

The exhibition, “When Home Won’t Let You Stay: Art and Migration” comes to us from the ICA Boston, and was organized by Eva Respini, Barbara Lee Chief Curator, and Ruth Erickson, Mannion Family Curator, together with Assistant Curator Ellen Tani. According to the organizing curators, the exhibition synopsis states that: “Throughout history, people have moved around the globe for a variety of reasons – fleeing war, religious persecution, and environmental disaster, or seeking better economic possibilities. The twenty-first century has already witnessed several migration or refugee “crises,” including mass migrations from Syria, the Middle East, and North Africa to Europe, and from Mexico to the United States. As such, the exhibition considers how a number of contemporary artists have responded to the migration, immigration, and displacement of peoples, and how they have uniquely envisioned the sites and experiences of transit.”

The title of the exhibition is drawn from the poem titled “Home” by the British Somali poet Warsan Shire, whose work gives voice to refugees, their often harrowing journey, and the painful realization that the life and home they once knew has been irrevocably lost.

The exhibition focuses on large-scale works by leading artists from around the globe, working primarily in sculpture, installation, and video. It is not intended as a complete account of migration in art, but rather, it offers several distinct and contemporary viewpoints on the topic. It features artists who are both immigrants and non-immigrants, and provides both personal accounts and poetic meditations on the topic of migration. The selected artists explore sites marking the journey of immigrants, including built structures such as homes and refugee camps, natural spaces like the sea,

and political sites such as borders.

The exhibition is contemporary, featuring art made since 2000 by 21 artists, many of whom have been featured in large international platforms for contemporary art exploring issues around migration including Documenta, the Venice Biennial, and Manifesta. The exhibition is also very global in its outlook, with artists in the exhibition hailing from more than a dozen countries—including Colombia, Cuba, India, Iraq, Ireland, Mexico, Morocco, Nigeria, Palestine, South Korea, and the United States.

The exhibition is not a personal political manifesto, but rather, seeks to look at migration and the unprecedented displacement of peoples in the 21st century from the point of view of artists, and to give a platform to artist's perspectives. Artists are not journalists, nor are they historians – they don't have the burden of bringing forward facts and figures. Rather, their work can pose challenging questions, engage us in difficult conversations, move us, provide us with an opportunity to think deeply about ideas, and perhaps even shift our assumptions and perspectives in some way.

While the topic of migration addressed through the lens of contemporary art is extremely timely, the exhibition also seemed uniquely suited to Minneapolis and the state of Minnesota more broadly due to the significant immigrant and refugee communities that have resettled in the Twin Cities. According to US Census data, Minnesota has the highest number of refugees per capita nationwide. In particular, the Hmong and Somali refugee communities in Minneapolis and Saint Paul have helped shape the unique demographics and cultural makeup of the Twin Cities since the mid-1970s. It is with all this in mind that I first proposed the exhibition “When Home Won't Let You Stay,” for presentation at Mia as a way for our institution to engage with the urgent issues of

migration and forced displacement facing the world today.

...

In addition to the ICA's checklist, we have added three Mia-specific installations and commissions for the presentation here, including works by Ai Weiwei, the indigenous arts collective, Postcommodity, and the Twin-Cities-based art collective, CarryOn Homes which I'd like to speak about in more detail.

In the case of Ai Weiwei, not only is he one of the most recognizable and celebrated figures in the international art world today, but also arguably one of the most outspoken human rights activists as well. The artist has consistently used his art world stature and work as a critical platform to bring increased attention and visibility to human rights issues, most notably, the ongoing refugee situation in Europe. Looking at the imposing neoclassical façade of Mia's building, I was immediately reminded of the iconic Ai Weiwei installation titled *#SafePassage* that the artist realized on the façade of the Berlin Konzerthaus in 2016. Consisting of thousands of discarded lifejackets arranged around the columns, this work was first installed on the classical columns of the Berlin Konzerthaus with subsequent iterations at the Yokohama Museum of Art, Kunsthall Charlottenborg, and the National Archives of Chile. The installation at Mia will mark the first time this installation has been realized in the United States. The lifejackets had been worn by refugees making the dangerous sea journey from Turkey to Greece, and the discarded lifejackets were recovered and donated to Ai Weiwei by the Greek mayor of Lesbos, Spyros Galinos, in 2016. To give some sense of the scope of this crisis, the United Nations Human Rights Council estimated over 856,000 sea arrivals to Greece alone in 2015, with approximately 800 dead or missing that year. While the artwork itself

was intended to commemorate all the refugees who undertook the dangerous passage across the Mediterranean, it does not legibly distinguish between those who perished and those who survived, nor does it give insight into the harsh realities that greeted the refugees after their perilous journey. As a result, I read this monumental work less as a memorial and more as a beacon of sorts. On the one hand the work recognizes the immense sacrifices made by countless refugees who are forced to flee their homes through its sheer scale. As the entrance to the museum, however, it beckons to the visitor through its high-visibility orange color, while also implicating the viewing public as a vicarious witness to the refugee's plight through the symbolic act of crossing the threshold from the outdoors into the museum proper.

