



Journeys into the “Poetics of Relation” at Pérez Art Museum Miami

By Anne Tschida | August 7, 2015

Less is so much more in the moving, well-executed exhibit “Poetics of Relation” at the Pérez Art Museum Miami. Almost every piece from the six international artists featured has a monumental quality, but there are not many of them. The relative sparsity gives the works ample room to tell their stories, of which there are many.

PAMM has been focused on trying to meld its art exhibits with our myriad local histories and cultures, and “Poetics” nicely achieves this objective. This isn’t filled with art exclusively from the Caribbean or Latin America, which has become an easy crutch for exhibitions showing our connectedness to neighbors to the south. “Poetics” deals with issues very close to Miami’s soul — migrations, diasporas and cultural identities — from artists who have roots in places such as South Africa, Uganda, the Dominican Republic and London. As a result, the exhibit is as diverse as our local *and* global community, with the added benefit that we in Miami get to see some fantastic art rarely shown here.

A single piece introduces the show, a wall covered with little gray heads; it’s impossible to resist being pulled in by *Congregation*. From Ledelle Moe, who was born in Durban, South Africa, these heads are made from dirt and concrete and are little portraits of people she has encountered after leaving her homeland (she is now based in the United States). It’s a “journal of her migrations,” chief curator Tobias Ostrander says of *Congregation*. But disembodied heads are disturbing, and some of the heads seem to be calling out, even screaming. “Violence is often involved in migration,” he says. The way the heads are pinned to the wall also makes the entire installation look like a map. We are starting on a journey. Turn to the right of this earthen piece, and the color scheme dramatically shifts. The blue, turquoise and emerald-colored flip-flops that comprise Dominican Tony Capellan’s *Mar Caribe* will feel very close to home; flip-flops are Miami’s universal shoe, and the hues are that of our sea. The hundreds of discarded flip-flops that Capellan collected from his beach are placed in dozens of rows so that they resemble waves rolling in and washing ashore.

They also suggest something more forlorn. Whose shoes were these; where did the owners go? Did they get on rafts and depart for richer lands? Did they wash away after floods or hurricanes? These are all scenarios with which Caribbean people are familiar. The piece expresses an essential dynamic about the region.

“The Caribbean represents the [ultimate] tourist destination,” Ostrander says of its gorgeous vistas and beaches. But it’s also a traumatic landscape. Tourists wear flip-flops, and so do locals, as they are the cheapest form of footwear in some of the poorest countries in the world. The famously translucent ocean can turn into a roiling graveyard for those trying to escape that poverty. *Mar Caribe* encapsulates it all.

As powerful as these examples are, a couple subtle artworks from two women artists with nomadic African roots almost steal the already strong show.

Yto Barrada was born in Paris but grew up in her parents’ home of Tangiers, Morocco. The storied city became a tourist playground for Europeans and Americans in the 20th century and was colonized by both France and Spain. It’s also only miles away from the Spanish coast, making it a launchpad for illegal immigration into Europe today. Barrada uses these historical and current realities to create her engrossing artworks, which here include sculpture, drawing, video and small, zine-like books.

For the 2011 video *Hand-Me-Downs*, Barrada has created a collage of old family photos and given it a narration that may or may not be true, in a sense the way Tangiers was mythologized throughout the years. In French, Spanish and English, she has

printed little booklets of this history. Like the lands of many of her Caribbean counterparts, Barrada's Morocco is a prison paradise, its inhabitants trapped by the political restraints on Third World immigration.

But the mesmerizing, 2015 video *Jangbar* from Zarina Bhimji might be the most arresting piece in the exhibit. Nominated for the prestigious Turner Prize in 2007, Bhimji is a Ugandan of South Asian ancestry, a group of people who have had a tumultuous experience in East Africa (the infamous dictator Idi Amin expelled all South Asians from Uganda in 1972). Bhimji has made a haunting film recounting the construction of the Kenyan rail line at the turn of the 20th century. The British, who had colonized Uganda and Kenya, brought in thousands of Indian laborers to build the extensive and dangerous railway, nicknamed the Lunatic Express after the high casualty rate of the workers. Like the Chinese who helped build America's first transcontinental railway, migrant labor and lives were — and are — essential elements to the creation of nations. But *Jangbar* is also a lyrical, rhythmic piece of great art. It's a treat to see something from this rising art star here in Miami.

Another real find in "Poetics" is Hurvin Anderson, a young painter out of London. Anderson is a second-generation English Jamaican who is making lush, shimmering landscape paintings; you almost want to jump into them. Somewhat like Barrada, he is mixing the imagery that he knows — that of England — with what he has been told about Jamaica. The result is a dreamy meshing of deep dark greens, misty mountains, a tennis court and old London street lights.

Landscape surfaces as a theme in the exhibit; there are relatively few figures. We seem to be following the paths of migration rather than the individuals themselves. It makes the exploration of new homelands and identities more universal.

African-American Xaviera Simmons, based in New York and represented in Miami by the David Castillo Gallery, also take us on a poetic trip, through text. In a site-specific piece, she has covered an entire wall in black-and-white phrases in Creole, English and Spanish, with references to the sea and unknown journeys. Simmons spent two years on a walking pilgrimage tracing the Atlantic slave trade.

Capellan's second, room-size floor installation rounds up the exhibit. It is made of detritus he has found again on his beach; when displayed on the floor with a preponderance of blues and greens, it also looks like an undulating sea. But *Mar invadido* literally is the trash that rolls up every day in his neighborhood, and the bits and pieces from homes that are perpetually flooded. There are toys, cups, detergent bottles, soda cans. They all belonged to someone once.

This piece also is landscape art. We live in a time when millions of people are displaced and migrating, leaving behind the remnants of their lives. But all of us on this modern journey are leaving a trail of junk that might wash up on anyone's shores, regardless of borders. It, too, has become part of our universal landscape.