

# From Behrouz Boochani to Bernard Collaery: photographer Hoda Afshar turns her lens on whistleblowers

*Three years after her famous portrait of Behrouz Boochani won the Bowness prize, the Iranian-born photographer sees Greek tragedy in those who speak out*

Kelly Burke – *The Guardian* – 10 February 2021

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“The whistleblower is the modern tragic figure in our current society,” says Hoda Afshar.

The Iranian-born, Melbourne-based photographer is talking about her new series, a collection of striking, monochrome 3D portraits of contemporary Australians who have spoken out about injustice, often at their own risk.

“For me it was about the character, not the individuals, it was about their actions, and at the heart of it, there was something that reminded me of the Greek tragedies,” she tells Guardian Australia. “That’s why I chose the title *Agonistes*, because this is a Latin word that means personal injury and an inner struggle.”

Afshar is speaking from London, where she is in lockdown due to Covid-19, but her work is about to grace the streets of Melbourne, Australia.

*Agonistes* is part of Photo 2021, a new biennial photography exhibition that pitches itself as Australasia’s largest and most significant photography event. The festival was supposed to premiere in Melbourne last year – as Photo 2020 – but Covid-19 had other plans.

Afshar – who won the 2015 National Portrait Prize and the 2018 Bowness Photography Prize for her [iconic image of Manus Island detainee Behrouz Boochani](#) – will headline the revived program, along with a range of international photographers including South African Zanele Muholland (whose work featured in last year’s Sydney Biennale at the Museum of Contemporary Art) and UK/Japanese artist Simon Fujiwara.

Photo 2021’s theme is The Truth. In an age of unparalleled social, psychological and technological shifts, festival director Elias Redstone says the relationship between photography and political and personal truth has never been more fascinating, complex or urgent.

“Photography has always had a complicated relationship with the truth,” Redstone tells the Guardian. “Despite the inherent subjectivity of the medium, photography is often read as fact, as evidence.”

The festival, opening on 18 February, will exhibit work across multiple Melbourne venues, including hoardings on the Metro Tunnel, the State Library of [Victoria](#) and Argyle Square.

Afshar's work will be exhibited on billboards outside St Paul's Cathedral, across the road from Flinders Street Station, on the corner of one of the city's busiest thoroughfares.



*Hoda Afshar's portrait of whistleblower Bernard Collaery will feature in the Photo 2021 festival. Photograph: Hoda Afshar*

Redstone describes Afshar as an “absolutely fearless artist” and says her investigation into the experiences of whistleblowers couldn't be more timely.

“Whether whistleblowing on matters to do with the military, intelligence services, immigration detention, youth detention, or aged and disability care, Afshar's subjects have spoken out for those whose voices were never meant to be heard,” he said.

“In doing so, she has created a new work that is urgent, shocking and unforgettable, making anyone that views it question what they might do if they found themselves in a similar situation.”

Some of the whistleblowers have become almost household names, most notably barrister Bernard Collaery, who is [facing jail for allegedly helping his client, intelligence officer Witness K, reveal information](#) about Australia's bugging of Timor-Leste government offices to gain the upper hand during oil and gas negotiations in 2004.

Another subject is David McBride, [the military lawyer who is facing lengthy jail time](#) for providing documents to the ABC on the conduct of special forces in Afghanistan.

Afshar has intentionally not named any of the whistleblowers in her collection, even though most are publicly identifiable.

Afshar used 110 cameras functioning instantaneously to capture 3D images of her subjects, then used a 3D printer to convert them to busts representing Hellenistic statues.

The challenge of the technology was that the expression in the eyes could not be captured, just as the expression in the eyes of classic Greek sculptures has been lost over time.

“[Greek] tragic theatre helped establish democracy and brought into focus the questions of the time – slavery, xenophobia, patriarchy and so on,” Afshar says.

“Greek tragedy was dealing those questions but the Greek tragic figure was the one caught between the choices of responsibility and obligation, morality and the law, public and the state – and they always chose public over the state. And they realised, at the end, the public don’t care and yet they have lost everything.

“But in about the fifth century forward there’s a period when the artists of the time shifted their focus, creating statues of ordinary people, so that’s where I find the essence of today’s tragedy.”

Afshar acknowledges her Agonistes collection draws its inspiration from her previous Manus Island project.

“I see this project as a mirror image of that, or something born from it because it was through working with the refugees that I was first introduced to this idea of Australia,” she says.

As an Iranian immigrant, the idea that employees in a modern democracy could be prosecuted for speaking out troubles her.

“Threatening employees with jail time if they speak out, or forcing them to sign a deed of confidentiality

... it came as a shock to me because I was wondering how is that even possible in a liberal democratic system like Australia?”

• [Photo 2021](#) is showing throughout Victoria from 18 February to 7 March 2021