

STATELESS

VIEWS OF GLOBAL MIGRATION

JANUARY 24 – MARCH 31, 2019

Bissane Al Charif
Leila Alaoui
Shimon Attie
Fidencio Fifield-Perez

Daniel Castro Garcia
Tomas van Houtryve
Omar Imam
Hiwa K.

While global migration has existed for tens of thousands of years, we are currently facing an unprecedentedly vast movement of people across borders. Presently fueled by intense conflict, political battles, economic inequality, and climate change, global migration is at its highest level since World War II. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, 68.5 million people were displaced in 2018, and among them, 25.4 million have been designated as refugees, 10 million have been left stateless, fewer than 105,000 have been resettled, and each day, conflicts and persecutions force 44,400 people to flee their homes.¹ The exhibition *Stateless: Views of Global Migration* seeks to humanize this stark data through individual stories that help to define this global human crisis. Eight contemporary artists offer distinct lenses for considering the contradictions inherent to the crisis, finding beauty and strength in the face of collective trauma. These powerful works of art bear witness, contemplate memory, and explore human connectivity to place, which becomes particularly poignant when one can no longer safely return there.

Although they use widely different artistic approaches, both **Bissane Al Charif** (Palestinian-Syrian, b. 1977) and **Omar Imam** (Syrian, b. 1979) give voice to people that have been uprooted from their homes in Syria, much like the artists themselves. With video, still photography, and sound, Al Charif's installation *Women*

Memories (2013–16) focuses on the harrowing stories of ten Syrian and Palestinian women who fled Syria in search of refuge. The women's voices underscore Al Charif's imagery as they describe the homes they left, their difficult journeys, the objects they carried with them, and where they imagine their lives will be in ten years.

As a political refugee himself, Imam uses irony and absurdism to address the violent events taking place in Syria. For his photographic series *Live, Love, Refugee* (2015) he collaborated with displaced people living in Lebanese refugee camps to reenact their heartrending stories and re-create their nightmares and dreams of escape, terror, and love. The resulting staged photographs are surreal and reveal both remarkable resilience and the darkness of trauma.

The works of both **Daniel Castro Garcia** (Spanish, b. 1985) and **Leila Alaoui** (French-Moroccan, 1982–2016) convey the traumatic experiences of sub-Saharan migrants who embark on life-threatening journeys across the Mediterranean Sea, seeking a better life in Europe—all of them depictions that artfully explore the boundaries of storytelling while avoiding clichés of victimization. Working in Sicily, Greece, Calais, and many other sites, Garcia examines the lives and stories of people attempting to integrate into a foreign place, while simultaneously challenging the visual culture and political rhetoric often used to represent and address the crisis. Alaoui's video

Crossing (2013) intertwines film clips of sand dunes and water with portraits of migrants, emphasizing the psychological and physical impacts of the decision to leave as well the journey itself. Tragically, Alaoui died at the age of thirty-three in 2016 from injuries she sustained from a terrorist attack in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, while working on a photographic project for Amnesty International.

In collaboration with seven Syrian refugees, the majority of whom recently arrived in Europe on rafts over the Mediterranean Sea, **Shimon Attie** (American, b. 1957) created the film *The Crossing* (2017), which unfolds as a series of slow-moving tableaux as seven Syrians act out a metaphorical tale based on their individual experiences of exile and flight. Filmed in a former casino, the participants engage in a game of roulette and, similar to all the artists' works in the exhibition, *The Crossing* considers the extraordinary risks migrants take in times of crisis, literally gambling for their lives.

As a political refugee in the early 2000s, **Hiwa K** (Iraqi, b. 1975) used personal experiences to inform the making of *A View From Above* (2017). This work highlights both the challenges that confront asylum-seekers and the frequent inhumanity of bureaucracy. In order to receive asylum, refugees must prove they are from a United Nations recognized unsafe zone, a process that poses countless difficulties. *A View From Above* tells the story of an anonymous soldier who fails his first attempt to receive asylum, subsequently figuring out how to beat the system.

The film *Divided* (2018) by **Tomas van Houtryve** (Belgian, b. 1975) considers the walls and fences that can be found along contentious borders, including the Mexico–United States border. Filmed with a drone, *Divided* focuses on a particular area where the Pacific Ocean meets the border in Baja, Mexico, and Alta, California. This political boundary has been reinforced over the years from a simple demarcation line to high steel barriers protruding into the Pacific Ocean, today closely monitored by US Border Control. As the ocean waves crash repeatedly into the barrier and become divided, they offer a metaphor for the flow of human movement across borders,

here represented by ocean waves.

Born in Oaxaca, Mexico, **Fidencio Fifield-Perez** (Mexican, b. 1990) also considers the Mexico–United States Border, but from a very personal viewpoint. Smuggled into the United States at the age of seven with his mother and three brothers, Fifield-Perez works with materials such as maps and newspaper clippings that harken back to his dangerous journey north across the border. For his site-specific sculpture *El Hielo / I. C. E.* (2018), Fifield-Perez constructs an intricate fence-like sculpture. Here human forms are intertwined, appropriating a traditional Oaxacan paper-cutting technique used to make paper cuts for celebrations, but also to mourn the dead. The work is at once an alluring and haunting memorial to all the children and adults who have attempted to navigate borders.

The works in this exhibition reveal untold stories of global migration, offering an alternative visual framework for understanding the complexity of the crisis. Rather than leaning into overly simplified imagery of nameless victims, the artists featured in *Stateless* attempt to illustrate what it means to leave—and lose—one's country of origin, and to depict it as an experience that is utterly specific, and thus highly varied. In excavating these stories, they divulge significant contradictions: acknowledgments of both place and placelessness, revelations of traumatic pasts alongside pathways to hope. These works of art present the global migration crisis from multiple vantage points. Although individual personal struggles reflect broad systemic issues, migration itself comes to the fore as a wide-ranging, and always deeply personal experience. Clearly, the global migration crisis—and the individuals most affected by it—cannot ultimately be represented by any singular image.

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Notes

1. "Figures at a Glance," The United Nations Refugee Agency, June 19, 2018, <http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>.