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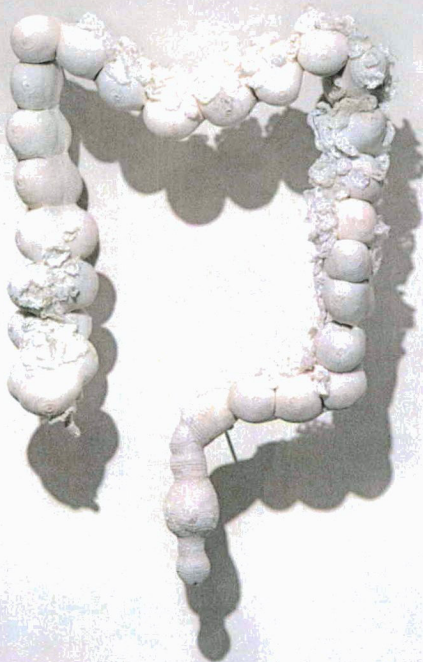
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Naufús Ramirez-Figueroa.
Ashen Wreath to Bloom, 2006.
Courtesy: the artist.



RECIPROCAL GAZING: Reflections of an Ungrateful Refugee

FRANCISCO-FERNANDO GRANADOS

In my years as part of a group of refugee teenage activists in Vancouver, I had the chance to talk at conferences and youth gatherings inside and outside of the city to try to raise awareness and give visibility to the increasing set of challenges that faced my community. In the urgent, post-9/11 climate of closing borders, exponentially increasing numbers of deportations and everyday racism, it felt necessary to speak out about our realities and give a voice and a face to issues that were being made invisible by both government and media.

Talking to the *Vancouver Sun*, Global News and documentary crews became increasingly frustrating as it became obvious that their interest in our stories had less to do with creating some kind of discussion around our work in the community and more to do with repeating an idealized version of Canadian multiculturalism where everyone, even racialized young people, had a chance to speak. The frameworks for representation these outlets provided were too rigid, too predetermined, too small. Refugees are meant to be grateful, and talking about the struggles of institutionalized discrimination or the brutalizing refugee certification process would not fit into these frames. Seeing the version of our stories rendered in print or on the screen made it feel like a sideshow, amplified and simplified so it could be consumed at a mass scale. Although the cameras could capture our likenesses, their one-directional gaze could not recognize the nuances of our situations.

The need to speak out is still pressing, but the frameworks for representation need to be transformed in order to go beyond the problematic of this one-directional way of looking. The search for cultural forms that engage a more complex point of view led me to art as an area of practice and research. Recent politically aware practices coming out of Vancouver present the possibility of a two-way gaze in representation, one that allows for dialogue to structure the work. Projects by my artistic partner and collaborator Amy Zion and fellow Guatemalan-born artist Naufús Ramirez-Figueroa create a visual manifestation of the circumstances that shape the lives of refugees without rendering the experiences of those who participate as easily consumable spectacle. In different media, and under different conditions, both of them commit to sustained collaborative relationships — in Amy's case with me, and in Ramirez-Figueroa's case with his mother — that have a significant bearing on the construction of the project itself.

In her 2009 video installation *Le Bateau L'Avenir*, Amy Zion conflates the tourist and the refugee to create a promo stand for a fantasy aquatic attraction for Vancouver's upcoming 2010 Winter Olympics. The boat, modelled after my somewhat unconventional hairstyle, promises to take Olympic visitors on an "unparalleled... interactive tour... just off shore from Vancouver's downtown core." *L'Avenir*, which refers to Jacques Derrida's notion of the unexpected future, would offer tourists the rare chance of having a socially conscious cruise around the city, featuring audio guides about local refugee issues. This unique opportunity would allow them to "explore the beauty of Vancouver, not through its colonialist past or neoliberal omnipresent, but through the unknown possibilities brought on by the Other."

The piece is an unorthodox product of my artistic partnership with Amy. Over the last year we have worked together as collaborators, but for *Le Bateau* we decided to change roles and become artist and model. As a gesture of solidarity, Amy wanted to create a monument to refugees. Through a series of ongoing discussions, I served as a consultant for the piece. We realized that a monument to the

refugee could not be a monument in the conventional sense: it could not be static, or made out of heavy metals. My unruly mestizo hair and its queer silhouette felt like the appropriate material for the project. Hair, a marker of racial difference, can stand for the refugee without putting any likeness on show. This allows for the figure to become visible while avoiding the exploitative trappings of conventional representation. Being consulted throughout the process brought about a kind of recognition between Amy and I that allowed us to rework the relationship between the artist/mediator and her subject.

