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# When You Can't Go Home Again: Immigrants and Artists Reflect

This exhibition at ICA/Boston presents works by 20 contemporary artists — many of them immigrants or members of the African diaspora — that highlight current migration events.



Nicole Miller January 11, 2020

Do Ho Suh, "Hub-1, Entrance, 260-7, Sungbook-Dong, Sungboo-Ku, Seoul, Korea" (2018), polyester fabric, stainless steel, 97 3/16 x 12 feet 6 1/4 x 11 feet 5/8 inches (courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul)

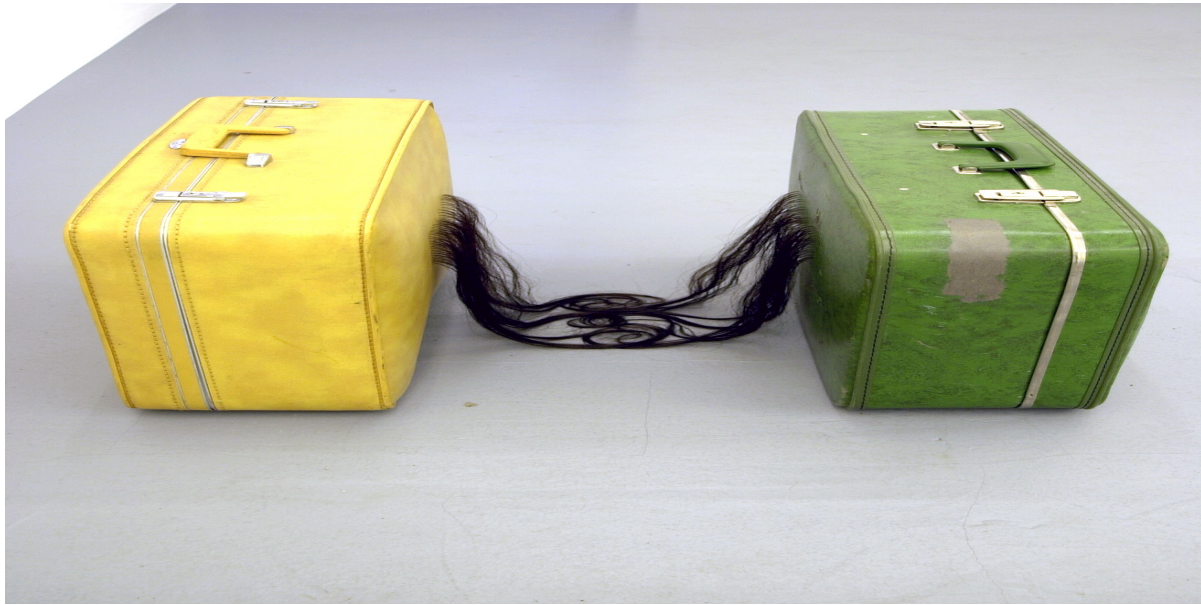
In September, the Trump administration set the cap on refugee admissions to the United States for the coming year at 18,000 — a historic low. To put this number in perspective, about 3.5 million people are currently seeking asylum around the world, according to [2018 estimates](#) by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Another 25.9 million, fleeing persecution, war, or violence, currently have asylum status. Millions more have been forcibly displaced within their own countries, bringing the global number of displaced people to an unprecedented 70.8 million.

As accelerated movement around the globe gains political and media attention, artists, curators, and cultural institutions are taking up the challenges of representing diverse mobilities, in global exhibitions such as documenta, Manifesta, and the Venice Biennale, and at collecting museums. This “migratory turn,”

as curator Emma Chubb has called it, raises crucial questions for institutions trying to **shape public perceptions of immigrants** or **re-examine current collections** in light of transnational concerns. It is important that institutions address the influence of colonialism on material cultures and methods of classification and display, as well as the museum's own role in the displacement or eradication of indigenous and exogenous communities.

