

## **Moments of Expulsion**

This story starts in 2008 but it is rooted in the ancient history of human migration. It is about migration of the involuntary kind by which people are forced to repeatedly move and resettle from one country or region to another because of political conflict, religious persecution or war. The term refugee is often confused with that of economic migrant, those who choose to move for a better standard of living. This misunderstanding causes negative public attitudes towards asylum seekers, fuelled by our politicians and the media. So it is an important distinction to make. Artist Jo Scolah considers the experience of exile in her new sculptural installation *Moments of Expulsion*. Reflecting on the eroding nature of asylum, it presents a bleak image of the failing shelter and lack of protection that refuge provides today. Back in 2008, *Bubble*, a sculpture by Scolah about life in the Middle East was suspended from the ceiling of the Holden Gallery at Manchester School of Art. It featured in her MA in Textiles exhibition. A patterned canvas stained with rust was packed with a jumble of textile remnants. As the large stitches strained to keep the whole fragile object together, the effect was a feeling of tension and vulnerability. It was just like a bubble about to burst. In 2011, the Middle Eastern bubble did eventually burst. The harsh regimes that once could thrive were challenged by a region-wide series of protests now known as the Arab Spring.

Jo Scolah's family history is part-rooted in the city of Aleppo in northern Syria. It was once the happy home of her Jewish grandparents. For centuries the Muslim city was home to a large and flourishing community of Sephardic Jews, who first settled there in 1492 following their expulsion from Spain. Her grandparents shared a similar lifestyle to that of their Muslim neighbours and they all spoke the same Arabic language. Commonality interests Scolah, and the feeling of unity that comes with shared experience. Aleppo is one of the

oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. Built on the successful business of trade, it has a long history of being home to a diverse community of inhabitants who worked together and trusted each other. It was an important commercial centre on the Silk Road trade route connecting the East to the West, from China to the Mediterranean Sea. It had a textile industry of international reputation, producing woven fabrics for kilims and rugs used to decorate the home. When the vibrant trading city fell in to decline during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century many Jewish families living in Syria emigrated to Manchester, attracted by its cotton trade.

It is at Artwork Atelier, just a stone's throw from Manchester city centre, in Greengate, Salford, where Scolah made *Moments of Expulsion* in response to the recent collapse of Aleppo. The large project space at this former warehouse provides artists with the space to experiment with new ways of working. For Scolah this meant how to work on a much larger scale. The support of an a-n bursary afforded her the opportunity to produce a timely response to a time -sensitive concern. Scolah needed to work fast. Soon Aleppo will be gone. In *Moments of Expulsion* long sheets of stitched, stained and printed woven cloth are suspended in layers from hooks high up in the ceiling from where they slump down on to the floor. Suspension is a strong word here. Everything in Aleppo is in a state of suspense. Its citizens are suspended in exile.

Textiles have always been the primary material in Scolah's work. She first trained as a dress designer. Then her early artworks sat between fashion and sculpture. A very early work saw her reflect on the custom in Israel of young women feminising their army uniforms for national service. By adding a pink satin lining to these harsh military outfits, Scolah looked at how we attempt to

dress our emotions to cover up how we feel inside. A series of sculptured clothing pieces about the body then followed her degree in Embroidery at Manchester Art School. Her sculptures have increasingly moved away from fashion with their emphasis on giving expression and individuality to the female body. Yet Scolah has continued to reflect on issues around identity. How we attempt to keep our emotions inside, careful what we choose to externalise. Her sculptures have always retained a human scale too, up until now.

I am reminded of the colossal sculptures by British artist Phyllida Barlow. Often referred to as anti-monuments, they share the same grand scale and sense of physical presence of most traditional structures created to commemorate a person or a place. Yet her precarious abstract sculptures made from commonplace, often DIY materials like plaster, plywood and tape, look as if they may collapse at any moment. Their raw and unruly instability contrasts with the durability of traditional memorials. Falling monuments are a feature of the times in which we live. The toppled statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad in 2003, for example, brought a symbolic close to nearly thirty years of the dictator's reign. Scolah's new sculpture works in a similar way. It is an impermanent monument to the impermanence of Aleppo.

