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World Refugee Day: Plight of the forcibly displaced

Date: 20 June 2007
AI Index: POL 33/002/2007

All over the world, governments and the media continue to portray asylum-seekers as a problem, rather than as people fleeing human rights abuses. Seeking asylum and protection in another country is not a crime. In fact it is a human right.

Far too often people who have been forced to leave their homes and flee their countries are described as "criminals" or "illegals". Or they are described as greedy and even as "terrorists" with little or no regard to the political or human rights crisis they have left. Those labels are often attributed to them even before they have had a chance to present their asylum claims.

The harsh reality is that, whether in refugee camps or in towns and cities, forcibly displaced people often live in squalid conditions. They are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Their lives are disrupted and many are separated from their families.

Amnesty International campaigns for the rights of the refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. On World Refugee Day 2007, Amnesty International focuses on the plight of the forcibly displaced with a variety of actions and events in various countries.

Exhibition

Amnesty International's International Secretariat in London will host a one-month exhibition entitled *Nurturing Hope -- Seeking Common Ground* by the artist Ricky Romain, whose work portrays various themes relevant to displacement.

Amnesty International's collaboration with Ricky Romain signifies a spirit of commonality and unification of purpose, each amplifying the other, as they demand justice and try to find space for everyone seeking asylum.

From the Artist:

The themes of asylum and immigration are political. As an artist, I try not to work with any party political agenda because I fully comprehend the complexities of the practical problems that society has to deal with concerning this subject.

However, as a human being, it concerns me that we are all too often ready to take part in the debate about numbers and statistics, with insufficient awareness of the root causes behind the human dilemmas in any given situation.

In the foreword of the Amnesty International report 2007, Irene Khan, Secretary General, predicts that:

'People power will change the face of human rights in the 21st century.'

The Arts must play their part in constructing a common ground where this change can happen, artists must not sit on the fence, they must inspire people to break down the fence and use the materials that have been separating peoples in new and innovate ways to bring them together.

Amnesty International advocates and campaigns for the protection and promotion of the human rights of refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced people and migrants.

Links:

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Further information about Amnesty International's work on refugees and asylum-seekers:

<http://www.amnesty.org/refugees>.

Further information about Ricky Romain and his work: <http://www.rickyromain.com/> (see also <http://www.axisweb.org/artist/rickyromain>)

Photo captions:

1. Fast-Track Family

This painting pays reference to the 'Fast-Track' method of assessment in which people seeking asylum are hurried through the system. The figures are wedged between the constrictive lines of a tangible 'fast track' that appears to crush them and mould them into a shape that dehumanises them.

The notion of 'family' in the title is ironic, as these people are strangers, having left all their relations behind.

2. Lost identities – Container Series

One of a series of paintings labelled 'Container Series'.

I was shocked when I first learnt about people trying to enter the country by concealing themselves in crates. This has long been a method of hiding for people fleeing from persecution to enter another country. The 'crosses' or 'stamps' signify the loss of identity of people forced to surrender their dignity to become an item of cargo.

Their lives are deconstructed and re-branded so that throughout their treacherous journeys they can remain undetected. Everything about them that would betray their humanity is subdued.

3. Looking for work (detail)

Groups of male asylum seekers or migrant workers often appear in my work. They usually have nothing but the coats they wear. These coats conceal their vulnerability; they act as a protective skin, they insulate the heart and hide it.

Coated figures are reminiscent of photographs of displaced Jewish peoples of northern Europe fleeing persecution. They also evoke memories of men lining up in dole queues in the 1930's, heads often bowed, hands searching in their pockets for answers.

4. The Dweller

So many of my paintings are inspired by groups of asylum seekers or migrant workers; this one is about an isolated figure. He is stooped and bowed and seems to be carrying an indescribable sadness but there is an air of serenity about him. He has turned inwards, and 'dwells' within himself; relying on his own resources and the resilience of the human spirit.

People seeking asylum are forced to change the nature of their dwelling places and the ambiguity of the surroundings in which this figure is situated emphasise the predicament of this dweller - who has no particular dwelling place.