Speaking about his thoughts on the refugee situation, Ai Weiwei has noted, "There's no refugee crisis, only a human crisis...When people talk about refugees, the words used are 'they,' 'us' or 'them.' The moment of realization that we are part of them, and they are part of us, is the moment when we can begin to affect change."

Providing further context for the façade installation at Mia, *Safe Passage* is joined by Ai Weiwei's wallpaper collage titled *Relating to Refugees* (2015-2016), which consists of over 5,000 images shot by the artist during his ongoing contact with the refugee emergency across Europe, the Middle East and elsewhere. Composed of mobile phone images, the collage functions as a moving tableau reflecting on the personal encounters of the artist with individuals and the tragic situation unfolding in the Mediterranean, thus bringing attention to, what is in his own words, "the biggest, most shameful humanitarian crisis since World War II." Acting as both a personal diary and public witness to the humanitarian disaster unfolding in 2015-2016, Ai Weiwei's candid

and unedited images weave together a moving tapestry that provides a sea of human faces in contrast to the otherwise anonymous lifejackets of *Safe Passage*.

In addition to the global refugee crisis, in bringing this exhibition to Minneapolis I felt it was incumbent on the museum to address the forced displacement of the Ojibwe and Dakota people who have long inhabited the land inside the boundaries of present-day Minnesota. Through a series of treaties, land cessions, and violent conflicts that culminated in the 1850s and 1860s, the US government exiled most of the Dakota and restricted the Ojibwe to reservations.

Realizing the importance of including indigenous voices in Mia's presentation of *When Home Won't Let You Stay*, and the lack of any artists of Native American descent in the ICA Boston's exhibition, Mia commissioned the artist collective, Postcommodity, to create a work that would respond to the issues of migration and forced displacement through an indigenous lens.

This newly commissioned work titled *Let Us Pray for the Water Between Us* (2020), transforms a large chemical storage tank (commonly utilized in agriculture) into a self-playing automated ceremonial drum. The drum itself is appropriated from a HAZMAT chemical storage unit normally used to store 2,200 gallons of hydrochloric acid for agricultural use. Chemical storage tanks like this are ubiquitous across Minnesotan small-scale farms, in what is largely an unregulated industry practice. This commission communicates the complexity of human relationships bound by shared sources of water that are increasingly difficult to protect and preserve from waste and contamination.

The drum's placement in Mia's rotunda is a conceptual gesture that challenges the venerated place of objects like Mia's *Doryphoros*—considered by the Greeks to be the ideal human form—as foundational objects in the Western art historical canon. Ironically, it is Greco-Roman objects such as this that are understood to represent the “cradle of Western civilization” while Indigenous cultures go largely ignored by the West. Here the artists have intentionally replaced the *Doryphoros* in the museum's atrium with a levitating ceremonial drum that reverberates an honor song created for the Dakota people and all tribes of all nations who now live within the traditional homeland of the Dakota, throughout the duration of the exhibition. This displacement enacts a symbolic upending of the colonial foundations of the museum, and seeks to forcibly dismantle—or decolonize—the institutional structures that have historically discriminated against Indigenous people and their culture.

...

And lastly, we will be working with the Twin Cities-based art collective, CarryOn Homes to commission an immersive installation for the final gallery of the Target Gallery show. CarryOn Homes consists of five artists from five countries: Zoe Cinel (Italy), Preston Drum (USA), Aki Shibata (Japan), Peng Wu (China) and Shun Jie Yong (Malaysia). With the aim of creating a space of respite from the difficult realities associated with the migration journey depicted throughout the exhibition, CarryOn Homes has created a “living room” where visitors are invited to rest and relax in the final gallery. At the center of the installation are handmade pillows made from articles of clothing that are linked to the artists' (and audience members') intimate and varied experience of home. The installation immerses visitors in audio and video featuring

stories of home, healing, and community found in the experience of local migrants and those living further afield. While the *CarryOn Homes – Living Room* is open to all, it also will function as a shared space for local immigrant and refugee communities to access resources, connect, and have restful and healing conversations.