REFUGE:
NEEDING, SEEKING, CREATING SHELTER

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Richard Mosse
Softball Stadium, Hellinkon Complex, Athens, Greece, 2019
Digital chromogenic print on metallic paper

As civil strife, economic insecurity, and environmental crises proliferate, artists from across the globe explore the search for refuge—how, why, and where people need, seek, and create shelter. The harsh and haunting realities of contemporary migrant life are vividly rendered in Richard Mosse's images of refugee camps in Greece, captured using heat mapping technology; in Serge Alain Nitegeka's figure painted with tea, coffee, and charcoal on shipping crates; and in Mohau Modisakeng's *Passage*, a series of photographs tracking the perilous journey of would-be refugees, alone in dark waters. Employing a wide range of techniques, these and other artists in the exhibition combine realism and fantasy, the mythical and the mundane, in images and objects that are both poignant and portentous.

In 2015, Mosse began following movement of refugees from the Middle East towards Europe, capturing their plight as heat maps—images he then put together as still photographs and as a film, *Incoming*. Designed by a weapons manufacturer, Mosse's camera has no aperture, is too heavy to hold, and cannot be brought into the U.S. The thermal camera captures heat signatures in shades of black, white, and grey, and is typically operated by remote computer, like a drone. "The camera is designed to stand on a sentry pole in the middle of

Hew Locke
The Wine Dark Sea, 2016 (detail)
Mixed media

the desert," explains Mosse, who adapted an Xbox controller and a Steadicam mechanism to use this technology. Human figures, tents, clothing, portable toilets, and other elements of the migrants' camps can be seen, though they appear surreal, sometimes cartoonlike. Noting that his heat maps both reveal intimate details about the refugees (circulatory patterns of their bodies' blood and heat flow are discernable) and obscure individual identity (facial features are distorted), Mosse subverts a surveillance technology intended to locate enemy targets by simultaneously exposing and protecting those whom society ignores or rejects. "I am using a military tool and trying to work against it…it is not designed for storytelling or aesthetic purposes," he explains. And yet the resulting images are highly aesthetic, offering mesmerizing narratives of today's leading human rights crisis.

Anita Groener's installation, *Citizen*, is a tangled web of Birch tree branches and twigs that hold single-file lines of miniature refugees, carrying their young children and their possessions on their heads, or backs, or pushing carts and wheelchairs. A few ride donkeys or mules bringing to mind the biblical flight into Egypt and linking centuries of people who have fled their homes in search of freedom, safety, or a better life. The delicate hand-cut paper silhouettes are traced from images of refugees pulled from mass media. Groener uses each image only once; each silhouette references an actual person, a unique trauma and story. The humble materials—paper and twigs—and the sheer numbers of the individual silhouettes intensifies the vulnerability of these people all searching for shelter, emphasizing the fragility of life. Critic and curator Joseph R. Wolin writes, "*Citizen* conjures the unfamiliar European woods through which migrants passed, but also the metaphorical ones they must navigate. Its scale requires looking up close to the consider the myriad of incidents, and produces repeated small revelations as dried leaves and knobby joints turn out to be human figures, a requirement that echoes the work's proffered obligation to pay attention to the existence of countless individuals who need our aid." Groener's accompanying video, *Blink*, is a compilation of hundreds of photographs of refugees; the sound of a beating heart keeps time as new and more images quickly appear and disappear on screen. The images show people running from violence, walking in the rain, snow, and intense sun, climbing over and under barbed wire fences. The speed of the video mirrors the constant news cycle: in the blink of an eye, the image, the story is gone, replaced by endless others.

Ornamented like reliquaries, the model boats that comprise Hew Locke's *The Wine Dark Sea* evoke global narratives of travel and migration—both sought and forced—from past and present. Covered in burlap bags, doll's clothes, beads, fake flowers, medallions, and more, Locke's flotilla includes battleships, schooners, lifeboats, container ships, rowboats, and other historic and contemporary vessels. Hung at eye-height, the procession is both celebratory and mournful, recalling "votive boats," the miniature models that first appeared in European churches in the 15th century, offered by sea captains and survivors of shipwrecks in thanks or as pleas for protection. Born in Scotland but raised in Guyana (known as "the land of many waters"), Locke investigates the intersections of colonialism, displacement, power, and its historical symbols, conjuring the journeys of explorers, pirates, slaves, missionaries, immigrants, tourists, and refugees. Titled after Homer's description of the ocean in his epic poems, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey, The Wine Dark Sea* embodies travel, migration, hope and suffering, prosperity and despair, the vast spectrum of journeys of bodies and souls; Locke's boats pay homage to the fantasies and realities of centuries of human flow. "It's not just about something dark," says the artist. "It's about people searching for a better life, which is a human right. It's what we do."

