

MAP Art Trail: Exile and Migration at the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum

For our 2023 special issue of the Midlands Art Paper, Adi Noy has created a trail of artworks and material objects featured in Coventry's Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, centred on the theme of exile and migration. This trail aims to highlight some of the gallery's most unique and relevant objects, and explore how different people have expressed their own experiences with migration through diverse creative and innovative media.

Adi Noy

Please note: not all objects are on display. To avoid disappointment, please contact Herbert Art Gallery & Museum in advance of your visit: ctm.info@cvlife.co.uk

Key words: Migration, Exile, Twentieth Century, Trail, Modern Art, Media, Refugee, Disapora.

[Object 1: Sofia Karim, Turbine Bagh \(2020\)](#)

Fig. 1 & 2: Sofia Karim, Turbine Bagh, 2020, printed paper. Courtesy the artist. Image reproduced by permission of the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum.

This beautifully lit piece of art is made from recycled samosa packets and a home printer, which is perhaps surprising for the viewer. Karim's work is part of the UK-based movement 'Turbine Bagh', which uses art as a form of political protest. Inspired by the women-led resistance group 'Shaheen Bagh', Karim uses the medium of samosa packets (a familiar item across South-East Asia) to draw attention to contested political issues in India and Bangladesh, with a focus on human rights, fascism, and the treatment of Muslim women.¹ In recent years, the movement has become involved in campaigns against the persecution of Muslims in the Assam and Kashmir regions of India, as well as in protests condemning the treatment of Bangladeshi immigrants to India. Karim's work is aesthetically beautiful, but also intimate and emotionally charged. Beginning in London in 2018, the project started as a personal endeavour to protest the unjust political arrest of her uncle by Bangladeshi forces. After buying some samosa in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Karim noticed that the packet was made from scrap printouts of court cases between citizens and the state, and decided that this would be the most powerful medium from which to create her work.

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The project resonated with people worldwide, and after requesting support from UK artists to join the movement, eventually creatives from all over the world (including the US, Nepal, Singapore and Mexico) were sending in their own handmade 'Turbine Bagh' samosa packets. The overwhelming support the project has gained has raised awareness for Hindu nationalism worldwide. Despite the upsetting realities the project illuminates, the warm radiance transmitted from these packets also reflects the hope the artwork aims to inspire.

Karim's work forms part of the gallery's temporary exhibition, 'Divided Selves: Legacies, Memories Belonging', which explores how geo-politics can shape individual identity, as well as showcasing presentations of collective identity, community and belonging.

[Object 2: Leilah Babirye, Nagarinya from the Kucho Ngo \(Leopard\) Clan, \(2021\)](#)

Fig. 3: Leilah Babirye, Nagarinya from the Kucho Ngo (Leopard) Clan

2021, Glazed ceramic, bicycle tire inner tubes and copper wire, 60.7 x 27.5 x 32cm.

Courtesy of the artist, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and Gordon Robichaux, New York.

Image reproduced by permission of the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum.

This beautiful and intriguing mixed-media sculpture of a member of the imagined 'Kucho Ngo (Leopard) Clan' represents one of the many realities of being gay in Uganda. Its creator, artist Leilah Babirye, uses her work to confront the anti-homosexuality legislation passed in Uganda, and to imagine a hopeful future of a queer African community. Here, Babirye has created her sculpture from discarded rubbish collected from the streets of New York, a reference to the derogatory Ugandan word used to refer to gay people – 'ebiscaya', meaning the part of the sugarcane that is thrown out. Forced to flee her country after being outed as a lesbian in her local newspaper, Babirye creates art as a response to her own experience of exile.² This sculpture helps form the 'Kucho Ngo' clan, a group of sculptures created by the artist to represent her imagined queer family. Through the creation of these artworks, Babirye helps to establish a community unavailable to LGBTIQ+ people in her native Uganda and other African countries. Much of the figure's magnificence comes from its unique and bold textures. This sculpture, as well as others like it, have been burned or visibly destroyed in some way. This represents Babirye's defiance against those who have rejected her art for its controversial themes, proving that both she and her art can succeed in the face of obstructions and criticism. By creating art that has been damaged, yet is still powerful and admired, Babirye's sculptures provide hope for fellow individuals who

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have also been exiled from their homes. The materials used in these sculptures also hold symbolic value, as the 'hair', made of old bicycle tires, reflects Babirye's artistic mission to keep society moving forward and to progress gay rights in Africa.³

Object 3: Iftikhar Dadi and Nalini Malani, *Bloodlines*, (1997, refabricated 2011)

Fig. 4 & 5: Iftikhar Dadi and Nalini Malani, *Bloodlines*, 1997, Sequin, fabric, board, 16 panels, each: 38 x 33 x 2 cm. Image reproduced by permission of the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum.

