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Curatorial Programs



ALMOST HOME: BETWEEN STAYING AND LEAVING A PHANTOM LAND

Wafaa Bilal, Keren Benbenisty, Juanli Carrión, Daniel Greenfield-Campoverde, Claudia Joskowicz, Ayesha Kamal Khan, Dana Levy, Esperanza Mayobre, Elham Rokni, and Karina Aguilera Skvirsky

Curated by Shlomit Dror

May 7 – July 16, 2017

Opening reception: Sunday, May 7, 2:00–5:00 p.m.

Leaving a place and adapting to a new one—conditions immigrants, expatriate communities, long-term travelers, and temporary residents are subject to—entails dealing simultaneously with contradictory positions: detachment and embrace, estrangement and connection, alienation and belonging. The tension and negotiations caused by expedition or diaspora comprise the conflicting roles of insider and outsider, and further emphasize the dissonance between romanticized ideation and stark reality. The artists in *Almost Home: Between Staying and Leaving a Phantom Land*, examine the roles of the foreigner and the local, the transient and the native, inviting questions about relation to place, and exploring the different realities dislocation engenders.

This exhibition highlights subject matter derived from perceptions of foreignness and familiarity, conjuring such questions as: How do we observe places and on what do we base our impressions? Does personal identity, memory and history determine one's relation to a place as much or more than the experience of change? And finally, how do others observe our surroundings, and alternatively, how do we view the places of others?

Departing from a “permanent” place awakens feelings of homesickness and nostalgia. The author Svetlana Boym writes that “nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy.” This exhibition consists of artworks that focus on displacement narratives the artists may have experienced personally, or were indirectly affected by. To encounter



Elham Rokni *41st Street*, 2014



Wafaa Bilal *The Ashes Series: Chair*, 2003-2013

a place after years of remoteness sometimes results in unfamiliarity and disappointment, forcing an immediate break with distant memories.

The artist **Wafaa Bilal**, depicts his birthplace of Iraq, though not in the same form he last saw it. Instead, both the photographs *Chair and Hospital*, which are part of *The Ashes* series (2003-2013), document the artist’s country as it was affected by the protracted Iraq War. Bilal did not physically visit the place during that time, nor were his photographs drawn from memory. Rather, the artist captured miniature maquettes he built and staged as scenes of crumbling interiors, directly affected by the aftermath of Operation Iraqi Freedom, from which he had fled. These “staged realities” are based on images taken by photojournalists, documenting war’s devastation in the artist’s native country. In these photographs, the viewer encounters quiet scenes after a violent act, devoid of any human figures. To replace them, Bilal sprinkled his scenes with human ashes weighing twenty-one grams, based on the notion that at a person’s death, the departing soul diminishes the body’s weight by that amount. Presenting transitional moments between reality and staging not only intensifies the impact of destruction in these interiors, but also emphasizes Bilal’s helplessness and inability to claim the things he left behind when he escaped Iraq as a refugee in 1991. By recreating moments of destruction that he experienced from afar, the places he knew from the past become foreign and unrecognizable for him.

Like Bilal, **Elham Rokni** in her video work, *41st Street* (2014), from the project *Yousef Abad*, documents her childhood habitat in Teheran, perceived by another pair of eyes. The footage in the video was taken by another person for whom the artist provided directions based on her memory.¹ Prevented from returning to Iran, the artist’s fragmented memories further alienate her from her birthplace. Yet she demonstrates an ability to guide someone else, who embodies her childhood narrative and recreates the paths she walked in. However, the scenes captured in the video may or may not reflect actual memories from right before the artist’s departure to Israel, nor the narrative she is imagining from her distant past. As Rokni directs the scenes from afar, with specific filming guidelines for her Iranian counterpart, she attempts to reclaim the space and relive the moments before she left. The film reveals to Rokni anew her childhood pathways, as the camera moves through main streets and smaller alleys. While looking for her father’s grocery store and trying to find her grandmother’s home, Rokni moves between past and present. Though living in exile and not physically present in the actual place she is portraying in her video, like Bilal, Rokni is able to transcend the dislocation.

