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RODNEY ZELENKA is an accomplished Panamanian visual artist whose body of work, shown in numerous exhibitions in Europe, North, South and Central America and Japan well interprets his philosophy of life and view of global politics' impact on the lives of all. No words are better than his, presented here, to introduce his work and interpret his paintings for our readers

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QUOTE of the MONTH:

“Truth exists; only lies are invented. ”

Georges Braque



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At a chaotic time in our shared world, like 1918 when Tristan Tzara authored the Dada Manifesto, when art as action and idea dominated, surpassing the object d'art, to be concerned with change, and especially rapid change, immediacy and destruction, we find conceptual art and spectacles of art today with roots in Dada.

Dada was followed by surrealism, a movement that saw Freudian inspired dream possibilities in the world depicted by surrealist artists. Freud's work allowed artists to follow their dreams to create possibilities, depicted in paintings. A pipe is not a pipe, but then what was it? It was whatever the artist and viewer imagined and dreamt it to be, not unlike the world we and our leaders imagine the world might become. Art as idea dominates today with symbols inspired by those ideas. Words are twisted to become meaning.

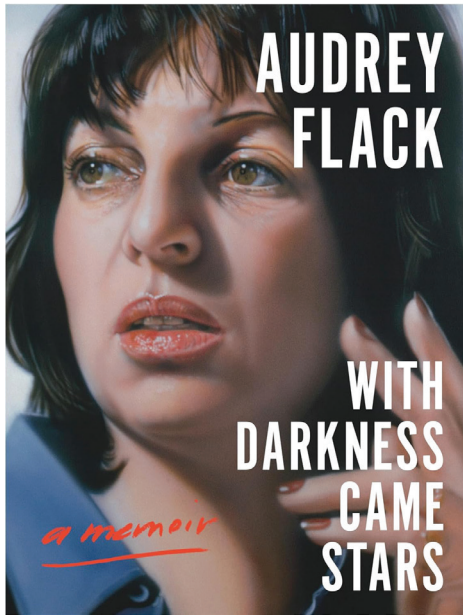
Form and content vie for superiority, with abstraction and surrealism seeming irreconcilable, but as okayed by Breton in the work of Paul Klee and Joan Miro, possibly because the symbols constituted a language without the negativity that Herbert Read claimed of the surrealists. The abstractionists were revolutionary in form, whereas the realists were revolutionary in content, but all conceded that their political allegiances, whether Communism, largely adopted by the Realists or Fascism or Capitalism affected their work. And ultimately, the recall of the recent war and the bodies literally buried emerged from the sandy ground as bones in Yves Tanguy's painting and Salvador Dali's *Etude pour le miel est plus doux que le sang* with headless bodies and bodiless heads on the beach. A headless creature symbolizing Emancipation from reason was the emblem of George Bataille and Andre Masson's *Acephale*, a magazine professing a new mythology in 1936. Rene Magritte's *Le Present*, (1939) depicting an eagle dressed in a bureaucrat's jacket, talons behind eggs, occupies his high perch on a mountainous landscape. Max Ernst's *L'Ange du foyer (Le Triomphe du surrealism)* (1937), *The Angel of Hearth and Home*, illustrates the terror of fascist, nazi and Francoist uprisings in Europe, opposing reason, Ernst's impression of what was going to happen to the world, a year before Ernst was arrested as an enemy alien. Dali painted *Construction molle avec haricots bouillis* (premonition de la guerre civile) in 1936

linking cannibalism to the cruel father and the history of Spain.

The work of the Surrealists, featured currently in an exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris is for our times, as we explore revolutionary forms of art, with technological as well as painterly techniques, and in so doing, examine, as the Surrealists did, what our dreams and humanism might imagine. The catalogue to the exhibit at the Centre Pompidou notes that surrealism sought to respond to "the dual injunctions of Karl Marx – "change the world". Indeed, the Surrealists co-signed their 1925 manifesto with the Clarte group of young communists denouncing the rise of fascism in Europe and reconsidering "the impermeable frontier between poetic creation and political activity they had defended until then." (catalogue, Surrealism, Pompidou). Stalin's doctrine of Socialism in One Country is unfortunately echoed by the nationalist doctrines of rulers of nations today. George Lukacs 1932 "Tendency" or "Partisanship" opposes the Protecult which placed Russian literary and artistic organizations under central control and instead proposed partisanship with humanism, allowing for socialist realism. The closing of borders today is opposed by artists whose work and imaginings cross those borders by uniting people in artistic pursuit. Similar to the Surrealists and opposed to the Dadaists, whose work was conceptual, artists emerging today are separated into both camps, conceptual and those who can really paint, and propel their message. And I am seeing more and more of those who are returning to understand the technical and emotional linkage that realistic painting provides, and that allows their political stance, whether presenting the challenges to the environment, to peaceful pursuits, to interest in the other, to empathy with those deserving of it, reflected in their painting and photography.

The fact that we are seeing little artwork emerging from the sites of the wars the world is currently engaged in is not surprising. Contemplation after the wars will produce the artwork, filtered through the sieve of creative thought. Dada was too immediate, chaos resulted. Surrealists filtered thought, adding process to produce imagery that chilled.

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Each issue, the New Art Examiner invites a well-known, or not so well-known, art world personality to write a speakeasy essay on a topic of interest.

Mary Fletcher is a multimedia artist Flaneur: www.axisweb.org/p/maryfletcher She has an MA in contemporary visual art and writes the blog: 4maryfletcher.blogspot.com. She is a humanist, feminist and socialist, influenced by psychotherapy. She lives in St Ives, Cornwall, UK.

With Darkness Came Stars' a memoir

Mary Fletcher

This memoir is presented as reflections on her life from a bench in the Bowery where she sat during over more than a year of artistic block, in her fifties when she was a famous photo realist painter.

She had obtained an art education despite her unencouraging background and gambling addicted mother. Remarkably her brother had brought home to his Jewish family from WW2 souvenirs of Hitler's paintings from the Nazi Eagles' Nest retreat.

Audrey drank in the Cedar bar with Jackson Pollock and the abstract expressionist men but kept apart from their alcoholism and sexual invitations.

She left abstraction and studied the Old Masters, chose modern life as her subject, worked with a therapist and sought a stable family life despite marrying in haste with the following repentance and eventual divorce. There are a lot of memories of the famous which bring out their bad sides..

I noticed all the factors that were usefully present in that area of New York then - the artists, the bars, the galleries, the wild lifestyle, new ideas and opportunities and critics writing.

She had humdrum jobs, then worked in graphics, and remarkably turned from abstract expressionism to developing photo realism, but always painting from her images rather than exhibiting them as photography. She explains that the sense of flat compositional surface of abstraction was important in her later paintings. She was criticised for using photos.

She had a difficult time as a young mother as her first daughter Melissa had severe autism and never learnt to speak. The condition was not understood and she and others were called 'refrigerator mothers' and encouraged to leave their offspring in institutions.

Throughout her life art was a therapeutic help and

she also performed on a banjo and formed two bands.

There was some good luck- when she was surprisingly given art opportunities and when her first, stable and calm boyfriend, Bob, got in touch and they were eventually happily married with him being very supportive.

She was able to travel in Europe. She joined a feminist consciousness raising group and did some paintings of still life deliberately featuring women's feminine belongings in contrast to the cars and planes the male photo realists favoured.

She featured Marilyn Monroe and did a picture about the Kennedy assassination. Her 'WW2' about holocaust survivors was much criticised but won an award from female survivors even though she had only depicted men in it.

In another remarkable change Flack gave up painting, withdrew from exhibiting for ten years and studied sculpture, looking into creation myths. Her huge commission for a figure of the Portuguese Queen Catherine for Queens district was eventually rejected and destroyed as she had not been aware of that monarch's involvement in the slave trade.

She ends, 'Art kept me alive and still helps me cope with the most heartbreaking situations in my life. In the midst of all the darkness that life can bring, art reminds us that with darkness can come stars.'

There are similarities to this in my own life and through reading this memoir and examining the many illustrations of her work I have come to know and respect Audrey Flack's contribution to art.

An artist with Purpose

Nancy Nesvet

“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter” (Martin Luther King Jr.)

Rodney Zelenka has clearly chosen this path, having told me that he believes in the need humans have for purpose in life, to leave footprints that honor our forefathers and shed light for the paths of our children. His realist, mostly figurative paintings and drawings, often black and white with hits of color, seem like graphic illustrations often shown in news publications, adding to the immediacy of the image and the need to read it. He claims influences including Faith Ringgold, Peter Paul Rubens (as in the *Assassins of the Innocent / Saturn Eating his Child*), Francisco Goya, Basquiat, Anselm Kiefer, Francis Bacon, Diego Rivera, Siqueiros, admiring artists who have the courage to make art about things that matter, and whose work is seen by a greater public, whether in news publications or in murals in spaces in the public arena.

Since the 1990's, subjects including war, migration, hunger, displacement, abuse of power, child abuse, gender violence, global warming, forest fires, over consumption, waste, extreme materialism, loneliness, fake news, brain washing, monetary wealth and spiritual poverty, have been themes in his work. Claiming inspiration from threats to the earth and the people who inhabit it, he claims to try to break out of molds, preconditioned perceptions, searching for new forms and symbols, exploring alternative paradigms to create works of art that connect with the viewer. His claim to be a Surrealist in the 21st century is not wrong. Surrealists dreamt of a better world after the chaos and devastation of World War I. Zelenka, in his artwork, shows migration to a better or at least alternative world after the real or imagined chaotic, devastated areas of today's world.

His creative process includes first studying previous artist's work, including Mayan frescoes, murals by Rivera and Siqueiros, paintings by Otto Dix and Philip Guston.

His compositions of gadgets and armor, especially in his recent Transformers series looks like work by Basquiat, and the surrealist, Max Ernst.

In Cubist and Italian futurist sculpture, in Picasso's sculpture, and in Zelenka's work, bodies are recognizable as bodies but are transformed in shape and



Blue Blood (2022)
acrylic on canvas



Death of an Angel - Angel of war (2022)
acrylic on canvas



Riot (2021)
acrylic on canvas

in space, reconstructed and in motion. Since 2022, based on artists' realistic images Zelenka painted his Transformers, considering and imagining subject matter including abuse of power, fake news, waste, overconsumption, waiting in line. Zelenka told me that he felt that, in those paintings, objects of daily use, suitcases, clothes, shoes, tires, baskets, bags, bottles, started to overwhelm the scene, and these objects, as we find in dumps, in our closets, office space, storage and that we purchase and travel with started to take center stage. Consequently, he decided to give these objects personality and replace the figurative narrative in a process of decomposition and re-composition. They became TRANSFORMERS.

His painting *Waiting in Line* resulted from Zelensky watching the long lines of travelers during the Covid epidemic. Due to the head coverings, suitcases balanced on heads, Peruvian style fedoras we see a resemblance to migrants marching and waiting at the gates in long, unending lines to escape to a new place, of greater safety and security, whether political or economic.

Depicting the proliferation of fake news by officials of many countries, Zelenka painted a cloud of belongings transported by migrants, calling it WEB Masters.

His painting, *Hard Labor* based on a work from the 18th century, "Volga Barge Haulers" suggested the most powerful and wealthiest were themselves victims of the Machiavellian world of the WEB.

Many are mixed media with elements from the street brought into the works. Paintings, sculptures and installations that were exhibited in museums in solo exhibits carry on Zelenka's empathy for the homeless, the trapped, the mad, and mothers finally reconciled with their babies. His work also comments on matters of deforestation and forest fires, destroying homelands and nature.

