

# STATE LIBRARY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Transcript of an edited interview with

**Abdul-Rahman Abdullah**

STATE LIBRARY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA — ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

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TRANSCRIBER: Luisa Mitchell

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### **NOTE TO READER**

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**INTRO:** Death. It's the most inevitable part of life. Some might say it's the only guarantee. But it's also a topic that many people shy away from because it makes us feel uncomfortable, scared or upset. It's often swept under the rug, not acknowledged or talked about, until of course, we come face-to-face with it ourselves. We hope to end this taboo through a series of interviews with many different people from all over Western Australia. We talk to ordinary people about their views on the grief, loss, love and celebration that *is* death and dying. This is a conversation on death.

**ABDUL:** My name's Abdul-Rahman Abdullah. I'm an artist. I work mainly in sculpture and installation. Last year I did a big solo show as part of Perth Festival at John Curtin Gallery here in Perth. It's a work called *Pretty Beach*. It was originally commissioned for a fairly major show at the MCA in Sydney and basically, I had the opportunity to show the work again, because it's such a large work. It can only really be shown in quite large institutional spaces.

**RITA:** So talk to me about the inspiration behind that piece of art.

**ABDUL:** So, the work itself, like I said, is called *Pretty Beach* and *Pretty Beach* is a place, it's a location. I guess it's actually the suburb's name. It's where my granddad lived. It's a beachside area on the central coast, just north of Sydney on Brisbane water, so there's these big inlets and bays – it's a really beautiful part of the world. My granddad lived in a house that we called the beach house, because it actually started off as a beach house. Basically, it was an asbestos house right on the water there and there's a big jetty out the front. It's about a 50-metre jetty, so it's quite a long jetty. At high tide the water would come right up and underneath the house, it was just a really beautiful place to live. And he was so connected to that place, because it's the only place I knew him living in, I guess, just because that's how our lives overlapped. It's been a while since I've actually talked about the work, but it's one of the most significant works I've done at this stage.

Back in 2009, my granddad killed himself. He took his own life. And he was an old man. He had suffered from severe diabetes. He was a chain smoker his whole life. He was basically a functional, happy alcoholic, you know. My other memories of him are just the smell of cigarettes and he'd always be drinking a beer. He was my dad's stepdad. So, he was sort of this archetypal white Australian guy, I guess, very much a product of his era. He took his own life, but it wasn't a tragedy in the sense of how the word suicide points to this idea of tragedy, because it was basically an act of euthanasia. He'd lived such an independent life and he'd always been so self-sufficient and when it got to the point where his body wasn't going to allow him to carry on in the way he wanted to, he chose to end it.

**RITA:** Did any of you see it coming?

**ABDUL:** No, not at all. Well, I mean one of the tragedies about it is I hadn't been there for so long and it'd probably been almost 10 years since I'd been there. You know, as you go into adulthood, life takes over. And the idea of crossing the Nullarbor, you wouldn't necessarily drive across it, but it just seemed further and further away the older I got, I guess, and you don't think about these things. I didn't even realize how advanced his various cancers were

and how sick he actually was. Because, like many men of his vintage, he didn't talk about that sort of thing. He didn't talk much at all to be honest. But I guess for me that memory, that association of someone being so alive and someone just being in their element and then being taken away from me, not necessarily being just taken away, but taken away from *me*, yet carrying on regardless...

**RITA:** You talked about the memories that it brought back to you of you being a child and going to see Granddad and associating with...?

**ABDUL:** That was the whole starting point for this work. It was quite a special place, but as kids, we would only go there maybe every couple of years because we would make the trek over East, you know, and we would drive over the Nullarbor. This was in the '80s. I don't think we ever went there in the '90s. It was mainly in the '80s. Basically when I was growing up between about three and twelve, those ages. So, we would drive over every couple of years, then we would make the trek up to Pretty Beach to see Grandpa.

The strongest memory I always had of the place was – I would've been probably about eight or nine, sometime in the mid-80s – out on the jetty in high tide, and just watching the stingrays swimming directly underneath me, swimming in these big arcs right underneath the jetty. And there's something really special about being in the presence of wild animals, being allowed to be within a certain proximity [to them]. I mean I was above the water, they were below it. I really had no impact on what they were doing, but when you're that close and you're able to witness them in their natural state, I suppose it's really transporting. It sort of takes you out of time and place and you don't want it to end. It's almost a privilege that you've been allowed to participate in something [like that]. So, I just remember these very vivid memories of watching them for ages swimming around and then the rain came in across the bay. And when you see rain come in from a distance like that, you can really watch it come. It's like a curtain coming across too.

