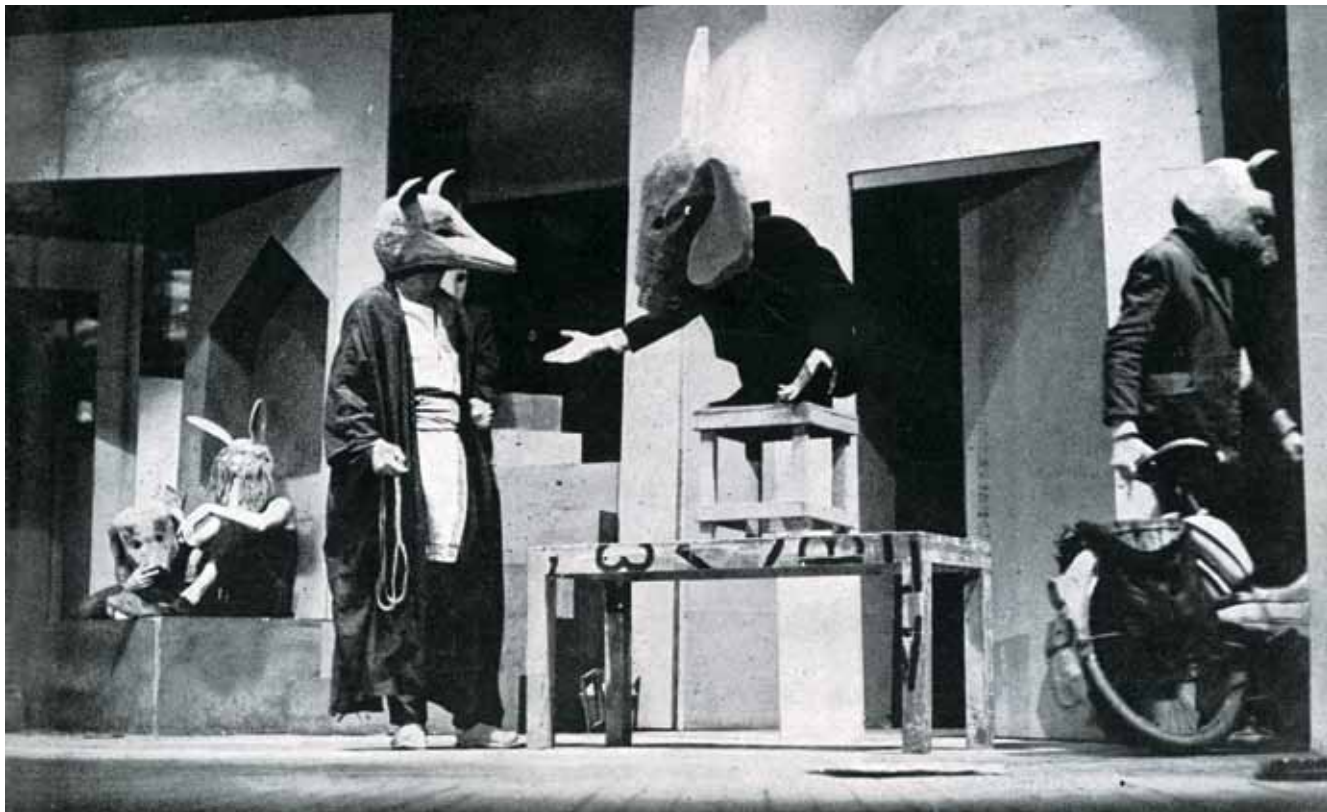
1 Theatricality

IN Let us jump in at the deep end, if from an oblique angle. Both your conversation and work suggest that you view the theatre as an arena for the mythical and even the metaphysical. Camille Paglia has asserted that 'art is a *temenos*, a sacred place. It is ritually clean, a swept floor, the threshing floor that was the first site of theatre. Whatever enters this place is transformed' (*Sexual Personae*, 1990). Your reaction, regarding your attitude to the theatre and your art practice as a whole?

HV Interesting proposition. I may not view it as dramatically as that however I do agree with the essence of this statement. I think the transformation happens when the audience or viewer confronts an art work and nowhere is this more pronounced than in theatre. In the visual arts it is harder to hold the viewer's attention and over the years I have tried to do this by the way I arrange the work within an exhibition. Of course I hope the works in themselves have certain qualities that engage or seduce the audience.

