

# SAN FRANCISCO WEEKLY

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### THE IN-BETWEEN

by Jonathan Curiel



Strider Patton and Max Ehrman

Earlier this year, before he began painting Searching for a New Home in San Francisco's Clarion Alley, Strider Jack Patton knew he would feature people who've been forcibly displaced from their homes. Almost 60 million people around the world fit that description, composing the greatest refugee crisis in modern history. Patton chose three: a 5-year-old Syrian boy named Zein al-Houssein; a 12-year-old Afghan girl named Nadia; and an unnamed Syrian girl who appears to be 7 or 8.

Patton painted them in circular blue frames that, like dream bubbles, float over painter Max Ehrman's swath of greenish swirls and lines. In an alley that has inspired some of San Francisco's greatest street art — and continues to draw locals and tourists alike — Searching for a New Home is that rare combination of engaging artistic style and subtle social directive. It also has a low-level high-tech touch: a QR code that takes people to a web page with details about Patton's subjects.

"It's a pretty big topic in the street-art world, with lots of refugee-focused murals in Europe, but I wanted to join the conversation out here," says Patton, a San Franciscan who has a master's degree in anthropology and social change, and who traveled last year to Europe, where the migrant crisis is more evident.

Syria's wartime exodus — with 7.6 million internally displaced, and an additional 3.9 million fleeing over its borders — was the initial impetus for Between Worlds, a new exhibit at San Francisco's Arc Gallery that evolved into a much broader mission: Portray what it's like to be in a geographical or cultural diaspora, where feeling uprooted is a fact of life.

Nearly all the exhibit's artists had direct or indirect experience with displacement, as with Carlos Cartagena, an El Salvador native who grew up in a time of civil war and death squads before leaving for the United States in 1989. At Arc Gallery, Cartagena's six-foot diptych *Estatuas de Sal* (Statutes of Salt) presents silhouettes of migrant children with their backs covered in what could be reflections of bright flames.

Cartagena has coated the images with a salt solution, firmly associating these modern kids with the prophetic biblical story of Lot and his wife, which links the act of looking back with death and destruction. To survive in their new home, Cartagena asks, are immigrants forced to renounce their past so completely?

For Maja Ruznic, who was born and raised in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the question of remembering is fraught with scenes of death. In the atmospheric, five-foot canvas *Pile*, Ruznic references bodies of massacred citizens from the internecine violence that convulsed the European country before she immigrated to the United States in 1995. The work comes across as a tapestry — almost like a carpet on a wall, with rainbow colors that, at first glance, suggest festivity instead of a public mortuary. *Pile* is part of a series called “Soil as Witness,” where Ruznic sprinkles what she calls “intermediary figures who transport dying souls from this world to the next.”

Two Iranian-born artists, Golbanou Moghaddas and Taraneh Hemami, gift the exhibit with work that delves into the meaning of memory and expectation. In a triptych etching called *From Water to Water*, Moghaddas narrates the life of a human-turtle-dove who goes from Iran’s Caspian Sea to the Pacific Ocean, leaving behind a life of familiarity and a thousands-year history for a stripped-down existence that ultimately leads to death. Moghaddas’ etchings — full of faith and worry — comprise a fantastical allegory that will remind some of the early illustrations for Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Raven*. That’s a good thing.

Hemami’s work at Arc Gallery, called *Absence*, involves the repackaging of photos in which people are replaced with cutout figures and other stand-ins. The images appear to be of Iranians in Iran — but then again, maybe not. In one photo from her collection, Hemami adorns the face of a female figure with the colors of an American flag. Hemami fractures each small panorama, unsettling our relation to a scene that we’re instinctively trying to re-create. Closure is not possible. The “in-betweeness,” or limbo state, that is so prevalent in much of the work at *Between Worlds* is scattered across every image in *Absence*.

“It’s about being absent from the physical places that remain, but also from the moments that were captured — you’re not even present in those images any longer,” says Hemami, whose work is part of her longstanding “Hall of Reflections” series. “You’re removed from family, and the special occasions that the photograph had captured initially.”

Curated by Arc Gallery’s Michael Yochum and Jack Fischer of Jack Fischer Gallery, *Between Worlds* addresses issues of race in America with Rodney Ewing’s *Portals*, a work of connected doorways that uses James Baldwin’s poignant words — “An identity is questioned only when it is menaced, as when the mighty begin to fall” — a listing of 19th-century African-American towns (like Buxton, Iowa, and Freedman’s Village, Va.), and other themes to connect periods of American history that were revolutionary in their way. People went to war with the culture to prevent more war.

Some of the greatest art in Western history — think of Picasso’s *Guernica* and Goya’s *The Third of May 1808* — are searing portraits of societies in the middle of war and chaos. “Painting is not done to decorate apartments,” Picasso once remarked, explaining why he thought all artists were “political beings.” “It is an instrument of war for attack and defense against the enemy.”

The “enemy” might not even be an army or a government. It could be a society’s naiveté or indifference. Or the “enemy” could be the artist’s own frustrations. Their art, then, is an outlet to make vivid what they’ve kept inside for too long. But displacement is fluid, and so is the art’s meaning, which can change when placed in a different context. This spring, Hemami went back to Iran, and for the first time there exhibited her work in a gallery, including photographs set amid piles of scattered bricks. In a 2003 Hemami exhibit in another country, a similar layout represented the bombing of Baghdad. In 2016 in Iran, it was something completely different.

“We used rubble from neighboring construction sites, and Tehran is filled with construction sites, because they’re constantly demolishing houses — 10 years is too old and apartments are constantly torn down,” says Hemami. “The comments I was hearing was that [my art] very much related to displacement. Even though I was talking about the migration experience, they were talking about feeling like immigrants in their own city. They felt displaced in their own city.”