One of the most visually striking works in the entire gallery, Iftikhar Dadi and Nalini Malani's collaborative artwork *Bloodlines*, draws attention to the forced migration and bloodshed that occurred in India and Pakistan due to British colonialism.⁴ The artwork is an impressive size and is made from brightly coloured sequins taking up a large wall of the gallery. Contrary to its eye-catching beauty, however, the work represents a dark reality. The creation relocates the demarcation line – often known as the 'Radcliffe line' – drawn by British colonialist Sir Cyril Radcliffe in 1947, to mark the newly recognised border between India and Pakistan. This borderline, created by a man with no knowledge of either countries, was drawn by hand on a map at random – an act which has resulted in the displacement and death of millions of people. The bright crimson line of sequins represents the immense violence and bloodshed caused by this partition, as well as representing the South Asian immigrants still impacted by the hostility and violence it continues to cause.

The work is thought to be one of the first collaborations between Indian and Pakistani artists, officially beginning on the 50th Anniversary of their independence. The remapping of the line aims to present an alternative and honest version of India and Pakistan's histories, as opposed to the commonly accepted partition line, which ultimately ignores the loss of life that followed their divide. In Dadi's words, 'Bloodlines is a Martian landscape, mapped with detached scientific objectivity by the Radcliffe Commission, an arbitrary line of demarcation soaked with blood.'⁵ Through its materials and creation process, *Bloodlines* also celebrates the way in which these countries have connected since their partition. The work's visual appeal comes from its use of traditional metal wrapped threads called 'Zari', used to decorate both Indian and Pakistani clothing. The Zari used here was created by embroidery professionals in Karachi, Pakistan, and provides the artwork with a bold and eye-catching vibrancy.

Object 4: Sophie Ernst, *HOME (Zarina)*, 2008

Fig. 6 & 7: Sophie Ernst, *HOME (Zarina)*, Karachi, 2008, Video projection on paper model.

Photograph by Felix Krebs, *HOME Project*, © Sophie Ernst.

This unique video sculpture by Sophie Ernst is part of an ongoing project that explores ideas about history and displacement, as well as the connection between location, architecture, and memory. Ernst's dynamic sculptures are created by placing a solid architectural model over a projection of a drawing, both rendered from the previous inhabitant's imagination and memory of the place. The 2D drawings are overlaid onto the 3D models, via a projection that is constantly edited as the individual's voice recalls memories from their previous home, as well as the reason they were forced to leave. Ernst uses this project, titled poignantly, *HOME*, to tell the stories of displaced persons, including those affected by the South Asian partition of 1947, the Israel/Palestine conflict, the exodus of Jews from Iraq in the mid-1900s, and the lesser-known Jewish community of Karachi, Pakistan.

Alongside the projection of drawings onto the sculptures, hands and photographs are also incorporated into these videos. These personal details infuse the anonymous buildings with touching and intimate stories of identity and family, as well as mournful recollections of escape. There is a contrast between the solid and fluid aspects of Ernst's video sculptures, which helps to express the conflict between the fond memories and harsh realities of migration faced by participants of the *HOME* project. This contrast also helps to illuminate the struggle between the mutable nature of memory and the solidity of the buildings and locations upon which they are based.

The sculpture featured at the Herbert gallery tells the story of Zarina, an Indian Muslim displaced to Pakistan by the two countries' 1947 partition. Zarina sorrowfully states in the video: 'I started drawing home when I decided I was not going back... But to keep the connection, I drew it. I drew the floor plan of the house, and I wrote down directions to my house.'⁶ The project has not only helped inform viewers about the gruelling hardships of displacement, but allowed its participants to reconnect with their previous homes by transforming their distant memories into tangible physical objects.

Object 5: Gavin Jantjes, *Untitled III*, part of *Korabra series (Slave Ships)*, 1986

Fig. 8: *Untitled III*, part of 'Korabra' series (Slave Ships), 1986. Mixed media on paper, approx. 180 x 200cm. © Gavin Jantjes. Image reproduced by kind permission of the artist.

This powerful reimagining of British slave ships as coffins comes from South-African artist Gavin Jantjes, whose goal to create 'art for liberation's sake' led to his exile from the country.⁷ The large and highly textured painting depicts a harrowing image of the forced migration of African slaves to Britain, with a unique focus on landscape and transportation. The painting serves as a reminder of the brutality and death necessitated by the transatlantic slave trade.

The *Korabra* series was created by Jantjes in response to the lack of acknowledgement he felt from Britain regarding its colonial past.⁸ The collection features seven large scale paintings aiming to reflect the oppression of black people in the past and present with a particular focus on slavery. The collection's title 'Korabra' comes from Ghana, and means 'to go and come back.' It bears a tragic irony in this painting as the coffin-ships imply that the individuals on these slave ships are on a one-way journey towards their deaths. Korabra is also the name of a funeral drum sounded for the dead, which leads some to believe that the painting also reflects the spiritual return of souls to their homeland, suggested by the ambiguity of the direction of the ships.