His work deals with war and war's consequences, shown almost 30 years ago, at the Sao Paolo Bienal, 1996/7 and several museums.

His 2023/24, works on paper and wood sculptures, of which have been exhibited in Mexico and at the Lichtundfire Gallery on New York City's lower east side carries on his practice of questioning authority, proliferation of the monied classes at the expense of the poor, and the middle class, the challenged and the innocent victim.

Finally, his four most recent artworks relate to migration or slavery, one the ever-present suitcase, on canvas and another of wooden hands reaching up for help? Forgiveness?

Of his last two works on paper, one relates to the

freight train "The Beast", that crosses migrants from Mexico and the wagons that took victims of the holocaust to gas chambers, or the many trains that have carried slaves in many dark times of our history.

The last one, "Once a Nest", is the ghost home, ghost parents and offspring that result from war and desperate migrations. And his work carries on, because the problems persist. And he paints every day to symbolize those persistent problems and issues, creating awareness to propel people to seek a solution. Although the condemned are caught in a spider web in his Suitcase Stories of a Condemned Voyage, they are comical and point toward an optimism in his paintings. That optimism lends hope to an often hopeless situation, and that is what characterizes Rodney Zelenka's art.



Suitcase Stories (2024)
mixed media: Cobolo wood metal screws, barbed wire, acrylic paint

Film Bang Bang available on vimeo [here](#)

Password Bang 2024

'You're Either with Me or Against Me':

THE LETHAL MORALITY OF POLITICAL ART

Jorge M. Benitez



Francisco Goya *Los Desastres de la Guerra*-No.0 -*Lo mismo*

Plate 3: *Lo mismo* (The same). A Spanish civilian about to decapitate a French soldier with an axe.

What is political art? More importantly, what does it achieve? Political art is as varied, nuanced, and contextual as its makers, patrons, and viewers. The questions become even more complex when the art itself begins as one genre and ends as another. Is Michelangelo political? Did not his religious sculptures and paintings serve the political ends of the Catholic Church to the same degree that they inspired the faithful? Did Holbein merely paint portraits of Henry VIII and his court, or were they professions of Tudor power and English aspirations? Was not Versailles built to impress French glory upon the rest of Europe? By the twentieth century the questions would become too complex and lethal to be answered casually.

The only certainty with political art is that it de-

pends upon a mesh of symbols and signs. It represents and promotes abstract ideas and aspirations while simultaneously pointing to goals. Unfortunately, symbols and signs require prior knowledge in the audience. Without an understanding of the symbolic and semiotic fullness of the painting, *The Death of Marat* is only a visually powerful portrait of a dead man in his bath. In this sense, is *The Death of Marat* a political painting or a work of art inspired by a concrete political event? The same could be asked of *Guernica* or even Goya's *Disasters of War*. Such works transcend their titles along with the events that inspired them. They rise to the level of art precisely because they are larger than politics, symbols, and signs. They move the viewer because their formal and expressive qualities bypass the need for pri-

or knowledge. They assert the power of the gaze as a tragic vehicle beyond the reach of language alone. They speak to the pain of our shared animality.

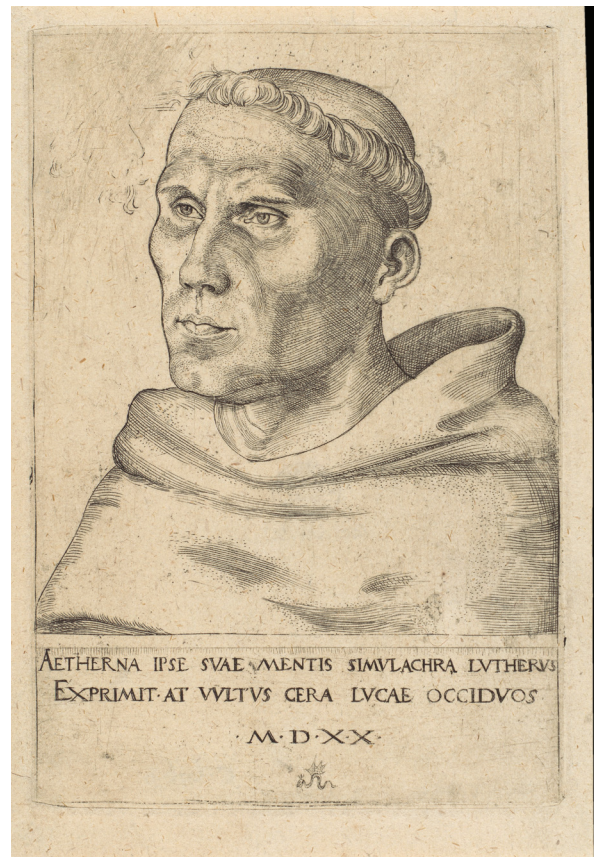
Conversely, political art provides a transgressive frisson not unlike soft porn. There is enough naughtiness for a sense of rebellion. But who is the rebel? Is it the political artist, the party, or the viewer who finds the orgy arousing but declines the invitation to participate? How many Christian Nationalists know Leni Riefenstahl despite their desire to emulate the grandeur of *Triumph of the Will*? How many Iowa farmers or South Carolina autoworkers have ever heard of the Guerrilla Girls and their consciousness-raising activism?

Political art mostly succeeds in authoritarian and totalitarian societies where the stakes drive the authorities and their victims to increasingly desperate measures. In liberal democracies, political art must compete with entertainment. Consequently, FOX News and Joe Rogan succeed because they provide performance pieces masquerading as news and serious editorial content. The pseudo-intellectual punditry of FOX finds its progressive analog in the histrionics of Stephen Colbert and the condescension of Sunny Hostin, performers with a veneer of political depth. Their mix of ideology and entertainment in front of a mass audience upstages the pretensions of a self-identified avant-garde.

Outside of authoritarian systems, political art suffers from the self-cancelling contradictions of both the modernist avant-garde and its emasculated postmodern descendants. In other words, when everything is art, nothing is art; or, as Marcel Duchamp said, "What I have in mind is that art may be bad, good or indifferent, but whatever adjective is used, we must call it art, and bad art is still art in the same way as a bad emotion is still an emotion." The same holds true for politics. If every human action is political, then nothing is political while even bad politics is still politics. Those qualities that shape the mystery of art and those actions that define the truly political lose their meaning in the pseudo-democratic morass of inclusive mediocrity. Everyone has agency because the meaning of the word is false. Like the Anglo-centric misreading of Michel Foucault, the reduction of human interactions to vulgar power dynamics negates the possibility of kindness, affection, or any expression of genuine altruism. Tragedy is reduced to an excuse for agitprop. Life becomes a Stalinist struggle for survival within the confines of party-driven theory. Under the circumstances, it makes sense that the National Socialist jurist Carl Schmitt should still be influential on American campuses given the follow-



Jacque Louis David Self Portrait (1794)



Lucas Cranach - Martin Luther as an Augustinian Monk (1520)





Albert Camus crowning Stockholm's Lucia on 13 December 1957, three days after accepting the Nobel Prize in Literature



Filippo Tommaso Marinetti

ing assertion: "The equation state = politics" becomes erroneous and deceptive at exactly the moment when the state and society penetrate each other. What had been up to that point affairs of state become thereby social matters, and, vice versa, what had been purely social matters become affairs of state – as must necessarily occur in a democratically

organized unit. Heretofore ostensibly neutral domains – religion, culture, education, the economy – then cease to be neutral in the sense that they do not pertain to state and to politics." A few pages later, Schmitt adds: "The political is the most intense and extreme antagonism, and every concrete antagonism becomes that much more political the closer it approaches the most extreme point, that of the friend-enemy grouping." Perhaps because he was a Nazi, Schmitt understood the true meaning of the avant-garde as the bayonet of politics: the most courageous and fanatical soldiers in a war without mercy. It explains, as Marinetti posited years earlier, why the modernist desire to move forward is inseparable from its need to destroy what came before. Like Jacques-Louis David, who was a signatory of the death sentence of Louis XVI, it is not enough to depose the king; he must be physically erased.

Although he did not address art directly, Schmitt's "friend-enemy" binary forms the core of political art. The viewer must choose a side. Neutrality is not an option. By its very nature the avant-garde cannot distinguish between art and politics or art and the state. The artistic act becomes an act of war that can only be sustained through aesthetic and intellectual violence. Its revolutionary nature demands the destruction, or at least the denigration, of all that came before. Yet that is also the germ of its demise. By achieving power, the avant-garde commits suicide. University art schools bury the avant-garde by turning political art into an academic exercise that degenerates into propagandistic kitsch. As Clement Greenberg observed in 1939: "Where today a political regime establishes an official cultural policy, it is for the sake of demagogy. If kitsch is the official tendency of culture in Germany, Italy and Russia, it is not because their respective governments are controlled by philistines, but because kitsch is the culture of the masses in these countries, as it is everywhere else. The encouragement of kitsch is merely another of the inexpensive ways in which totalitarian regimes seek to ingratiate themselves with their subjects." If conservatism is the fate of every revolution, then the political art that promoted it is destined to become "an official cultural policy." Like revolution, propaganda is inherently reactionary and kitschy.

The Protestant Reformation invented propaganda, but the Catholic Church gave it its name when it responded with the establishment of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith as part of a slow response that came to be known as the Counterreformation.

Thanks to the printing press, the scatological vul-



Banksy, London. (2008)

garity of Martin Luther and his followers blindsided the papacy with images of demons defecating popes and priests. Protestant pamphlets and broadsides seduced the illiterate majority as their literate friends read the texts aloud. The combination of word and image multiplied the power of the message. Despite being a doctor of theology, Martin Luther understood the language of the common folk and was not above polemical raunchiness. By joining forces with artists such as Lucas Cranach, he converted the printing press into a weapon that unleashed resentment, exaggeration, misinformation, and occasionally truth with a power that would not be seen until the rise of social media in the 21st century. The ensuing Wars of Religion killed one third of the German and Central European population. Political art had proven its worth.

It had also proven that it was impotent without the technology of mass communication. A political drawing, no matter how powerful, was useless without a means of dissemination. A single painting or sculpture could not move the masses unless it was reproduced in print with accompanying text. The press was more dangerous than the brush.

By the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, propaganda was beginning to assume its modern form as an instrument of mass mobilization. Armed with reason and virtue, the disciples of Jean-Jacques

Rousseau had learned to go beyond Lutheran crassness while still appealing to the people. Indeed, the revolutionaries held the moral high ground, a delusion that still serves would-be saviors. Albert Camus expressed the concept succinctly with a warning: "Morality, when it is formal, devours. To paraphrase Saint-Just, no one is innocently virtuous."

Political art cannot be divorced from the devouring nature of formal morality. Camus understood what every revolution has amply demonstrated since 1789, namely, that virtue, far more than power or corruption, is the soul of political violence. Political art, no matter how innocent it may appear, is the aesthetic expression of that violence. It leaves no room for nuance or doubt. It demands absolute loyalty with a straightforward pronouncement: "You're either with me or against me." It serves the thuggery of virtue with Robespierre-an inhumanity. Those lethal qualities are once again asserting their authority as the radioactive printing press of social media and universal misinformation threaten liberal democracy and the rule of law with the dictatorship of chaos.

The Holy Prison

Isabella Chiadini

It is difficult to realize that you are in front of a prison unless you are on the opposite side, beyond the little bridge that crosses the canal, and even then you need to have good eyesight to notice that above a massive door – like many in Venice – there is an old-fashioned oval enamelled plaque, from the Ministry of Justice, which defines this building as a prison.

