



'Hold', 2011
Fired clay, 22x65x25cm
Finalist Fisher's Ghost Art Award 2012,
Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney
Photo Mike Buick

A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

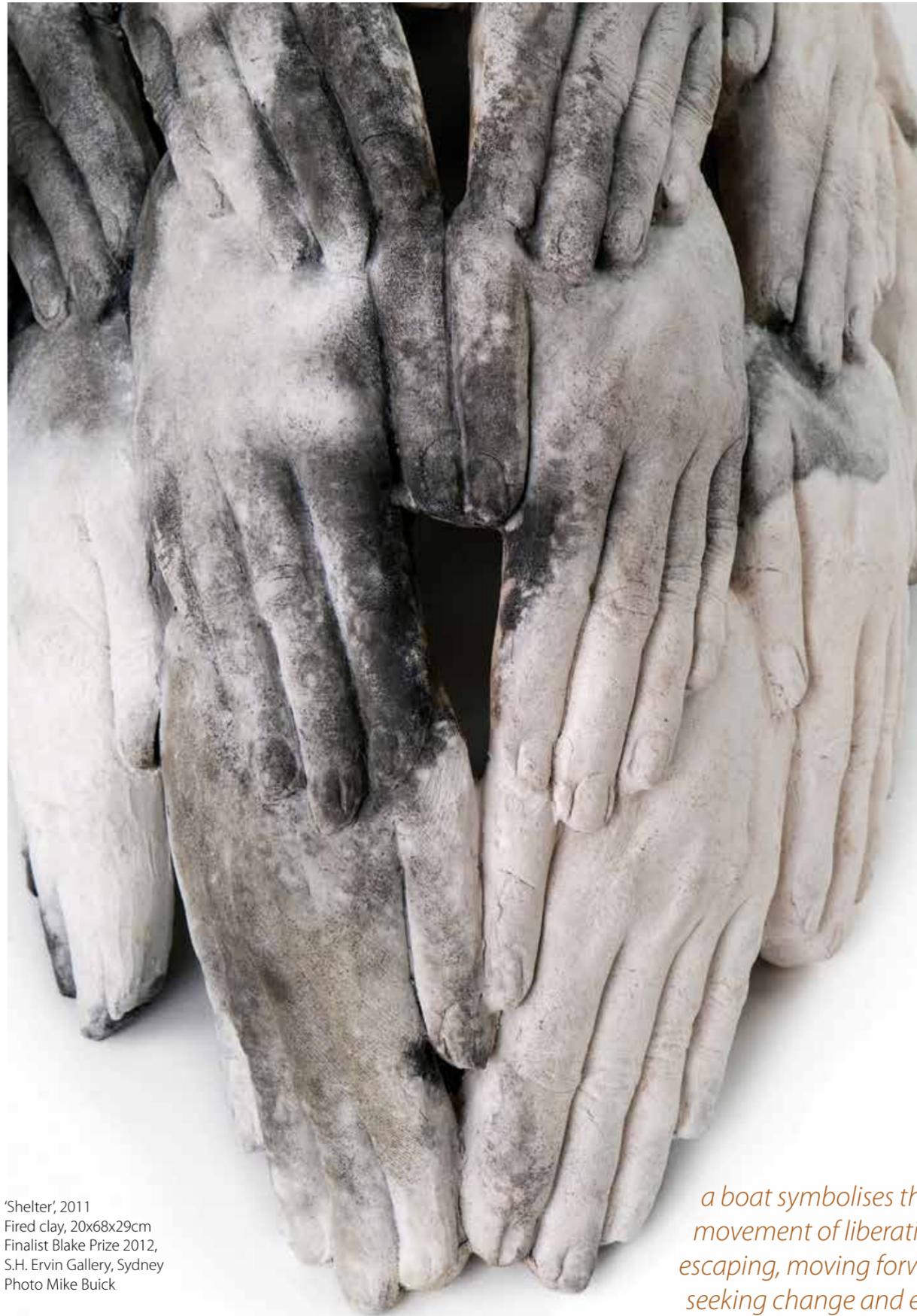
Artists Nerine Martini, Gabriella Hegyes and Mandy Schoene-Salter work with public art projects

NERINE MARTINI

Nerine Martini is a visual artist working in the fields of sculpture, installation, drawing and public art. She has an interest in working cross-culturally and creating artworks that respond to stories of migration, belonging, dislocation, cultural identity and home.

A recurring motif in Nerine's practice is that of the boat, a powerful symbol in the lives of all cultures.

From ancient times it has been the boat and the fluid power and movement of rivers and oceans which enabled us to remove ourselves, whether accidentally or deliberately, to a better and hopefully safer place. Even the evocative image of human hands cupped together like the prow of a boat symbolises that movement of liberation, escaping, moving forward, seeking change and even adventure. Freedom.



