

Bishara, Hakim. "Spotlight Immigrant Artists Enduring the Arduous Process of Applying for an O-1 Visa", *Hyperallergic*, 20 February 2020.

## HYPERALLERGIC

THE EXTRAORDINARY at Hunter East Harlem Gallery presents work by artists who've gone to extraordinary lengths to make their work in this country.



Installation view of The Extraordinary at Hunter East Harlem Gallery (photo by Argenis Apolinario)

Obtaining an artist visa to the United States (legally known as the O-1 Visa for "individuals with extraordinary ability or achievement") has traditionally been an arduous and expensive process. But with strict new regulations imposed by the Trump administration, it has risen to the level of a bureaucratic nightmare, especially for emerging artists. Just ask artists Gil Arnaud Ngole from the Republic of Congo, Anna Parisi from Brazil, Rambod Vala from Iran, and Sarah Mihara Creagen from Canada – all of whom were denied an O-1 visa.

Works by these artists, in addition to five others, are currently featured in THE EXTRAORDINARY, a group exhibition at Hunter East Harlem Gallery dedicated to artists holding or applying for the three-year O-1 artist visa.

These artists were selected in an open-call process that received 123 applications from 40 different countries. A jury of prominent art world figures – María del Carmen Carrión of the Cisneros Institute at MoMA; Solana Chehtman of The Shed; Hitomi Iwasaki of the Queens Museum; and artist Javier Telles – was tasked with sifting through the applications. The result is a diverse and impressive collection of talents that also includes Ramyar Vala, Woomin Kim (South Korea), Firoz Mahmud (Bangladesh), Yue Nakayama (Japan), Shimpei Shirafuji (Japan), and Catalina Tuca (Chile).

Just how difficult is it to obtain a coveted O-1 visa? First, visual artist applicants must demonstrate a convincing exhibition history, which is already challenging for emerging artists. But that's just the beginning: Applicants must also provide a dozen recommendation letters, future work contracts that amount to a living wage in the designated state, and press clips (like this one) that speak of their "renown" and "distinction" in their field. And without hiring a good immigration lawyer (with fees averaging \$5,000), this pursuit would be practically hopeless.

Bishara, Hakim. "Spotlight Immigrant Artists Enduring the Arduous Process of Applying for an O-1 Visa", *Hyperallergic*, 20 February 2020.

Hence this exhibition, conceived by its curators, Arden Sherman and Nora Maité Nieves, to help visa-seeking artists bolster their CVs and improve their chances of success amid an intimidating application process, while also providing them an opportunity for them to showcase recent work.

Among the different works in the exhibition, only one refers directly to the trials and tribulations of immigration – "The Challenges of Imagination" (2017), a video installation by Vala and his brother Ramyar (who received the visa but has since been banned from re-entering his home country of Iran). The video tells the uncanny story of how the brothers found themselves living temporarily in the Chicago home of Nobel Prize-winning economist Gary Becker who wrote that immigrants should pay a fee of around \$50,000 to enter the US. Their video, which shifts between personal anecdotes and art historical references, is a direct response to Becker's neoliberal xenophobia.

Another remarkable work is Parisi's rusted metal sculpture "Raíces (Roots)" (2018) which reveals racist and patriarchal notions in Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre's 1933 book *Masters and the Slaves*. Through magnifying glasses, viewers can observe troubling quotes from the book engraved in metal plates. One such quote reads: "And so the saying goes, white women we marry, Mulatas to fuck, and let the Black girls work." Parisi believes that these abhorrent notions should be magnified because they remain prevalent, albeit often concealed, in Brazilian society. A performance by the artist that was scheduled for the closing reception was canceled because her visa application was rejected.

Equally outstanding are Mahmud's muralistic drawings on paper from his series *Drawing Reverberation (Ouponibrshik/Porouponibeshik)* (2017-2019), where traditional Bengali motifs are blended with the colonial history of the region. Shirafuji's landscape photography series *Essays on the Idea of America* (2019) similarly applies his own gaze to Americana.

This compelling presentation of works continues with Kim's eye-pleasing rock sculptures, which mimic mineral formation with daily ephemera like toilet paper, used soap, and – a favorite – plastic nails.

See also Nakayama's documentary-style video *You're Every Song I Ever Sing (Version 1)* (2019), in which child actors perform monologues written by adults, thereby poignantly presenting the troubles of older generations via a unique perspective.

Another conceptual video project is Tuca's *This Thing is Red* (2018, ongoing), in which the artist asks professional 3D-printing designers to create digital renderings based solely on an oral description of an object. As you can imagine, this telephone-like system generates novel objects with little resemblance to the originals, immediately evoking phenomenological thoughts about the representation and limitations of language.

And finally, don't miss Creagen's humorous, body-related "Pee Tree" (2019) which draws from time spent at the gynecologist's office.

But one artist remains absent from the show. Ngole was denied entry to the US due to the authorities' suspicion that he might overstay his visa. "It's totally discriminatory," said Sherman. "This would never happen to a European. It's only because he's from an African country."

Bishara, Hakim. "Spotlight Immigrant Artists Enduring the Arduous Process of Applying for an O-1 Visa", *Hyperallergic*, 20 February 2020.

As a tribute to Ngole's struggle, Sherman mounted a mini-exhibition comprised of his application paperwork inside HEHG's presentation of Gallery Cubed, a traveling pop-up project organized by Nathan Rayman and supported by the Network of Extraordinary Artists (NEA).

In conjunction with the exhibition, HEHG is offering public programming that includes workshops with immigration lawyers, support group meetings with other visa seekers and awardees, artist talks, tours, and performances. See the full program [here](#).