The white facade is squeezed inside other buildings that before becoming a prison it was a convent. Little has changed from its original structure made of cloisters and courtyards that fit into each other and expand inwards. On the wall of the deconsecrated church next to the prison there is a mural *Father* of two large feet by Maurizio Cattelan. The shades – some more nuanced, others more intense – of grays, blacks and whites blend in some places with the white of the wall. It is we who must look carefully they who offer themselves to us despite their enormity. Only at this point, after having lingered on the details, could we make a further leap from the decision to have stopped. We could overcome – in a broader sense – the limited vision of inanimate details and bring them back to a body. They are painful, dirty, hardened, eaten away, perhaps wounded feet; they are the feet of a poor, fragile, perhaps adrift person. They are bare feet but it is not nudity that they show; their exposure does not deprive them of the strength of modesty and dignity. It is a sense of estrangement that those feet induce. Estrangement from the hypertrophic self, which we let go, even for just a moment, to take on a gaze that is not our own. The Holy See Pavilion was designed as a physical

and conceptual opening of a prison – whose existence we often collectively tend to disregard. Cattelan's work offers us the key to understanding, the cipher, of the Holy See exhibition project, which the artists and curators define as a true manifesto, which therefore rests on a common thread: the authentic and respectful desire to get closer to the complexity of lives we do not know. In this case, the lives of the inhabitants of the Giudecca Women's Prison in Venice.

The Shakespearean verse "I love thee not with my eyes" (Sonnet 141) echoing the verses 42.5 of the Book of Job, "Mine eyes have seen thee." informs the concept of the Pavilion inspired by the two verses that reflect and dissolve into each other. "A cross-fading that blurs into an action where seeing becomes synonymous with touching, of embracing with the eye, of allowing a dialogue between sight and perception". There are eight artists whom Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça, Cardinal Prefect of the Dicastery for Culture and Education, has chosen: Maurizio Cattelan, Bintou Dembélé, Simone Fattal, Claire Fontaine, Sonia Gomes, Corita Kent, Marco Perego & Zoe Saldana, Claire Tabouret. And there are two curators: Chiara Parisi, and Bruno Racine.

His Eminence Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça says that "it is certainly not a coincidence that the title of the Holy See Pavilion wants to drive our attention on the drama of the representations in our eyes" but this is not a metaphorical gaze ... comfortably protected by that anonymous voyeurism that contemporaneity has globalized. The title *With My Eyes* contains in itself something both disruptive and prophetic; it proposes a step in a different cultural direction, questioning this our time in which human vision is increasingly deferred and less direct Will we still know what it is to 'see with our own eyes'? The Holy See has chosen to develop its project in a space that we could define as a non-pavilion, and not only that: the works we see are the result of the collaboration between the artists and the inmates, who also have the role of guides. Bruno Racine asks himself "How can the historically handed down concept of the 'national pavilion' be interpreted today? The peculiarity of the Holy See, a singular state lacking a national art scene, prompted us to experiment with a new formula. The Giudecca Women's Prison House was the answer."



Sister Corita Kent



Sonia Gomes

Chiara Parisi explains, “Although it is forbidden to take photographs, we trust that this experience will remain in the visitor’s memory ... with their eyes...” Parisi says that the strength of the project lies in its underlying idea: “In a surprising corner of the world, artists and female inmates join expressive forces in an unusual collaboration, prison reality and unlimited artistic expression meet and seduce each other: this is the heart of the Holy See Pavilion at the Biennale Arte 2024, a project with an incredible visual narrative. The exhibit is an interweaving of relationships that have evolved over time, in an environment where being observed or judged need not enter, and that reflects what we desire for ourselves, wherever we are”.

It’s almost time to go in; we are told that our phones, documents, and everything else, must be packed away. Therefore I am getting ready to rely on my human memory the images and feelings that most likely will overcome me; mainly because what I am going to experience in this place appears to be remarkable and because I know that I’ll have to tell what I’m going to see without any cell phone crutches. Never has a queue time been so useful to establish a necessary connection among the small waiting group. We share so much perceptible emotion

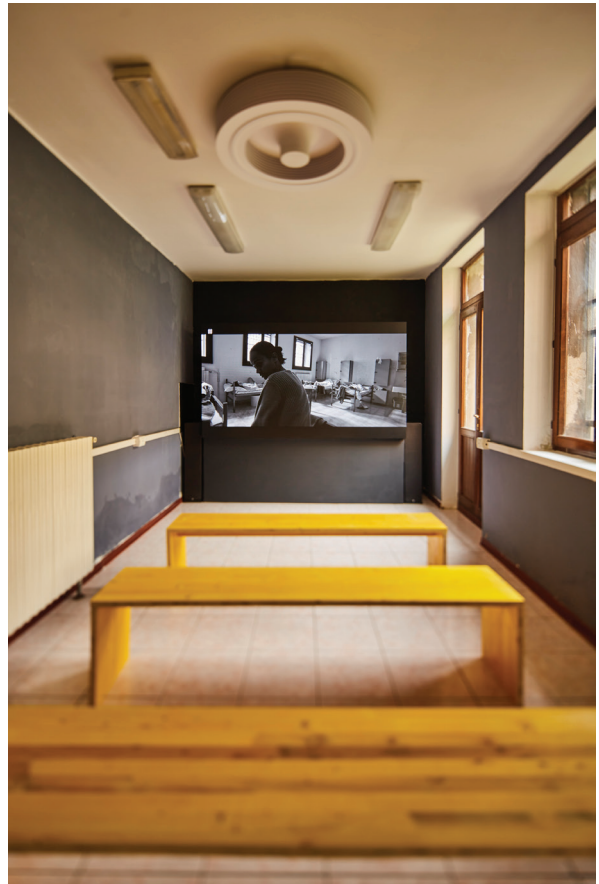
that a few chats make us a sort of unique entity, however labile, whose only purpose is listening and seeing. I likely will be out in about 45 minutes but, as one of the women will tell us shortly, anyone could end up here.

We see prison life and expectations in the short film shown in a small bare room. The protagonist of the film, shot by the Italian artist Marco Perego, is the American actress Zoe Saldana, who delicately blends in with the faces and bodies of the inmates, who made the film with her. The film tells in 16 minutes the last hours of a woman who is about to leave prison while another woman is about to enter. Perego makes us slowly approach the prison, from a shining Venice; but it’s a matter of a moment and we’re inside a cell: a dormitory with more or less 10 beds - a table, lockers, a bathroom without a door, shared showers - where everything happens under the gaze of others, whether they are the prison guards or the other inmates.

Get undressed, raise your arms, open your mouth, stick out your tongue. Hands that wear latex gloves and eyes that scrutinize. Up, down, show your hands, get dressed. The guards do what they have to do; the inmate cries. The guards, imperturbable, don’t pay attention. This is one of the scenes: with-

out frills and aseptic; it represents reality and at the same time also suggests what is not explicitly said. Marco Perego and Zoe Saldana said they arrived at Giudecca with a screenplay but then the film developed little by little. The only certainty they had was that they wanted to make a film in which the inmates expressed themselves both through the contribution of their ideas and in the staging. How difficult it must have been to show so much of oneself in a place that one is often ashamed of, or that one is ashamed of having been in. The inmates, at first, did not want to meet the two artists. They hid under the sheets. This makes it beautiful and touching, you feel the essence of the people beyond what they may have done before entering those cells. You perceive – almost under your skin – how a life is led in those suffocating spaces. You perceive the deprivation of freedom but, in some way, also the glimmers that open up and alleviate the constraints: coffee, work, friendships despite everything:

from a narrow street we enter a room – it is a cafeteria – whose counter recalls the Italian bars of the 1960s and 1970s. All the walls of the room – except for the one of the counter – are covered with the works of Corita Kent, a former nun and American artist who died in 1986. Her works are hung by layering. Someone who loves painting gives away his works; these are added to other paintings, which are added to group photographs and many other things. I don't know if there was anything hanging on those walls before the arrival of Corita Kent's works, but what is certain is that they have found their place, inside that room, like everything that accumulates inside this type of place. All the works on display contain words: letters of the alphabet more or less colored and more or less large and therefore thoughts swallowed up by the room that contains them; but at the same time, the text conveys the message by emerging from the background; it is striking. The bar we see inside the Giudecca is not a display: it is the one frequented by the prison guards; a sort of recreational club where the inmates work as bartenders. And where could the words of Corita Kent, an artist-activist who has fought against all kinds of oppression all her life, fit in if not in a place where the work of some intersects with the recreation of others? I believe that Kent's silkscreens, colorful and pop, are in a coffee shop because the meaning of that place – located in a prison – lies in the possibility of increasing the connections between the women and men who frequent it. Those connections give work back its participatory and humanizing peculiarity; those who have to serve a sentence – but also those who supervise – rediscover the ethical dimen-



Marco Perego & Zoe Saldana

sion of the work. As happens in the bars outside the Giudecca prison, those whose walls are layers of artifacts, I imagine that relationships are developing around Corita Kent's works that go beyond sterile obedience and orders as an end in themselves.

The cafeteria is the first room we saw; right there, looking at Kent's works together with our guides, the tension dissolved; at a certain point, one of the inmate lecturers couldn't help but abandon the safety of the written sheet, "sometimes it takes time to understand what is important to say."

Leaving the cafeteria we see a succession of words in front of us, which emerge from slabs of lava rock hanging on the wall of an open-air corridor; a barbed wire fence rises from the wall. The Syrian-Lebanese artist Simone Fattal collaborated with the inmates so that their thoughts, their poems or their prayers would welcome those who, like us, come to visit.

"...My life is an invisible planet...", "I scream while remaining silent...", "A father gives his children this whole world" Simone Fattal and the curators define it as a visual dialogue; the inhabitants of Giudecca introduce themselves by putting into words their feelings, desires, sadness, anger, melancholy and even joy. Some say that practicing writing generates



*Installation view of Claire Fontaine's work
(photo by Marco Cremascoli, courtesy the Holy See Pavilion)*

miracles: I don't know if it's really like that but I'm sure that trying to start writing, deciding to dedicate time to giving substance to something confused, that would otherwise escape, is one of the happiest ways, in a certain sense, to investigate the deepest self. A jumble of lines, colors and material density that perhaps evokes the complex personalities of the authors, who are prisoners, but are also much more. "Before going to sleep ask yourself if you are satisfied with your life..." Susanna. "I am in this beautiful historic building, where duties are the mantra of every day... I feel the heat in every corner of these "walls"..." IRIS M.C.U.

At the end of the corridor, on the wall of the watchtower, an eye of neon tubes crossed by an oblique line watches us. *Sensitive Content* is the work of the feminist collective Claire Fontaine formed by Giulia Carnevale and James Thornill. It is the larger version of the eye that appears when a photograph, on Instagram, is obscured to protect us from potentially shocking content. "Instagram uses this warning with the intention of protecting us by making us choose not to see a certain image, just as we do not see people who live in prison. In these months of work for the exhibition, many guests have shown that they have extraordinary talents, but the condi-

tions of detention mean that they are not valued." Through a door in the corridor we enter the central courtyard, also called the Corte del Passeggio because it is here that the inmates can spend time outdoors: a few benches, a few trees, an old stone well and clotheslines. On a wall of one of the four buildings surrounding the courtyard stands a neon sign; it says in letters large enough to be read from afar, *We are with you in the night*. The sign is visible from the windows of the cells and by those who hang out in the courtyard; in the evening the neon tubes light up in an intense blue: the light stands out clearly within the space surrounded by walls and barred windows. The work, created by the collective in 2008, has already been exhibited in front of the Museo del Novecento in Florence in 2020/21; it takes up a phrase that appeared in front of the prisons of some Italian cities in the 1970s. Claire Fontaine amplifies its value by making it as visible as possible: loaded with a consistency of form and content; freely interpretable by anyone. The collective often repeats that their art-making takes on meaning in the performance of participatory and public artistic gestures; traversable, using a concept by philosopher Giorgio Agamben, by a multitude of "any singularities". In this case, then, the message echoes the Book



A mural by artist Maurizio Cattelan is seen outside Giudecca Women's Prison

Photo by Gabriel Bouys/AFP via Getty Images.

of Job's verse "Mine eyes have seen thee.", on which, as we now know, the entire conception of the Pavilion rests. The inmates explain to us that those words, placed there with grace, right inside the prison walls, give them relief: they are a bit like a caress. We are with you in the night, it is written on the wall; it means that out there is someone who does not forget those who live in prison. Every time that declaration of closeness, and of affection without judgment, takes on color by breaking through the darkness, the anguish and heaviness of thoughts are alleviated; and the emotion that that light unleashes is a good thing, the inmates tell us.