'Shelter', 2011
Fired clay, 20x68x29cm
Finalist Blake Prize 2012,
S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney
Photo Mike Buick

*a boat symbolises that
movement of liberation,
escaping, moving forward,
seeking change and even
adventure...*

*'The past is not dead. It is not even past'
(William Faulkner)*

Nerine quotes William Faulkner: 'The past is not dead. It is not even past.' While she alludes to this in a particular context, it nevertheless feeds into all of her work and projects for communities which depict change, escape and refuge. The past is still here and now. It remains with us and must be acknowledged.

The boat seems to come from the past, laden with the baggage of other lives, just as it also floats on into the future, bearing our hopes and dreams. It has become a potent symbol for Nerine, weaving its way through her projects, both public and personal, a universal symbol.

The ladders on a 2014 work—*Ascend*—created for Sculpture at Sawmillers and located at McMahons Point on Sydney Harbour, represent hope and a means of elevation out of a situation of hardship. The weathered steel gives the work an industrial feel, relating to shipping and shipyards. The sculpture is about uneasy journeys, the skeletal boat symbolizing fragility. It is a tribute to all those who have made the difficult journey by boat.

A major project completed this year is the *Migration Project* commissioned by Wollongong City Council, a series of sculptural artworks celebrating and honouring the contribution of migrants to the social, cultural and economic fabric of that city.

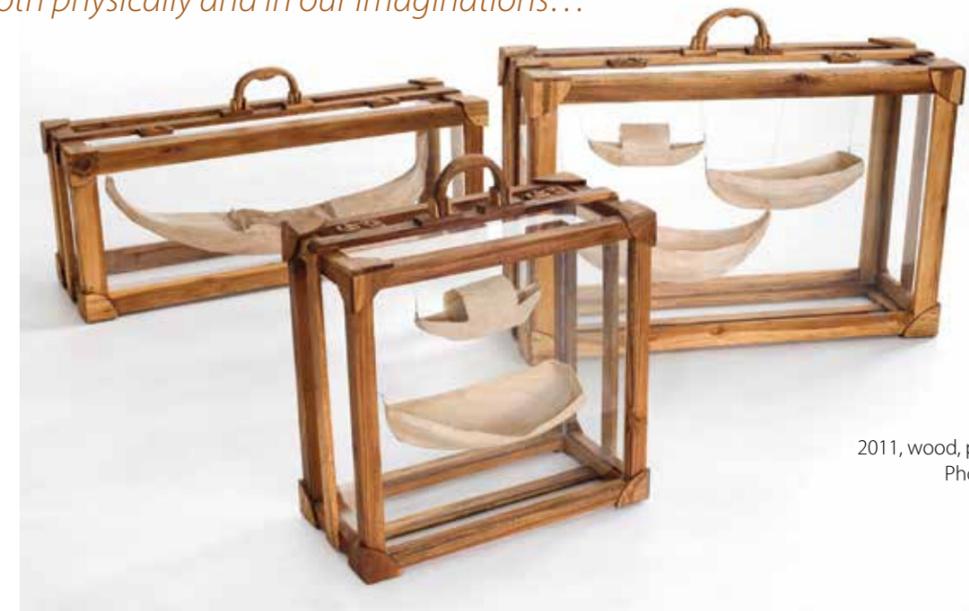
Nerine explains one of the aspects of the commission that attracted her to the project: 'For me this project presented an opportunity to reflect more broadly on immigration in Australia since the mid 20th century. The *Migration Project* was initiated by mostly European migrants, however in discussions about their intentions it was clear that they didn't want the work to be about any

specific nationality, rather it is intended as a tribute to all migrants past and present.'

The centrepiece of the *Migration Project*, *The Boat* is a contemporary landmark sculpture reminding us that migrants have journeyed in search of a better life. Constructed mainly of steel, it references the industry and business that migrants helped to establish in the Wollongong area. The 4-metre long stainless steel skeletal boat form is elevated on rusted steel I-beams which evolve into ladders reaching more than 5 metres into the air.