And basically, when it hit, when the rain came in, it crumples up the water and the stingrays were taken away from my view. I wasn't able to access them in that way. But nothing changed for them. Like I said, they're not going to get any wetter in the rain. They just continued on. I ran inside because rain is cold. I don't even know how long this would have taken. There were a few minutes out there, just being with the stingrays, but that memory was always the one I went back to and was what I associated most with going and visiting Grandpa. It's funny because I've got very strong memories of Grandpa, but it was this one which came to signify the place [for me].

That became a placeholder memory, it came to embody how I wanted to view his passing or how he died. A lot of it comes back to tropes of souls and the afterlife and what happens when you die and these sorts of things. But I didn't want to get too caught up in these ways of seeing it, I just wanted to sort of focus on the idea that something carries on. It's just taken away from me. You can take that any way you want, just the essence of who he was. I like to think of him carrying on in some way, shape or form. I don't know, it's an ending, but it's not an ending, if you know what I mean? I just didn't want to regard it like that.

**RITA:** Was it saying that his passing was monumental or that the whole life and death experience is monumental?

**ABDUL:** Well, I guess for me it was. It was a work about him and him in the place that I associated so much with him, but I wanted to step back from that individual view of death and just see it as a way of describing or embodying the idea of death as an experience for people. I mean, that's part of the beauty of making large-scale sculpture or installation works, where you can really immerse people in the idea and create something that they become physically or bodily a part of.

[*Pretty Beach*] is a group of eleven stingrays swimming in a circle with this installation of rain coming down from the ceiling, five-metre drops of rain, and each drop is about two and a half thousand drops. I think each drop is five metres in length, [made] of silver-plated ball chain, with a crystal on the end. So, it creates this very ethereal column and underneath there is this real sense of movement of the stingrays moving in a circle, and there's a soundtrack of rainfall in there, which you don't necessarily notice straight away. It's a bit of a subtle one, but when you're in the space then it sneaks up on you, I guess. And that really contributes to a sense of immersion.

Yeah, I love that work. Yeah, it's one of the things I really like about sculpture. You can put people in the presence of something and let them walk amongst it. And most of my work is animals. Animals are a huge part of my visual language, but a big part of that is making things in a fairly realistic way and things that are recognisable and at the same scale as people entering the space.

Actually, I made the work for a big biennial project called The National, which is about 50 Australian artists, sort of a snapshot of Australian art for that biennial period, which was for me one of the biggest shows I've been a part of at that time. It was only me and one other artist in this huge space. I walked in there and there was a Mr. Williams, who is an Elder from the APY lands; [there was] this huge painting on the wall. This big ochre painting which speaks to genocide, it speaks to central Australia, it speaks to the heart of Australia. But there's a little vase of flowers in front of it when I walked in. I was like, oh no, this is a bad sign. And it turned out he had passed away two weeks earlier, just before the biggest painting he'd ever done was going to be on show at the MCA. So, some of his family were there.

But this room became this monument to passing [and] to death. You know, it was these two massive works which became about death. [I mean] mine was specifically about death, but Mr. Williams had just passed on [too]. I mean this is not something you can plan for. [And] my work was this rain and [had] this soundtrack, it was so *wet*. It was from the central coast of New South Wales. And this work [by Mr. Williams] was from the dry heart of Australia. It was so dry you [could] feel your eyeballs drying out just looking at it. And it was also a very hard work, pointing to genocide and all these things. For me, that room became this sort of embodiment of the extremes that Australia represents, the many countries that are actually Australia. And embodied in this one room, which I felt really went beyond [just] me. It was really special to be able to participate in that.

**RITA:** Were you emotional?

**ABDUL:** You know what? Yes and no, because the actual act of making the work is like five months of carving eleven stingrays, it is labour. The only [time] when I actually got emotional was talking about it and the bit that always got me is that I know that when they found Grandpa, he had with him all our letters as kids and I still get a bit teary, that always gets me. He had our letters and our photos, we'd send him pictures, you know? And he had them all with him as he died. A big part of that is like, I felt like I'd let him down and hadn't been there for so long. But on the other side, I was glad that he had loved ones that he was able to be with at the end in some way shape or form. That's the bit which always gets me when I talk about it, and I wouldn't always necessarily talk about that, but that's the real connection for me, is that he was thinking about us at that point. I would have had no idea what was going on [for him] at that time. But yes, that real sort of personal connection to it, that's what always got me, you know, got the tears going.

