

Where Do We Migrate

Group exhibition asks you to consider the plight of refugees, exiles, and migrants



Kimsooja's "A Needle Woman, Paris" (still)

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Where Do We Migrate To?

[At UMBC's Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture through April 30.](#)

In these global times, human beings are becoming an increasingly migratory species. The current exhibition at UMBC's Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture sets out to examine what that shift means for us. *Where Do We Migrate To?* includes the works of 19 different artists and collectives, as well as an accompanying film series, on the topic of the migratory experience. In his essay of the same title, curator Niels Van Tomme writes, "Subjected to an overall sense of displacement, human nature itself is undoubtedly shifting; we are all migrating into something else, towards somewhere else." In other words,

migrants have something to teach us.

Fittingly, the artists in the exhibition hail from many different lands—Russia, Peru, Korea, Mexico, India, and Iran among them—some as immigrants from yet another country. And the gallery space is loud with what they have produced—sound installations, audiovisual pieces, drawings, 3D installations, photographs, maps, sculptures—so much so that it is at first difficult to distinguish one piece from the next, especially those that incorporate audio. But once you approach the individual works, the cacophony fades. A few of the pieces are so conceptual as to be goofy—Brendan Fernandes "Homecoming" consists entirely of a short, looped video of a grunting pair of lions; their rumblings are translated into subtitles that read "Go Home"—but the exhibition as a whole is moving and, at times, enlightening.

Pedro Lasch's "GuÃas de Ruta" is one of the more powerful pieces. Three identical specially designed maps representing the Americas hang on the wall, in various states of disrepair. One is torn and wrinkled; the next has deep creases where it has been repeatedly folded. In between the maps hang three pieces of text, fragments of an interview with one of three migrants—a Haitian, an El Salvadoran, and a Mexican—talking about their difficult, presumably illegal passage (or passages) to the United States. The maps are part of a larger series titled "Latino/a America," in which Lasch gives individuals who are about to cross the United States-Mexico border two maps to carry with them. After their trip, they are to keep one and send the other back to the artist. The maps, initially an artistic gesture, thus take on a hallowed quality. They are now objects that, with their dog-eared corners and dirt stains, hint at journeys many cannot imagine undertaking.

Another piece that has a visceral impact is Kimsooja's "A Needle Woman —Paris" a silent video projected on a wall. We see the back of a woman (Kimsooja herself) as she stands perfectly motionless on a busy Parisian sidewalk, waves of pedestrians parting around her. She has a long black ponytail, a gray robe. We never see her face and several minutes into this riveting 25-minute film it becomes apparent that hardly anyone else does either. Once in a while, a passerby appears to note her presence briefly. But in general, their eyes glide over the frozen woman, their expressions unchanged behind sunglasses and cell phones, cut off. Kimsooja has enacted this performance in numerous cities—Shanghai, Delhi, London—and it would be fascinating to see others

for cultural comparison. But the solitary piece works well in the context of this exhibition. If the mysterious Needle Woman is a migrant, she is an immobile one who nevertheless alters the flow of life around her. By the end, you feel a kinship with her, a desire for others to take notice.

Andrea Geyer's "Interim" has a similarly empathetic effect. The piece is an 80-page tabloid newspaper. Within is the photo-illustrated tale of a young female immigrant from an unnamed country moving to an unnamed American city. The story is told in descriptive fragments—"She kneels down to pet a small, white dog"—with entire sheets of paper left blank. Sound bites from the woman's experience—a few minutes of *Democracy Now* with Amy Goodman, of *Seinfeld*, of a newscast—are seamlessly included, and here and there a line that feels lifted from a cultural handbook for foreigners appears: "We will certainly stop and be friendly if you ask us a question, otherwise we will stay wrapped in our own concerns." These little nuggets of advice come off as overwhelming and too proscriptive in the context of the woman's story. The accompanying photographs have no captions, but some appear to have been taken in the American West, others in New York City. They are not all artfully composed; some are taken at night, others are blurry, or they depict undistinguished street corners. But because of the text, you begin to see these places through *her* new eyes, rendering the familiar surprising. "Interim" draws you in in the same way an elaborately illustrated children's book might, page by expectant page.

Other standout pieces in the exhibition include Blane de St. Croix's two installations in the form of landscape sections built of wood, plastic, dirt, paint, and branches. One depicts the border between North and South Korea, the other between the United States and Mexico. The delicate flocking of grass in a valley, the filigree-like sagebrush, and above all the intricately woven border fences—one topped with a tiny roll of concertina wire—are beautiful and shocking. Seeing such places rendered in loving, miniaturized detail somehow makes the fact of their existence more monstrous, especially since the landscapes are noticeably empty of human beings.

Glide on past the endlessly grunting lions and Svetlana Boym's overly convoluted "Hydrants Immigrants," in which photographs of New York City fire hydrants are paired with texts, which may or may not be true stories told by immigrants. (Boym writes that the piece "refers to the tradition of found objects and urban data collection but it also sidetracks and embarrasses these traditions with deviant immigrant storytelling"—a leap too far for this reviewer.) Most of the works, however, deserve your time—like Julika Rudelius' disturbing "Adrift," in which a group of people nod off together in a featureless room, heads all bobbing to the rhythm of some unknown conveyance, headed some unknown place; like Xaviera Simmons' large-scale photo installation "Superunknown (Alive in The)," which features numerous images culled from news articles of boats overcrowded with refugees, anonymous "boat people" made even more anonymous by the abundance of photos. The best pieces in *Where do We Migrate To?* remind us that adventure—sometimes of the most terrifying kind—is very much alive in this seemingly globalized age. They remind us of what we have learned not to notice.

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