From the Corte del Passeggio we enter the room intended for the inmates to meet with their children and family members. The set up is the work of the inmates. This room is beautiful. It is like being in a kind of bubble; wrapped in a soft sky-blue where you live upside down in a welcoming place without sharp edges. Then we begin to focus on the place that contains us and the walls come to life. Hands, mouths, bodies, women upside down, rosaries, trees, leaves, candles, little lights hanging from the branches of a tree: a party, perhaps; and a little angel: next to him the words *fortune*, and *mother*. Two smiling guards recall the valets of royal palaces. Two more smiling guards are drawn on either side of the French window through which you enter another courtyard. A courtyard of colorful slides and swings, a few benches, sturdy trees that provide shade; and a scent of maritime pine needles that gets into your nose. It is the space where children and family members hug, and I imagine that the guards' duty to control is tempered by the emotions of the girls and women. But, to remind us that we are in a prison, therefore limited in our ability to move, are the guards, whether drawn or real.

During our visit, always, a heavy door closed behind

us as soon as we walked towards another place. And another door was opened for us, granting us access. So that blue room is beautiful, very beautiful, and the impressions I had entering it are obviously not comparable to life in prison, of which one prisoner says "Here everyone eats, if you are sick they put a hand on your shoulder to make you sink [...]. You have to deal with your limits and your weaknesses. There is no privacy in this hell disguised as justice". In one of these passageways there is the only window in the prison without bars; the only one that can be opened: from there you can see the vegetable garden that they cultivate, the other fruit trees and flowers, which in addition to adding color to the grayness of the building, are used in the cosmetics laboratory. It is precisely here, one of them tells us, when they look out the window, that they sometimes feel like they are at home. I've been thinking about patience/of ordinary things, [...]/And what is more generous than a window?

We enter an empty space, but although empty, it reminds us of a room in a house because the walls are covered with light wood panels and one of these is covered with a picture gallery. If they were not paintings they could be photographs; the family photographs that in some houses are found at the entrance or along the stairs that lead to the upper floor, or in the living room. The inmate lecturers explain to us that the French painter Claire Tabouret created those portraits inspired by the photographs that each of them showed her. The soft and delicate colors convey their warmth and intensity. It has not always been easy, especially emotionally, to search for the photographs, and choose the one that more than others concentrated a significant memory and an identity. The paintings re-vivify the moments captured by the photographs; each portrait is the result of a mutual trust between Tabouret and the inmates: an exchange and sharing of suggestions around the stories of the inhabitants of Giudecca. One of the two lecturers points out a little girl: it is her daughter. Hesitantly, the other lecturer points out a boy with curls: it is her son. We enter a deconsecrated church filled with the smell of wax and incense. The light, sad and faded, converges in the center. The wooden floor and the semi-square plan make it similar to a theater stall without seats. The space is empty, without benches. The shape of the balconies recalls theater boxes with wings at the sides. *Sinfonia* is composed of fabric sculptures created by the Brazilian artist Sonia Gomes together with the inmates: Thirty-five textile sculptures descend from the ceiling: the fabrics - cotton, silk, acrylic, poor or precious, single-colored or multi-

colored - are wrapped around themselves like lianas or thick colored ropes. The fabrics used were clothes, or anything else, that belonged to someone because Gomes wants them lived and imbued with life. Inside the church, a melody, composed by the Brazilian guitarist Plinio Fernandez, spreads, interrupting itself at times; the rhythm accompanies the spaces delimited by the textile sculptures. The church is dedicated to Mary Magdalene, who sinned but was forgiven; we read her story, a symbol of the possibility of redemption, inside two rose windows in the center of two opposing walls. As our guides tell us, the sculptures that float between the two rose windows ideally connect the punishment with the possibility of living another life. The peculiarity of this place favors the dual position of spectators and actors. The waving works never cease to make us actors of the fantasies they trigger; probably immediately after having been spectators, amazed, and perhaps enchanted. The inmates never wanted to come here; I think this empty and dimly lit place was disturbing. Now it's different: one of the two inmates tells us that to her, those twisted fabrics swinging from the ceiling, recall her tense body with her head pointing downwards, beyond the bars, when she tries to look out. The other inmate tells us that some of their companions really like these textile sculptures because they invite you to look up: they are cocoons ready to turn into butterflies; a bit like them. The non-pavilion of the Holy See presents itself as an 'unprecedented and new reality', say the curators; almost certainly the creation of a work of this type was possible because the Giudecca Prison is defined as a virtuous example. Of course there are others in Italy, but the data from the Associations that monitor the situation of prisons say that there have already been 642 suicides since the beginning of 2024. These data always strike me, for this reason I wanted to see the work of the Holy See at the Venice Biennale. Then it happened, a few weeks before the press conference to present the Pavilion, that a 27-year-old boy, an Italian rapper, hanged himself in his cell. He was a friend of my nephew, who works in that environment. A few years ago I happened to see Jordan burying his face in the cream of his birthday cake. I saw him for less than a minute but that face smeared with cream, and him laughing wildly and hugging the dog, continually comes to mind when I imagine him lifeless with a sheet around his neck. He ended up in prison - several times - because he had committed crimes. He was certainly a fragile boy, with a life full of stumbles behind him; if he lowered his tough mask he would say he was depressed. In prison, the last time he was there, he had reported hav-



Sonia Gomes

ing been molested; he had written a letter to his father begging him to make sure he could get house arrest; Some say he would have escaped from house arrest as he had already done; and that type of death, in some way, was always planned. I instead say, along with many of his other friends, that we cannot know: the only certainty we have is that Jordan Tinti died within the walls of an institution of a democratic country; that, according to our Constitution, should have taken care of him. But he was left alone. Reflecting therefore on the creation of the Holy See in Giudecca, the beauty of what was possible to achieve, in an active prison, clashes even more compared to the degradation and state of abandonment in which the inmates of too many Italian prisons survive. That the Holy See is concerned with giving voice to fragility is both a revolutionary and obvious act. Obvious, because dealing with the so-called fallen is its reason for being, revolutionary before becoming obvious; but it takes on a further revolutionary connotation for two reasons: for the expressive mode adopted and because this multifaceted dialogue stands out above the flatness of the indifference of the institutions and of most of the media. The curators explain that the reality of the Holy See Pavilion is the result of an energy that challenges ar-

tistic and prison conventions. Challenging conventions: that is exactly what they say. The challenge cannot be traced back to political categories, as strong as the temptation is, but it can be traced back, if we want to find a root for it, to the re-discovery and therefore to the human and imperfect adhesion to the only word that so distinguishes this Papacy (human and imperfect), that word is Gospel. This word, whose fundamental trait is compassion, which requires commitment, is addressed to everyone, even to my secular sensitivity unfolding in this prison through this exhibition. The disruptive work that we see and experience does much more than raise awareness: It insinuates itself into a way of living that despite almost never having anything educational about it; in its challenge to conventions shows that it is possible to inhabit the prison rather than being locked up within its walls. In Giudecca a difficult and radical choice was made, considering the place where everything is held together by written and unwritten rules. The curator Bruno Racine explained that “It was necessary to choose a place that had a meaning. The idea was that the place was a message and attention – according to what the Pope says – must be paid to those who are separated from society. It is not just about seeing, it is about sharing a shocking experience. Every visitor has a message to transmit after the visit”. In fact this prison is no longer a mere container of individuals but is transformed into a sounding board for emotions, which make us more open, more malleable, less closed. The works are charged with effectiveness not because they are exhibited but through human relationships: between the inmates and the artists, between us and the inmates and the artists, between us and the people we will meet outside of here. Then the introspective movement, the connections, the flows of creative thought – merge in the moment of presentation, which is an equally creative gesture. But it cannot be accomplished if we are not all there. The curators and artists explain that “The Holy See Pavilion establishes itself as a place of life and encounter, a cosmos where artistic and social norms are reinterpreted, representing a heterotopia that reflects and subverts traditional spaces.” In a heterotopia, in the Foucaultian sense of spatial organization that incorporates and reveals the network of relationships that intersect it, there is never anything static; it is the dynamics of human interactions that question and contradict what in those spaces appeared as order. It may be just my impression, but I would like to underline that I felt the element of disruption very strongly in the way the works were shown, as well as in the works themselves, both cre-



Sister Corita Kent



Simone Fattal

ated in the manner of theatrical representation. It is another of the many possibilities of heterotopia – very intense – that was realized in Giudecca. After all, we entered and exited spaces that open and close almost as if they were curtains, places that seem to encompass backdrops and wings. Michel Foucault writes: “The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. Thus it is that the

theater brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another; thus it is that the cinema is a very odd rectangular room, at the end of which, on a two-dimensional screen, one sees the projection of a three-dimensional space.”

The prisoners become prisoners-lecturers; they wear a dress that invests them with that role: prisoners and lecturers. They are the ones who mark and distort the time and rhythm of the prison. Only they are permitted to say and think what until that moment, perhaps, was unthinkable. And I would say more: I was part of a staging, or of what was prepared in the previous months and of what actually went on stage; The film, for example. The lava plaques: illuminated by the poems and colors of the inmates’ thoughts; they are a real presentation; the silk-screens by Corita Kent hanging in a cafeteria that looks like a stage set; the portraits made from the inmates’ photographs: hanging in a place that takes on the appearance of a room in a house. The textile sculptures: located in a space that can be considered a theater, they in turn evoke images that could potentially be represented. The blue room of the meetings with the family members, where everything happens as if the inmates were on a stage. The textile sculptures: located in a space that can be considered a theater, they in turn evoke images that could potentially be represented. But the involvement of the inmates was noticeable even as they showed us the works they had not actually collaborated on. I think of the works of the Claire Fontaine Collective, or of Maurizio Cattelan, whose warmth and intensity imply a special dialogue and knowledge between these artists and the women of Giudecca. Continuously – as I imagine has been the case during the months of the Pavilion’s creation – breaking points with respect to what has been established has been produced. An example: during the route the inmate lecturers have a written text to follow; but the more the group blends together, the more often they deviate from that text; almost surprised by how much that slippage reveals to them. The inmates’ guide strips the works, the place, and the inmates themselves, of any attribution of meaning other than that emanating from the women inmates in the prison. In that moment nothing is truer than what we see despite, or thanks to, the staging. Sonia Gomes, who worked with the inmates to create the textile sculptures, says she saw a transformation in them, as if they were poets of a new reality. This movement of deciphering reality that redefines and reorients the gaze, giving life to a sort of lightning and primacy, does not end. It continues to generate itself, surpass itself



Claire Tabouret



Maurizio Catalan

and spread endlessly.