IN There is an obvious theatricality about much of your work generally, from drawings and indeed public sculptures featuring a human figure, sometimes fragmented or represented by a simulated shadow, or implied by ladders seeming to disappear through the ceiling to infinity, like the Indian rope trick. It is easy to see the figure as you-as-everyperson acting out a role within the suggestions of a room or similarly bounded space. Can you expand upon the appearance and reappearance of your avatar and the character of dramas in which it has been engaged over the years?

HV Yes, that outline, the shadow, that crept into my work in the mid 1980s when I was making sculpture and installation using earthbound geometry, circles and pyramids. In parallel to this in my studio I was preparing designs for public art projects and in the proposal drawings and models I used simple human figures to get a sense of scale and the idea of human interaction with the work. Somehow these images all started looking like me. I think it was then that they crept into my studio work.



Shahr-e Ghesseh (City of Stories) by Bijan Mo'fid, 1969. Hossein Valamanesh as the elephant.

I did not want them to be recognised as me but they still needed to be me. The body was used as an outline and then it could be filled with different images or ideas. Nowadays it seems to come and go. The only time I didn't use my own outline was when I made *Falling breeze*, 1991. I used the outline of Nassiem, my son, when he was around twelve, hence the title: Nassiem means 'breeze' in Farsi. Maybe I was seeing growing up as a kind of falling or coming to earth.

IN Can you jump back to your first grounding in the theatre and comment on the nature of your attraction to that medium?

HV My involvement with theatre started from a sense of curiosity when I accompanied a friend to a Scout hall in Tehran, where he had joined a theatre group. I became immediately attracted. The group was the brainchild of Bijan Mofid, an artist of multiple talents. He had gathered a group of young, untrained enthusiasts to train them in acting and music to realise his masterpiece, *Shahr-e Ghesseh (City of Stories)*. He wrote the play in rhyming verse with songs and music which he had also composed. He taught us theatre to realise his dream.

After two or three years the work was ready to perform. We put together a make-shift stage and made masks. I forgot to say that all of the characters in the play were animals except the narrator, Bijan's wife, Jamile Neddaei. They all wore masks but were in human clothing. I was the elephant in a black suit and tie, a newcomer to the city. Anyway, the play was performed in the Scout hall in 1969. From this humble beginning we were invited to perform in Shiraz Art Festival where the play was a great success. Back in Tehran it was recorded for television and performed on stage for many months. It became a most loved and remembered play. Because we all had to wear masks the sound of the play was pre-recorded and we performed to the recording. It is still listened to by Iranians today. *Shahr-e Ghesseh* was a brilliant play, critical and satirical, that looked at the social and political situation in Iran using folktales and popular stories to great effect. The selection of animals and their life stories was insightful, in terms of contemporary life:

donkey the worker, monkey the wise joker, bear the bureaucrat, the hippy horse, the parrot a poet, the elephant the newcomer – and not to forget a love story between the mouse and the cockroach.

After the *City of Stories* I worked on another of Bijan Mofid's plays, *Mahh o palang* or *Moon and tiger*, not as an actor but as a designer of sets and costumes. Then I was called up to do national service and spent time in the regions, away from Tehran, and went back to painting and drawing. After two years I returned to Tehran and joined The Theatre Workshop, a progressive and experimental centre for theatre workers collaborating on projects. There was an exciting sense of camaraderie, all being part of something new for theatre in Iran. While I was there, besides acting, I designed two book covers for plays that were written by the writers in the workshop – but then came my decision to emigrate to Australia in 1973. I was never so involved in theatre again, until *When the rain stops falling* came along (premiered at the 2008 Adelaide Festival).

IN You attracted well-deserved praise for your sets, costumes and overall visual design for the play you just mentioned . . . what was particularly significant to you about this project and its theme?

HV The experience of being part of the creative team for the production of *When the rain stops falling* was a unique opportunity. It was the foresight of Chris Drummond, artistic director of Brink Productions that bought us together, Andrew Bovell the author, composer Quentin Grant and myself. We started from the idea of extinction, animal and human, on various levels. Each of us brought our expertise and experiences to the table. After three years and four workshops it was up to each individual to refine their input. The complexity of Andrew's writing, its settings and characters necessitated a minimalist approach to accommodate all the transitions. I designed a suite of different visual elements that we could use to shift between time and place. You are right in pointing out the theatricality in some of my installations and public art works and I see the viewer as a participant, acting out the observation of the work and completing it.