Despite the atmosphere of tragedy that surrounds this artwork, there are no direct depictions of brutalised faces or bodies. Instead, Jantjes uses symbols and motifs in his paintings, as well as a dark colour palette and textured mediums like sand and tissue paper, to create powerful symbols for pain and death. Standing small in the background, we see faint pyramids on the left and Greek columns on the right, symbolising the transportation of slaves between Africa and Europe. Jantjes's art was considered 'too political' by the South-African apartheid government, and as a student he was forced to flee the country in 1970 after extreme surveillance and threats of punishment from both his university authorities and officials of the state. Since his exile, he has continued to create influential political art, believing that it is the role of the artist to use their talents to 'fuel collective resistance globally'.⁹

Objects 6 and 7: *The Specials* poster and suitcase

Fig. 9 & 10: *The Specials* poster 1979, 75cm x 45cm, and *Suitcase*, 1979-81. Image by kind permission of the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum

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'The Specials' are a well-known Coventry band, credited with the origination of '2-Tone' music, a unique fusion of Jamaican ska and British punk rock, as well as elements of reggae and 'new wave' style.¹⁰ The genre was created because of Jamaican immigration to the UK, and challenged commonly held racist attitudes about the inferiority of black people by proving that music that appealed to *both* black and white audiences could exist. This suitcase belonged to Roddy 'Radiation' Byers, lead guitarist of the band. It features funky graphic stickers, as well as the classic 'Specials' chequerboard print.¹¹ The vintage poster alongside it also displays this chequerboard symbol – simple, yet bold and easily recognisable. The band's distinctive black and white logo is reflective of their political aim as a group: to create an anti-racist environment, fostered by a new type of sound to which people of all races could enjoy.

Held in the gallery's 'History of Coventry' collection, this poster represents one of many that would have been used around the city to advertise some of the countless concerts performed by 'The Specials' in their hometown. The band, which controversially for its time was formed of interracial members, represents an overcoming of musical boundaries and prejudices, as well as a successful example of how migration can create new and exciting forms of artistic expression.

Object 8: Inini Initiative, *Journey of Life*, 2003

Object 9: Larry Achiampong, *Pan African Flag for The Relic Travellers Alliance (Ascension)*, 2017

Fig. 11: *Journey of Life*, 2023, Textile, 110 cm x 213 cm. Copyright Inini Initiative. Image reproduced by kind permission of the artists.

Fig.12: *Pan African Flag for The Relic Travellers Alliance (Ascension)*, 2017, textile, 300 x 200cm.

© Larry Achiampong. Image by kind permission of the British Council and the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum

The Inini Initiative is a social enterprise that tackles the social stigma surrounding mental health in black and ethnic minority communities in Britain, as well as poverty, unemployment, and refugee rights.¹² This flag was hand-stitched by members of the group as part of the 'Community Flags Project', aims to reflect the 'journey of life' of BAME migrants in the UK, as well as their identity, and hopes for the future.

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The group chose colours that they felt represented their community, inspired by Larry Achiampong's *Pan African Flag for The Relic Travellers Alliance (Ascension)* (Figs. 11 & 12). Achiampong is a British Ghanaian artist, whose artwork (also presented in the gallery's 'Divided Selves' collection) makes up a series of four imagined flags. The series relates to the unity of Africa's fifty-four countries, as well as to Achiampong's character of the 'Relic Traveller', a future Pan African historian collecting data from lost African history and the reconnection of African diaspora. The colours of the Inini flag mirror those of Achiampong's work, including black for power and identity, red for love and struggle, yellow for wealth and happiness and white for hope and peace.¹³

The initiative utilises many different activities to help migrants and refugees integrate into their new lives in the UK and help them establish friendships and communities, as well as to raise awareness of mental health needs. One of these activities is the creation of art. This flag is one of the many cultural initiatives created by Coventry citizens as part of the Inini program.

[Object 10: Barbara Walker, *The Big Secret I*, 2015](#)

Fig. 13: *The Big Secret I*, 2015, Conte on paper, 159 x 195 cm, © Barbara Walker. Image reproduced by permission of the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum.

This large-scale pencil drawing by Barbara Walker addresses the underrepresentation of black servicemen in modern British depictions of war. The empty figure in the painting is representative of the contributions of black men and women to the British war effort from 1914 up until now, whose memory has been neglected and forgotten.

This artwork is part of a triptych entitled *The Big Secret*, each of which features soldiers of colour whose faces or bodies have been hidden or obscured in some way. This erasure of their faces symbolises the untold stories of the British Armed forces: *The Big Secret* particularly references the contributions of migrant soldiers from the British West Indies Regiment and the King's African Rifles.¹⁴ This drawing forms part of Walker's *Shock and Awe* corpus of works, a five-year project beginning in 2015, which focuses on the psychological impacts of war and the return to civilian life afterwards.

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Fig. 12 *Pan African Flag for The Relic Travellers Alliance (Ascension)*, 2017, Textile, 300 x 200cm. © Larry Achiampong. Image by kind permission of the British Council and the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum.

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Endnotes

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