

Out on the Water: Images of Asylum

Shimon Attie's art installation coincides with the United Nations General Assembly.

By SOPAN DEB

Standing on the waterfront of Brooklyn Bridge Park on a misty Sunday evening, the visual artist Shimon Attie pointed to his latest installation moving slowly up the East River.

It was a tugboat dragging a barge that had been carrying an LED screen through New York City's waterways for four days. The project is called "Night Watch," and the screen on top of the barge — 20 feet across, 12 feet high — looped a silent film lasting nearly 10 minutes. It shows portraits of a dozen individuals who live in or around the city who were granted political asylum. They appear on screen with blank faces staring intently into the camera, occasionally walking toward it.

The beginning of the film features a quotation attributed to James Baldwin: "We contain the other, hopelessly and forever." The ending spells out the installation's intent more clearly: "For the millions who have been forced to flee their homelands to escape violence and discrimination. For the fortunate few who have been granted political asylum in the United States."

As the barge went by where Mr. Attie was standing, the Statue of Liberty was prominently visible behind the installation.

"The waterways for New York for the last two centuries have been integral toward welcoming new immigrants from all over the world," he said.

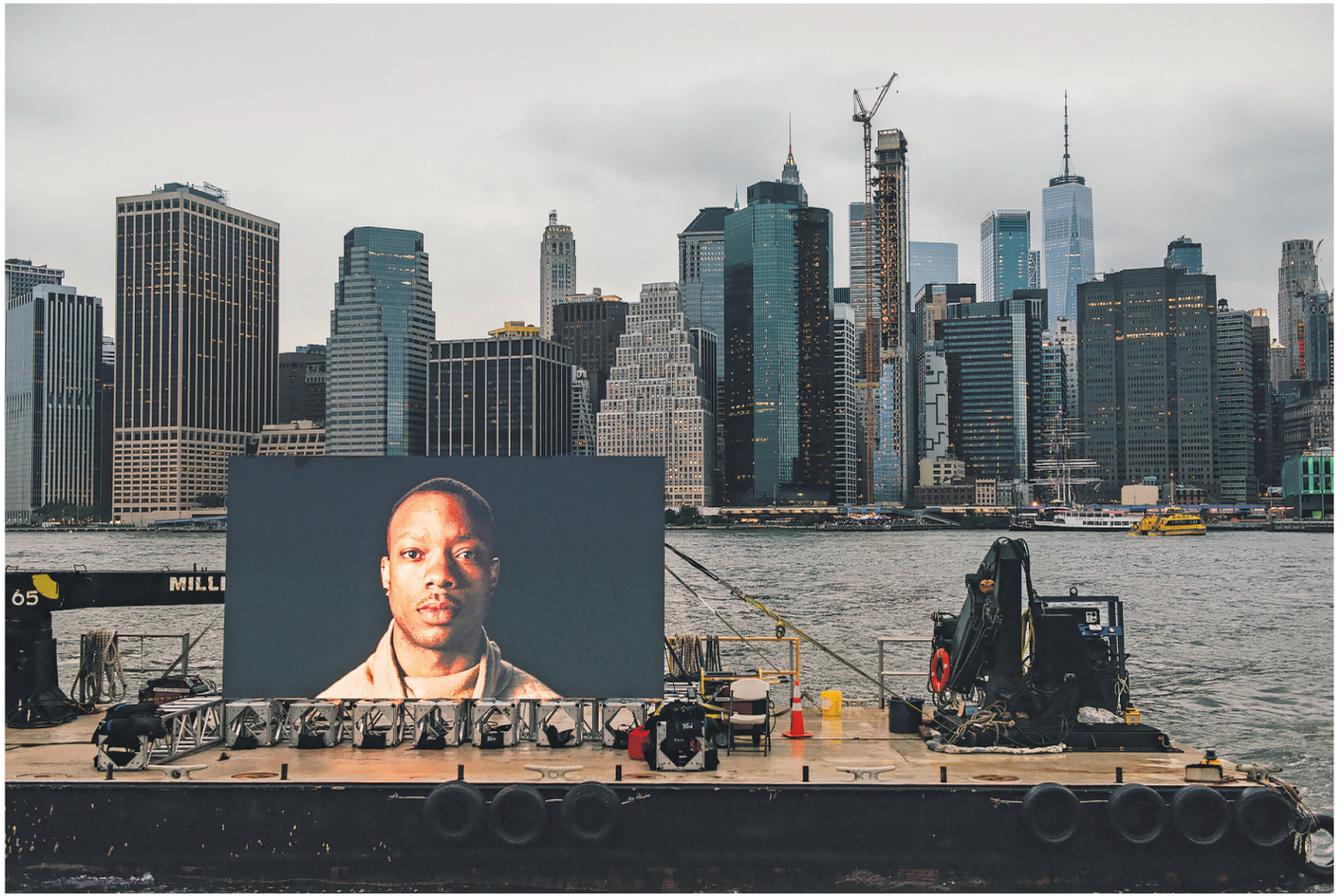
The exhibition was commissioned by More Art, a socially conscious nonprofit based in Manhattan that specializes in public art projects, and was timed to coincide with the United Nations General Assembly convening this week.