Dinh Q. Lê
Go Cong Dong Beach 1, 2006
Chromogenic print

The anonymous portraits Nitegeka creates on shipping crates highlight human vulnerability and the mistreatment to which refugees are often subject. Recalling his own experiences as a refugee from Burundi, Nitegeka's figures are presented as confined within a shipping crate, sometimes stamped with a barcode, reflecting the transformation of the individual into a commodity that can be bought or sold, like coffee, tea, or charcoal—the materials the artist gathered to create these works. The global shipping trade of goods (and of human beings) is also referenced in Stephanie Syjuco's *Applicant Photos (Migrants).* Posed studio-style and captured with a cell phone, these portraits show figures swathed in patterned fabrics that hide their faces, denying individual identity. The shape-shifting graphics obscure the figure and highlight the designs, which today are associated with "ethnic fashions," derived from the colonial history of the Americas, Africa, and Asia, now produced in factories and shipped worldwide as part of the massive consumer trade conducted by GAP, Forever 21, Urban Outfitters, Target, and other big-box stores. These passport-style photos recall the common application process for asylum or immigration, an experience during which people may feel as invisible as they do exposed. The artist observes that "the work comments upon the ways in which the 'foreign' is constantly thought of as Other—by institutions, nations, and the larger flow of media images that lump migrants into faceless categories."

Like Nitegeka, Vietnamese artist Dinh Q. Lê left his home as young refugee; during the Vietnam War, his family fled to California. Lê's *Go Cong Dong Beach* photographs pay homage, he says, to those who nurture "a hope and belief that there is a place that is better." Lê's visions delineate both the real and the surreal, evoking his own memory of migration and the fantasy of flight shared by those hoping to reach, as he names it, *The Imaginary Country*. "To seek a better life by crossing the four seas," the ancient Chinese saying that inspired *Go Cong Dong Beach* animates works throughout the exhibition in which the sea serves as a potent symbol for both desire and danger. In works by Anthony Goicolea, Ellen Kooi, Antonio Cazorla, Lê, and others, the sea offers escape, while Modisakeng, Jorge Méndez Blake, and Alex Hernández, illustrate or allude to shipwrecks, evoking the threat of disaster that so often attends the traveler's crossing to safety.

In Yoan Capote's *Isla (Crudo)* [*Island (Raw)*], the sea surrounding the island nation is depicted by hundreds of dark, sharp fishhooks. Inspired by 19th-century visions of the sublime painted by Caspar David Friedrich, as well works by J.M.W. Turner and Arnold Böcklin, Capote's *Isla* series is intended to evoke both beauty and terror. For Capote, the fishhooks embody the simultaneous allure and risk of leaving Cuba by boat: "I consider that the sea itself is a permanent mental reference for people who live on an island, and its horizon is a constant image that could evoke hope, fantasy, isolation, and frustration." The artist says that the fishhooks can also be understood "as an iron curtain, as a political border, as a trap, as a metal fence, as a wall, as hope, as an exit." Having witnessed the multitude of lives lost by those who pursued escape from Cuba, Capote offers a reflection on *Isla* that is globally pertinent: "each fishhook could be counted as one of those people," he explains. "I wanted this series of work to embody that risk and frustration, the frustration of accepting that geography and politics decide the limits of individual liberty."

What does adaptation look like in a world increasingly dominated by disaster and dislocation? For the women walking toward safety in Alfredo Jaar's *Rwanda* series; for the Palestinian families displaced from their ruined homes as depicted in Naomi Safran-Hon's painting; for the woman contemplatively trying to make sense of her future in a new, potentially hostile world in Akea

Mohau Modisakeng
Passage 7, 2017 (detail)
Inkjet print

Brionne's *Vertigo*; for Colombians leaving crumbling communities envisioned by Sair García; for nomadic tribes navigating the expansion of cities in the Mongolian steppes drawn by Tuguldur Yondonjamts; and for so many others, what can they bring and what will they find that will ensure survival?