Seeking traces of a home left behind is also the focus of **Dana Levy**’s video *This Was Home* (2016). In this work, the artist simultaneously represents the stories of her maternal grandfather, father, and of Levy herself, each filmed in a short journey visiting their childhood homes in different parts of the world: Poland, Egypt and the United States. In this one-channel video, which is divided into three sections, Levy brings together individual narratives by three generations. One side of the screen shows Levy’s grandfather, a Holocaust survivor, whom she accompanied to and documented in Sosnowiec, Poland—a place he last saw before being transported to Auschwitz in 1940. In the middle is Levy’s father documented by his daughter as they roam the busy streets of Cairo, trying to find his home, which he left for Israel in the 1950s. The third section shows the artist’s early and short-term migration story from Israel to Atlanta, Georgia, which shaped her childhood experience. Each person is presented standing in front, inside or beside their “original” homes, while



Dana Levy *This Was Home*, 2016

recounting their childhood stories as adults, and constantly shifting between past and present. In the video, Levy embeds personal pictures from her family albums as well as images she located in various archives, that “fill in the gap” for the photos that were never taken. Restoring her family’s narrative raises the question of whether a generational memory can reshape our sense of place. Finding their homes, whether intact, in ruins or occupied by other tenants, also raises issues about the relationships we form with places. Where is Levy from? Poland? Egypt? Israel? The U.S.?

It is inevitable that our ancestors’ migration stories are intertwined with our personal memory and identity. **Daniel Greenfield-Campoverde’s** work, *Rocks from Atlit* (2016), emerged as both a personal quest to investigate his grandfather’s odyssey as a World War II survivor from Auschwitz to Palestine (via Hungary, Italy and Cyprus) and as a metaphor for the condition of refugees today. Investigating his grandfather’s past and history, Campoverde visited the Atlit Detainee Camp in Israel (a museum today), which from the late 1930s until the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, functioned as a detention camp under the British Mandate. Like the artist’s grandfather, Jewish refugees who escaped Nazi Germany and tried to enter Palestine illegally were detained here. Campoverde collected rocks at a site nearby, taking a piece of the land with him, as though embodying his grandfather’s footsteps. Photographing the stones in a sealed plastic bag, he renders the work simultaneously performative and static, indicating the artist’s physical and spiritual connection to the earth and the place. Campoverde’s sculpture *The Weight of Mobility* (2017), is a cast of his grandfather’s foot made of concrete, attached to a folding ruler holding a postcard. Examining his family’s continuous exiles, the material, firmness and mass of the foot suggest an opposition to this narrative, granting the sculpture its monument-like impression. Observing the earth as a timeless element, Campoverde asks “what do we identify as our soil?” He further questions: “...for those of us with hybrid identities, caused by voluntary exiles, migrations and trauma, how do we remember what is left behind? Can soil ever be a marker for memory and place?” Campoverde seeks for a connection with his heritage through the land, and at the same time, questions his ties to it.

Campoverde’s spatial experience of Atlit and Levy’s exploration of her family’s homes are linked to **Karina Aguilera Skvirsky’s** investigation of her ancestors’ country of Ecuador. In her work, *The Railroad Workers/Los Obreros Del Ferrocarril* (2016), she examines the migration story of Maria Rosa Palacios, her great-grandmother, from Chota to Guayaquil, Ecuador in 1905. As a fifteen-year-old Afro-Ecuadorian and descendant of slaves, Palacios was seeking work as a domestic servant for a wealthy family in that area, and thus embarked on a long journey, which Skvirsky took herself for this *oeuvre*. In this photographic series, Skvirsky captures Ecuadorian landscapes, referencing her great-grandmother’s treacherous voyage through mountains and other difficult terrains to arrive at her destination.



