

Hidden Footscray Launch Speech

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Hidden happens.

This exhibition itself offers a prime example of how hidden happens. The best laid plans of mice and men curators and producers repeatedly derailed by COVID. The pandemic has kept this exhibition under wraps for about 3 years now. It has been alternately postponed, cancelled and reinstated. It's a testament to the persistence and determination of those producing this show that it didn't remain hidden, sidelined, lost, that we're here in Footscray today, celebrating these wonderful works.

I remember the Footscray my family used to visit, back when we were new migrants in the late 70s. Mainly to shop at Forges – remember Forges? The buildings are still there – I wonder what it's like inside? I remember windy, narrow aisles piled high with – lord knows what – spread across those two buildings it seemed huge, endless and untamed, to the young boy I was then. I always felt there were treasures waiting to be discovered, hidden around the next corner, just out of view. I also remember Leed In Records, the ten pin bowling, the ice skating rink. In many ways Footscray today is a helluva lot different to that Footscray of the 1970s, and yet in other ways it's not. This town is still driven by the thrum of new migrants who continue to reshape these streets, as they did back then, perhaps with a different face and in different shoes, but with the same purpose in mind, to find a place to raise a family, make a new home, create a new life. To find out what lies hidden around the next bend.

The tale of Footscray is the tale of how hidden happens. Each new person who walks these streets, each new shop front, each new language spoken, adds another layer to Footscray, replacing the past as children replace their parents. Footscray has been the front door

to Australia for so many of us. It's the welcome mat. As we wipe the dust of our old homelands off onto that mat we layer over our pasts and the past of Footscray with new beginnings, dreams and hopes.

It's also the tale of how hidden unhappens. We're all here in Footscray – we know where Footscray is - so it can't be that hidden, unless you're meant to be somewhere else right now, in which case, it's time to call on Siri for directions. Footscray becomes more and more unhidden all the time. As we continue to be discovered by migrants both international and, more recently, from over the bridge.

Ways of living and being are eroded and sidelined as these new hidden and unhidden Footscrays emerge each day - a new hospital, the blacksmith's forge behind us here, The Saigon Welcome Arch on Leeds Street. That rhythm of change is unstoppable and, often, it's a good thing; but sometimes it's not. Vale Franco Cozzo's old shop. Megalo, megalo, megalo only in our memories from here on in.

Hidden happens deliberately. Sometimes with all the subtlety, literally, of a bulldozer. Little regard is given to what is being hidden, lost or removed as we chase the novelty or the profits to be derived of that which will replace it. Sometimes hidden happens at the pace of life, grandad's axe has seen several new handles and axe heads over and over across the years but it's still granddad's axe, changing yet unchanging, like a river.

Speaking of rivers, The Maribyrnong, for the countless generations who came before us, before the idea of Footscray, who might have sat on the sloping banks above the river gazing across the flood plains where the race course and container yards now sit, what hidden stories could they tell of this place? So much of what this land was for them is hidden from us. Forever? Can we ever know even a fraction of what they understood this place to be?

Hidden happens by accident, we often don't know the value of the things we have, or we value the wrong things. Archaeologists rejoice over the finding of a broken cup thrown away by heedlessly someone hundreds of years ago, of no value then. But of great worth now. What do we cherish that will become worthless? What hidden lost thrown away things of ours will people uncover and cherish in the future?

When my wife and I moved to Seddon, twenty something years ago, we removed the fire place in our little workers' cottage only to find two letters there from the late 1890s. They must have slipped down the back and had remained there, hidden for over a century. We wondered what to do with them, forgot about them over the years, almost threw them out by accident on several occasions and then finally hid them away, kept them somewhere safe, just in case (of what I don't know) and then we forgot about them until there was a knock at the door one day. An elderly woman and her husband stood there. Her grandparents had lived in this house, she'd spent much time there as a youngster. Back in Melbourne for a few days, researching her family history, she wondered if she might pop in and have a look around for old time's sake. She told me her name and – bingo – the letters. Where were they? Thank the Lord we hadn't hidden them too well - turned out they were addressed to her great grandparents. Accidentally hidden and unhidden and hidden again for a hundred years or more, finally found and cherished by the right person.

Hidden happens intentionally, we hide our sexuality, ethnicity, our origins, we are hidden at the same time by others and from others for those very same reasons.

Hidden happens sneakily, we prevent or deny something or someone, we look the other way. Hiding can be secretive, selective. We can pretend our way into not knowing.

Hidden happens over time. A flower might be hidden by a shadow, a letter down the back of a mantelpiece. Sometimes we just have to wait for the clouds to pass and for the sun to shine in order to see what has always been there in front of us, hidden in plain sight.

These works encourage us to notice, to fossick, to ask questions and to be curious, to look underneath and through gaps in fences and histories. They challenge us to seek and yet they also bid us pause, to deliberately place ourselves in Footscray, to wait for the clouds to pass and the sun to shine and to let the hidden discover us.