ICA/Boston's current exhibition, ***When Home Won't Let You Stay: Migration Through Contemporary Art***, presents recent sculpture, installation, painting, and video works by 20 contemporary artists — many of them immigrants or members of the African diaspora — that highlight the affective and material traces of current migration events. The museum has also commissioned a series of gatherings, workshops, and performances that address immigrant communities, especially in East Boston, where the museum's new Watershed exhibition space recently opened. While the impact of this outreach is hard to assess, the exhibition's artworks underscore the political and social import of migrant representation, as it informs our ideas about identity and displacement.

Western media reports on migration tend to center on dangerous journeys through violent border regimes. Here, the curators wisely focus on migrants' multiple histories and destinations. Do Ho Suh's large fabric structures produce, with delicate precision, the remembered spaces of his childhood home in Seoul, South Korea. Viewers pass through rooms of translucent pink or lemon-yellow fabric stretched over thin metal frames. The structures acknowledge the impermanence of home, while extruding personal memories into a public, collective space. Domestic interiors also appear in the paintings of Aliza Nisenbaum, who depicts the everyday intimacies of a migrant family from Mexico living in New York, and the portraits of Rineke Dijkstra, who has photographed a Bosnian refugee named Almerisa inside her home over 25 years. These quotidian scenes expand the geographic and temporal locus of migration beyond the limbo of transit.



Mona Hatoum, "Exodus" (2002), compressed card, leather, metal, human hair, and beeswax, 19 3/4 x 26 x 26 inches (private collection)

Still, the journey remains a major theme throughout the exhibition. In spaces of transit, where subjects are vulnerable to disappearance and death, objects take on special weight. Objects stand in for the human figure in works such as Mona Hatoum's enigmatic "Exodus II" (2002), a sculpture that joins two suitcases by a dark cord of human hair, or Kader Attia's "*La Mer Morte*" ("The Dead Sea") (2015), an installation comprised of blue clothing arrayed on the gallery floor, suggesting the tidal remnants of those attempting to reach Europe by the Mediterranean Sea. Camilo Ontiveros also alludes to an absent subject in his "Temporary Storage: The Belongings of Juan Manuel Montes" (2017). Installed in the first gallery, the sculpture is constructed from the household objects of a 2017 DACA deportee. Bound with rope, the crude bindle — twin bed, plaid bedspread, sports equipment, suit coat, and ties — plays on the various meanings of belonging using the language of itinerant movement. The work's found objects and ad hoc construction also reflect a dominant sculptural vernacular. In the context of this exhibition, such strategies of salvage and assemblage appear to reflect the makeshift methods of people on the move — or perhaps the impulse, among Euro-American artists, to seize eclectic materials from global cultural currents.

Richard Misrach, "Wall, east of Nogales, Arizona / El muro, al este de Nogales, Arizona" (2014), from the series *Border Cantos*, 2004-2016, pigment print, 60 x 80 inches (courtesy the artist; Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York; Frankel Gallery, San Francisco; and Marc Selwyn Fine Arts, Los Angeles)

The forensic burden of the object extends to the systems of globalization that propel migration. Photographer Richard Misrach's large-scale grid of images, "Artifacts found from California to Texas between 2013 and 2015" (2013-15) from his series *Border Cantos* (2004-16), documents objects abandoned in the desert near the Mexico-United States border. A crumpled pair of Calvin Klein underwear or a matted beach towel printed with Disney's Pocahontas bring to mind international trade agreements like NAFTA: so-called free trade facilitates the flow of commodities across national borders while eroding local sovereignty and undermining agriculture, industry, and ecologies in the global South.

French-Moroccan photographer Yto Barrada offers a more oblique view of the structures of passage. Color photographs from her series *A Life Full of Holes: The Strait Project* (1998-2003) chronicle the Gibraltar Strait and its environs, where movement between Morocco and Spain is freely open to those with an EU passport, while blocked for Moroccans without a visa. Photographed on a ferry from behind, from above a factory floor, or embracing on a street, Barrada's figures are not easily identified as either coming or going, Christian or Muslim, Arab or Berber. The complex entanglements of Morocco's colonial and postcolonial histories and Barrada's own position as a French and Moroccan citizen educated in Paris and New York mark her photographs with ambiguity or an "unresolved quality," as the curators put it. With quiet composure, the work cautions viewers against readily ascribing narrative meaning to the multiple sites of migration.