**RITA:** I can visualise that when you're describing it. It's a huge act, isn't it?

**ABDUL:** Oh yeah. It's such an act of bravery, the way I see it too. Because you'd make that decision, and he was making that decision because he was going to lose his legs to diabetes. And so, he would have really had to drag himself out there and then set all this up. It would have taken him a while and he was probably in great pain and discomfort, but he decided what he was going to do, and he was going to carry it out. He wasn't going to make a hash job of it. He was going to do it.

**RITA:** Do you think then that death at the end is something that happens that you do alone?

**ABDUL:** Oh yeah, it really is. From my few experiences of it, I have been there when people have died in other ways. I've heard the last breath of, there was only one person, but you hear it quite literally. There was quite a loud one and then there was no more. And then you hear everyone else [respond], and it's not pleasant hearing people respond to their mother or their wife or whatever literally dying. But it is, because I mean from those experiences people aren't even conscious necessarily, their body is on its way out. So, my Granddad was very much alone, but that's what he would have wanted. That's how he lived his life. He lived up there alone for decades. He chose that. Which, you know, is quite reassuring in some ways, in that particular case.

I guess when I do talk about it and have talked about it publicly in this work, even that suicide aspect or euthanasia, people have come up to me and said that was their experience too; of their parents or grandparents or even partners, where that has been a big part of it. And it has really added to their sense of burden that they couldn't really, even if [they're] feeling very comfortable, they couldn't necessarily tell all the details of what happened for legal reasons. Which is really such a burden on people I think, knowing that somebody wants something and can't necessarily have it. I guess people were almost relieved, happy in a way, that someone was able to do that unencumbered or they were just able to carry it out, you know?

It was because he was just there by himself. Because the reality is, if he wanted to do that and someone else was there, the chances are that they would be trying to stop him from doing that. And it's not necessarily a good or a bad thing, it's just a thing, you know – for them it's a bad thing. I think it just complicates it all, [but] it's not about being part of the end. It does make you think, what would you do in the same situation? But I don't want to dwell on that; it may or may not come up and then I'll dwell on it.

**RITA:** So, as a society, Abdul, we find it quite difficult to talk about death openly. It's almost the last taboo. Talk me through some of the reactions that people had to that piece of work, because you were very open that this was after the death of your Grandad when he took his own life.

**ABDUL:** Well, I guess funnily enough, the idea was floating around my head for many years before; it was 10 years after he died that I actually made the work. And that's not uncommon with the way I work, but this particular one, you really have to sit with an idea for quite a while until you go, okay, I'm ready to do this. And more than any other work I've ever made, the reactions to it were so emotional. I had a lot of people contacting me either after a talk or just messaging me through my website or any other means, about how they cried and spent a lot of time with the work.

As an artist, all you're after is for people to spend time with your work. If the people give it time, then the work has worked, you know, it's succeeded. People went back and visited it several times over and over and I got really genuine emotional responses because [it] really brought up a lot of memories and reflected a lot of their current experiences. With a lot of the talks, you can just always guarantee that a certain amount of people in that room are experiencing death in some way, either a recent death or an imminent death of a parent or a loved one or are in the process of dying. And it's just such a normal part of the human experience. For complete strangers [to] just stand up and talk about the hardest things they ever experienced was... It wasn't confronting or challenging, [well] it was confronting in one way, but not in a bad way for me, because people were being very vulnerable and open, and I didn't necessarily expect that.

Part of me goes, great, the work has worked, but the other part of me is like, it's a beautiful thing to be able to provide a space that people can let you into what's going on in their life. A lot of these people were quite elderly and things like that, which you wouldn't necessarily approach a stranger and talk about your partner dying, you know? And it wasn't even that I was discussing it with them. I [just] provided a space there where they could tell me about it, because there's not a lot I can add to it. When somebody is telling you about something like that, you can smile and nod and offer noises basically, you know, not even words, but it wasn't like they wanted answers or anything. It just provided a space where they could be, you know... what was inside could be outside in some way.

**RITA:** So, I think part of it is also about being given permission, I suppose?

**ABDUL:** Yeah, I guess so. Well, we have no sort of external signifiers that someone's even going through a grieving process. I mean, it's fairly common around the world in different cultures to embody it, to wear black or something. Those things are a part of it, but here and

now I don't see that. The only signifier I guess is the occasional hearse you'll see. And even that's very rare. That is literally the only way you'll encounter actual death. Other than the million deaths you'll see on TV and in movies over your lifetime. It's just completely been removed and fictionalized, dramatised, I suppose.