During our visit, Giulia read us one of her reflections: “The Biennale has given us the opportunity for once to be protagonists and no longer just spectators who lose their rights. We have been extras, poets, writers: even if we are delinquents, we are not the last. Thank you for making us free even for just an instant”. What I saw is immeasurable.

Through My Eyes

Commissioner: His Eminence Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça,

Curators: Chiara Parisi and Bruno Racine

Artists: Maurizio Cattelan, Bintou Dembélé, Simone Fattal, Claire Fontaine, Sonia Gomes, Corita Kent, Marco Perego & Zoe Saldana, Claire Tabouret

Conversations: Hans Ulrich Obrist

Production: COR arquitectos and Flavia Chiavaroli

The Naked Truth

Daniel Benshana

Cartoons – briefly described as caricatures of a person to make a political point were trialled in the English civil War (1642-1651) at a time when it didn't matter the quality of the paper as long as you got your message out every day to the assembled populace and your troops. Thousands of political pamphlets were produced by both sides and, for the illiterate, the pictures produced were as important as the words. And if the words to the images were short, they could be read out for the illiterate to remember. Although, both sides often began their writing on the war with the word 'true' – 'true information', 'a true revelation, what was written was not always considered trustworthy, so the post-truth era has been far longer than many suggest. A drawing of Charles 1st with cherubs around him and a godly presence in the clouds above his head tells you he is chosen by God even if you cannot read the words which, under a piece of Hebrew state 'By Mee Kings Reigne'.

Before this Civil War, printed material was heavily censored in Britain. Those who were rich enough could pay for a handwritten newsletter to be sent to them, but they relied upon the writers to know what they were talking about, and it was often couched as gossip. In 1641, censorship ended and there was an explosion of printed material. Images, which have always been a part of culture, exploded along with the pamphlets, with and without added words. Religion was not far behind in producing its own tracts which reached their height in the 19th century with many clergy putting out their thoughts to sway opinion during the Oxford Movement and the crisis in the Protestant church which almost brought it down.

Although English Artist William Hogarth would become the chief artist/social commentator with few ever equalling him, George Townshend, later 1st Marquis Townshend, known as Viscount Townshend, thirty years younger, serving as Brigadier General in Quebec, was among the first to use caricature as a means of political satire in 1760s Canada making instant and important points about wars, the political establishment and individual power brokers. He was described as 'warm-hearted, sensitive and capable of enthusiasm, but often disgruntled, quarrelsome, lacking in judgment, and burdened with an insuperable urge to ridicule' in short, a perfect caricaturist. In 1841 with publication of the first issue of the famous Punch magazine, cartoons



Royalist message 1663

were no longer for the illiterate and often carried paragraphs of conversation or explanation as some had done in the Civil War. They also became a thing in themselves as famous as the magazine.

In France caricature started in wood cuts in the 14th century. With the invention of the printing press these transferred to papers, but it was after the French revolution that the print cartoon followed the course of the English caricature. The cartoons of Jacques Bonhomme, the French version of Everyman, appeared regularly. The historian Annie Duprat said that 1500 cartoons appeared in the three years from 1789 -1792. So effective were they that Honoré Daumier, a painter of some repute, earned six months suspended prison sentence in 1832 when the king hit back after he portrayed Louis-Philippe as Gargantua. He went on to caricature doctors and lawyers as well as the nobility. Press freedoms guaranteed in 1881 gave the cartoon a shot in the arm and it was unchallenged in the west until Charlie Hebdo and the religious bigotry of Islam so reminiscent of the religious bigotry of the Catholic church and all other suppressions of open forum commentary. Even



Join or Die - A clear message before the American Revolution

Benjamin Franklin had pertinent images in his printing in the 1740s as the colonies trod the path toward revolution. In Spain, during the eighteenth century, Names abound in the succeeding decades, John Tenniel (1890s). Thomas Nast (d.1902) Bruce Bairnsfather (WW1), Will Dyson (WW1) Philip Zec (WW2) to name but a few of the hundreds who took to the form and following Hogarth made it into the annals of art. Jules Feiffer, whose dancer interpreted so many moods over the years of the twentieth and twenty-first century and the author of *Maus*, Art Spiegelman.

While women have come through strongly and many from the 1800s have been rediscovered there are any number of anonymous cartoons right down the centuries that may have been penned by women. One of the most read is Roz Chast, on staff at the *New Yorker* where she has published over 1000 cartoons, also appearing in *Scientific American* and other publications. It was in America that the strip cartoon gradually developed a written story with images in sequence rather than the single bold image as in 'The Katzenjammer Kids' (started in 1897) and 'Gasoline Alley' (started in 1918), prominent examples of the genre. Art Spiegelman, author of *Maus*, possibly invented the graphic novel, used by many artists today, including Iranian woman artist Marjane Satrapi whose *Persepolis* and *Woman, Life, Freedom* document her life in Austria and Iran after the Revolution. Variations on the graphic novel, such as William

Kentridge's animated drawings on video about subjects such as miners in South Africa and other issues keep the graphic novel going strong today.

Although the Chinese cartoon existed in ancient times, it did not grow into an independent painting style until the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) when it exhibited the same strong commentary on war and social inequality as the European and American cartoons.

The potency of the cartoon continues to deliver in the Internet age where images are more important than words and memes, as cartoons and short videos, influence thinking in a much deeper way than the traditional cartoon. The humour in the old style may make one nod in agreement and shrug or laugh, but today the Internet enables a thought to be shared and become an action, not simply a biting commentary or a satirical amplification of the day-to-day. Teachers have used them as tools to invite discussion and even scientists use them to elucidate difficult concepts. What used to be the term for practice pieces by painters and sculptors has become an essential tool in the freedom of speech debate. The cartoon at its best is an irreverent expression of a feeling that the nation can share; a little like the jester at court, or the child watching the parade, it says unequivocally 'by the way, in this instance you have no clothes'.

Henry Cruikshank's Moment

In early nineteenth-century Britain, political cartooning was a major form of protest art, so much so that in today's digital media, nineteenth-century political cartoons are still reprinted as illustrations in accounts of many events and controversies from that century.

Why was cartooning then such a big deal? To begin with, along with theatre, caricature - cartooning that depicted specific people or situations - was the dominant form of popular comedy. Unlike the patent (licensed) theatre, cartooning was a form of street theatre. The standard format of the Regency cartoon was a single-plate image. Consequently, vendors were able to display cartoons in shop win-

dows. The target buyers of this material were middle-class and affluent educated men, for whom the cartoonists often included allusions to classical literature and other material that only formally educated people would know. Even so, people who couldn't afford to buy these prints read them through the plate glass. In the same era, newspapers were subjected to taxes - reviled as 'taxes on knowledge' - which priced most working-class readers out of the market. Political cartooning loomed large because there was no cheaper nor more accessible form of mass-produced political commentary.

Within cartooning, one of the most significant nineteenth-century artists was George Cruikshank



Down with 'em! Chop em down! My brave boys give them no quarter. They want to take our beef and pudding from us and remember the more you kill the less poor rates you'll have to pay. So go it lads show your courage and your loyalty!

Henry Cruikshank 1819

(1792-1878), the son of cartoonist Isaac Cruikshank, apprenticed to his father. By 1819, when George Cruikshank was twenty-seven years old, he had begun to make a name for himself independent of his father's workshop. He contributed to satirical publications like *The Scourge* (which lived up to its title) and the political cartoon series *The Political House that Jack Built*. His art often targeted government corruption, social inequalities, and the excesses of the ruling classes, utilizing extravagant, busy, grotesque compositions to make his work both immediately captivating and memorable.

The Industrial Revolution, which had begun in the eighteenth century, propelled large numbers of people from the struggling farmlands into the cities, especially the manufacturing cities of the North of England. The newcomers went to work in the textile mills and other industries. Consequently, urban populations swelled. This was absolutely true of Manchester, which quickly became Britain's major industrial city. However, because only men of property could vote, very few Mancunians possessed the right to vote. And as the city's population grew, the electorate shrunk in proportion to it. People got together and talked. Something, they decided, must be done so that Britain's emergent constitutional monarchy would really represent the people.

Reform campaigner Henry Hunt headlined a peaceful protest calling for political reform held on August 16 in Manchester's St. Peter's Field. The demonstration attracted at least 60,000 men and women from miles around. They walked to Manchester to attend. Some brought children. One was a woman who was eight months pregnant. Seeing the large crowd, the town's powerful capitalist elite panicked. The magistrates called in the Hussars - the local militia. As the crowd listened to speeches, the local magistrates, fearing unrest, ordered the military to disperse the demonstrators.

The militia charged into the crowd on horseback, wielding sabers and causing chaos. Over fifteen people were killed, including a toddler and the pregnant protester. Hundreds more were injured. The incident became known as "Peterloo" in ironic reference to the Battle of Waterloo (1815), at which Britain had defeated Napoleon. At Peterloo, the government defeated the people - that is, Britain.

Or rather, it didn't - because they fought back, including in the medium of print satire. One effective protester was the artist Cruikshank. In the wake of Peterloo, Cruikshank's political cartoon *Massacre at St. Peter's* or *Britons Strike Home* depicted the Hussars running down the Manchester demonstrators, including women and children. The flags implicate

the British establishment in this local atrocity. This cartoon not only announced the news for people who could not buy papers, but also immortalized the crisis that came to be known, satirically, as Peterloo as a national shame, inspiring radicals to seek the reforms that Hunt and the Manchester crowd had demanded. Britons strike HOME! the caricature punned. Peterloo was indeed a strike against home: against Britain's own people. The bloody battle hatchets at the upper righthand corner render the image far from comic.

Other commentators echoed Cruikshank, or at least shared his political vision and his style. For instance, the poet Percy Shelley (1792-1819), who was the same age as Cruikshank, wrote a poem called *The Masque of Anarchy* (1820) about Peterloo. It depicts the day's horrors as street theatre, quite literally, burlesquing various government figures whom he held responsible in grotesque terms. In essence, *The Masque of Anarchy* translates the terms of Cruikshank's political cartooning from the visual to the verbal.

In 2013, literary critic Michael Demson and cartoonist Summer McClinton translated *The Masque of Anarchy* back into cartooning, creating a graphic-novel version of the stories of Peterloo, Shelley's composition of *The Masque of Anarchy*, and the use of the poem by American labor organizer (and neglected LGBT heroine) Pauline Newman, a witness of the mass-murderous Triangle Factory fire. With Demson and McClinton's book's publication, titled *Masks of Anarchy: The History of a Radical Poem, From Percy Shelley to the Triangle Factory Fire*, the Romantic-era protest cartoon arrived in the twenty-first century to continue the struggles in which Cruikshank had participated.

The Korean Peninsula In Four Parts

Rina Oh



Pachinko, an Apple Plus original limited series based on the best-selling novel by Min Jin Lee, is a story about the struggling colonial Joseon era in Korea, 1905-WWII.

Season 1 introduced audiences to the main character in the series, Sunja portrayed by Korean actress Mina Kim. Sunja, an only child is born into a lower-class family with a crippled father and a mother who runs a boarding house in Busan. Sunja is portrayed by three actresses: young childhood (Yu-na Jeon), teenage and young adulthood (Minha Kim), and older Sunja as a grandmother (Youn Yuh-jung) with each reflecting a different passage of time in her life. The story begins with her birth, during a time when the Korean peninsula was colonized by the Imperial Japanese Army in Joseon. She continues to identify herself as a Joseonji throughout the series – a terminology that is still used today to define Korean expats by the Japanese. This was the beginning of the great Korean Diaspora of what used to be the Hermit Kingdom for hundreds of years.