Karina Aguilera Skvirsky *The Railroad Workers (Los Obreros Del Ferrocarril): Chota*, 2016

Palacios was one of last migrants to travel this route before the country completed construction of a new railroad in 1908. Returning to places her great-grandmother may have walked, and looking at these terrains almost a hundred years after her migration, Skvirsky maps Palacios’ biography in an attempt to reclaim this land and fill in the void between the photograph and the lived experience. In her work, she embeds archival black and white records depicting indigenous laborers from Ecuador and migrant workers from Jamaica who built the railway. Their images are inserted within the creases of the landscape, bringing together past and present, providing two versions of a place. In these works, Skvirsky reimagines her great-grandmother’s experience during her voyage, perhaps encountering migrant workers, who like herself, traveled long distances to find work. By juxtaposing these landscapes with archival images of railway construction, Skvirsky explores how personal memories intersect with collective memory. Reconstructing her cultural genealogy, and shifting between past and present, the artist mythologizes the landscape: Are these the same places Palacios had seen? Would she recognize them? The familial narratives Skvirsky, Levy and Campoverde present in their works examine two facets that link a personal biography to geography: One emphasizes the individual’s experiential connection to a place and the other attempts to solve a puzzle, trying to construct their broader narrative of their families’ (and their own) origins.



Daniel Greenfield-Campoverde *Rocks from Atlit*, 2016

The unstable conditions of immigrants who are in search of a new place is the subject matter of **Claudia Jaskowicz's** two-channel video *Sympathy for the Devil* (2011). In this work, a reenacted interaction between two elderly, immigrant neighbors takes place in an elevator in a high-rise apartment building in La Paz, Bolivia. One man is K. Altman, the alias of the former Nazi officer Nicholas "Klaus" Barbie, known as the "Butcher of Lyon," who was responsible for the death of 14,000 Jews and Resistance leaders in France. The second is an unnamed Polish-Jewish refugee who emigrated to Bolivia during World War II. This story of two people from disparate, yet frighteningly close backgrounds, living in one confined reality, underlines a familiar post-war condition in South America, particularly in countries like Bolivia, which became a home to persecuted Jews, and at the same time welcomed former Nazis with open arms. The two men who allegedly lived parallel lives in the same high-rise are introduced to the viewer in the opening scene in the building's elevator, as one enters and the other leaves. The slow motion of the video stretches out time, prolonging the intensity of this jarring encounter. As the film progresses, we get a glimpse into each man's apartment, both capturing a similar view of La Paz's landscape, deepening even more the clashing contrasts between them. While the Jewish refugee is seen interacting with a young person in his apartment, indicating that he established a new life, a family perhaps, the former Nazi's apartment seems cold and empty. Jaskowicz explores these alternate sides of the narrative, and scrutinizes the way these two individuals are affected by one another. Leaving behind opposing destinies, the daily confrontations of these two immigrants blurs their pasts, and at the same time demonstrates how a new place may redefine history, memory and reality.

Ayesha Kamal Khan examines the anxiety of displacement. In this site-specific, sculptural work, *Seeking* (2016), she stretches long wires from one end of the wall to another, to create a constellation-like structure, or a mapping system of some sort. On the wires, she randomly displays found objects, such as miniature ladders (reminiscent of transition) and abstract shapes made from plasticine that seem unstable or about to fall off. These small items resemble nomadic structures, symbolizing temporary solutions to claim land. In this work, it's as though Khan has created a map for the landless tenants, for those who could not find a place on the map. "They seek a ground but float on air," Khan states, referring to those in search of a place to claim, and "...no land claims them." The floating objects strongly suggest the lack of rootedness and belonging. Khan's abstract, ephemeral shapes are neither figurative nor identifiable.



