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American origin stories through five centuries of art at the KMA

By JOYCE CORRIGAN
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“Columbus Day Painting” by Titus Kapfar, which the artist says subverts the Euro-centric telling of the “discovery” of America.

Image courtesy of KMA

Can an art exhibition shine a light on America’s shadowy and complex history of immigration issues? Can works of imagination get closer to the truth of the countless colorful, sometimes excruciating real-life narratives of those who arrived on these shores the last 500 years?

The concept of great numbers of people from one country resettling in another country in a short period of time always has the potential to be, well, unsettling. But that's the story of America. Which is why "ARRIVALS," the new exhibition at the Katonah Museum of Art, is arriving not a minute too soon — this weekend, Oct. 2-3, in fact.

"There are more people in migration across the globe than at any time since World War II. With climate change, this will only increase," said Heather Ewing, who curated "ARRIVALS." "In these hyper-partisan and polarized times, it's a difficult conversation to have, but I wanted to create a framework that encourages a deeper discourse about what it means to be American, what holds us together as a nation. And I urge everyone to look to the artists for the way forward," added Ms. Ewing, who is associate dean for administrative affairs at the New York Studio School and a research associate of the Smithsonian Institute.

"ARRIVALS" is organized around seven "arrival moments": Columbus in 1492; the Middle Passage; the Mayflower; Ellis Island and Angel Island; World War II; 1965; and today. Each section features works from different time periods and perspectives placed together in dialogue. "My goal with this curatorial structure was to invite visitors to look critically at some of the myths and origin stories that we, as a country, have created," said Ms. Ewing. "Also, what are the stories that I didn't learn about, and why?"

More than 50 artists representing different eras and genres are featured, including Vanessa German, Titus Kaphar, Dorothea Lange, Cannupa Hanska Luger, Ben Shahn, Roger Shimomura, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith and Kara Walker. The exhibition explores how artists have visually shaped their own and other American origin stories, how they've disrupted these narratives, redefined ideas of heritage and belonging, and how they are imagining new ways to navigate their own stories.

"We often hear, 'We're a nation of immigrants,'" said Ms. Ewing, "but the reality is much more complicated. Yes, many of us are children of immigrants, but others are descendants of settlers who displaced people who had been living here for millennia. Still others of us are descendants of those who were trafficked from their homelands and brought here in chains to be sold into slavery."

In his work, "Columbus Day Painting," Mr. Kaphar, who is African American, deliberately covers up Columbus and his Spanish explorer cohorts in colorless shrouds, prompting viewers to focus their gaze on the Native American figures in the canvas, who are not

shrouded. Here, the previously marginalized and “invisible” natives are front and center during a key moment in American history, Columbus’ arrival. The work evokes the musical “Hamilton,” where the Founding Fathers, heroes of the American Revolution, are all portrayed by people of color. “If we don’t amend history by making new representations,” Mr. Kaphar once said in an interview, “we are always going to be excluding ourselves.”

“Kaphar’s artistic reimagining of history is at the very heart of the exhibition,” said Ms. Ewing. “Who has the microphone? Who is telling the story? Who drafted the laws? Here he’s mining the silences, the histories of those that have been suppressed.”

Ms. Ewing was inspired by the stunning variety of artists through the generations that chose to depict origin and immigration stories. She was particularly haunted by, and thrilled to include, 42-year-old Cannupa Hanska Luger, an artist of Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, Lakota and European descent who was born on a reservation in North Dakota. Now based in New Mexico, the artist is known for large-scale installations, video and social sculptures that communicate stories about 21st century indigeneity. His KMA piece, “STTLMNT: an Indigenous digital world-wide occupation,” was originally created for the Mayflower 400th observations in Plymouth, United Kingdom. It was conceived as a month-long, indigenous-led encampment that would have taken place the summer of 2020 if not for COVID-19; it’s since been reimagined for a digital space.

“Luger invited contemporary artists from tribal nations across North America and the Pacific to participate,” explained Ms. Ewing. “Filmmaker Razelle Benally, of Oglala Lakota/ Diné tribes, traveled all over to make films documenting these artists’ practices, and ‘ARRIVALS’” includes a special director’s cut.” The project can also be viewed at sttlmnt.org.

With global migration on the increase and America still a priority destination, Ms. Ewing acknowledges there will be never be a shortage of “new” American artists painting, sculpting and video-taping their origin stories. “Even as I find this topic of immigration crisis daunting, I do find inspiration and hope,” said Ms. Ewing. “We are pretty unique as a nation of all the world — ‘a teeming nation of nations,’ as Walt Whitman called us. You cannot really go to France and become French, or China and become Chinese, even if you do become a citizen there. But you can become American.” In addition, many of the artists in the show who have experienced or carry the legacy of traumatic origin stories went on to achieve honorary degrees, extraordinary success and renown as artists in America, who then serve as inspirations to others in their community.

“Ideally what binds us together is an idea, rather than race, ethnicity or religion,” adds Ms. Ewing. “We’ve never yet lived up to our founding ideals of liberty and justice for all, but we do have something incredible to strive for.”

Could it be argued that, if it weren’t for the immigrant experience, many great American artists might never have become artists?

“The Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat, whose parents fled Haiti for New York in the 1970s, talks about how the creative world-building that immigrants engage in to make new lives in strange new lands is a kind of artistic practice in itself,” notes Ms. Ewing. “I do think the experience of feeling like an outsider fuels a lot of creative life.”

The exhibition opens Sunday, Oct. 3. A preview for KMA members will be held from noon to 2:25 p.m., and the public opening will take place from 2:30 to 5 p.m. The exhibition will remain on view until Jan. 23, 2022.

Tickets should be reserved prior to visiting the museum.

For tickets and more information, call 914-232-9555 or visit katonahmuseum.org.

Katonah Museum of Art is located 134 Jay St., Katonah.