A naïve Sunja, as a teenager (portrayed by Mina Kim) meets and falls in love with an older, married man Hansu who already has a Japanese wife, and children. He is part of the Yakuza. He emigrated to Japan in his earlier years and after losing his father during

the Kanto earthquake in 1923 joined the Yakuza organization to survive in a cruel and discriminating foreign country. Often referred to as lower than pigs – the Joseonji's living in Japan, in *Pachinko* deliver a detailed first-person experience of what it was like to live in those hard days.

Sunja becomes pregnant, carrying the child of Hansu while he makes a proposition to provide her a life of comfort, as his concubine. She refuses to be his mistress when he tells her they cannot wed – and runs away from him. Shortly afterwards, she weds a pastor, Isak who provides Sunja and Hansu's (portrayed by Hallyu Star Lee Min Ho) child with a legitimate surname. Noah is born in Osaka to where the newlywed couple immigrate with hopes for living a better life. They are faced with unimaginable hardships for decades. We are brought back and forth between the colonial era and the current time portrayed in this series (roughly 1980's). In the post war era, Joseonji's in Japan continue to struggle with identity in a foreign nation ruled by their colonizers, living as a subservient race in a xenophobic Japanese society often experiencing violence directed to the community and individuals.

This is a story I desperately longed to learn more about, and while watching each episode – I was giv-



Lee Ufan': RELATUM - THE CANE OF TITAN
steel and stone
on the Parterre du Midi of the Château de Versailles

en much insight as to the feelings, political status and hostile geo-political and socio-economic environment of Koreans in modern Japan, Joseonji's are still called by that name while South Koreans call themselves 'Hanguk-saram'. As North and South are divided, we no longer see or hear about the Northern provinces, due to restricted access.

Hansu returns to Busan, to find his identity after living a rough life in the underworld – disguising himself as a Japanese National to avoid discrimination. Since the colonial era, in 2020's Japan, fourth generation Joseonjis are still denied citizenship but encouraged to forfeit their cultural identify. Of roughly 500,000 stateless Koreans living in Japan today, these stateless Koreans do not have citizenship in any country.

Season 2 continues the storytelling of author Min Jin Lee's book, of the protagonist Sunja's plight to survive in Japan, during the colonial rule of Imperial Japan over the Korean Peninsula. Both Season 1 & 2 of *Pachinko* are available to watch via Apple TV. I recommend watching the first series, reading the novel, and watching Season 2. Exactly in that order. Min Jin Lee is a South Korean born author and journalist who identifies herself as a Korean American.

She currently resides in Harlem, New York. Her work often addresses the Korean Diaspora. Her parents owned a wholesale jewellery store on 30th Street and Broadway in Koreatown, in New York City. She is a 1.5 generation Korean American and shares a common denominator with those whose parents immigrated to the United States in the 1960s-1980s. South Korean immigrants, 1990s to today are different from those who came here decades ago. Today, they come with college degrees, many having spent most of their lives living in comfort unlike the previous generation. There is a divide between these two groups of Koreans. They identify themselves differently. Korean Americans and Koreans from Korea, are a separate group of immigrants. Many do not get along with each other. For those of us able to access both sides of the immigration groups, it is a gift which places us artists in our own unique category, as the filmmaker and novelist have done here.

The Korean Diaspora in Generations: Mono-ha Movement

Lee Ufan, a Korean minimalist painter and sculptor who works in Paris and Kamakura, has lived through the blood, sweat, and tears we watched the fictional



Lee Ufan at work in his Paris studio, February 2014
 Photograph © Simon Grant

characters in *Pachinko* go through. A self-proclaimed wanderer and lifelong cultural border-crosser, Ufan stands out as an artist born in 1936 in colonial Korea, decades before the 38th Parallel lines were drawn, dividing the Korean Peninsula into two halves. His rejection of the unification of North and South Korea and his promising career as a significant artist of the 20th and 21st centuries, accounting for life as a combination of colonial suppression and massive political change ultimately took him and his studies overseas to Japan. While Lee Ufan is primarily known today as a successful minimalist artist and pioneer of the Mono-ha movement in Japan, he is a philosopher whose literary work beautifully paints inner thoughts filled with criticism of global issues juxtaposing the calm of his visual work. His early essay: *Sonzai to mu wo koete Sekine Nobuo ron* (Beyond Being and Nothingness – A Thesis on Sekine Nobuo) (1979-71), is much celebrated and shared in the art world today. The literature reads like an artist in the process of contemplation, creation, working in sections, and finishing a piece of artwork by making final edits. He is one of the founders of the Japanese avant-garde art movement *Mono-ha* ('School of Things'),

whose members use stone, iron, plate steel, rubber, glass and cotton to explore the relationship between objects and space.

The *Mono-ha* movement emerged in the late 1960s-early 70s in Japan. Lee Ufan's environmental work is projected through his usage of natural materials, both in form and placement. Identifying himself as Korean, born in Haman-gun, Lee Ufan contributed to both the (anti-western movement and *Mono-ha* in Japan and Korean Monotone Art (*Dansaekjo Yesul*).

He is a pioneer in the Korean contemporary art world, becoming one of the first of very few masters who've succeeded in marking their place, philosophy and gathering international acknowledgement early on in his career. His *Mono-ha* work was first exhibited in 1967 at the Sato Gallery in Tokyo. His contribution to the 1971 Paris Biennale consisted of a *Relatum* piece where a rubber mat was held down and stretched by three strategically placed rocks. The year after, in *From Object to Being*, Lee published a collection of critical pieces as the manifesto-like anthology *In Search of an Encounter*, in the art journal *Bijutsu techō* accompanying a seminal *Mono-ha* roundtable and was fervently embraced by young Japanese artists while sparking off a 'Lee Ufan fever' in Korea.

As the artist evolved, his philosophies followed. I can see it in his treatment of nature, following the work of architects in its minimalistic and non-evasive form. A mirroring of natural materials composed like a musical symphony that is visually delivered through the sound notes of a flute sonata. This is an overall reaction to the retrospective work, while sections in time are played with various instruments. Lee Ufan uses tools to utilize the brushstrokes in the form of Korean munjado.

Lee Ufan explores the relationship between his art, the viewer and the surrounding space and events taking place within it. 'I bring together natural stone and industrial steel plate, there's nothing more to it than that,' Lee has been quoted: 'Yet this encounter gives rise to an enigmatic experience.'

Lee Ufan does not change the stones he uses in any way – he simply relocates them. Selecting the right stone is a painstaking process. 'It is as difficult to understand the stones of a certain region as it is to understand the people who live there,' Lee wrote in 1988. The components of a Lee Ufan sculpture are encounter, emptiness, space and time – they all come together in the stones he uses.

It is oftentimes, the critique and or opinion of one artist to another which is considered the highest type of regard, more critical versus an academic who



may not completely understand the nuances of the artist. From artist to artist, there is no greater compliment. Lee Ufan began his career as an art critic, and artist. Moving from critiquing to sharing his philosophical, oftentimes solemn pessimistic outlook on life. Lee Ufan's *Art of Encounter* is a philosophical book, that has a collection of essays he's authored. I highly recommend reading this book.

Korean expats from Lee Ufan's generation carry with them, the legacy of Confucianism. Much like the fictional story of the working-class protagonist in *Pachinko*, the artist embarked on a journey to the promised land (Japan). He grew up during an era, where succeeding in the homeland of your colonizer would be equivalent to achieving the American Dream for modern day Korean expats like me. At least he's lucky enough to have retained his Korean citizenship. For many of the expats who migrated during colonial times, they are part of the stateless Koreans living in Japan demographics. Becoming a successful Korean artist in Japan during the civil rights era is almost equivalent to getting an EB1 visa in the United States today.

I wonder if Lee Ufan experienced similar struggles as a young college student, learning the language, culture, and displacement in a new environment much like the fictional characters in *Pachinko*.

Living in the home of his colonizer, whose attitude towards Korean immigrants in Japan were more discriminatory than welcoming. I wonder if his minimalistic work reflects his calm demeanor, is it cultural or the result of the physical human environment. His criticism in written form stand in contrast to the calmness of nature we see in his body of work over decades. Perhaps that pessimism in his philosophical literature is a deep wound of a life he could've lived had our history as Koreans steered in a different direction.

Lee Ufan's anti-unification led to his arrest by the Korean Central Intelligence Agency KCIA in 1964 for throwing himself against the South-North unification movement and the military regime. This was the beginning of politics influencing his life, then work and continuous reflections as a philosopher. Perhaps this was the cause that led the artist to spend so much of his time in meditation and thought.

The process of concept to creation is an act of meditation, and criticism of the environment whether that environment is nature, man-made socially, politically charged, and many times for immigrants it brings unimaginable hardships, and it affect us psychologically. Sometimes, – we just need to escape and calm ourselves.

In 2021, Filmmaker Dan Buyanovsky made a short film on Lee Ufan where he verbally shares his philosophical thoughts. A few quotes are translated from Korean to English below.

"I have a pessimistic perspective; I believe that it is time for mankind to end its era on earth".

"I think we need to reduce our emptiness and all-over-ism and familiarize ourselves with a 'minus' way of thinking".

I believe that the time of living with a 'minus' way of thinking along without 'plus' has to come, by simultaneously considering to make something and to dissipate something".

The Divided Koreas: Polipop

aka Political Pop Art with a Q & A

Mina Cheon, (b.1973) is a new media artist, scholar, and activist best known for her *Polipop* paintings inspired by Pop Art and Social Realism who spends her time divided between the US and South Korea. She describes herself as a Korean living in America. Her work is inspired by Pop Art and Social Realism. I've been fascinated by Cheon's renditions of North Korean female soldiers for a few years and get a sense of voyeurism through her paintings. They bring out mixed reactions that are nostalgic, enigmatic, placing us in a timeless time capsule while asking ourselves: does it really exist out there? I get to visit and see a place I would never get to unless I'm perusing old films, reading about the defectors, or watching an entirely made-up fictional K-drama about the intangible North Korea.

Cheon describes *Polipop* as "Political pop art. It is visually accessible, eye-catching colorful work that is layered by cultural comparative studies and inquiries of global geopolitics and warfare. Wars are lucrative and peace is an expensive endeavor. Using the rhetoric of pop art, the political statement is



*Happy North Korean Girl (2012-2013)
acrylic on canvas*

about peace on earth.”

There are Korean communist sympathizers today, and South Korea is most unwelcoming of these political views. Before there were two Koreas, there was the Independence Movement which existed throughout the colonial era. Today, the two Koreas exist in parallel universes. We speak the same common language, with a noticeable accent from either side of the border. As an expat – I see the two Koreas as two parts of my ancestral land. I recently began perusing the lives and more curiously – the food my counterpart motherland is consuming. About a decade ago – I watched every video online I could find and specifically searched for North Korean Cuisine. I was researching to write a Hansik cookbook when I read Pyongyang was the former capital of the Korean Peninsula and so the king moved the capital to Seoul. I read the Northerners prefer non spicy whereas the Southern provinces of South Korea love to put red pepper on everything. But in Seoul it all comes together like a melting pot.

About a decade into my research on Korean food, I began to look to see reflections of the lives of the people who consumed the foodstuffs. And that’s when I found *Polipop* in New York. It sounds like a lollipop, except we’re not consuming food literally (not at first glance). We’re experiencing a subtle conversation between the North and South, comically, in a non-threatening and curious fashion.