Another part of this project has been the installation of three posts collectively entitled *Dwellings*. These reference the accommodation provided to migrants when they first arrived in Wollongong—sheds, caravans and Nissen huts. The artwork reflects a story of humble beginnings, hard work and their contribution to family and community life. Nerine uses many different techniques, processes and materials in her practice: works on paper, ceramics, carved wood, etched stone, laser-cut steel and cast bronze. In 2011 she created a series of ceramic casts of her own hands, rhythmically layered to form archetypal boat sculptures, the ongoing theme within her art practice. In the same year she made a series of three carved wooden suitcases, titled *Departures*, containing suspended paper boats cast from Vietnamese Do paper. The boats are based on boats from around the world, from Asian fishing vessels to Venetian gondolas. In many Asian cultures there is a custom of burning paper objects to send a message to the spirits; therefore paper boats are significant to the afterlife of any person who has had a relationship with boats during their lifetime. The suitcases

*'Departures' is about the things we carry through
life both physically and in our imaginations...*



Departures
2011, wood, perspex, paper
Photo Mike Buick



Life Boat / Thuyen Cuu Roi is about ocean journeys of courage and compassion. The sculpture is constructed from an old wooden boat which came from Hoi An, a town in the centre of Vietnam. The boat was originally used for trading goods such as ceramics, bronze, fish sauce, pepper, herbs and incense from Vietnam to countries in the region such as China, Indonesia and Malaysia. The people refer to this boat as a "pregnant boat" (*ghe bau*) because of the shape of the vessel and its ability to carry many things. Eyes are painted onto the front of the boat as a symbol of warning and to protect the boat and its passengers. The arms are made from carved recycled timber and coated with lacquer using traditional Vietnamese techniques. The hand gestures (detail above) were inspired by the statue, *One Thousand Arms One Thousand Eyes*, seen at the Bút Tháp Pagoda near Hanoi.

could have been carried by any person migrating to Australia in the last century: they represent familiar objects from the past. The work poetically combines Western and Eastern cultures, reflecting journeys made in this life and journeys to the next. It is about the things we carry through life both physically and in our imaginations. *Departures* was selected as a finalist for *Hidden: Rookwood Cemetery Sculpture Walk 2011* and *Sculpture in the Vineyards 2011*.

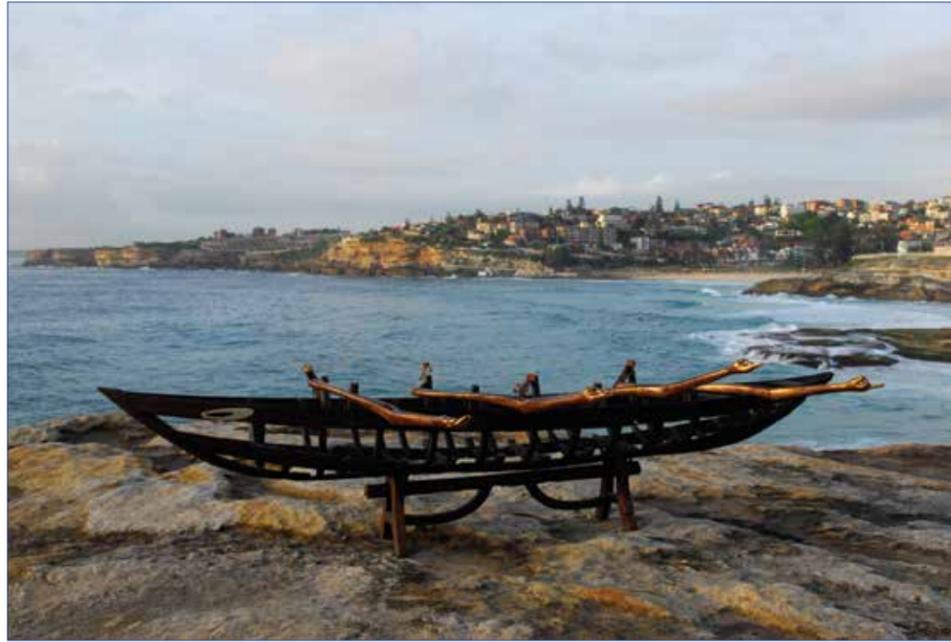
One of the most significant achievements in Nerine's career has been the sculpture entitled *Life Boat / Thuyen Cuu Roi*, made during a residency in Vietnam in 2006. This sculpture is about ocean journeys of courage and compassion. *Life Boat* was exhibited at the Museum of Ethnology in Hanoi and the Hue Festival before being transported to Sydney where it was exhibited in *Sculpture by the Sea, Bondi*, and the Helen Lempriere National Sculpture Award in Victoria where it was awarded the People's Choice Award and was purchased by Arts ACT for permanent display in the Civic Library in Canberra.

The *Life Boat* maquette was purchased by a friend, Pham Chi, whose heart-wrenching personal story appears on Nerine's website. Of the sculpture maquette he says:

'Eight arms attached to *Life Boat* are the manifestation of eight arms of the Kwan Yin statue from the ancient But Thap pagoda in Hanoi that Nerine once saw during her research in Vietnam. Since then eight arms always wave to her soul.... I am writing these words in front of *Life Boat* that I purchased from that day. Every night, when my wife and children sleep, I often sit and look at the boat. The light above shines on the boat and leaves a shadow like a carcass of the boat, another boat—a fish skeleton—lying somewhere on the ocean bed... And Kwan Yin's arms forever dancing to everyone like ocean waves.'