Of Age

You've come of age in the age of migrations.
The board tilts, and the bodies roll west.
Fanaticism's come back into fashion,
come back with a vengeance.
In this new country, there's no gravitas,
no grace. The ancient Chevys migrate
west and plunge like maddened buffalo
into a canyon. Where the oil-slick geese go,
no one knows—maybe the Holland Tunnel
because they take it for the monstrous turbine
promised them in prophecy. I brought you
to this world, and I do not regret it.
The sky's still blue, for now. I want to show you
an island where the trees are older than redwoods
ever since Prospero turned them
into books. You'll meet him when you're ready.
For now, though, study this list of endangered
species: it's incomplete, of course, since all
species are in some danger nowadays.
This is the country I bequeath to you,
the country I bequeath you to. You've come
of age, and you're inheriting the whole house,
busted pipes and splintered deck and all.
This is your people, this, the mythic West
your grandparents wished to reach, and reached.
The oceans surge, but the boat is up on blocks.
There's no America to sail to anymore.

Amit Majmudar, 2015 Poet Laureate of Ohio

Nick Cave
Untitled, 2012-2014
Mixed media including concrete figure, plaster crown, ceramic birds, strung beads, and vintage stools

Migration and displacement have long shaped and shadowed United States history, as reflected works by Joel Daniel Phillips and Nick Cave. Phillips developed his drawing series, *Killing the Negative*, with poet and educator Quraysh Ali Lansana, in response to what Phillips describes as "a subset of the Farm Security Administration's (FSA) foundational commissioned photographs of the Great Depression. These images are of course, well known, and images like *Migrant Mother* by Dorothea Lange have become some of the most recognizable and important images in the American photographic lexicon. Less known, however, is the process by which these images were selected for publication: Roy Stryker was the head of the FSA, and for the first 4 years of the project, images he deemed unworthy were 'killed' by punching a hole in the original negative." *Killed Negative #33* is a charcoal and graphite rendering based on a 1937 photograph attributed to Russell Lee, taken at a Minnesota campsite where Native American families lived while picking blueberries. Migrants in their own indigenous land, the subjects of Lee's photographs were among those "killed" by Stryker's hole punch; he was reported to have rejected most images of Native Americans, choosing to erase their suffering, their presence, and their history from the visual archive of the FSA.

A host of decorative, kitschy possessions surround the small, Black figure at the center of Nick Cave's *Untitled* sculpture from his series, *Made by Whites for Whites*. The original purpose of the found central object was racist: it was produced as a lawn ornament or other decorative item designed to denigrate African American identity. After discovering a spittoon fashioned with the features of blackface, Cave traveled across the U.S. to flea markets and antique stores, gathering dozens of such racist commercial objects, and then returning to his studio to transform these artifacts of hate into multi-valent assemblages that confront past and present. Here, a small male figure's head is crowned in gold; the stool upon which he sits becomes a throne. As critic Bansie Vasani writes, "these seemingly inconsequential figures are enshrined in elaborate arbors made of birds, flowers, chandeliers, and kitschy decorative items festooned with beaded strings." The legacy of slavery—of separation, forced migration and labor, violence and discrimination—is a recurring theme in Cave's work. His found and repurposed objects transform a symbol of oppression into one of reverence: rescued from history, the figure projects the image of a small deity, enveloped by once discarded objects that now offer protection, serving as relics or talismans.

"We are a nation of immigrants" is a phrase often invoked in support of cultural plurality in the U.S., and yet, in recent years, the sentiment is increasingly contested by those who perceive immigration across the nation's southern border as a threat to

Ana Teresa Fernández
Borrando la Frontera [*Erasing the Border*], 2021 (still)
Video

social stability. The complex reality facing those seeking a better life through migration is addressed from a range of perspectives in works by Carlos Vielma, Ana Teresa Fernández, Margarita Cabrera, Daniela García Hamilton, and Arleene Correa Valencia. The physical geography of the human-imposed border between the U.S. and Mexico animates Vielma's haunting image of the landscape between El Paso, Texas, and Tijuana, Mexico, rendered in dust the artist collected from the sidewalks of Tijuana, a portion of which was blown across the border from its neighboring, but inaccessible city.

The train rails used to create the physical border between the United States and Mexico that punctuate the heavily populated San Diego beaches along the Tijuana border are a central character in Fernández's series, *Borrando la Frontera* [*Erasing the Border*]. In the video and photograph on view, the artist in a dress and high heels, climbing an enormous ladder, and spray-painting the border wall between San Diego and Tijuana a powdery blue, in an attempt change the visual appearance of the barrier into one that blends into the natural landscape, laboring to restore the pristine oceanside to its original, undivided state. Fernández's work challenges the concept of borders, both external and internal: while manmade walls and fences define nations, they also represent intersections of identities, which are far more nuanced and complex than nationalities. Fernández's appearance and actions also challenge gender stereotypes: says the artist, "I explore territories that encompass these different types of boundaries and stereotypes: the physical, the emotional, and the psychological."