Our consulting relationship also recognizes the limits of representation. *Le Bateau* does not claim to speak for refugees. The video portion of the piece sees through the eyes of the tourist. Winding locks of black hair from the boat interrupt the utopian sight of the sea, the sky and the expensive Vancouver waterfront. This obstructed master view tells of the position of the tourist and the refugee in the context of the Olympic games. In our relationship of reciprocal recognition, Amy not only frames me as the subject of her representation, she also manages to evidence her own position of privilege as a Canadian-born citizen. In this way, the relationship is able to create a balanced dialogue that still admits to the differences in power.

With its humorous, outlandish and eerie proposition, *Le Bateau* explodes the logic of late capitalist transnational movement. Global neoliberal policies have created the conditions that allow refugees and tourists to exist as groups of displaced individuals. The economic privilege of the tourist depends directly on the oppressive social and economic conditions that force many people in developing countries to flee. Refugees who reach countries of asylum are systematically kept in subordinate positions, continuing the legacy of European and North American colonialism.

In Canada, we have a situation where Vancouver is hoping to attract visitors from all over the world while policies that have been in place since 9/11 continue to close national borders to keep out "terrorists" and "illegal immigrants." The Safe Third Country Agreement, signed in 2002 by Canada and the United States, makes it possible for refugee claimants attempting to come into Canada to be returned to the US, forcing them to claim status in a country that routinely detains asylum seekers in isolated makeshift prisons. Other such measures include the recent visa requirement for people coming into Canada from Mexico and the Czech Republic, and raids carried out in schools by the Canada Border Services Agency in 2006, in which Latin American youth living in Toronto were detained and later deported.

In the face of these systematic forms of oppression, cultural work that imagines refugees as multi-layered subjects that cannot be contained by stereotypes is crucial. The work of Naufús Ramirez-Figueroa embodies the broken and mended connections in refugee families, the process of migration, and queer male sexuality, all in one intricate sculptural figure. His 2006 piece *Ashen Wreath to Bloom*



Amy Zion. *Le Bateau*
L'Avenir (Video Still), 2009.
 Courtesy: the artist.

is delicately crocheted in the shape of a large intestine that hangs on a wall, as if floating. The piece was made in a vertical journey through the continent, travelling back and forth until it was completed. It echoes the circumstances of refugee subjects who have to be uprooted before they are fully formed. Ramirez-Figueroa knitted the piece with his mother, who still lives in Guatemala. The two of them, who lived apart as a consequence of the civil war that ravaged the country for more than thirty years, began working on the sculpture during one of his visits, after she taught him how to crochet a couple of years before. The connections between the bulbous shapes in the blooming wreath map out a relationship between two separated but familiar collaborators, creating a dialogue between them that goes beyond a spoken, written or pictorial language.

The use of an intestine as a symbol points to a visceral relationship to identity that is complex and sometimes conflicted. In conversation, Ramirez-Figueroa tells me that the idea for the piece came out of his childhood fears of being kidnapped and having his organs stolen and sold — a common fear for those of us who grew up in Guatemala. The gut is a site of passage for anything that enters the body, including trauma, which cannot be illustrated, only felt. The Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB) states that a “refugee claimant has the burden” of proving that he or she is “eligible for... protection.” A claimant’s eligibility is determined at a Refugee Board hearing that feels more like a criminal trial than a certification of migratory status. I remember visits to counsellors and psychologists where I was encouraged to speak about my memories of trauma so that they, as experts, could attest to it and lend credibility to my family’s claim in front of the IRB. Refugee trauma must be manifested and made official in order to be authenticated. Without any kind of biographical reference that may or may not

be a part of his particular experience, Ramirez-Figueroa’s gesture of putting an internal organ up for display parallels the processes of certification and authentication that are demanded from migrants.

Yet, the sculpture cannot be defined only through the lens of immigration. A queer sensibility is also a part of the work. The intestine is an element in male homosexual play. Viewed in this way, the organ is an expression of queerness that refers back to migrant experience by virtue of being a two-way channel. The different dimensions of the work exist together, in exchange with each other, refusing to be pinned down.

In both of the artworks that I’ve discussed here, the process of engaging with another results in cultural expressions that account for my experience, and likely that of other people with similar stories. When the dominant paradigms of nationalism and capitalism fail to recognize the humanity of those who are not legible within its structures, this kind of recognition provides not only an important political statement, but a necessary means of validation. □

Notes

1. “Process for Making a Claim for Refugee Protection.” Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada. Last updated September 10, 2009. October 17, 2009. <http://www.irb-cisr.gc.ca/Eng/brdcom/references/procedures/proc/rpdspr/Pages/rpdd.aspx>

FRANCISCO-FERNANDO GRANADOS is a Guatemalan-born, Vancouver-based artist and writer currently working in performance, social intervention and cultural criticism. Through his practice, he aims to create ephemeral spaces where socio-political contexts can collapse and co-exist with personal stories.