

Art Exhibition Review: The Sea is the Limit

By [Fiona Wong](#)

Saturday 7 July 2018

Enter, walls painted blue which echo the vastness of the sea, a treacherous and extremely dangerous journey undertaken by an abundance of refugees. The title of the exhibition, itself, based off the saying 'the sky is the limit' explores the boundaries of the sea, representing not only freedom, but also the physical barrier dividing the refugees. A multifaceted blue resembles the sky, evoking the feeling of hope and freedom. Curated by the contemporary artist Varvara Shavrova, in the Madsen One and Madsen Two Galleries of the York Art Gallery, the exhibition consists of the works by eleven international artists: Nidhal Chamekh, Taus Makhacheva, Shahram Entekhabi, Brian Maguire, Mohammed Sami, Vanessa Vozzo, Vladimir Miladinović, Halil Altindere, Varvara Shavrova, Nick Ellwood and Susan Stockwell. Each have been in close contact or have been migrants themselves. We are invited into their struggle and journey, immersed with the wide range of media, creating a more intimate approach to the refugee crisis. Whilst no art can ever truly allow us to experience the realities of a refugee, we can only try to understand and come as close to that as possible. In Shavrova's own words: "This sets this project apart from a more sensationalist if not exploitative approach to the currently 'hot' topics of 'migrant crisis', and instead brings the empathy to the fore of the reflections on this tragic and ongoing situation that is showing no signs of being resolved nor going away any time soon."



Madson One Gallery, York Art Museum 2018. Photo Credit: Fiona Wong

The exhibition begins with Sharova's *Blankets Project*, where she reflects upon her own experience as a migrant, settling in Ireland from Soviet Russia. A row of large blankets, each printed with images and

memories from her family albums, are hung up on hooks. Viewers are invited to wrap themselves in a blanket and watch a short film projecting various illustrations depicting scenes encountered by refugees. The blankets fulfil two meanings of warmth: physically, and emotionally; the embrace of a blanket evokes a sense of comfort and safety. It is an association that has been made from a very young age, symbolising protection.

The next room explores the journey at sea, where *Vanessa Vozzo's Apenea Project* is based off the shipwreck in Lampedusa in 2013, killing over 300 migrants. She uses immersive interactive technology consisting of goggles and headphones which take us underwater, encapsulating the fear of the emptiness of the sea. We are left frantically searching for anything to appear, and the question of whether one can make it to safety. Furthermore, photographs of belongings that were found at sea are placed on clean white screens, demanding to be seen, acting as memories and fragments of those involved in the shipwreck. It is a clinical approach, resembling a post-mortem operating theatre. However, we are also reminded of the similarities that can be found between the refugees and ourselves, their belongings were also items that we owned or used. The photograph of a smiling family in a clear plastic protective pouch, and the unfathomable loss of a loved one, serves as a reminder of the loss of individuality behind facts and figures in news reports. This intimate relationship created with death is further explored in Taus Makhacheva's *Baida* video and performance piece, *Baida* being an illegal fisher boat that goes far out into the Caspian sea to the extent where it is untraceable. In the case of an emergency, fishermen would tie themselves to pieces of the boat that were floating in hopes that their loved ones would find their corpses, they feared that their loved ones would carry hope of their return more than death itself.



Blankets Project (2016), Varvara Shavrova. Photo Credit: Fiona Wong

Ending on the idea of sending refugees to Mars, a Turkish artist, Halil Altindere provides an ironic response to the refugee crisis with *Space Refugee*. Another installation that uses the new technology of goggles and headphones, where one is fully immersed into another scene. This demonstrates the racist and negative attitudes towards migrants, highlighting the absurd idea that it would be preferred for them to live in space rather than welcoming them in other countries. Despite the feeling of hopelessness resonating with us, we are left seeking solutions – surely more can be done? Surely we can do more?

The Sea is the Limit Exhibition at the York Art Gallery ends on 2 September 2018.



Space Refugee (2016) Halil Altindere. Photo
Credit: Fiona Wong



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