Fernández's efforts to paint a "hole in the wall" is not only an attempt to erase its power over the people on both sides of the wall, but also alludes to how the border disrupts the natural world, a topic further addressed in Margarita Cabrera's interactive installation, *Pepita Para el Loro Para Que Hable o Calle* [*A Nugget for the Parrot to Speak or Stay Quiet*]. Cabrera's life-sized parrot sculptures, made with hand-sewn textiles from recycled U.S. border patrol uniform fabric, reveal another crisis happening at the U.S.-Mexico border: the illegal trade of animals and the ensuing ecological loss. The Mexican red-headed parrot, native to the forests of northeastern Mexico, are considered an endangered species due to the illegal trapping and entry into the U.S. pet trade. Cabrera's birds exhibit this species' ability to mimic language; each parrot contains a voice-activated device to sonically engage audiences. Words spoken by viewers are repeated, bird by bird, creating a miniature echo chamber of voices, suggesting a range of meaningful questions: "How are our communities complicit in the dehumanizing enterprise that exists in the U.S. government toward our immigrant communities?" asks Cabrera. Like the mechanical parrots, individual and group responses towards social and political issues are often amplified and repeated back; Cabrera's work enacts the divisive feedback loops currently shaping the national discourse about immigration.

This very public border crisis has a multitude of private faces, countless, individual stories of trauma and triumph. In Daniela García Hamilton's *Birthdays on the Other Side of the Hills*, two children look at one another through a floating, columned border: within the orange grid, a child celebrates a birthday, while the other watches from a distance atop a coyote. As a first-generation Mexican American, García Hamilton's painting makes visual the physical disconnection many migrant families experience, missing birthdays and other life milestones. The coyote represents the "human smugglers" on which many Mexican immigrants rely on to enter the U.S; requiring money and immense trust, "coyotes" offer passage across the border, but these journeys are often extremely treacherous.

Arleene Correa Valencia
Al Otro Lado [*To the Other Side*], 2021
Repurposed family clothing on watercolor paper, reflective fabric and embroidery

"In 1996 my mother, brother, and I wrote more than 40 letters to my father who had, in my eyes, abandoned us in Mexico after migrating to East Los Angeles, California in search of work," recalls Arleene Correa Valencia. "He left us behind and came to the United States to be able to provide for us. During this time, I felt the most immense amount of pain because my father is and always will be the love of my life, my best friend and inspiration. I used the archive of tear-covered letters to create these textile works in an effort to highlight the pain that my family went through at the time of this separation." Valencia's textile work, *Refugiados* [*Refugees*], is based on the only existing photograph of the artist's parents and eldest brother, taken in 1992, prior to their family separation between Mexico and the U.S. Valencia uses fabrics from clothing worn by her family members to reflect her "attempt to recreate fragments of figures that are never truly whole." Six works on paper also on view are titled after texts written by the artist's family members in letters to her father during the family's separation. Correa Valencia uses reflective fabrics and glowing thread in all of these works: "I have carefully drawn lines to show people connected in the light but apart in the dark revealing the contrasts of 'visibility' and 'invisibility,'" she explains. "When exposed to light, the outline of the adult figures absorbs this energy, symbolizing the fear of family separation and deportation. But in darkness the separation is made visible as the child absorbs the light and becomes a beacon of hope." In daylight, the children's bodies are blank, absent; the threads outlining their forms glow under the light of a black light UV flashlight, highlighting their visibility and connection to their parents, as well as the invisibility of individual and mass suffering of migrants worldwide.

As the global refugee crisis continues, ensuring universal access to human rights will require seismic changes—changes potentially inspired by accumulation of the subtle yet potent shifts in perspective that the unique testimonies told through art can engender. Describing the role of art in shaping change, Richard Mosse says, "I believe that beauty is the sharpest tool in the box; I think that aesthetics can be understood as the opposite of anesthetic; it can be used to awaken the senses rather than to put you to sleep. We have a moral imperative to adequately communicate these difficult narratives so that people can be more aware."

– **Alice Gray Stites**, Museum Director, Chief Curator

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Cover:
Arleene Correa Valencia
Refugiados [*Refugees*], 2022 (detail)
Repurposed family clothing on canvas, Mexican textiles, embroidery and beads