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## Art and exile

**The Guatemalan civil war lasted 36 years and more than 200,000 people were killed or disappeared.**

RMIT University's Angel Calderon remembers the moment he realized he had to flee the country of his birth, Guatemala.

"Two armed men approached me. They said, 'Boy, leave the country or you will have the same fate as your brother'. He had disappeared five months earlier.

"Exile took me to Mexico, Honduras and Panama; eventually I settled in Australia," he said.

Mr Calderon landed in Melbourne on a cold and wet September morning in 1985 - the day before the Hawthorn-Essendon VFL grand final.

"I was neither able to speak nor understand English. There was no one to meet me at the airport," he said.

Twenty-five years later, Mr Calderon has a young family and a successful career in Policy and Planning at RMIT.

He has also tapped into a hidden talent - painting - with an exhibition attracting interest from media and arts circles.

Inspired by his life experiences, Mr Calderon found painting an accessible way to convey a message. He has also produced poems and essays.

"Painting has allowed me to blend cultures, heritage and common grounds between different and yet similar countries in that they have a rich cultural heritage with their indigenous population and are positioned in regions of cultural and artistic growth," he said.

Mr Calderon cites his influences as the Latin American and Spanish artists of modernism, as well as Australia's Sidney Nolan and the form of expression of Mirka Mora.

"I am actually considering one of RMIT's art programs," he said.

"RMIT has been a leader in the art, design and architecture fields with a world reputation, together with the strength of technology."

On the question of Latin America today, Mr Calderon - who returned to see his parents in 1999 - said Australia was becoming one of the preferred destinations for many Latin American students seeking to have an international student mobility experience.

"Almost 20,000 students from Latin American countries are studying in Australia," he said.

"The closer commercial links between Australia and Latin American countries, the greater the opportunities for Australia's educational exports."

'Stills of Life' exhibition is on at Mr Burch cafe, 129 McKinnon Rd, McKinnon until 31 August.

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Angel Calderon's colourful acrylics on canvas are on exhibition at Mr Burch cafe.

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