Mr. Attie has been doing this kind of work for decades. In a 1991 installation called "The Writing on the Wall," he collected pre-World War II photographs of everyday Jewish life in Berlin and projected them on the streets where they had been taken. In 1998, for "Between Dreams and History," to convey the New York City immigrant experience, he projected written thoughts, including poems, memories and wishes, from 75 residents onto tenement buildings on the Lower East Side.

But this one may be more difficult for viewers to comprehend, given that the only hints of the project's purpose come at the beginning and end, which, because of the barge's movement, many viewers will miss. But even watching the footage without knowing the context, Mr. Attie said, was still valuable.

"There's a powerful resonance about simply having the poetry of these large faces floating by on what looks almost like a 19th-century raft in a completely unexpected location," Mr. Attie said.

In an interview, Mr. Attie, 61, discussed his most recent project, which will run through Thursday. These are edited excerpts from the conversation.



GEORGE ETHEREDGE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

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Why did you decide to spotlight former asylum seekers?

There are two answers to that. One is I have a long history of working with refugee and asylum communities. Also, it's a topic of great urgency in this moment of our history. These are people whose lives have been saved by the United States. I couldn't think of something more urgent to do.

How did you decide on the 12 people to feature in the film?

That process took a few months. We partnered with several legal advocacy organizations that were getting applications approved for asylum seekers. They came to trust us. They came to trust me. They opened their clients to us. I showed them my past work. I talked to them about what the idea was. I asked them what they thought. If they didn't like the idea, this project would not happen. They loved the idea because it's different. More specifically, I picked people who have character, strong faces, and people who would be good in front of a camera.

Where does this project rank in terms of logistical difficulty?

I've had more difficult and challenging projects and less difficult and challenging projects. The Berlin project was just guerilla art. That was easy. That was me and four slide projectors.

This project, we started about two years ago. I took about six months considering what I wanted to do.

I'm going to answer a question you didn't ask. The barge and the tugboat resonate in a very historical way, almost like a raft. Yet, right in the middle of it, there's a large contemporary, high-tech, high-resolution LED screen. So they make a very nice synthesis together.

Was connecting with the 12 participants the most challenging part of the process?

Over the years, I've done a lot of community-based projects, especially with communities that have been marginalized. It's a territory I'm familiar with. It is challenging, but it isn't the most challenging part. The most challenging part, I think, is to try and make a strong work of art.

Because I don't work in an instrumental way, I don't have a message. I'm not trying to communicate something that's reduced or specific or foreclosed. Rather, I'm trying to do two things: One is to try to use the language of contemporary art; two, to transmit a possibility to experience this subject matter in a new way.

What do you want people who see this to think about?

As an artist, I'm a little hesitant to get that specific because it's a little more multifaceted than that. I would say that I would like members of the public to take away a possibility to reflect on this topic: "The Stranger Among Us."

There have been different art projects with asylum seekers and refugees even recently. But they typically deal with people from far away trying to flee to safety, whether in Europe or here. These are people who live among us. These are our neighbors. They are our co-workers. They are our friends. This notion of insider and outsider and trying to scramble that and turn that upside down.

An image from "Night Watch," a project by the visual artist Shimon Attie, in which a barge carries a screen that shows a short film featuring individuals who were granted political asylum in the United States.

She Damns the Torpedoes, Too

Arlene Shechet champions porcelain and much more.

By TED LOOS

KINGSTON, N.Y. — Splinters were flying onto the floor recently as the artist Arlene Shechet wielded a tool with a whirring blade called an angle grinder. She was carving a massive block of wood that was slowly turning into a sculpture of a woman for her art installation "Full Steam Ahead," in Manhattan's Madison Square Park.

Working in a rented studio, Ms. Shechet had no safety gear on. "It's fun!" she yelled over the noise.

She hadn't done a large-scale figure in wood before this 10-foot-long piece, "Forward."

"This is really big for a first go," Ms. Shechet acknowledged. And "Full Steam Ahead" is her first major public project, too. "I try to be a little bit of an amateur to keep my life exciting," the veteran artist added.

Ms. Shechet is known for her bold, colorful and inventive ceramics, as seen in a 2016 show at the Frick Collection in which she mixed the renowned Royal Meissen porcelain, from the 18th century, with her own exuberant work. But she has reached a paradoxical inflection point that mature artists get to, if they're lucky: Precisely because she knows what she's doing, she's comfortable pushing into unknown territory.