The *Polipop* movement is the Asian counterpart of the Western Pop Art Movement, with an added extra layer of politics to everyday living. The Pop Art of the two divided Koreas is a cultural exchange and a communication tool. Part of Mina Cheon’s practice includes diplomatic messages communicated through videos and as she describes “it’s similar to the Hunger Games”. Cheon has previously sent the popular Choco-Pie to North Korea in little packages. Food is the most non-invasive and best way to communicate across national borders. North Koreans are fascinated with Cheon’s dialogue of Choco-Pie, and their reaction was: “It’s fun”, in the Korean language.

The Choco-Pie site specific installations were exhibited twice. The first time, with 10,000 and the second, with 100,000 sponsored by the manufacturer, Orion at the Busan Biennale.

During my brief interview these were some of the questions along with responses by the artist about where the inspiration comes from for her *Polipop* work.

Mina Cheon explained: “As a Korean, my prominent artistic subject being about the Koreas, it is the basis of my curiosity and identity, from there, I view the world from this lens. If a country is split, so should the artist in practice, therefore I work both as a South Korean Mina Cheon and North Korean Kim Il Soon.” Her typical *Polipop* work grazes between her real self, presented through metaphorically symbolic forms of the subconscious mind (Mina Cheon) and alter-ego presented as the North Korean counterpart (Kim Il Soon).

Here we have a combination of two split personalities, while delving into a deeper understanding of why the artist focuses deeply in this subject area. The divided Koreas is apparent in the parallel universe existing between truth and reality. What we know and see vs the unknown is Cheon’s alter ego exploring that option, with history and reasoning explained about her ancestral hometown.

Art in Migration

Richard Vine

Human migration is ultimately political. This is obvious in cases of forced relocation, such as the expulsion of Christian Armenians from the Ottoman Empire—a geopolitical policy decision, entailing death marches and executions, that is obliquely but very touchingly evoked in Arshile Gorky's canvas *The Artist and His Mother* (1926-36), which depicts the beloved parent who starved to death before her son's eyes in 1919. Voluntary population shifts, the cumulative result of innumerable personal decisions, require an explanation such as Jacob Lawrence provided, point by point, in the sixty image-and-text panels of his painting series *The Migration of the Negro* (1940-41): "The migration was spurred on by the treatment of the tenant farmers by the planter. People (and before us our sapien ancestors) have moved about the surface of the earth, in large numbers either because they were compelled to do so by hostile forces or because they perceived living to be greatly more desirable in some locale other than their own. The two-volume *Cambridge History of Global Migrations*, which covers only from the year 1400 to the present, comprises over 1,300 pages devoted to factors such as war, trade, conquest, famine, pestilence, exile, debt, indenture, slavery, exploration, colonization, religion, urbanization, industrialization, labor flux, citizenship, and refugee status. All the commercial wealth and all the private charity in the world, one comes to realize, will never fully alleviate a problem that only international governmental action can fix.

In the past few years – due largely to the relentless flow of displaced persons from the global south to the global north in both the Americas and the Mediterranean Basin – the art world has been inundated with exhibitions focusing on migration. The most striking US examples include: *The Warmth of Other Suns: Stories of Global Displacement* (2019) at the Phillips Collection; Washington, DC, *When Home Won't Let You Stay: Migration through Contemporary Art* (2019) at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; *Crossing Lines, Constructing Home: Displacement and Belonging in Contemporary Art* (2019) at the Harvard Art Museums; *how the light gets in* (2019) at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, and *A Movement in Every Direction: Legacies of the Great Migration* (2022–2024), which traveled to five institutions. Abroad, the same preoccupation



Djamel Tatah: *Untitled*, (2020)
oil and wax on canvas

could be seen in myriad undertakings – for example, the five-part exhibition series *Art and Migration: Who Are We?* (2017-19) at Tate Exchange in Britain. Capping this global trend was the 2024 Venice Biennale, *Foreigners Everywhere*, visited by some 700,000 people over seven months.

Unfortunately, the critical upshot of this massive historical self-examination has been little more than the art world's standard response to all social ills: blame capitalism. During the 2019 Warren Kanders controversy, some 120 public intellectuals sent the Whitney Museum an open letter lambasting institutional entanglement with "the power structures of settler colonialism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism." Meanwhile, art world intellectuals seldom if ever mention the millions of people uprooted and slaughtered in Russia, China, Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, and Latin America to establish socialist or communist regimes. And they remain largely silent on the migration-causing horrors perpetrated within the global south itself by religious fanatics, dictators, cartels, and warlords. Instead, we are treated to the irony of hearing tenured professors and globe-trotting critics express disdain



Bouchra Khalili, Mapping Journey #2,(2008)
video still*

for the Western socioeconomic and political system, while themselves enjoying the legal protections and middle-class lifestyle that this system affords and that legions of the world's dispossessed so desperately covet. Could there be a hint of subliminal guilt, even self-loathing, among these culturati caught up in a luxury trade that is utterly dependent upon the largesse – and speculative collector greed – of capitalism's one percent?

Since ideology is impervious to argument, let's turn instead to technique. Recent curatorial efforts reveal three major, closely interrelated ways that artists think and feel about migration: literalism, symbolization, and empathy. Beyond those formal approaches lies yet a deeper connection, a kind of ontological symbiosis, between artists and migrants, artworks and refugees. "We know so much and care so little," Ai Weiwei told a Colorado audience when he won the International Artist of the Year award from the Anderson Ranch in 2018. He had just released *Human Flow* (2017), a feature-length film that documents, in minute daily particulars, the endless struggles of individuals who leave their homeland, cross treacherous seas or land borders, and strive to establish a foothold in an alien land. To make the

work, which was first sparked when the artist witnessed refugees floundering ashore on the Greek island of Lesbos, Ai visited 40 detainment camps in 23 countries.

In many instances, the displaced individuals speak directly to Ai's camera; in others, they interact, sometimes tearfully, sometimes jocosely, with the Chinese artist, who frequently repeats, "I respect you." These intimate visuals are occasionally intercut with text reporting brutal statistics: the migrant crisis involves 68.5 million people, more than half under 18 years of age; the displaced spend an average of 25 years in camps; less than 5 percent ever succeed in attaining resident status in a new country; although media attention focuses on the US and Europe, 90 percent of the movement takes place in countries: Bangladesh, Myanmar, Pakistan, and others, that are neither wealthy nor at the forefront of Western consciousness. Ai's direct involvement springs from his personal history. He grew up in remote Xinjiang Province, where his famed poet father, Ai Qing, scrubbed toilets in internal exile, one of the countless 20th-century intellectuals that Mao Zedong banished to the countryside. Having himself been detained in a secret location by the Chi-



Kader Attia: **The Dead Sea**, (2015) clothing installation
 Photo courtesy of Alyssa Goins.

nese government (which is to say the Chinese Communist Party) for 81 days in 2011, Ai has no hesitation about calling out the world's true oppressors, the direct creators of much (probably most) current migratory urgency. Thus his 2017 Hirshhorn Museum solo included the floor installation *Trace* (2014), featuring 176 Lego portraits of individuals imprisoned or exiled by explicitly named despotic regimes in 30 countries.

While few practitioners have Ai Weiwei's art-star resources, many share his indexical method for humanizing archival finds and field research. Alfredo Jaar, whose projects include photographing exploited goldmine workers in Brazil and representing a million Rwandan genocide victims through the closeup image of a sole woman's traumatized gaze, has deftly encapsulated this personalized, fact-based method. At the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Santiago, his *Geometry of Conscience* (2010) uses 500 photo-negative portrait silhouettes to evoke the approximately 1,500 people "disappeared" into prisons or graves by President Augusto Pinochet, whose 16-year dictatorship of Chile also spawned a million refugees. "Every work," Jaar told *Art21*, "is a response to a real-life event, a real-life situation." Taking the ultimate step, Tania Bruguera, in her *Immigrant Movement International* (2011-18),

moved in with migrants living in Queens and established a volunteer center offering them free classes and social services.

Other artists prefer to use symbolic or diagrammatic imagery to render the refugee crisis both comprehensible and pungent. Thus Rena Saini Kallat constructs wall maps from circuit boards and electrical cables (some resembling barbed wire) to illustrate global trade and migration routes; Bouchra Khalili's eight-channel video *The Mapping Journey Project* (2008-11) shows hands charting the multi-national odysseys of various displaced persons, who narrate their long treks in voiceover; Mona Hatoum's *Grater Divide* (2002), a human-sized folding screen of serrated steel suggests the social and psychological transformations migrants must pass through to change their domicile from one country to another; Kader Attia's floor-scattering of mostly blue clothing, *The Dead Sea* (2015), commemorates the countless refugees who have drowned in ill-fated international water crossings. The essence of such work is to distill multiple experiences into a single unforgettable visual emblem.

Imaginative identification with migrants, though always transient and imperfect, affords perhaps the most compelling access to their state of being. For three decades, Djamel Tatah, a son of Algerian im-



Ai Weiwei: still from **Human Flow**, (2017) video, 140 minutes.

migrants to southern France, has painted pensive figures that resemble pale wandering spirits. The implicit point that migrants, however successfully they may integrate into their new environment, bear forever a dual identity and a sense of loss; echoed by myriad artists who make refugee testimony videos: Emily Jacir (*Where We Come From*, 2001-03), Candice Breitz (*Love Story*, 2016), Isaac Julien (*Western Union: Small Boats*, 2017), Hiwa K (*Pre-Image [Blind as the Mother Tongue]*, 2017), and many others.

Each of the three artistic strategies discussed here entails the other two to some extent. And as Ai Weiwei's camp visits and Bruguera's live-in project in Queens attest, nothing arouses empathy more efficiently than face-to-face interaction with the dispossessed. Certainly, that was the impact of Olafur Eliasson's *Green Light* (2016), an itinerant workshop that began in Vienna and made its way to the Venice Biennale. Migrants and exhibition visitors chatted, joked, and commiserated as they shared in the fabrication of green go lamps, signifying hope for the refugees, who also received money from the sale of the items they produced.

Still, a question remains. Why does migration engage members of the art world to a greater and more intense degree than other equally serious social problems – gun violence, income inequities, ageism, healthcare costs, Islamic jihadism, Russian and Chinese aggression? The answer lies, in part, in the fact that so many artists are themselves genteel migrants. Raised in one country, educated in another,

living in a third, and exhibiting their work worldwide, they wear the badge of global nomad proudly. Moreover, modern and postmodern art is itself a product of psychic displacement, in two ways. First, ever since the late 19th-century revolt of the avant-garde, membership in the world (really the club) of serious art has required a veritable self-exile – a renunciation of mainstream values and the dreaded “bourgeois” sensibility of the unredeemed majority, rife with false consciousness.

Second, at a quasi-metaphysical level, every art-maker performs an act of expulsion and transfiguration, wrenching materials from their normal state into something new and other the representation of an intangible idea or feeling.

Artists, in short, do to visual things what migration does to living beings; they create, in effect, émigré artefacts that alter any environment they enter, and are simultaneously changed by it. Call it cultural assimilation in process. Global contemporary art museums are, in effect, enclaves of deracinated objects and viewers, veritable high-culture Chinatowns, while galleries and auction houses serve as placement agencies for newly arrived migrant artworks. Those hybrid creations reassure us that we, the bohemian elite, are not alone in our displacement, our existential never-quite-at-homeness. Rather, here in the refugee camp of the art world, tiny, isolate, and overcrowded, we employ them to signal each other encouragingly, in a language all our own.

