

## Bringing Human Migration Closer to Home

*As a global refugee crisis sped up and spread out, curators at a New Mexico museum spent two years reshaping a show about people on the move.*

BY RAY MARK RINALDI MARCH 12, 2020



A still image from “Future Ancestral Technologies: We Survive You,” by Cannupa Hanska Luger, part of the “Displaced” exhibition at SITE Santa Fe. Credit: Cannupa Hanska Luger

The challenge of building an art exhibition around current events is that the subject matter can be in constant motion. Curators are forced to watch and wait as news unfolds each day, hoping things will slow down long enough to capture a critical moment.

But the creative team assembling “Displaced,” SITE Santa Fe’s upcoming look at human migration, saw the opposite happen. Media reports about refugees only escalated, and expanded to cover more geography, during the two years they spent honing the exhibition’s lineup.

“For a long time this show didn’t really even have a name; we just knew that we wanted to address the global refugee crisis,” the museum director, Irene Hofmann, said in a telephone interview.

“And if we think about how that was understood two years ago and how it’s understood now, it’s actually quite different.”

On the minds of Ms. Hofmann and the co-curator, Brandee Caoba, at the outset were reports of refugees from the Middle East and North Africa flooding into Europe, a humanitarian crisis disrupting the political and social order in dozens of nations.

As time went on, new catastrophes grabbed the headlines. Among them: Muslim Rohingya fleeing Myanmar for Bangladesh to escape religious persecution; poverty-stricken Venezuelans pouring into Colombia; Cameroonians seeking sanctuary from political violence in Nigeria; and, dominating media coverage in the United States for many months, caravans of families from El Salvador and Honduras trekking north into Guatemala and Mexico.

“And for a lot of people here, that brought things closer to home,” Ms. Hofmann said.

“Displaced,” which will run from March 21 to Sept. 6, was reorganized several times — with some artists added and others dropped from an early roster — to stay current in a moment when the United Nations Refugee Agency estimates there are more than 70 million displaced people worldwide.

A global crisis demanded an international response and that is reflected in the exhibition’s final roster, a diverse group that includes the Syrian artists Yara Said and Moutaz Arian, Reena Saini Kallat of India, Candice Breitz of South Africa, Ai Weiwei of China, and others. In all, 12 artists will fill the 18,000 square feet of exhibition space at SITE, New Mexico’s most prominent contemporary art museum.

The contributors are bonded by a similar theme — the plight of humans on the move — but their storytelling methods vary. Some contributors explore personal experiences in their work, such as the muralist Guadalupe Maravilla, who migrated as a child from El Salvador to the United States in the 1980s during the Salvadoran civil war.

Others take a more detached and journalistic approach. The Irish artist Richard Mosse, for example, will show stills from his three-channel video installation, “Incoming,” which used aerial images captured with the same thermal, surveillance-camera technology militaries employ to track enemy activity on a battlefield. His haunting images, reduced to monochromatic shades, document the actual movement and encampments of human beings as they migrated from North Africa and the Middle East.

Another wide-angle approach comes from Ms. Kallat’s “Woven Chronicle,” a 50-foot-wide map of the world drawn with electrical cables; the piece has been shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The map articulates the shape of all seven continents in bright colors but overlays them with numerous additional wires designating major migratory routes over the centuries.

In this artist’s view of the planet, all of humanity is connected into a complicated web, woven by journeys across land and sea. The electrical wires are a metaphor, acting as both “conduit and barrier,” she said in an interview. “On one hand, they serve as channels of transmission and yet, on the other, their linear formations evoke barbed wires or different kinds of fencing.”

The piece is accompanied by an audio track mimicking the sounds of travel — ship horns, bird calls, waves. There is an urgency to it, but also a sense of history.

“Humans have been displaced from their homes for millennia, for different reasons, by force or by choice, and so some of the works do take a more historic lens,” Ms. Hofmann said.

Those objects also include pieces from Hew Locke, a British artist of Guyanese descent, known for his small-scale models of water vessels, ranging from cruise liners to fishing boats, that commemorate the arduous sea journeys of displaced people throughout time.

While some of the objects included in “Displaced” were previously exhibited, others were created or adapted specifically for the museum, among them Harriet Bart and Yu-Wen Wu’s “Leavings/Belongings.”

The duo has been collaborating on the piece for more than two years, traveling across the United States and hosting workshops in urban and rural areas where members of local immigrant and refugee communities share stories and create “bundles”: balls of cloth, tied together with ropes, that resemble the makeshift sacks many migrants carry on their journeys. There will be piles of those bundles in the exhibition, with photos of their makers.

The curators also recruited Cannupa Hanska Luger, a New Mexico artist, to develop a site-specific iteration of his “Future Ancestral Technologies” project. The continuing series taps into the world of science fiction, imagining in great detail a future where a nomadic group of humans — some far-off descendants of the indigenous peoples to whom the artist traces his lineage — wanders the world, wearing invented regalia, creating new rituals and existing on recycled remnants of the present day.

His installation for “Displaced” centers on a 1988 Volkswagen van, retrofitted as solar-powered transport for these nomads. “I’m basically creating an empty campsite for this population, and there’ll be a three-channel projection on the walls,” he said. “I created these telescoping tepee poles that can fit in a small vehicle rather than having to be hauled by a truck or on a trailer.”

There is a post-apocalyptic feel to the piece, something the artist believes is appropriate when considering the plight of Native Americans, whose own apocalypse occurred as Europeans ventured into their lands centuries ago.

“We have very literal, very raw and difficult subject matter. We have very poetic, beautiful, healing subject matter,” Ms. Caoba said of the exhibition. “And then we have this futuristic outlook that I think will be exciting for people.”