

PAMM's "Poetics of Relation" Probes the Immigrant Experience

By Stassa Edwards | July 7, 2015



Installation view of Poetics of Relation

Miami is constantly in flux, negotiating and renegotiating its sense of self, in large part because of its ever-changing population. It's a city whose identity is formed by constant change, by absorbing and adapting to new immigrant populations who — for myriad reasons — have sought a home in the city's sticky warmth. Perhaps that fluidity, that mutability, is the only solid sense of identity Miami can claim.

Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM) presents its exhibition "**Poetics of Relation**" as an intellectual and artistic engagement with the city's search for identity. It explores the heady topics of diaspora and migration through the concept of landscape. The poignant pertinence of many of the works in "Poetics of Relation" makes the exhibition a success.

The exhibition's name is borrowed from a book of essays by Martinican academic and writer Édouard Glissant. He was part of group of black intellectuals from former French colonies who gathered in Paris in the mid-20th Century to form the core of the Négritude movement, which exposed the racist roots of European colonialism. Central to the group's ideology was a search for a kind of universal identity. Its members, including Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, believed there was an urgent need for Europeans to see how global interaction resulted in constantly changing cultural formations. Glissant stated that nations' peoples form their identities in relation to one another, and reshaped the consciousness of entire societies.

His concept is both abstract and radical, which makes it an inherently difficult point of departure for a museum. But PAMM chief curator Tobias Ostrander and guest curator Tumelo Mosaka have stitched together an exhibition that is sensitive and

smart, featuring diverse media in works by six living artists from diasporic communities. According to Ostrander, the exhibit "uses landscape to think about history." Though the concept of landscape permeates the exhibition, here it is a deeply flexible term: Land and borders are simultaneously real and intangible, expansive and limiting, meaningful and meaningless.

"Poetics of Relation" opens with *Congregation* (2006), a wall-based installation by South African sculptor Ledelle Moe. The work comprises small sculptures of heads — people Moe has either seen or known — cast from concrete made from the soil and sand of the many countries she's visited. The heads have been configured to resemble a map and evoke the difficult history and complexities of Moe's homeland, a place whose identity, she says, is both "modular and solid." Moe's impressive installation is a near-perfect opening to the exhibition; it condenses the show's themes into an accessible representation. Her sculptures — another of her large-scale pieces, *Memorial Collapse V* (2006), appears later in the exhibit — are thoughtful works that are in purposeful dialogue with the other pieces that fill the midsize exhibition. They work especially well with Tony Capellán's *Mar Caribe* (1996).

Like Moe, Capellán is concerned with mapping, particularly with the various kinds of landscapes that produce borders. *Mar Caribe*, an installation of cheap plastic sandals whose thongs have been replaced by barbed wire, will undoubtedly be a crowd pleaser. The repetition of blue and green sandals is meant to evoke the ocean and presents the sea as an impenetrable barrier that keeps the poor who wear such sandals permanently bound to a place and class. It's a work that seems particularly relevant given the current political landscape of Capellán's native Dominican Republic, where claims to citizenship, to the land, have become virtually meaningless.

Whereas Moe's work reflects on the tensions between the fixed and the flexible, Capellán's installation speaks to the violence of borders as barriers; identity, then, can be as treacherously violent as it is elastic.

Moe's and Capellán's large, impressive pieces are balanced by the lush, quiet paintings of Hurvin Anderson, a second-generation British-born Jamaican who works in the tradition of British landscape painting. But his large-scale works aren't simply romantic reflections on the English countryside. Rather, they take the Jamaican landscape as a point of departure. *Hope Gardens* (2005) depicts the famous botanical gardens in Kingston, and Anderson's brushwork alternates between abstraction and realism. "Hope Gardens" is painted in large white letters, a reminder of the British colonization of the island nation that at one point the British were free to build on, label, and claim. That history lingers in Anderson's painting. Colonialism lurks throughout "Poetics of Relation." Racial segregation and slavery seem to underpin the exhibition, yet they're never quite allowed to take center stage. But restraint is one of this exhibit's most powerful qualities. For every loud, large-scale work, there's a quiet, introspective one. The result is a yin and yang between the personal and the political. That's evident in Yto Barrada's *Twin Palm Islands* (2012), two metal palm trees that, like vintage marquees, are lit with colorful light bulbs. The work conjures the past and present of Barrada's Tangiers, a city that's long been a tourist attraction for Europeans. Balance is found with the juxtaposition of Zarina Bhimji's *Jangbar* (2015), an impressionistic film that probes the Kenyan railroad built in the early 20th Century by imported Indian workers. The film investigates the lives of those anonymous workers, migrants who were brought by the British to expand their reach into Africa. Bhimji's *Jangbar*, commissioned by PAMM, is one of the standouts. The artist says her film explores "grief but tenderness at the same time." And indeed, it's the filmmakers and photographers who, in some respect, steal the show. In addition to Bhimji's film, Xaviera Simmons' *Superunknown (Alive in The)* (2010) is a heart-wrenching look at the perils of migration. The work is a wall-size grid of 50 found photographs. Simmons appropriated the photos from news sources and the internet. All depict boats of immigrants floating in the ocean.

Like Capellán's *Mar Caribe*, Simmons' photographic installation feels relevant as the news continues to remind us of the dangers of migration, of hopeful immigrants who have risked their lives to break free of borders and barriers and instead find themselves adrift at sea.

The poignant pertinence of many of the works in "Poetics of Relation" makes the exhibition a success. At issue here are national and ethnic identities that, for both historic and cultural reasons, are intricately bound to place, to landscape, and to discrete cultural knowledge.

But that, perhaps, is the push and pull of identity and of "Poetics of Relation." It is not an exhibition that's afraid of tension. Nor does it fear admitting it offers only reflection on migration, not concrete answers. In that respect, PAMM has proven it understands its city.