

Jinny Yu: *Don't They Ever Stop Migrating?*

Oratorio di San Ludovico, Venice, Italy, 5 September–22 November 2015; The Rooms, St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada, 7 May–18 September 2016.

In a departure from her previous works, which were primarily concerned with questions about painting, Korean Canadian artist Jinny Yu seized an opportunity to show in the context of the 56th Venice Biennale by responding to the growing refugee crisis in Europe. What struck Yu while she was doing research for the exhibition were the ways the European popular press represented refugees as swarms, waves, or tides rather than as individuals. As a visible minority in both Canada and Venice, where she spends much of her time, but also as a body that blends in seamlessly in Korea, Yu was interested in exploring the affective dimensions of exclusion and Othering, which she had experienced from multiple perspectives as a result of her own migrations and displacements.

Don't They Ever Stop Migrating? consists of a single room made of fabric, a three-dimensional painting that swallows the viewer within its constructed world, and a dizzying swarm of brushstrokes laid down in ink (fig. 1). A sound collage of voices taken from Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963) provides a synaesthetic counterpoint, adding to the vertigo of experience with a maelstrom of whispered anxieties. "Where did you come from? What are you? What's happening? I think you are the cause of all this! You're frightening the children..." says a chorus of female voices, tinged with fear.

There are gaps in the sound collage, silences that allow the viewer to pause and take stock of the sheer splendour of the work that surrounds them. Absent the emotional manipulation of the panicked voices, the expressive beauty of each individual brushstroke emerges, and the painting's soaring monumentality reveals an opening of worlds, rather than oppressive collapse. With each gust of passing wind, the painting flutters and changes shape, demonstrating how changes of context and perspective can irrevocably alter perception.

Importantly, in this increasingly partisan world, the work does not take sides but simply seeks to interrogate the affective dimensions of Othering at the core of the refugee crisis in today's context of nationalist populism. As Yu commented, "I wanted to put the viewer in the position of witnessing mass migration and making them feel what we feel when we see a mass of unknown entities moving around." Fundamentally, Yu's work seeks to understand the fear that host populations feel about migrants, and to convey some of these anxieties to cosmopolitan Biennale audiences. At the same time, Yu uses a medium that is identifiably East Asian—ink on fabric—which asserts her rejection of a Western ideal as universal. In its place, she invites the viewer to enter



FIGURE 1 Jinny Yu: *Don't They Ever Stop Migrating?*

into her world of complicated entanglements and to envision this space as a site of empathy and negotiation.

The work also encompasses a gendered dimension, as the archival fragments that make up the sound collage are exclusively female. In part reflecting Hitchcock's own misogyny, the work also reveals the misogyny that underlies the rise of nationalist movements, which use sexual and gender politics to justify "protecting" native populations against the perceived sexual predators of other races.

At this moment of rising nationalist populism and increasing global hostility to migration and difference, Yu's *Don't They Ever Stop Migrating?* seems particularly prescient. When Yu first conceived of the installation in 2015, Europe was just beginning to respond to the increasing numbers of refugees entering the continent from Africa and the Middle East. Fittingly, the work itself has migrated. From its initial site in Venice, co-curated by Elisa Genna (Nuova Icona) and Ola Wlusek (Ottawa Art Gallery) at the Oratorio di San Ludovico, where it was seen in the context of Okwui Enwezor's manifesto-exhibition *All the World's Futures*, it circulated to The Rooms in St. John's Newfoundland, and has now entered into the permanent collection of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, Ontario.

Don't They Ever Stop Migrating? took on new significance in St. John's, resonating in the Canadian context with the election of Prime Minister Justin

Trudeau in October 2015, widely considered a rejection of the increasingly xenophobic policies championed by the previous governing party during its final days. In a brilliant curatorial move, Mireille Eagan (Curator of Contemporary Art at The Rooms) installed *Don't They Ever Stop Migrating?* at the conclusion of her exhibition *The Free World*, a group show of Bulgarian artists who defected to Gander, Newfoundland as political refugees in the 1990s. While *The Free World* presented an uplifting story of immigrant success and the accomplishments of Canadian multiculturalism, *Don't They Ever Stop Migrating?* reminded viewers to think beyond triumphalist narratives and Canadian exceptionalism to confront our own repressed fragilities and fears, what Yu calls the “raw emotion” elicited by the unknown. In the context of *The Free World*, Canadian audiences were invited to critically engage with both the fearful voices and the immigrants who “came from away,” opening complex pathways of empathy on both sides.

For artists, curators, and scholars struggling with the questions of “What is Asian Canadian visual culture?” and “Why study Asian Canadian visual culture?”, Jinny Yu’s work *Don't They Ever Stop Migrating?* is an important case study. Eschewing essentialism and embracing solidarity, the work speaks *from* and not just *about* her subject position. The affective insights that she brings to complex questions of global importance demonstrate the subtle shifts and critical insights that embodied alterity brings to artistic practice, and the fundamental importance of pluralism and debate—not tokenistic inclusion—in public discourse.

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