

Unfamiliar territory: artists navigate the complexities of the refugee crisis

From Shahpour Pouyan's creative reappraisal of Persian miniatures to Bissane al Charif's exploration of the memories of Syrian refugees, artists are using their work to highlight the human dimension of the refugee crisis

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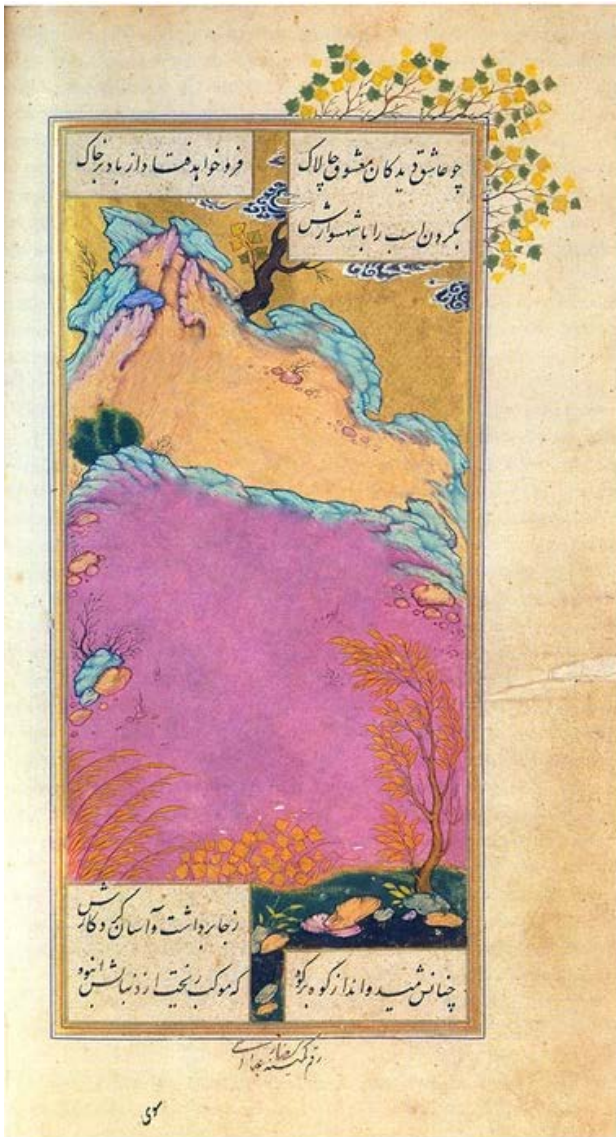


Making history ... Shahpour Pouyan's reworking of a 16th-century Persian miniature entitled God Sets the Course for the Ship, and Not the Captain. Photograph: Shahpour Pouyan/Lawrie Shabibi/Copperfield Gallery

Earlier this month, as the words “migrant crisis” permeated daily conversation, and migrants became refugees became people fleeing for their lives, the image of a small, ancient ship landed in my inbox. A sailing boat, really, thin wooden masts and white sails rolled up, the hull hovering against a darkened sea. Framed demurely by gold thread and two boxed-out captions, it was a quietly arresting thing. In between stories of fraught Mediterranean crossings and lives lost in terrifying circumstances, it lodged itself in my mind.

This diminutive work is one of a series of revisited Persian miniatures that the Iranian artist Shahpour Pouyan is currently showing at London's Copperfield Gallery in an exhibition entitled History Travels at Different Speeds. Of the 16 miniatures in the show, the boat – entitled God Sets the Course for the Ship and Not the Captain – is the one

that stops you in your tracks. Pouyan sees a bleak metaphor for the refugees' plight in the piece's colours. "Silver was used to paint water," he says. "But the destiny of silver is to oxidise, to blacken. People are putting their lives into the hands of traffickers, who put the boats on autopilot and jump ship. The ships travel west with no captain or crew, but packed full of believers, literally entrusting their destiny to God."



Shahpour Pouyan's mixed-media take on Farhad Carries Shirin, a 1632 miniature by Riza Abbasi. Photograph: Shahpour Pouyan/Lawrie Shabibi/Copperfield gallery

Pouyan has reworked these classic miniature masterpieces since 2008. Using digital and manual manipulation, he removes all people from the artworks, then painstakingly recreates their landscapes. Yet the resulting images have an eerie emptiness to them. You got to many places, he says, places like Persepolis, emptied of people but pregnant with a sense of civilisation abandoned. "And it's what's happening today in Aleppo, for example. This destruction, this emptying has happened before – it will happen again." Lives and killings are erased, grass and flowers are etched into life, the sea is as dark as a tomb. The miniatures hover between something like hope and something like despair.