In contrast, Richard Mosse's "Incoming" (2017), which has received significant international attention, illustrates the art world's susceptibility to big-budget, high-concept, immersive tableaux. His three-channel video applies the white, techno-industrial gaze to migrants moving through North Africa and the Middle

East toward Europe. Shot with a military-grade thermographic surveillance camera, the work captures its subjects at prayer, on a moving desert convoy or a crowded boat in the Mediterranean, through scenes of rescue and death. Rendered in high-contrast black and white and projected at a slowed rate of 24 frames per second, the people have an eerie, spectral presence. The installation's IMAX scale, surround sound, and long running time — nearly an hour — can feel overwhelming. “Using a part of a weapon to figure the refugee crisis is a deeply ambivalent and political task,” Mosse is quoted as saying in the exhibition catalogue. “And building a new language around that weapon — one of compassion and disorientation, one that allows the viewer to see these events through an unfamiliar and alienating technology — is a deeply political gesture.” That may be but I wonder whether the project subverts the de-humanizing logic of surveillance, as the artist intends, or re-inscribes the dominant tropes of Europe's recent refugee crisis, centering the vulnerability of black and brown subjects seeking refuge among the military-industrial regimes of Western Europe.

Mosse's work brings to mind the questions posed by Saidiya Hartman in her book *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997), which interrogates representations of violence against Black slaves:

What interests me are the ways we are called upon to participate in such scenes. Are we witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of the world-destroying capacities of pain, the distortions of torture, the sheer unrepresentability of terror, and the repression of the dominant accounts? Or are we voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance? What does the exposure of the violated body yield?



Xaviera Simmons, “Sundown (Number Twelve)” (2018), chromogenic color print, 60 x 45 inches (Jeanne L. Wasserman Art Acquisition Fund and Anonymous Acquisition Fund)

In this exhibition, Xaviera Simmons and Isaac Julien both refuse to represent what Hartman calls “the spectacular character of black suffering.” Simmons’s series *Sundown* (2018–ongoing), which includes performance-based photography and text-based paintings, and Julien’s three-channel video “Western Union: Small Boats” (2007), each link black mobilities in the Americas and the Mediterranean to legacies of white imperialism and violence. In their respective mediums, each alludes to structures of white supremacy through theatrical or stylized performances and complex systems of visual reference, including costumes, masks, and interior decoration.

Simmons’s work, which references both the diaries of Christopher Columbus and the “sundown towns” across the US where Black Americans are not welcome after dark, counters one potential reading of the exhibition: that the forms of displacement represented here constitute a single, monolithic event. Though the exhibition’s didactic materials include a glossary of terms that draw distinctions between migrant experiences (*citizen, emigrant, undocumented*), the exhibition’s framing by two large-scale installations suggests a global or universal point of view. From Saini Kallat’s *Woven Chronicle* (2011-19), a wall-sized Mercator projection constructed from circuit wires, to Yinka Shonibare’s *The American Library* (2018), a 6,000 volume collection of books covered in brightly colored Dutch wax print fabric bearing the names of prominent immigrants or their descendants, *When Home Won’t Let You Stay* gestures toward the threads of history and culture that connect us. It invites viewers to see themselves in representations of migration. But there’s a danger in universalizing the figure of the migrant. To emphasize global citizenship or shared predicaments, we may fail to recognize and confront the differential impact of biopolitical violence, especially on non-White, non-European or American subjects.

**When Home Won’t Let You Stay: Migration through Contemporary Art** *continues at the ICA/ Boston (25 Harbor Shore Drive, Boston) through January 26, 2020.*