Claudia Jaskowicz *Sympathy for the Devil*, 2011



Ayesha Kamal Khan *This May Fall (flying carpet)*, 2016



Keren Benbenisty *Mare Nostrum*, 2016-2017

Instead, their sense of dislocation suggests that they are in search of a center, for a place to stand. Khan's emphasis on physical and mental tensions suggested by the extended wires draws on a connection to the videos and photographs discussed above, as they all demonstrate the notion of impermanence and the constant shift between homelands and other countries.

The suspended elements in Khan's work, evoke the feeling of being in between, or shifting from one place to another. This idea of "non-place" is also conveyed in **Keren Benbenisty's** drawing *Mare Nostrum* (2016-2017). In this work, Benbenisty depicts the waves in the sea, conjuring the ocean as an infinite, borderless area. On the other hand, this portrayal is evocative of the harsh reality for those trapped in water in search for a land on which to rest. Exploring forms of migration, Benbenisty began this work with the investigation of the Suez Canal, planned by Ferdinand de Lesseps in 1869, to connect the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea for commerce and trade purposes. This man-made construction resulted in the scientific naming of the Lessepsian migration, in which marine species from the Red Sea migrated to the Mediterranean, colonizing the latter's ecosystem and forcing many animals and plants out of their "native" place. Benbenisty's waves are made with her fingerprints, recalling the migrants' experiences of being identified and documented on entering a new country, a procedure she herself went through when entering the U.S. from Israel. This archetypal action symbolically recreated, further speaks to the refugee crisis and to the waves of immigrants coming by sea, enduring dangerous and life-threatening journeys of unknown outcomes and destinations,

dealing with the unpredictable and capricious powers of nature and of the authorities. The use of fingerprints here also suggests the notion of identity, when individuals are defined by the abstract lines on their skin surface, and categorized by the friction ridges of their fingers. The connection Benbenisty makes between human and animal migration reflects upon concepts of place, native versus local, belonging, and adapting to new environments.

Immigration conditions and procedures are subjects **Esperanza Mayobre**

focuses on in her work, based on her experiences of immigration to the United States from Venezuela. She considers her work, *Temporal Humanitarian Status* (2008), to be a portrait of herself as an immigrant, addressing her impressions of being uprooted from her cultural environment. Similar to an eye-chart, she uses this template and lists all the visa types the United States offers. This triptych also includes a drawing of an unfinished or crumbling structure and a photo of a wall, bringing together representational and conceptual elements. Using a variety of visual formats, the list of confusing travel visa categories along with the more abstract sections conveys a sense of inaccessibility or a broken system, where the bureaucratic language of immigration policy in a place like the U.S. simultaneously suggests progress and failure. In her other work, *Welcome to the Yunaited Estai* (2012), Mayobre addresses the bilingual condition of speaking both in English and in Spanish and purposely misspells the mispronunciation of the phrase. Using a mat that is usually placed before a door or home entrance for people arriving to wipe their shoes on before entering, symbolizes the authority's power and force, "stepping" on immigrants who are powerless against immigration enforcement. The artist's use of language in this specific way, underscores where she comes from and where she is now—living between two cultures. The use of text here also expresses Mayobre's distance from the English language and the importance of maintaining her native Spanish, and as such, embracing her cultural identity as an immigrant.

Many works in the show explore the effect of memory for those facing permanence and instability. How do these memories affect our migratory experiences, and how do they shape our assimilation in a new place? **Juanli Carrión's** *Memelismos* (2017), is an ongoing project where the artist collects objects specifically from immigrant populations, which he later wraps in heavy-duty plastic of different colors, obscuring the article's physical appearance. In this process, Carrión transforms these random items into abstract sculptures. This work also looks at the sentimental and emotional connection we develop towards objects we own, and the significance material



Juanli Carrión *Memelismos*, 2017

culture has in shaping our identity. In addition to the objects, the artist also collected oral histories, recording owners' stories. To many, these objects become emblems from the past, remembering a time long gone. The title of the work contains the word "Meme," coined by the British biologist Richard Dawkins, which means "to imitate" and analogizes transmission of cultural ideas through mimicry to the transmission of biological information through genes. Carrión explains: "Ironically appropriating the term "Meme," the project explores the commodification of culture and

its transference through memes, creating a chromatically coded archive of memory to go deeper into the consequences of visual memory on cultural identity." Like the sense of impermanence that exists in exile, memory too is ephemeral. A home, which is a solid structure, also contains memories that attempt to conquer time and recover shattered fragments that no longer exist. Memories, not only places, shape our migratory experience.