2 Early Influences and Multiculturalism

IN Western art histories – and most art histories have been Western-centric, even those purporting to be universalist – have tended to slight Islamic art histories. Islamic art histories have apparently returned the compliment. James Elkins (the Chicago based academic) informs us that an Iranian art history from 1959, Ali Nagi Vaziri's *Tarikh-i umumi-I*, does not deal with post-Gothic Western art at all. What was the nature of your studio and art historical instruction at art school, directly and indirectly . . . what were its emphases . . . did it foster pride in Iranian culture, and to what extent did it open you to Western influences?

HV My art school training in Tehran, which was equivalent to the last three years of high school, was based on a French Academy pattern – starting with drawing from plaster casts of European classical sculpture and progressing through Impressionism to the art of the 1950s. We also studied 'anatomy artistic', perspective and direct documentation (drawing and painting) of objects of antiquity in the museums. As you see the methods of training were mainly very Western orientated, however, there were other subjects like miniature painting and calligraphy. I cannot recall much of my history lessons that introduced us to modern Western art but I do recall occasional lessons in Western and Eastern mythology.



Karaj, 1968, oil on hessian, 35 x 50 cm. Collection of the artist.

IN I have to say that some of your teenage drawings could be quite crude and angry, more than a little reminiscent of prisoner art, which is surprising in light of the later levels of refinement you achieved – however revelatory of your political perspectives they were. Can you comment on these . . . and when did you become aware of the pull of high art, to put it that way, of either East or West?

HV Those drawings were done after art school when I was doing compulsory military service. During art school I was aware, as you put it, of high art at a basic level. Those drawings were made when I became engaged with social and political issues of the time in the late 1960s, early 1970s. I see them more as social surrealism and yes, they are crude and angry, a reaction to living in the Shah's Iran.

IN I listened with interest to Pino Migliorino assert on ABC Radio National [30 November 2010] that he was working with his organisation, the Federation of Ethnic Community Councils (FECCA), to 'reclaim multiculturalism' – a confusing term which many have seen, mischievously or otherwise, as licensing and even promoting the disintegration of Australian society. I note that you, Hossein, had by coincidence emigrated to Australia in 1973, the very year in which the term had been introduced to recognise the identity of migrant groups within mainstream institutions, and when the final vestiges of the White Australia Policy were supposedly removed by the Whitlam government. So you were re-establishing yourself and attending an Australian art school during the turbulent era of multicultural debates, during which signs and memories of Iran appeared constantly, unabashedly, in your work.

Can you talk about your mindset in those early years in Australia, the reception of your work, and the fact that you managed to push into the mainstream, eventually exhibiting with some of the best dealer galleries in the land – and how they may have mediated the character and production of your work?

HV What was interesting and important about this time was that I was able to be free, well maybe not

completely, of my earlier social and political concerns, and was able to explore my own thoughts and emotions. I was interested and aware of contemporary art of this period but I had decided to take the advice of an Aboriginal elder painter in Papunya and paint 'my story'. This personal perspective became a way of introducing myself and my work, and I think that my viewers and galleries appreciated my way of looking at the world.

As part of this personal exploration I did look at my cultural background, however I was not making 'Iranian' art, and the sense of place where the art was being made was important. Nowadays I see myself as an Australian artist of Iranian origin, but the notion of Australian-ness or Iranian-ness has become less relevant and in a way, paradoxically, the more the work becomes personal the more it has universal appeal. I think this is because it is from a deeper place than ethnicity and biography.

IN Even so, your work became more various and on occasion more conceptual, you simultaneously celebrated such historical Iranian cultural heroes as the poet Rumi; can you comment on this rich sounding contradiction?

HV You are right that some works appear more 'conceptual' but I don't dissect the ideas and images – I allow them to come forward slowly to develop both formally and conceptually. You mentioned the poet and Iranian culture and I'd like to say that poetry in its written form remains important in Iranian society today. It has also been transmitted orally for many centuries. Rumi has a special place in my heart and has always been a great teacher and source of inspiration for me. His poetry, unlike religion, does not preach dogma and obedience. It contains passionate, insightful illuminations in the path of love and freedom, not only with answers but also with questions. His poetry encourages a sense of wonder. Since I started reading him in the late 1960s I have always found it inspirational and it did not matter what my own mindset was at the time, whether being a young Marxist or later studying Buddhism.

