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This D.C. exhibition should be seen by everyone concerned about the migrant crisis



A scene from Erkan Özgen's moving film "Wonderland," featured in "The Warmth of Other Suns: Stories of Global Displacement" at the Phillips Collection. (Courtesy of Erkan Özgen)

By [Sebastian Smee](#)

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So much of what we hear today about forced migration and border security is said in bad faith. It is said by politicians and pundits who wish to sound emphatic and by those who, opposing them, would have us believe the issues are simple.

Bad faith eventually creates fools of everyone. So "The Warmth of Other Suns: Stories of Global Displacement" — an exhibition about migration and the global refugee crisis at the Phillips Collection — arrives at an excellent time.

The show restores good faith — along with nuance, the perspective of history and human feeling — to a subject more often today used cynically, so that people with heart-rending stories are reduced to hollow numbers.

People without sympathy for asylum seekers tend to ignore the historical roles of their own countries in creating the refugees' predicaments. They forget, too, that

international asylum laws emerged out of great traumas, in which the blame was widely spread. Those laws emerged, specifically, out of World War II, on the eve of which the United States, among with other countries, [turned back persecuted Jews](#) who had crossed the Atlantic Ocean by ship.

Asylum processes can be long and tortuous. But they exist for a reason. When a legal process is perverted or abandoned, as happened [in Australia](#) — where the government has deliberately left migrants intercepted at sea to stew, without legal recourse, in a geographic and psychic limbo, for the sole purpose of creating a deterrent — the results are tragic. The moral failing infects every aspect of society, just as it does when children at border facilities are separated from their parents.

“The Warmth of Other Suns” — which fills all three floors of the Phillips, a first for a temporary exhibition there — is rich in varieties of poetic sympathy. It is full of urgently improvised objects, stunning films (look out in particular for John Akomfrah’s “Vertigo Sea”) and hope.

Hope is hard to hold onto when your life is on hold, pending who knows what. Yet limbo is a defining condition of forced migration. Refugees, Dina Nayeri wrote in [“The Ungrateful Refugee,”](#) are trapped in a perpetual present: “The future brings anxiety because you don’t belong, and can’t move forward. The past brings depression, because you can’t go home, your memories fade, and everything you know is gone.”



Meschac Gaba’s “Mémorial aux Réfugiés Noyés (Memorial for Drowned Refugees)”: a pile of blankets alongside three electric lanterns — objects that honor the more than 18,000 refugees who have died since 2014 trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea. (Lee Stalsworth)

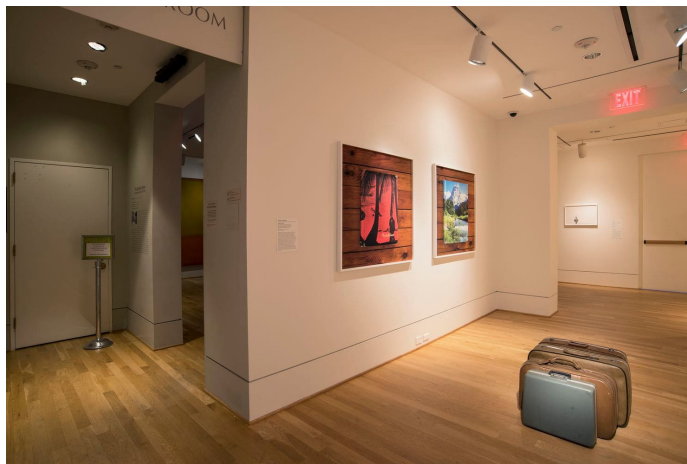
In refugee camps, Nayeri wrote, “stories are everything. Everyone has one, having just slipped out from the grip of a nightmare.” The late Chantal Akerman used this as a guiding principle in her 100-minute video “From the Other Side (De l’autre côté),” which she filmed on the Mexico-U.S. border in 2002. The film includes interviews with migrants and the families they left behind. “They have stories to tell . . . unfortunately,” Akerman said. As often as not, their sentences peter out into silence.

Be prepared for the emotional impact of an even more powerful video, “Wonderland,” by Erkan Özgen, which shows footage of a 13-year-old deaf and mute boy named Muhammed. The boy escaped a terrifying Islamic State attack on Kobane, Syria, eventually making it to the artist’s hometown in Turkey. Unable to speak, but desperate to be understood, Muhammed acts out his story with hand gestures, facial expressions

and frantic body movements. “The power of his body language,” Özgen has said, “made any other language form insufficient and insignificant.”