While Pouyan focuses on history, Bissane al Charif, a Syrian-Palestinian artist now based in Paris, operates in the immediacy of life as a recent exile. Al Charif studied scenography in Nantes, France before returning to Syria to work. She accompanied her parents to Paris in December 2012 for a medical operation. Afterwards, going back just didn't seem like an option – life in Damascus was no longer liveable. Which isn't to say that living elsewhere was easy.

“Leaving your life behind isn't simple,” she says. “Dropping everything, accepting you have to start again someplace new. There are so many questions.” An exhibition at the British Council earlier this year showcased the beginning of her multimedia work *Mémoires de Femmes*.

While Al Charif's departure was altogether less traumatic than that of so many Syrian refugees – she left by plane, when there still was an airport – she felt that they would have held similar concerns. So she interviewed a diverse group of eight women who had fled, asking them the same questions. What is the home you left like? How did you leave? What did you take with you? Where do you imagine your home will be in 10 years' time?

Because Al Charif chose detail over drama, the documentary results are mesmerising in their mundanity. The women describe beloved homes in such detail that you are right there with them; they relate arduous, extended journeys; and they list the random things they found in their handbags. One woman spoke of a tube of hand cream she received from her sister as a present. “I don't use it any more,” she told Al Charif, “I just open it to smell it and remember her.” This resonates with the artist. “I didn't think I was leaving, so I only came with a small suitcase,” she says. “Still now, I miss my true belongings. I have very little from before. My mother came when I had my daughter, a few months ago, and brought me a few items of clothing, but I don't have much.”

Al Charif paired her audio recordings of the women answering her questions with images of nondescript interiors or exterior shots filmed from car windows and the top floors of buildings. She isn't attempting a portrait of Syria. She's simply letting eight women speak. Their words are subtitled in French and English, but there's no further explanation. “I just wanted to put these women there, one after the other. We all left. This is what we've lived through when we did.”

And that is precisely what gives this work its edge. It anchors something fleeting. As Al Charif points out, this departure might be a huge moment, but starting over in a foreign country and a language you don't speak means that it is quickly forgotten. Also, remembering is exhausting. Al Charif wonders constantly if she shouldn't make work about something else. Or if she should have gone back to Syria and stayed. Or if she ever will go back. Maybe not. “I don't know yet what I feel. I'm still in transit. I've not completely accepted my departure, but at the same time I know that I have left.”

An artist who has examined every side of this coin, for decades, is the Cameroonian Barthélémy Toguo, whose installation *Urban Requiem* is one of this year's Venice Biennale highlights. A collection of oversized wooden stamps, the handles of which are sculpted human busts, are arranged on large, stepladder-like structures. A huge canvas bears printed messages culled from news reports, social media and encounters with members of the public: “Nous sommes tous les enfants d'immigrés” (“We're all the children of immigrants”), “Stop Lampedusa”, “Democracia real” ...



Barthélémy Toguo's Migrant, 2014. Photograph: Todd White/Barthélémy Toguo/Pippy Houldsworth Gallery

A couple of these stamp sculptures are on display at Pippy Houldsworth Gallery in London, the words “FMI” and “migrant” in bold woodcut capitals. “I use these stamps to show the cries of people who are suffering, and also to deal with the problems our society is facing – immigration in particular. I feel that we are all in transit, we are all potentially beings in exile. We take our cultures with us, and that can go as well as it can go badly. But it cannot be stopped.” These stamps are not a response to recent events, but a presage – Toguo has been exploring these ideas for years. As early as the mid-1990s, he was working on a series of confrontational performances entitled Transit. His 2005 installation Climbingdown was a direct response to the intensity of the life that comes after the departure – huge multi-storied bunk beds hung with cheap, chequered plastic-fabric travel bags – while Road for Exile, from 2008, is an uncanny prediction in rough-hewn wood and canvas: a small wooden boat, heavily laden with ostensibly African bags, atop a sea of glass bottles.

And we’re back at the unseaworthy vessel, that symbol of lives adrift and beyond control that each new news day takes out of the realm of the illustrative and into the literal: people, by their thousands, throwing their lot in with traffickers and smugglers and needing not a metaphorical but an actual lifeboat. As migration becomes the defining issue of this century, to quote Alexander Betts, Toguo, Al Charif and Pouyan bring the humanity of it all back to the fore and ask that we remember – with each speech and each story – that very real lives are at stake.