IN Do you think that the upsurge of Western interest in Islamic culture following 9/11 worked in your favour . . . or, to put it another way, did Bin Laden inadvertently grant you an extra warrant for the Iranianism we sometimes find coming to the fore in your work? And to be more provocative still, and thinking for example of works which heavily feature Farsi script, would you allow that your work sometimes veers towards a subtle kind of orientalism?

HV It is true that there is more interest now in art from Iran and the Middle East, however this is not new. I recall the surge of interest in Eastern European and Russian art after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall, also the interest in Chinese art in recent years. It seems that with major political change we look at art of these regions with greater interest. Perhaps art like fashion seems to require the latest fad. It is a pity that this openness doesn't exist all the time. In regards to further attention to my work I'm not sure. Probably a bit has rubbed off. An Iranian aspect of my work has always existed but fortunately has nothing to do with Bin Laden!

The work has featured Farsi script and use of calligraphy since the early 1980s. The use of calligraphy and text has had an important place in Iranian contemporary art since the 1950s. Text, in Farsi or English, has been more evident in my work recently and the concerns of the work are more universal than 'oriental'.

IN I was being a little disingenuous, as you will realise, in associating success with a whiff of exotica. Does an artist advisedly chase the ball of art globally, or plump for kicking goals in one's back garden? To what extent, Hossein, do you see yourself as doing both – as a dedicated cosmopolitan, so to speak?

HV I strongly believe that one needs to establish a conversation with your own community to begin with. At the same time it is important to expose the work to unfamiliar audiences be it in Australia or overseas. I am happy to show my work outside of Australia but I don't want to do this to just add to my CV. There needs to be a deeper connection.

3 Aboriginality

IN The multicultural revolution, with its European and Asian focal points, took little account of Indigenous culture as such, yet it seems fair to say that you have gained momentum and perhaps credibility from both waves of cultural development during the 1970s. The issue of Aboriginal art alone – the fact that it is the greatest movement in Australian art history, if you can call it a single phenomenon – has of course precipitated the readjustment of Australian art history from top to bottom. You spent about three months visiting places like Warburton and Papunya in 1974, just a few years after the Western Desert painting movement flowered into being at Papunya. Various commentators and you yourself have seen these visits as seminal to your work, finding the Australian desert there to bear resonances of Sistan-e Baluchestan, the province in eastern Iran where you spent your childhood, while Aboriginal art practices offered a licence to mine your own ancient cultural inheritance.

We are familiar with Indigenous references in your work into the 1980s and 1990s – *Dot painting for beginners I* [1999], for example, or a little later the dot paintings made from heart pills – but I must ask your opinion: has the Aboriginal influence on you been exaggerated in the rush to honour the Western Desert painting revolution and your acknowledgement of it? And can you describe in detail just what happened at Warburton, and Papunya, and the ways in which being in those places did, or did not, influence your search for selfhood, which I take to be one of your fundamental motivations in travelling to those so-called remote communities?

HV I don't think the Aboriginal influence on my work has been exaggerated. My early encounter with Aboriginal art and culture was an important point in my life and art practice. In many ways it opened my eyes and influenced my decision to stay here permanently. These encounters not only influenced my art practice but also affected my overall attitude to life.

Before talking about specific events, a bit of background. It was only a year after I had immigrated to Western Australia that I was asked to join a commu-



From left: Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri, Obed Raggett and Hossien Valamanesh at Papunya, 1974.

nity arts group, the Round Earth Company, to travel to remote Aboriginal communities for about three months. I was very ignorant and ill informed about Aboriginal people and their culture when I arrived here – however this trip was a most fortunate introduction to this land and its people. We started from Perth, heading east. The first community we encountered was Cundalee, near Kalgoorlie, then we headed north east to Warburton and Docker River, later towards Kata Tjuta and Uluru. We spent a few days in Alice Springs and then visited Papunya, where I met the artists.

As you mentioned it was the early days of dot painting and I was amazed by the simplicity of the method used for such remarkable achievements. It was all very new to me and in my excitement I asked the artists if I could use this method to make a picture. They generously said yes, no problem as long as you paint your own story. It was explained to me that each artist had their own Dreaming story that they were allowed to paint. This was my first painting in Australia, a dot painting in Papunya loosely based on the epic poem the *Conference of the birds* by the Iranian poet Attar.