It is hope — the hope of finding somewhere better — that motivates the 68.5 million people who, as of the end of 2017, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, were forcibly displaced worldwide (40 million of them inside their own countries). But there’s often also — and here’s the hitch for host countries expecting instant assimilation — the hope of returning home.

I have a friend whose father fled Iran for Boston during the 1979 Islamic Revolution. He expected to return home when the turmoil was over. “He literally never unpacked his bags,” his daughter told me. I thought of him as I stared down at Zoe Leonard’s “Liberty N.Y.” at the Phillips — three vintage suitcases and a typewriter case, all aligned in a row.



Zoe Leonard’s “Liberty N.Y.,” 2001.
(Lee Stalworth)

Leonard’s work is melancholy. But it feels inherently optimistic beside Meschac Gaba’s “Mémorial aux Réfugiés Noyés (Memorial for Drowned Refugees),” a mute pile of blankets alongside three electric lanterns. These simple objects, offering no hope — only futility and the bitter consolation of memory — honor the more than 18,000 refugees

who have died since 2014 trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea.

“The Warmth of Other Suns” was organized by the Phillips Collection with New York’s New Museum. The works were chosen by the New Museum’s Massimiliano Gioni and Natalie Bell. The title — a line from author Richard Wright — is shared by Isabel Wilkerson’s celebrated 2010 book on the [Great Migration](#), the early-20th-century mass movement of African Americans from the southern United States to the North. In many ways, that book, along with Jacob Lawrence’s “Migration Series” — a jewel in the Phillips’s collection — are pilot lights for the entire show.

Lawrence’s series is accompanied by a sprinkling of other historical works, including photographs of Depression-era migrants by Dorothea Lange and Ellis Island arrivals by Augustus Sherman. These give the show welcome historical perspective, and an awareness of displacement as an intimately American phenomenon.



A panel from Jacob Lawrence’s “Migration Series.” (Courtesy of The Phillips Collection)

Perhaps the most haunting historical work in the show is Arshile Gorky's portrait of himself and his mother, on loan from the National Gallery of Art. Gorky based the painting (one of two versions) on a photograph sent to his father, who had emigrated from Armenia to America. Alas, the photograph's latent message — "don't forget about your family back home" — had no effect: Gorky's father had already met another woman and started a second family.

Events in the meantime overtook Gorky and his mother. During what most historians call the Armenian genocide, they were sent out on a death march. She died of starvation, in her son's arms, in 1919. After his own immigration to the United States, Gorky found the photograph in a drawer at his father's home. The painting, then, is a memorial, an act of love, a statement of impossibility.

Beside countless individual works, there is one room in the exhibition that continues to haunt me. A huge blown-up photograph of waves on the Atlantic dominates one wall. The photograph, "The State We're In," by Wolfgang Tillmans, could be of any body of undifferentiated water, but it happens to show an area where international time zones and borders intersect. (The waves don't appear to care.) An adjacent wall holds two embroidered world maps, their political territories marked by national flags, commissioned from Afghan craftswomen by the Italian artist Alighiero Boetti.

A second Tillmans photograph, facing the first, shows a pileup of wrecked and mangled migrant boats on Lampedusa, the picturesque Italian island (closer to Tunisia than Sicily) that's on the front line of the Mediterranean migrant crisis. And another wall holds a grid of blown-up photographs, culled by artist Xaviera Simmons from various sources, each showing a desperately crowded migrant boat.

All of these works surround an installation by Kader Attia, "La Mer Morte (The Dead Sea)." It consists simply of blue clothing — shirts, pants, sweaters, socks and shoes — strewn on the floor like so many discarded lives. It's devastating.

In the end, this exhibition is not just about difficult predicaments and dashed hopes. It is about imagination, and the trials it faces. Just as those of us with homes and free choice can't easily understand the plight of refugees if we can't hear their stories or see their circumstances, refugees, too, can't imagine what the journey ahead will involve, or what their future life might be.

Imagination thwarted or challenged calls out for vision, and the deeper engagement art offers. This show provides it.

The Warmth of Other Suns: Stories of Global Displacement Through Sept. 22 at the Phillips Collection. phillipscollection.org.