

Beyond Fear and Loss, Reaching for Hope, 2017: the visual expression of refugee experience of flight from homeland and the journey to a new life in Canada

Curator's Statement

"One in every 113 people on Earth has now been driven from their home by persecution, conflict and violence or human rights violations." UNHCR

The pressures of violence, war, civil unrest and climate change are increasing exponentially around the world. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees states that there are now 65.3 million refugees and displaced people from many countries, the highest numbers in history. 41% of these are children and almost half are women. That is almost double the current population of Canada.

With the increasing polarization in world politics, the pressures of refugee applications, asylum seekers arrivals, and the fear of terrorism, it is becoming increasingly difficult to house, feed, and assist people who have fled their homelands. Security is seen as a primary issue by many countries that are the hoped-for destination of these homeless people.

Many asylum seekers are refused and returned to their unsafe countries of origin, and anti-refugee sentiments are encouraged and growing. Borders are being shut. Refugee camps are overflowing and totally inadequate. People are risking death to escape from their home countries - hoping for a safer life.

For a decade before 2015, policies on refugee asylum were very restrictive in Canada. Many asylum seekers were refused and returned to their unsafe countries of origin. With a change of government policy, Canada's doors are once more open to asylum seekers and newcomers. The arrival of 35,000 or more refugees from Syria who are fleeing terrorism and violence in their own country is a welcome change. We are a country that has room for those who need a safe home and the opportunities our communities can offer. We have changed and grown as an inclusive and multi-cultural society. But that welcome may be at risk.

Canada has continued to accept refugees, with a more open policy than many other countries. We accept many, but it is also increasing the pressures within the Canadian social system. We want to be accepting and open, but the pressures are leading to more restrictions.

It will take caution and vigilance to make sure that we keep our doors open to those who need safe haven and at the same time support those who are already here, and who are in need of assistance. We need to make sure that we do not reach a point where one group of Canadians blames another for loss of opportunity and supports. Many of the services are in place, but are being cut when instead, they need to be expanded: funding for housing,

settlement services, counseling, job training and language skills. Most importantly, we need to stop seeing those in need as "other" which has been increasing because of the attitudes and change in government in the USA. In a truly inclusive society, no one is left behind.

Among the many refugees who are denied asylum and deported, are artists, musicians and writers, who are perceived as dangerous by repressive regimes in the countries of their origins and who face imprisonment, torture or death upon their return.

Artists are dangerous. They call us to walk in their shoes, to perceive the world differently than we accept generally as a society, to think, to feel pain and joy, to see and feel the darkness and the light. They suggest ideas that often challenge authority because they come from human experience and observation. Their perception is shared in a way that strikes beyond the superficial to the heart of what it means to be human, and therefore they deny and challenge those whose world-view is imposed on us.

Visual artists can reach beyond words and right to the heart and soul to express their experience of fear, pain and loss, and the relief and joy and opportunity that finding refuge can bring. This is an opportunity to share the artists' experience, to give them a chance to show difficult work, and for us to express our welcome. It is a chance for them to connect with artists who support them through teaching and camaraderie and understanding.

This exhibition - our second, is a chance for us all to grow in understanding of what community truly means; what can happen when it is broken; and an opportunity for us to rebuild and strengthen our civil society.

Helen Melbourne,
Curator/Facilitator