Constant movement from place to place, whether by force or choice, reinforces the concept of liminal space—a place and time of transition. In situations of journeying from place to place, whether temporarily, or with the intent of permanent resettlement, a strong impulse to retain one's otherness competes with an even stronger one to blend in. Living in a place like New York, one regularly meets people from all over the world. Being curious about their background and journeying, the irresistible question of "where are you from?" does not always have a straightforward answer. Some people may have reservations about their past, and, reluctant to embrace it, they celebrate their earned "local" status in a new place. Others, while endorsing a new culture and language, hold fast to their ancestral identity. The artists of *Almost Home* examine the experience of living between places and cultures, raising questions about locality and its roles. They often address these issues by materializing places from memory. Whether their works were inspired by their personal immigration experience, or that of those close to them, these artists' exploration of attachment and detachment and of insider and outsider, underlines the idea of connecting with more than one place at a time. ■

— Shlomit Dror, *New York, NY*, 2017

NOTES

1. Rokni's project began as a collaboration between herself and an Iranian-American artist Rokni met while studying abroad in New York. The video is accompanied by a manuscript, *Dear [REDACTED] Salam*, detailing the three-year correspondence between Rokni and her collaborator ("A"), who quit the project towards the end, due to political and personal conflicts. In both the video and text Rokni has omitted the identity of that person.

BIOGRAPHY

Shlomit Dror is a curator working in Greater New York. She has organized group exhibitions including, *In Her Eyes: Women Behind and in Front of the Camera*, (Newark Museum, 2012), *F_Ill in the B_L_nk*, (NARS Foundation, 2013), *Ready or Not: 2014 New Jersey Arts Annual*, (Newark Museum, 2014), *Seeing through Abstraction*, (Residency Unlimited, 2015), *Story of A Story*, (Smack Mellon, 2015), *Esther Naor: The Object is Present*, (A.I.R Gallery, 2015), and *Partner in Crime*, (Paul Robeson Galleries, Rutgers University, 2016). Dror held the positions as the Consulting Curator of American Art at the Newark Museum, Curatorial Assistant at the 2011 Inchoen Women Artists Biennale, and has also been at El Museo del Barrio, Félix González-Torres Foundation and the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies. Her writings have been published in catalogues for the Newark Museum, CUE Art Foundation, Point of Contact Gallery, as well as online essays. She was a guest juror at Fresh Paint Art Fair in Tel Aviv, Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, City Without Walls among others, and has served as a visiting critic at Residency Unlimited, NARS Foundation, The Wassaic Project, Wave Hill Visual Arts Program and the Elizabeth Foundation. Dror received an MA in Museum Studies from New York University and a BA in Art History and Latin American Studies from Bard College. She also took part in Independent Curators International's (ICI) Curatorial Intensive program.