It's funny too, because I guess we're talking about this through art, through a kind of cultural outcome [lens], [and] I guess the only other direct associations [we have] are basically mortuary sculptures, you know, headstones or gravestones and their long history of ways of, not describing death, but you know, they point to the idea, in a similar way that TVs and movies sort of dramatise and fictionalise things. You might have angels or little cupids or something sad, an open book or something like this. But again, you don't encounter those on a daily basis, they're very specific to a location. It's not an inviting thing to be a part of. So, it's odd, but it's odd in a vacuum way, in a silent kind of way, which is [that] I feel like it hasn't been sanitised, it's been made so uncomfortable that you just don't go there, it's distasteful to go there.

But for people who are experiencing it and going through a certain process I guess that's really isolating. I mean among even their closest friends, families and loved ones, there's no language to fall back on or to even talk about it.

More recently in 2020, my mother-in-law died. And that was after five years with cancer and all this, but it was something that, you know, we were very close and I'm very good friends with her. And so that for me was much more of an up-close experience of someone dying than my granddad, because this was someone who was in my life every day. All the families involved were very close, and even then, the language fell apart, even people who'd known her or known the family for decades had no way of talking about it or inquiring, or any of those things. It was just a weird, uncomfortable vacuum. No one knows what to do in that space. I mean, there's the funeral and there's all of that, the rituals that we do go through, but life goes on before and after that. It is not strange because it's not unexpected, but when you're sort of in amongst it and seeing it all up close it's like you are sort of in the presence of so much *nothing*.

I was born and grew up here in Australia and my dad is white, Australian Anglo, and I'm seventh generation here through him. So, for a non-indigenous [person], that's quite a long time in the country. My mum is from Malaysia, she's Malay. I do know that when my mum first came to Australia in 1971, she had a really hard time. You know, you [can] imagine, how Australia was, *it still is*, [imbued with] the entrenched structural racism and just the pure bigotry you experience as a woman of colour, and a woman in a headscarf of colour, you know. And she came here in 1970.

So, I'm mixed. I've always seen who I am as almost cultural cherry picking. I've always felt I've had the privilege of taking what I want and discarding what I didn't see necessary. That's one of the [benefits] of everything being such a mixed bag here, I've always felt quite comfortable doing that. Having said that, I've been quite dislocated from my extended family and family in Malaysia, so I haven't been there for any of those rituals. I haven't been there for any of that grieving process.



I mean, a big part of that is, traditionally for Muslims, you are buried within 24 hours of dying. So that's been a quite hard thing for Mum, because she's got to a certain age now, she's 72 now. The last two years, we don't count [them] because of COVID [and] no travel, but you know, she got to the point where she's only going back for when people die. This is a really common experience for migrant people, but because it all happens so quickly, she would generally miss the actual funeral and things like that. So, I've never been a part of that. Never seen it. And ironically, most of the funerals I've ever been to have been Catholic or they're all completely non-denominational.

But the crux of the thinking around death and dying for all of those sort of Abrahamic cultures is there's a lot of common ground; basically, you die, your soul gets plucked out, they weigh up the good and the bad and they send you up or down. And that is still the heart of it, that's the basis of how Muslims would approach that as well. Your soul leaves and goes to heaven or hell.

But as a kid, I was much more enveloped in [it]. We grew up as a very practicing Muslim family and I'm very much Muslim now, but I pick and choose when and how I might embody that. I have got my own rules about *the* rules, which I don't feel that most of them apply, it's up to me. But even as a kid I didn't see the value in really trying to conceptualize what heaven and hell and a soul and all that really were. Because I was, from a very young age, I felt like this isn't a question that will get answered [until] we die. And it's inevitable. There's not a lot of point in really trying to focus on this [now].

I guess one of the big things as a Muslim kid is this idea [that] when Muslims die – it comes across quite dramatic, the language is very dramatic – [there] was always the idea of the Day of Judgment. And basically, this was this day that will occur sometime in a nonspecific future where everyone who's ever lived will be basically pulled up and quite literally your good deeds and your bad deeds will be weighed up in front of everyone.

And you would go to *Jannah* and *Jahannam*, Heaven or Hell. And it was a really scary idea as a kid. I know why these things are in place, these big overarching ideas of good and bad and how they're meant to impose a certain morality on human beings, because by and large people may or may not need that, but it was a very dramatic and scary way of thinking about what happens when you die. It also had not a lot to do with actual dying.

