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Immigration's many faces is focus of SPACES exhibit

BY: FRAN HELLER Contributing Writer

The late Jewish playwright Herb Gardner once described America as a "melting pot where nobody melted."

These words reflect the state of limbo an immigrant feels as both outsider and insider in his adopted land. They also capture the thrust of an intriguing exhibit at SPACES

that examines issues of immigration, displacement and identity through a global lens.



In his film "Essential Current Affairs," artist Dan Acostioaei recalls Rodin with his portrayal of a couple with terrorist hoods engaged in a kiss.

"Legal Aliens: Changing Territories, Shifting Identities, Moving Images" includes video and installation art by 12 international artists who explore the thorny issue of immigration from a wide range of perspectives. The imaginative and thought-provoking show, co-curated by Israelis Ofri Cnaani and Rotem Ruff, both currently residing in the United States, wrestles with the complexities of an issue that has become an international political football.

The oxymoronic title "Legal Aliens" suggests the omnipresent tension for the immigrant, who is a legal resident of his new homeland but is always in a sense a stranger to it.

Nothing characterizes this sense of displacement better than "Wandering Home," the fascinating video by Israeli artist Sharon Paz. In the video, a room from a person's home appears to be moving, like a train, across a changing landscape. The work underscores the physical process of moving from one place to another as well as the emotional and psychological ramifications of uprooting.

At the point of departure, the room looks familiar, lived in and casual. Upon reaching its destination, the room appears sterile; lifeless, its furniture shrouded in white.



Scene from Sharon Paz's video "Wandering Home," in which the artist transposed footage from the Negev into the windows of her New York City apartment.

It's the artist's New York apartment, which she is in the throes of packing up, explains co-curator Cnaani.

Paz shot the desert landscape while driving through the Negev. She shot her apartment separately and then inserted the landscape in the windows of her apartment to create the effect of a "portable house." The fleeting glimpses of the huts and tents of the nomadic Bedouin tribes serve as an allegory of the artist's own migrations, from Israel to New York to Berlin and recently back to Tel Aviv.

Israeli artist Dana Levy and New York artist Marc Lafia invited over 50 people from 35 countries, all currently living in Tel Aviv, to sing a song from their homelands. Using three video screens, "Sing to me and tell me your story" evolves into a multicultural and multilingual collage uniting diverse immigrants through the power of music and song.

In an e-mail interview, Levy poetically describes her video work as "moving paintings." For her, beauty comes from variety. All the people in the video came to Tel Aviv from remote countries in hope of making a better life for themselves. What they share is a longing to be somewhere else.

When they sing, language and barriers disappear. Singing is about communicating emotion; understanding each word becomes unimportant. For Levy, it's about finding the unconscious connectedness of people.



Scene from Adrian Paci's video "Pilgrimage," which shows Albanians revering an ancient beloved icon that was removed from their village to a church in Rome.

The three videos in the work were shot in the seedy neighborhood behind Tel Aviv's central bus station, where legal immigrants (olim) and mostly illegal immigrants live.

The work exposes the gap between the reality of their anonymous and difficult lives and this happier moment of fantasy. It's very poetic, very political and very international, says Cnaani. It makes Tel Aviv like every other megalopolis in the world with its system of international workers; it's the dark side of every big city, she adds.

The genre of video art, in which images are constantly moving, shifting and changing, serves as a powerful paradigm for notions of uprooting, displacement and migration.

The works range from straightforward narrative, like a documentary, to a surreal, intensely personal expressiveness whose meaning can remain elusive to the viewer.

In her documentary-like "We Love Germany, Thanks for Everything," Jenny Vogel tells a very funny and heartwarming story based on a true incident involving a group of men from Sri Lanka pretending to be a national handball team. The counterfeit team inveigled their way into a small town in Germany that was sponsoring a local tournament.

The scam provided the Sri Lankans with a means to illegally escape their own country.

Vogel tells the story from the point of view of the Germans, who, despite being duped, sympathize with the illegal immigrants' desperation to find a better way of life.

The title comes from the infiltrators who left a letter after they disappeared.

Dan Acostioaei creates a perplexing work in "Essential Current Affairs." In this surreal film, a couple, whose heads are covered in black cloth masks, like those used by terrorists, are seen kissing and embracing.

Against a backdrop of terror and human alienation, the video suggests the fear people have in revealing their true selves.

The artist, who lives and works in Romania, did a residency program at SPACES, which became the linchpin for the current exhibit. This work, explains Cnaani, is a perversion of Rodin's or Brancusi's "The Kiss." These are lovers who are also strangers; physically close yet dangerous to each other. They wear masks to protect themselves.

Many of the artists, like Chilean-born Francisca Benitez, who lives in New York, are immigrants themselves.

Benitez delivers a strong political message in her video "Garde l'Est," with its "haunting image of bundles nesting in Parisian trees." The bundles are the personal effects belonging to Afghani illegal immigrants, who congregate near a train station to illegally immigrate into Britain from France.

Using fragments of news reports from English and French networks, the trenchant video underscores the hostility natives feel toward immigrants who live in a no-man's land between equally unreceptive cultures.

In her split-screen documentary "The Conversation," New York photographer Karina Aguilera Skvirsky is stopped for questioning by a policeman. The video evokes the paranoia of a post-9/11 world in which an American can no longer feel comfortable in her own land.

Identity issues assume an intensely personal hue, as in "Grandma, Gautam and Ghalib" by Gautam Kansara.

The poignant video revolves around an interaction between the artist's grandmother and the artist, in which the grandmother is translating classic Hindi and Urdu love songs. The work shows the inability of the London-born artist, who lives in New York, to communicate with his grandparents' generation and with India, which remains a fantasy.

The SPACES exhibit is an expansion of a theme Cnaani and Ruff first explored as guest curators at the Smack Mellon Gallery in Brooklyn, N.Y. Their objective, in New York and at SPACES, explains Cnaani, who was in Cleveland recently, was to look at the issue of immigration through the artists' individual histories.

At SPACES, all the videos play simultaneously, like at a multiplex cinema, explains Cnaani. When you watch one video, you can see another. Playing everything at once is also like a multicultural reality.

Cnaani sees video art as a hybrid between fine art, cinema and the medium of television. She eloquently describes her preferred medium as "moving photography," in which the artist "uses the camera as a paintbrush."

Cnaani has just been awarded a Six-Point Fellowship, a prestigious two-year stipend for emerging Jewish artists creating work with Jewish content.

She is also a two-time winner of the American-Israeli "ShareT" Cultural Foundation, which helps support young Israeli artists go abroad and seek higher education.

Cnaani, 32, calls herself a "legal alien" who could stay in America for good, if she wants. She remains undecided. Like many of the artists in the exhibit, she is torn between her native country and her new home.

Cnaani hopes the exhibit, on display through March 9, opens a window to everyday life and the complexities of today's society, "which is not pure American, or pure Israeli, or pure anything," she insists.

SPACES Gallery is at 2220 Superior Viaduct, Cleveland.