CHECKLIST

WAFAA BILAL

THE ASHES SERIES: CHAIR,
2003-2013

Archival inkjet photograph
40 x 50 inches
Artist's Proofs

THE ASHES SERIES: HOSPITAL,
2003-2013

Archival inkjet photograph
40 x 50 inches
Artist's Proofs

Images are Copyright Wafaa Bilal
and Courtesy of Driscoll Babcock
Galleries, New York, NY

KEREN BENBENISTY

MARE NOSTRUM, 2016-2017

Artist's fingerprints on painted
wood panel

78 x 63 inches

Courtesy of the artist

JUANLI CARRIÓN

MEMELISMOS, 2016-ongoing

Donated objects, industrial heat-
shrink film, acrylic paint and sound

Dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist

(Installation view at Sala Murillo,
Cajasol Foundation

Photo credit: Sonia Espigares)

DANIEL GREENFIELD- CAMPOVERDE

ROCKS FROM ATLIT, 2016

50 x 33 inches

C-print photograph mounted on
aluminum panel

Courtesy of the artist

*LA TIERRA MAS AJENA/THE MOST
FOREIGN LAND*, 2017

36 x 10.5 x 4 inches

Concrete, vintage measuring stick,
brass rod and postcard

Courtesy of the artist

CLAUDIA JOSKOWICZ

SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL, 2011

8:19 min.

Two channel video installation,
sound

Courtesy of the artist and LMAK
Gallery, New York, NY

AYESHA KAMAL KHAN

SEEKING, 2016

Plasticine, bending wire,
scotchlite, cloth, stones, paper,
graphite, rubber, plastic, clothesline,
small bamboo ladder

Dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist

(*THIS MAY FALL (FLYING CARPET)*,
2016, photo by Tal Barel)

DANA LEVY

THIS WAS HOME, 2016

17:43 min.

One channel video installation, sound

Courtesy of the artist and Braverman
Gallery, Tel Aviv

ESPERANZA MAYOBRE

TEMPORAL HUMANITARIAN

STATUS (Visa. Structure. Wall.),
2008

Collage, drawing on pen, silver gelatin
32 x 20 inches

Courtesy of the artist

WELCOME TO THE YUNAITED

ESTAI, 2012

30 x 20 inches

Doormat carpet

Edition 1/60

Courtesy of the artist

ELHAM ROKNI

*41ST STREET (From the Yusef-Abad
project)*, 2014

36:53 min.

One channel HD video, sound

Courtesy of the artist

KARINA AGUILERA SKVIRSKY

*THE RAILROAD WORKERS (LOS
OBREROS DEL FERROCARRIL):*

CHIMBORAZO, 2016

Folded and collaged archival
inkjet print

20 x 24 inches

Courtesy of the artist

*THE RAILROAD WORKERS (LOS
OBREROS DEL FERROCARRIL):*

IBARRA, 2016

20 x 24 inches

Folded and collaged archival
inkjet print

20 x 24 inches

Courtesy of the artist

*THE RAILROAD WORKERS (LOS
OBREROS DEL FERROCARRIL):*

TAMBILLO, 2016

20 x 24 inches

Folded and collaged archival
inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

*THE RAILROAD WORKERS (LOS
OBREROS DEL FERROCARRIL):*

CHOTA, 2016

Folded and collaged archival
inkjet print

20 x 24 inches

Courtesy of the artist

*THE RAILROAD WORKERS (LOS
OBREROS DEL FERROCARRIL):*

CHIMBORAZO (NOCHE), 2016

20 x 24 inches

Folded and collaged archival
inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Cover: **Esperanza Mayobre**, *Welcome to the Yunaited Estai*, 2012

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Moving to the United States from Israel more than a decade ago, this show reflects many of my own personal questions and concerns derived from my experiences living in diaspora. Sharing these stories with the artists has been both comforting and eye-opening. First and foremost, I would like to thank all the artists in this show for deep and intelligent conversations about immigration experiences. Their work has been a source of inspiration for this show, projecting profound empathy to those with similar backgrounds. Lucy Lippard's captivating and thought-provoking read, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: New Press, 1998) was an essential source for this essay. Thank you to all the galleries for graciously providing the artworks for this show. Above all, I would like to extend my gratitude to Deborah Rising for designing this brochure, and to David, Noah, and Karen Dorsky, as well as to Chelsea Cooksey of Dorsky Gallery Curatorial Programs for their support and commitment in bringing this show to fruition.



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