

MECA celebrates migration, and many others follow

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By Bob Keyes Staff Writer

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Erin Hutton and her colleagues at Maine College of Art began talking about migration in July 2016, before the election of Donald Trump and before conversations about immigration and border walls divided the country.

“Then the election happened, and things changed,” said Hutton, director of exhibition and special projects at MECA. “We knew this was a topic we needed to address.”

The Institute of Contemporary Art at MECA opens “Making Migration Visible: Traces, Tracks & Pathways” on Oct. 5, the largest piece in what has become a statewide collaboration among artists and community organizations to “change the conversation about migration,” Hutton said.

The prevailing tone of the immigration dialogue is negative. It’s about closed borders, family separations and the oppression of people and their forced journeys from their homes to new countries across unfriendly boundaries. It’s about exile and displacement, and

governments securing their borders and global leaders trying to come to terms with climate change so they can anticipate displacements.

The conversations suggest an ongoing global crisis.

MECA wants to change the tone of the conversation and talk about how migration has reshaped communities and enriched the world, told by the stories of artists who have all made their own personal journeys. The premise of "Making Migration Visible: Traces, Tracks & Pathways" is that migration is the norm and not an exception. It's part of the human existence and part of the cultural DNA of all people, and the traces of migration are part of all landscapes. In Maine, one of the least diverse states in the country, there are immigrants from the Middle East, Latin America, Africa, the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia and the republics of the former Soviet Union.

The exhibition is co-curated by an artist from MECA and an anthropologist from Colby College in Waterville. Julie Poitras Santos is an artist, writer and an assistant professor at MECA. Catherine Besteman is a professor of anthropology at Colby, who recently published a book about the experiences of Maine refugees.

Outside the exhibition, their work involves site, story and mobility, and the curators bring those same sensibilities to this exhibition. With photographs, paintings, installations and multimedia, the art reflects each artist's own mobility and explores the loss of one home and the creation of a new one, while helping viewers navigate stereotypes and understand how economic and social injustices affect world mobility.



"Desperate Cargo," Mohamad Hafez, plaster, paint, float, found objects, MP3 media player, rusted metal, lighting, 144" x 48" x 40", 2016

They also worked with the understanding that none of the art they selected for the exhibition would include human beings. The presence of human is suggested by their traces, tracks and pathways, but never explicitly shown.

“A lot of the art that we saw invoked pathos, an aesthetic of suffering. It was important to me to reject that,” Besteman said. “Some of the art in the exhibition tells a story of suffering, but I didn’t want the exhibition to be about suffering. But rather, mobility is fundamental to being human, and the traces of mobility are everywhere.”

Santos said they looked to artists who address migration from the perspective of materiality and the objects, materials and landscapes that tell migration stories. “We were, in part, also thinking about questions of visibility and invisibility – migration is happening around us all the time, these works make us aware of that by calling our attention to how we imbue objects and spaces with meaning,” Santos wrote in an email. “I also am very interested in artists who work within their communities as many of these artists do, collecting stories, serving as translators, engaging in aspects of social practice within their art practice.”

The artists in the MECA show include a MacArthur genius grant winner (Jason De Leon), Fulbright scholar (Eric Gottesman) and Kindling Fund grantee (Daniel Quintanilla). There are two MECA graduates among the dozen artists in the exhibition.

Born in Baghdad in 1975, Ahmed Alsoudani came to the United States in the late 1990s. He graduated from MECA in 2005 and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 2006. A painter, he is based in New York and represented Iraq at the Venice Biennale in 2011. It was the first time Iraq hosted a pavilion in 35 years.

Edwige Charlot was born and raised in Paris, France, is of Haitian heritage and came to the United States when she was 9. She graduated from MECA in 2010 with a degree in printmaking and explores issues of race and heritage in her work. She recently moved from Portland to Providence, Rhode Island, where she works at AS220, a deeply-rooted community arts organization. She received the St. Botolph Club Foundation Emerging Artist award in 2013.



"Jordan Is Not a Country/Tourist Police," Eric Gottesman, Pigment Print, 2013

Other artists are from Syria, Mexico, Taiwan and the Republic of Benin.

The larger statewide effort includes community partners who, throughout the fall, will mount exhibitions, screen films, stage plays and host poetry readings, lectures, dinners and other events. On Nov. 2, MECA gathers participants for a day-long public symposium on the topic, "Art+Politics."

"I hope the collaboration serves as a national model for how to bring a fresh perspective on immigration around the world," said MECA President Laura Freid. "We often just look at the destruction and the immediate dislocation of people. It makes me hopeful to see creativity and collaboration and beautiful works of art resulting from experiences that were so unfortunate."