I guess what I wanted to take out of all those traditions and those beliefs is the idea that you are not necessarily [just] your physical body, call it a soul or an essence or a consciousness, whatever you want to call it, who we are is not necessarily a part of what you see. They're separate, they are able to be separated. So, I really do feel that who we are doesn't blink out of existence when our body packs it in. It goes somewhere, it does something. I'm just not sure what that is. And that's what I wanted to say with the work, that [we] may just be a memory. It may just be like who we are to everyone that's still here, you know? But I wanted to do something that could be all of those things. It could be the passage of a soul, it could be the memory of someone. It could be this idea of a life or a vitality that carries on in another way. Obviously, death is just a part of life.

**RITA:** Do you think about your own mortality ever?

**ABDUL:** Not really. It doesn't seem a very useful thing to dwell on. Now that I've got kids, of course you know that they're going to outlast you, ideally. But that's not something I actually think about a lot. [There] doesn't seem to be any good reason to. It also seems like a bit of a bummer. I mean, you plan a will, you imagine how you might be remembered every now and then.

But I guess, it's probably going to sound a bit narcissistic, as an artist you do leave more of a trace because I spent decades of my life literally making objects that will remain and are hopefully archived, you know, as part of collections and that, so they will remain. Whereas it becomes really apparent when people pass on, depending on the life they've led, is what they leave behind. And for the most part they just leave people behind, and that's very normal.

Especially with my mother-in-law, I guess more so than my grandpa, because he was quite removed, but I do like to talk about her, and my wife and her mum were really close, and [we] talk about her with the kids. Our kids are so little and she only met two of them. But [we] talk about her like she's a person in our presence. I just really feel uncomfortable about the idea of someone dying and then they just are erased. They just blink out of existence. Nobody even references them because it's uncomfortable. And by the time the sort of discomfort has passed, the time has passed. I just want to make sure that I just talk about her as if she is a real thing, you know? Because she certainly is. Good thing is, she also left a trace. She was a vet and then she became a furniture maker and an artist. So, there are objects she's left behind. [You can say] basically Grandma made this, so there's associations which can be made for the kids.

**RITA:** Once somebody passes, as you say, it becomes uncomfortable to actually talk about that person. Do you think that's a societal safeguard that's been put in place because people just feel too uncomfortable to talk about death, or it's too sad, or too...?

**ABDUL:** [Death is] almost bureaucratized, it's medicalised. It's even to the point where it's very unusual to die in your home nowadays and in fact, it's quite complicated. You have to go through an entirely different process if that happens. Like many natural processes, particularly health-related things – *birth*, you know, is the big other one, obviously it's the big counterpoint – but it is the same thing, where it has been entirely medicalized and sanitized. [It's been] removed from domesticity, it's been removed from the home as much as possible. In fact, you have really got to fight to do that. I guess it's a way of categorizing, understanding and giving something a, what would you call it... so it fits a form, so it can be processed on mass. [A] one-size-fits-all way of dealing with something, which is clearly not that. It's a way of streamlining big populations, I suppose, and a way of documenting it.

It is very isolating for people. When my wife was going [through], you know, you lose your mum, which nearly everyone will go through that at some point. But immediately afterwards it's just sort of expected [that you] go back to life, go back and continue on, because you have got to do that anyway. But you know, what's going on inside is so enormous and all encompassing. It can really leave people very isolated and in a bad place.

**RITA:** Do you think that we don't know how to do grief well?

**ABDUL:** No. We just don't know how to do it. Well, that's what I felt, there was no nothing, nothing to lean on. And maybe that's where rituals and established ways of going about something really help people for longer grieving processes, things like much more public grieving processes. I guess Australia is a very mixed bag, but I think a core of our bureaucracy and the way we approach things is based on a deeply felt Anglo culture. It's very unemotional. It's very cold, I guess. That's the way I feel about it, anyway. And that's the basis of our official way of doing things. That's the way I see it anyway. Emotional responses are a weakness and people never cry in public or never even sort of reveal what they're feeling publicly.

At the same time, I've been to a few Italian [funerals] and there are very different public grieving processes that happen, where the Nonna's and the aunties would be crying and would be collapsing. In some way it is performative. It's not always, but it is that too, but it's also... it serves a purpose, and it serves a reason.

**Outro:** Thanks for listening. This interview was recorded on the lands of the Whadjuk Nyungar people, and we pay our respect to their Elders, past, present and emerging. This oral history collection was commissioned by the State Library of Western Australia and produced by Luisa Mitchell from the Centre for Stories. Narration by Luisa Mitchell, editing by Mason Vellios and special thanks to executive producer and interviewer, Rita Alfred-Saggar.

**END**