Carolynne Skinner
www.nerinemartini.com

Opposite page left: *Ascend*, 2014 Corten steel, 150x84x32cm
 This work was created for *Sculpture at Sawmillers 2014*, located at McMahons Point on Sydney Harbour
 Main picture: The Migration Project comprises two separate artworks located at George Dodd Reserve in North Wollongong: *The Boat* and *Dwellings*. Three posts are collectively entitled *Dwellings*, they reference the accommodation for migrants when they first arrived in Wollongong: sheds, caravans and the Nissen huts. The beautiful timber posts are recycled ironbark, which originally came from a bridge in northern NSW.



Top: Life Boat / *Thuyen cuu roi*
Sculpture by the Sea Bondi, 2007
photo Jack Bett

Below: Nerine Martini working on
the Life Boat project in Hanoi

Opposite page: Life Boat / *Thuyen
cuu roi* on display at the Museum of
Ethnology in Hanoi, 2006





THIS IS THE STORY OF THE OWNER OF LIFE BOAT (MAQUETTE)

I am a friend of Nerine Martini, the artist who created Life Boat. I am a Buddhist and one of a million Vietnamese refugees who risked their lives at sea in search for freedom.

Before my successful escape, I had had ten years living under the Communist regime (1975-1985). More than half of that time, I was arrested and tortured in a number of jails and re-education camps; the rest of that time was spent in hiding, or repeating attempts of escape by boat. In those ten harsh years, despite torments during investigations, despite ruthless toil in re-education camps in Con Dao island (Poulo Condore), Cam Ranh, Tran Phu, A40, A30 Despite wavering between life and death, I had never given up my intention of escaping Vietnam. The boat was a lingering obsession.

In May 1985, I and 38 other men, women and children, boarded a thin boat, not even 10 meters long, with primitive motors and a scant supply of food; we departed from Ca Mau, heading for Thailand. Leaving behind firing bullets from Vietnamese sea border police, we faced storms, hunger, thirst and finally Thai pirates. We were all stripped and badly beaten. Women and young girls were raped. The boat was methodically chipped away, searching for gold and diamonds.

Have you ever seen Thai pirates? Try this: a group of big muscular men, brown skin, long wavy hair, their bodies full of scars and tattoos. They wear only underwear, sort of female strings of pink, or green. They wear gold chains on their necks. They carry axes or daggers; they move quickly and in harmony with other mates, from the torture they inflict to the rapes. But the most horrible thing is their eyes which I cannot forget even now 20 years later. When we arrived in Terengganu (Malaysia), we 38 people no longer felt human. We crawled onto the sand with no clothes. Some young girls still bled between their skinny legs; their blood mixed with ocean water, and boat oil running down on their purple legs.

The boat had finished its fate, starting to sink under waves of water; the sunlight flared on Terengganu sand.

Just like millions of Vietnamese refugees around the globe, I am still hit by nightmares after 20 years of settlement in Sydney. The nightmares persist, I sweat with them in the fear and frustration of being trapped, waiting for investigation, being in jails... Everything remains, regardless of daylight or night time. Miraculously, the boat is never in my nightmares.

I was introduced to Nerine Martini in 2007. Last winter, I went with a few art friends to visit Nerine's home in Blue Mountain in the intention to help her load the Life Boat from the truck onto her yard. Life Boat is a real boat skeleton of around 5 meters long, transferred from Melbourne to Sydney after an exhibition. It was the first time I saw Life Boat.

When the huge truck entered Nerine's front yard, I was totally overwhelmed by the boat—I was nailed onto the ground by the cold of Sydney's mid winter and the grey sky of the Blue Mountain. Tears ran down my cheeks as I heard ocean waves, angry and loud. I heard the sobbing of an 8-year old girl after her rape; I heard the cries from an old man whose gold teeth were pulled out by Thai pirates; I saw myself naked sitting in front of the deck, the rain beating my tattered body and I yelling out: 'Kwan Yin, Mother of Mercy, please save us.' Twenty years ago, I shouted this out with all my strength.

Eight arms attached to Life Boat are a manifestation of eight arms of the Kwan Yin statue from the ancient But Thap pagoda in Hanoi that Nerine once saw during her research in Vietnam. Since then eight arms always wave to her soul.

I am writing these words in front of Life Boat that I purchased from that day.

At night, when my wife and children are sleep, I often sit and look at the boat. The light above shines on the boat, and leaves a shadow like a carcass of the boat, another boat—a fish skeleton—lying somewhere on the ocean bed ... And Kwan Yin's arms forever dancing to everyone like ocean waves.

Pham Chi

This edited story may be seen in full at
www.nerinemartini.com.au