Collaborators include museums, playhouses, libraries and community centers, some 70 in all, with Museum LA in Lewiston, the Frontier in Brunswick, the Center for Maine Contemporary Art in Rockland among them. Some things are up now – an exhibition exploring Maine's Jewish history opened Friday at the Maine State Museum in Augusta – and most begin in October, propelled by "Tracings, Tracks & Pathways" at the ICA at MECA.

On Oct. 30, Portland Stage opens “Refuge/Malja” by Portland playwright Bess Welden. It’s about a Jewish-American war photographer who becomes attached to a young refugee who was the subject of her photos. In this play, the camera becomes the bond between the two. Through photography, they begin a language lesson. She teaches him English, he teaches her Arabic, and the audience learns along with them.

Welden, who lives in Portland and teaches theater part-time at Colby, began writing the play after following the European migration crisis in the news in fall 2015. Her sister-in-law, Jodi Hilton, is an international photojournalist and was on the ground in Lesbos documenting boats of refugees as they arrived on the Greek island. Among the images that stuck with Welden were photographs of the shoes that people left behind as they began their perilous journey through Europe. Many of those shoes belonged to children, and Welden wondered, “At what point does a family decide they are going to flee their home because it’s not safe enough?”



“Jordan Is Not a Country/Desert Fence,” Eric Gottesman, pigment print, 2006

As a mother, Welden couldn’t imagine facing such a decision. Those thoughts sparked her play. It began as a one act and quickly expanded into a full-length play as she did more research and learned how many unaccompanied children make the journey alone.

Her play feels timely, and it is. But she thinks it always will be timely. “I fear this story isn’t going to end. It is of a particular moment, but the story of human migration, of people picking up and moving to a new place is part and parcel of the human experience,” she said.

The Rabkin Foundation on Brown Street in Portland will open an exhibition on Oct. 5 that focuses on the life of Dorothea Rabkin, the wife of artist Leo Rabkin and the foundation’s co-founder. Dorothea Rabkin, who died in 2008, was among the hidden children of World War II, shuttled among homes in Berlin to hide from the Nazis.

She and her twin sister, Rose, had a tragic childhood. Their father was Jewish and their mother was not. As things got worse for Jews in Berlin, their mother abandoned the family. Soon after, their father committed suicide, leaving the girls alone. Other families took them in, hiding them in closets and basements until after the war. In 1947, Rose came to the United States, and Dorothea followed.

As a couple, Dorothea and Leo Rabkin collected folk art and outsider art, “a resonantly apt passion” for a refugee, the New York Times wrote in its obituary for Dorothea, also noting that she was drawn to folk art by its “democratic roots.”

Susan Larsen, executive director of the Rabkin Foundation, said “Making Migration Visible” offered the chance to tell Dorothea’s story through a collection of family memorabilia. The exhibition also will include art work from her circle of artist friends in New York, many of whom were German. Larsen, who knew Dorothea Rabkin nearly 40 years, said Dorothea enjoyed being with her German friends because it gave her a chance to speak her native tongue.

“The irony of that was, Dorothea on the streets of New York would open her mouth, and she would have a German accent. People would shout at her about how terrible were the German people and how Americans suffered during the war. Little did they know, she was one of the victims of it,” Larsen said.

Mary Allen Lindemann, co-owner of Coffee By Design and vice chair of the Greater Portland Immigrant Welcome Center, is supporting the exhibition as a sponsor. Coffee By Design has always used the arts to reach people and has always attempted to be active in the communities of the customers it serves, so getting involved felt natural, she said. Her work with the Immigrant Welcome Center instilled a sense of urgency.

The center opened a year ago at 24 Preble St. with the mission of helping immigrants become engaged with the community on civic and economic levels. On Oct. 26, the center will host a music and poetry event, “The Power of We,” with Portland poet Kifah Abdulla that will celebrate its expansion. The center is adding a digital language lab that should help

immigrants learn English efficiently, Lindemann said. “We’ve really tried to look at barriers to immigrant integration, and language is one of them. Many of the people coming here are well educated with five languages. But English might not be one of them,” she said.

On Oct. 13, the Center for Maine Contemporary Art in Rockland will host a one-day pop-up exhibition, “A Shared Space | Lewiston,” by Quintanilla, who is among the artists showing at MECA. “A Shared Space” is a virtual reality installation about physical and social spaces that tells the story of friends who grew up in Kenya and moved to Lewiston to start their lives anew.

CMCA also is partnering with For Freedoms, a national arts effort to create issue-oriented art in every state in advance of the midterm elections, on a temporary billboard installation in its downtown courtyard, “Every Refugee Boat is a Mayflower” by New York artist and writer Christopher Myers. It’s on view in the CMCA courtyard through Oct. 14. “It’s important to be part of the ongoing dialogue in Maine about immigration and migration,” said Bethany Engstrom, CMCA’s associate curator. “It’s such an important and timely issue.”

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