Reflected in the unfinished aesthetic of *Moments of Expulsion* is the ongoing experience of around five million Syrian refugees currently seeking asylum from the civil war. What started as a peaceful student protest against forty years of rule by the Assad regime has turned into a violent conflict. As it continues to drag on for years, so too does the time the country's refugees are forced to spend in exile, away from their homes, livelihoods and communities.

Whereas images of home conjure up safety and security, the loss of home reflects a rupture of trust. The causes of the conflict require a political solution. Without resolution the duration of exile lengthens. It is never ending. Feelings of insecurity and fear must heighten whilst feelings of hope must fade with time. Lives being held in long term limbo.

The feeling of lacking control is reflected in Scolah's method of drawing, an integral part of her making process. *Moments of Expulsion*, like all her sculptures, started with the activity of drawing and all the lines in her installation are drawing lines. She relinquishes control over where she draws each line by closing her eyes. She wishes to avoid what she thinks her subject looks like. She can only feel where the pencil line is going. The image comes from her imagination instead. She describes the activity as "feeling the form from within and pushing it out through drawing". These shapes are then drawn again sculpturally using fabric and metal.

Scolah salvages these discarded and overlooked building materials from derelict sites during trips visiting family in Israel. Scolah was brought up a traditional Jew but not very orthodox. The steel rods designed to reinforce concrete in structures are broken, bent and buckled with failure. The metal hooks for hanging meat carcasses were bought at an Israeli market and are used to suspend Scolah's structure. She carries these ordinary materials in a suitcase home to her Salford studio from the Jewish homeland.

After the Second World War, when Jews were given refuge and Israel as their home, the 1951 Refugee Convention was introduced to ensure that nations would never again turn their backs on all those seeking refuge. It sets out the rights of refugees granted asylum from persecution at home. It also sets out the responsibilities of countries to protect refugees in their territory. However

countries are under no obligation to provide asylum. The makeshift nature of Scorah's installation expresses the temporary protection offered to asylum seekers admitted to safe countries but given no guarantee of permanent refuge. Scorah carefully works the surfaces of each canvas layer with rust, a common metaphor for slow decay due to neglect as robust iron and steel is gradually converted in to a soft crumbling powder. It is an image of neglect, decay and ruin. With temporary asylum people are unable to regulate their status or integrate in to communities. Their rights to work are often restricted and educational and recreational opportunities absent. Entitled to exercise their fundamental human rights, they are held in detention and subjected to arbitrary treatment. When a place of refuge is only temporary, you never know what is going to happen next. How to adapt to a new culture whilst keeping a sense of one's own identity? Exile must make you feel unsafe anywhere.

The form of *Moments of Expulsion* is bold yet fragile and suggestive of a temporary and inadequate shelter, like the tents in refugee camps where there is very little refuge to be found. Where there are no sanitary conditions and very little food. It also suggests the makeshift shelters of those left living in the ruins of Aleppo. Most want to escape but Syria's borders are closed, the checkpoints controlled by soldiers and tanks regularly rolling by. There are severe shortages of electricity and water, no fuel and barely any food. Now completely under siege, all supply routes to Aleppo have been cut off and there is no access for international aid. For those Syrians who remain Aleppo can no longer feel like home. Shelter has been harshly torn away. Those who stayed to outlast the brutal conflict have the misery of living without refuge. They are internally displaced, forced to flee clashes between the rebels and pro-regime forces. An inevitable result of war, they are refugees too.

Our experience of *Moments of Expulsion* is completed by a piece of recorded music composed in direct response to the installation. It is by Cameroon refugee ..... It is played on an oud, a traditional instrument from the Middle East. It provides another layer to reflect the multiple layers of exile. The sound of a drone in the background creates a heightened feeling of threat. The music trembles, like how it must feel to run away.

The popular image of ancient Aleppo and its medieval architecture including the magnificent Silk Road souk is destroyed, just like the UNESCO world heritage site itself. The popular image of Aleppo today is that presented by the daily news, of building rubble and twisted steel wires that failed to protect the concrete homes, schools and hospitals and the people they sheltered from the constant barrage of Russian airstrikes. Great contemporary art reflects the times in which we live and *Moments of Expulsion* holds up a mirror to the violent devastation of a city and its people torn apart by civil war. This is not the end of the story.

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