You also asked about Warburton. Overall we were very much welcomed in communities with hunting trips and sharing of meals and we were also invited occasionally to witness ceremonies. However, Warburton

was extra special as it was the right time of the year to see a particular ceremony that was a major event in their cultural calendar. The ceremony was conducted in a place with great views of the horizon, away from the camp. It went on for three to four nights and all the community was involved, men, women, old and young. They started as the sun was setting. The audience participated by singing and hitting sticks together or thumping their thighs. In front of the gatherings there were two large fires and a clearing for a stage with a wall made of branches and leaves. Behind this were dancers who came out in small groups thumping the red earth with their feet and making a cloud of dust. The singing got louder and dry sticks were thrown on the fire for extra light.

On the first few nights the dancers continued until midnight but on the final night there were more people gathered and a sense of anticipation and excitement was in the air. Like the other nights the singing and dancing began around sunset but did not stop at midnight and continued with more vigour until there was a hint of light in the sky. The dancing in front of the wall had stopped but singing continued and we felt attention turning to the east although there was nothing to be seen. After a while we could see two small spots shimmering on the horizon. The singing became louder and we realised the two spots were two men dancing and slowly coming towards us. They must have started their dance a long way away and as they came closer we could see them clearer. They had tall headdresses on and their painted bodies were covered in sweat. Then we witnessed the rising of two morning stars from the spot where they had started dancing.

As the sun started rising the men were in front of us and collapsed from exhaustion. They were quickly ushered behind a screen. Men were invited behind the screen to see the dancers and touch them on the shoulder. We felt the warmth and sweat on their bodies, and then started walking back to the camp. In the silence of the dawn we could hear the budgerigars in the distance. With no conversation we all felt that we were privileged to witness something extra special which rarely happens in a lifetime.



Conference of the birds, 1974, acrylic on canvas, 122 x 76.5 cm.
Private collection, Hobart.

IN Fascinating . . . can you talk about how all this impacted on your sense of place, of where you were in the world, and the character of your art in ensuing years, especially given your recent acknowledgement that you are ‘not really a bush person’?

HV What was overwhelming about this experience was witnessing our connection to nature and the universe. It did not seem to matter where we had come from and I felt I was part of the ceremony. The effects on my practice were both physical, through the use of natural materials, and metaphysical by recognition of such a connection.

4 The Angela Factor

IN It may be presumptuous, but I have rather assumed that your wife Angela's craft practice, pursued after you both met and married when attending the South Australian School of Art in the 1970s, was crucial to your financial survival as independent artists (Angela once told me, amusedly, that as a teenager your son and only child Nassiem thought that one of you, at least, 'should get a job!').

HV That's right, we both did our bit to make ends meet. I remember setting up a stand in the Central Market to sell Angela's pots. We had our first exhibitions together at Bonython Gallery in North Adelaide and later our works in public places also helped. Poor Nassiem, whose advice we did not take, had childhood experiences that may have put him in a good position to be dedicated to his own practice as a filmmaker.

IN Can one also presume, again, that your dynamism in seeking out different artistic solutions in terms of sculptural as well as pictorial work, or in public art as well as private, helped Angela develop from a craft

base to diversify her practice . . . and is it the case that Angela, as a particularly reflective person and keen reader, extended you also? Can you talk about your philosophies and methods of collaboration?

HV Gradual changes in Angela's practice started in the early 1990s, and her higher degree studies at the SA School of Art and later in Glasgow also contributed. It has been fortunate for both of us to have a life partner with the same commitments and interests. Since 1984 we have shared a studio in our back garden and as much as we both enjoy our solitude when making our work we also enjoy the conversations and company. Her opinions and advice have been a great help to me.

Our formal collaboration started with *Garden of memories*, 1993, at the site of the old Pennington Migrant Hostel in Adelaide. In that and other public art projects, after developing the basic ideas and images together, we then take on different aspects of the project. Angela is more inclined to be involved in research and reading and I look more at the spatial qualities of the site and physical aspects of the project.



An Gorta Mór, Memorial to the Great Irish Famine, 1999, collaboration with Angela Valamanesh; sound element by Paul Carter, sandstone, bronze, glass, granite, 1200 x 3000 x 300 cm. Hyde Park Barracks, Sydney.