Wesselmann's Easy Catch

Elga Wimmer

Designed by Frank Gehry, the Paris based Louis Vuitton Foundation with its soaring glass and steel architecture spanning several floors, is the ideal venue for this impressive exhibition of 1960's through early 2000's paintings and multi-media work by Tom Wesselmann (1931 – 2024). *Pop Forever Tom Wesselmann & ...*, which runs from October 17, 2024, through February 24, 2025, includes, in addition to Wesselmann's, art by thirty-five contemporary artists that give context to the show, tracing its Dadaist roots.

These include such notable artists as Derrick Adams, Ai Weiwei, Marcel Duchamp, Hannah Hoch, Jasper Johns, Jeff Koons, Robert Rauschenberg, Mickalene Thomas, Andy Warhol, Marisol, and Marjorie Strider. The show's curators, Dieter Buchhart and Anna Karina Hofbauer, set out to prove that Pop's influence continues to be felt around the world, across all generations.

A quintessential art movement of the mid-century (though rooted in the 1920's) Pop reveres objects used in everyday life and in commercial advertising. Not outwardly a political movement, it nevertheless overthrew traditional movements in art history of the 20th Century, inadvertently contributing to a political dialogue. That dialogue included reproductions, in paintings and sculptures of objects associated with the middle class, echoing the surrealists' association with socialism.

The Pop movement was global from the start, as seen in the exhibition *The World Goes Pop* at the Tate Modern in 2015/2016. From Eastern Europe to Argentina, from France to Japan, the Pop influence was everywhere at once. That exhibition, curated by Jessica Morgan, Director at Dia Art Foundation, New York, included artists of all backgrounds.

In this regard, Morgan took care to showcase many female artists, formerly not given much notice in the Pop art movement such as Marta Menujin, Nicola L., Kiki Kugelnik, Martha Rosler, Delia Cancela, Beatriz Gonzales and Anna Maria Maiolina.

Pop Forever Tom Wesselmann & ... shows that Pop is much more than a visual language to celebrate Western consumerism, as it is sometimes dismissed. Rather, it alludes to objects that cross class barriers and elevates objects used by the middle class to the realm of art, much as Duchamp did for Dada, gain-



Still life n°49 (1964)

ing access to the art world by those who can identify with its portrayals.

Tom Wesselmann's work presented here ranges from the early delicate drawings to his huge installations, offering up a de facto retrospective, spanning an entire career of some fifty years. We see the Dadaist roots of Pop art, in works by Marcel Duchamp and Kurt Schwitters, a precursor to Wesselmann's first collages in 1959. In chronological order the exhibition leads us from the Great American Nude of the 1960's, to the large-scale embossed Standing Still Lives and Landscapes (1970's), which lie on the fringe of abstraction, to the Sunset Nudes (2003/2004).

From an art historical perspective, his work is more conservative than others who work in the Pop genre. He focused on the female nude — a centuries old tradition — while other Pop artists would provocatively repurpose the American flag, soup cans, comic strips. At the same time, Wesselmann's work is more universal, not relegated to images from US life, expanding the audience for POP in general and his work in particular.

Whereas the female nude was often depicted as a passive object of desire in art history, Wesselmann's

nudes are unabashedly erotic, powerful, and sexy, predating the feminist era and the unabashedly sexual, female figures of women artists including Lisa Yuskasavage. *The Mouth* (1968), *Smoker* (1973) and *Mouth#14* (Marylin) were deemed shocking in their day.

His *Great American Nude* series was greatly inspired by De Kooning's women. Whereas De Kooning's women exude a joyless cynicism, Wesselmann celebrates women. His *Starry Night Nude* (1959) hints at the influence of Matisse and Van Gogh.

The artist's wife Claire would often model, and the viewer can witness her identity morph seamlessly between model, muse, wife, fellow artist and creative co-conspirator. Both Claire and Tom Wesselmann studied art at New York's Cooper Union in the late 1950s.

The term, Pop art, coined in 1955 by the British scholar and art critic, Lawrence Alloway, references a glorified popular culture that elevates common,

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Interestingly, The Louvre Museum featured a show called "Fou", (in English Fool) noting the image of the fool, who often spoke truth, and was deemed crazy for it. Francisco de Goya y Lucientes' *El Sueno de la razon produce monstruos* (The sleep of reason produces monsters) is no different from the Surrealists' reminders of the condemnation of reason and artist's subsequent production of monsters of different parts, surrounded by flying bats and chimeric faces. Reminiscent of artwork highlighting social and political criticism, Goya's paintings and drawings depict themes of madness and social criticism including *Yard with Lunatics*. 19th century artists painted portraits of the famous and mentally ill, Charles VI of France, Johanna the Mad, commenting on the madness of those in power. The Fool exposed the mad. Fuseli painted *Lady Macbeth marchant dans son sommeil*; Francois-Auguste Biard painted *The Exorcism of King Charles VI's Madness and the Lunatic Hospital* (1833) both exhibited at the Salon. Victor Hugo's *Quasimodo* was the ultimate figure of the fool and his play, *Le Roi s'amuse* features a jester, also recognized as a fool in the court of Francois I, adapted by Verdi in the opera, *Rigoletto*. The chimeras, at the cathedral of Notre Dame, inspired by medieval gargoyles and statues, combined two species or animals, much as the Surrealists combined man and animal or two animals to create new species and confuse. The exhibition shows the painting by



Cynthia Nude (1981)
colour silkscreen

unremarkable objects, and themes, to iconic status. This is as true now, as it was then.

Jan Matejko of Stanczyk at a Ball at the Court of Queen Bona after the Loss of Smolensk (Poland, 1862) showing a jester grieving the loss of Smolensk and the contrast between the jester's frivolous nature, his political awareness and concern for his country. The "Portrait of a Jester" (1537) by the Master of 1537 shows a jester looking through his fingers, which is a German and Netherlandish expression meaning "to close eyes to something", here to the folly of his fellows. The jester's costume comprised of opposing squares of color is itself a symbol of disorder. Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools*, (1494) recounts the journey to the land of fools to denounce, with engravings and text, contemporary foibles. The image of the fool speaking truth survived even the enlightenment, as figures in *Don Quixote's Dulcinea*, (later appearing in a print series by Picasso) to proclaim irony, farce and disorder wherever it appears.

It is up to the artists, the creatives to see through the rhetoric, the fake news, to see and depict the real world and imagine a better one. Whether called a fool or a surrealist, artists are willing to be called names to show the unvarnished truth and invite others to see what might happen if their message is not acted upon. All art is political. It is of the people, for the people, and the artist stands as one to warn of what might come.

The Intimacy of Politics

Elizabeth Ashe

There are several, genre-crossing phrases in the art world that are truly definable. *The Personal is Political* was coined by the feminist movement. Realizing that politics crosses boundaries, from countries to families, Doris Salcedo, Jeffrey Gibson, and Suzanne Brennan Firstenberg are making work that underscores the personal as political, giving the viewer space to take the work personally, to participate, to see the human body through the artist's politically charged statements.

Last year, Doris Salcedo traveled – from *Uprooted* at the Sharjah Biennial 15, to the Fondation Beyeler with eight rooms, to MoMA. and *Plegaria Muda (Silent Prayer)* at the Harold and Arlene Schnitzer Gallery, which also exhibited at Beyeler. Salcedo's work is about the evidence of a body, a name, a conversation. Her politics puts the person into a symbolic role others may sidestep into. She leaves space to engage and pushes the viewer around uncomfortable layers that are difficult to ignore. Last year, a sculpture series at Beyeler, *Untitled*, had a row of seventeen rods, pierced through the breasts of ten stacks of plaster-imbedded shirts. Plaster and white buttoned shirts melded, each stack, turned each death appearing the same as the other. The deaths are old; blood has been bleached out as if the stacks were once painted marble. The sameness of stacks of white button-shirts become masses of fabric and plaster, turns them into an architecture of death, like cemetery stones. In common, they were worn by plantation workers, who all died. The mass of these pierced shirts did many things. The rods contained and gave structure to the shirts. The rods stayed open to the sky, like urban architecture in Central and South America, where concrete homes remain “unfinished”, with rebar reaching skyward. It's a trend made with optimism for the future need for more generational space. But with Salcedo, the optimism shifts on a personal, bodily and spacial level, no matter what, more lives will stack, nameless, working, on top of these lives that came before. One column of *Untitled* has the same gravitas as seventeen. Looking at them dried out my throat. Each column is so pristine, minimal, intentional, a mark of nameless labor and an architecture kept tidy.

As these white shirts pierced through the chest, “*Uprooted*” also pierces. It juggles ecological, political and personal needs wrapped up together. The sculp-



Jeffrey Gibson: *US pavilion*, Venice Biennale



Suzanne Firstenberg: Alienable Right to Life, Freedom Plaza,, Washington, DC, May, 2024

tural installation is made from many young trees, which evolve from an occasional placement to a thicket, to a home none can enter. The home is the size of a one room cabin, nothing luxurious. The trees, like the immigrants the piece is tied to have been uprooted from their home soil. Immigrants share basic, universal needs including shelter and safety. But when the forest is dead and cannot welcome life, when the trees don't live long enough to provide good lumber for building, the troubles that push you to immigrate do not resolve in your new country. Immigration from political crises is a global issue with so many countries giving massive push-back right now.

Last year during Miami Art Week, Jeffrey Gibson was showcased at Marc Straus. *Always After Now* (2014) shows its body, cultural politics, cosmos at an altered scale. The booth had several works by Gibson, but for me, this piece was the distillation of everything; Native, Minimalist, both stitched into a modern figure lifted on not one but two, different pedestals. It sucked my breath away to spiral in

through its one glass eye. It combined contemporary, natural, and more traditional materials, with various beads, yarns, threads, crystals, tin jingles, fur and rawhide, a wool army blanket. The beads in black and white linear patterns spiraled and shimied, to accentuate the hundreds of tin cones on the hips, arms and shoulders of the sculpture. This child-sized doll dancer melded time and culture. Here is a child-sized doll, elevated to adult height, ready to be noticed with traditional and contemporary materials making each bead. The sculpture is large enough to showcase a range of assemblage skills, counting as instruction for a younger generation, large enough to show importance culturally, and as a dancer who could move. All he needs to do, is jump down off his block and pedestal. I had to fight the urge to sit down and just wait for it to dance, and I would have happily waited until the close of day. As a child size, it could be embraced, it could be a way to take up the march forward from the genocide and the barbaric re-education in schools that Native children were forced to attend. "Always After Now" changed up scale in a way the broader American public doesn't talk about or certainly see their deep relevance in Native American culture. Native American artists are changing the course of contemporary art.

And then, 2024 saw Gibson as the first Native artist ever chosen as the solo representative of the U.S. at the Venice Biennale. *The Space in which to Place Me* was an installation that considered every aspect of space and set his Native and Queer identities at the forefront. The works were loud audibly and visually. As quoted in the New York Times on April 13th, "I'm kind of enamored by the challenges of practicing democracy," which really fit the bill of his approach to Venice. He incorporated more elements, and used many direct quotes from earlier American documents, including the Constitution, the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924, and writings of Booker T. Washington; words that spark a feeling in the reader, no matter what your deeper cultural connections are. Gibson even had jingle dress performers dancing in Venice. Grandiose pedestals painted in a solid red were a stage and a mountain in the open courtyard outside the Pavilion – and Gibson painted the external walls of the Pavilion as well. Like his work in Miami, he kept things in the round. He repeated one of his signature sculptures, a punching bag. This time, it reads "we hold these truths to be self-evident" and to read it, the viewer moves around it, not dissimilar to how a boxer moves around a bag in practice. He has upcoming works for Mass MoCA and the Met, as well as a book.