"Full Steam Ahead," on view through April 28 in the northern section of Madison Square Park, includes a dozen sculptures in various materials. It adds new seating in the form of stools and makes subtler changes too, swapping out some of the back slats on nearby park benches with a cast resin.

Ms. Shechet, 69, compared the installation to both a cabinet of curiosities and a secret garden. "I want that 18th-century notion of delight and discovery," she said.

The installation breaks from the old model of public art projects. It's not a single massive sculpture but a suite of human-scaled elements that can be touched, and it's off-center from the park's central green, where most artists would choose to work. (Ms. Shechet's friend Martin Puryear picked the big lawn for his 40-foot-tall sculpture, "Big Bling," in 2016.) And it is the rare project with a ceramic piece — "Low Hanging Cloud (Lion)" — that weighs more than a ton. Porcelain, her material of choice, is not often seen in such venues.

Ms. Shechet, who has a larger main studio in the Catskills and a place in TriBeCa, challenges the idea that ceramics are necessarily delicate. "It's toilet bowl porcelain,"



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Full Steam Ahead
Through April 28; Madison Square Park, Manhattan; madisonsquarepark.org.

she said, laughing. People don't use it, she said, because it's heavy, expensive and complicated to fabricate.

"The decorative arts is such a disparaged category, I think, because it's thought of as female," said Ms. Shechet (pronounced SHEK-it). Scroll forms that reappear throughout the work refer to teacup han-

naval figure who uttered some version of those words (usually cited as "full speed ahead") after "Damn the torpedoes" during the Civil War.

A collaboration by Augustus Saint-Gaudens on an exedra designed by the architect Stanford White, the statue, cast in 1880, stands above reliefs of two female figures representing Loyalty and Courage.

As a counterpoint, Ms. Shechet will place what she called her "buxom" "Forward" figure on the steps leading up to the 19th-century archetypes. Her piece can be used as seating, too.

That sort of tweaking of traditions comes naturally to Ms. Shechet. The standard pedestals used to display artworks interfere with the sightline between the viewer and her sculpture. So she makes her own. In "So and So and So and So and So and On and On" (2010), for example, dazzling glazed ceramic and glazed kiln bricks are the pedestals — as thought-provoking as the head-like figures atop them.

The painter Nicole Eisenman, who has recently been working in sculpture, said that she goes to the "generous" Ms. Shechet for advice.

"She's a trailblazer," Ms. Eisenman said. "Arlene has such a sense of all the balances — between grotesque and funny, what's found and what's made, the pedestal and the sculpture itself."

Normally, Farragut presides over a pool of water, but the first thing Ms. Shechet did was put him in dry dock.

"I said, 'Can I empty the pool and take the water out?'" Ms. Shechet said, recalling her talks with the park. "They hemmed and hawed, and finally we negotiated it."

Stepping down into the empty pool space to view some of the works reminded her of walking into the sunken living room of her grandparents' Art Deco apartment on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx, said Ms. Shechet, a Queens native.

Some of her figures are slightly mysterious. In her studio, she stood by "Tilted Channel," a two-armed shape made from powder-coated cast iron, while a reporter guessed what it was: a slingshot? Ms. Shechet said it represented a sprue, a tool for casting molten material like porcelain. ("I want people to say, 'What is that?'") Another sprue was meant to evoke the Statue of Liberty.

Ms. Shechet chuckled while recounting Mr. Puryear's reaction to her plan for the park. "He said, 'This could go wrong, and so could this.' And I said, 'Well, that's because I'm stupid enough to do things without really knowing what I'm doing.'"

And with that, Ms. Shechet smiled and went back to the grind.

In a studio in Kingston, N.Y., Arlene Shechet prepared for an installation of her sculptures in Madison Square Park. Above is her piece "Forward," and at left is "Tilted Channel."

dles. "But this work is all heavy and monumental," she said. "It makes the female big and tough and something you have to pay attention to."

Brooke Kamin Rapaport, the senior curator for Mad. Sq. Art, the park's exhibition arm, said that Ms. Shechet fits the "post-bronze" age of public art, noting that Mr. Puryear's piece used chain-link fence and plywood.

"Artists are choosing their material and adapting it for the outdoors," Ms. Rapaport said. "It's bringing excitement to the public art field. Porcelain is considered fragile, precious and private, but Arlene's is durable, accessible and public."

In the area of the park she chose, Ms. Shechet faces off with some old-fashioned male monumentalism. The title "Full Steam Ahead" refers to the Admiral Farragut Monument, a bronze sculpture of the U.S.