

MIGRATING WORLDS

The Art of the Moving Image in Britain

Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, CT

October 10 - December 29, 2019



OPPOSITE Isaac Julien, *The Leopard (Western Union: Small Boats)* (2007), production photo. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro London/Venice.

ABOVE Alia Syed, *Panopticon Letters: Missive I* (2013), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist and Talwar Gallery, New York and New Delhi.

Migrating Worlds is an exhibition consisting of six moving image installations and a program of three single channel works, all presented in digital video formats. Subtitled “The Art of Moving Image in Britain,” the exhibition is elegantly laid out in the Yale Center for British Art, the venerated Louis I. Kahn building. Completed in 1977, three years after Kahn’s demise, the museum represents the pinnacle of his architectural style, which has been described as combining the monumentality of the mediaeval castle with the minimalism and brutalism of late modernism (see, for example, <https://www.archdaily.com/334095/happy-112th-birthday-louis-kahn>)¹. The metaphor applies with equal force to *Migrating Worlds*. The works address urgent matters central to current discourses: identity (racial, gender, ethnic and national), colonialism’s reprehensible impact on cultures and peoples and

its profound after-effects up to the present day, and the climate crisis with an emphasis on its connections with these issues. It is noteworthy (and understandable as a political gesture) that in this explicitly ‘British’ exhibition, the connection of several of the artists with the UK is by way of its former colonies, through descent, migration, or education. A number of the works investigate current issues partly by connecting them with the sordid past of the mother country.

On encountering a group show, I usually spend time viewing each work before consulting reference materials. I sat for a while attempting to make sense of the Alia Syed installation *Panopticon Letters: Missive I*, which consisted of elegant images of flowing waters (of the River Thames, I found out later) with geographical coordinates intermittently overlaid, the screen



Zina Saro-Wiwa, *Karikpo Pipeline* (2015), frame enlargements and installation view from *Migrating Worlds: The Art of the Moving Image in Britain*. Courtesy the artist and the Yale Center for British Art. Photo: Richard Caspole.



sometimes fractured horizontally. The version I viewed was silent, meditative, visually calm with disturbing interruptions, a respite from a content-heavy show. Later I understood that there was in fact a spoken soundtrack, made up of quotes from texts with references to “history, the environment, imperialism, and the place of the human in the contemporary world,” including Bentham’s description of the Panopticon. It seems the voiceover was a central element. But too late. The sound was turned on for the piece after I was already involved with other installations.

In fact audio was the major weakness in an exquisitely mounted show that complemented the splendid Kahn architecture. But, like many exhibitions comprising audio-visual works I’ve experienced as spectator and even some including my own cinema installations, attending to sound seems to be beyond the expertise of the visual arts curator. In *Migrating Worlds*—perhaps appropriately titled in this regard—sound leaked from installation to installation, creating an unpleasant discordance that interfered with the experience of several pieces. The curators wisely avoided the crude compromise of individual headphones except when integral to a specific work, but for unexplained reasons they failed to adopt other readily available technological solutions, such as focused speakers. Booming audio from Theo Eshetu’s *Atlas Portraits*, mixed with the voices of the Alia Syed piece and occasional growls from Isaac Julien’s *The Leopard*, almost overwhelmed Zina Saro-Wiwa’s powerfully silent five channel digital video work *Karikpo Pipeline* (2015).

The five screens of *Karikpo Pipeline* are laid out horizontally as an image plane about 20 feet wide, an untidy scrubby landscape stretching across them, once as a continuous image, later fragmented or mirrored horizontally. The palette is muted: a range of gloomy greens and ochres, mud brown tracks and elephant grey paved paths cutting into the landscape, the ashen rust of decaying pipeline elements partially obscured by verdant grasses, and patches of chemically blue water pooled around disused wellheads. A splendid bare-chested figure appears, his head obscured by a black and white antelope mask, his waist-down apparel, sun-hot yellow and flag-red, in striking contrast to the landscape. He is joined by two others similarly costumed. Using the abandoned pipeline materials as set and support, they engage in an acrobatic dance display, superimposing vibrant, deeply-rooted cultural force on a landscape ravaged by non-indigenous industry. The silent video draws one in visually, but at the same time it is clear that there are deadly serious political and philosophical purposes underlying the ritualistic presentation, a world of meaning not to be revealed by the images alone. The booklet accompanying the exhibition provides the essential details.

The artist’s surname is known internationally through her father’s work in Nigeria. Ken Saro-Wiwa documented and publicized the blatant disregard of human rights and environmental values that characterizes the transnational oil conglomerates’ 30 year ruthless exploitation of natural resources in West Africa.

Because of oil spills, oil flaring, and waste discharge, the alluvial soil of the Niger Delta is no longer viable for agriculture. Furthermore, in many areas that seemed to be unaffected, groundwater was found to have high levels of hydrocarbons or were contaminated with benzene, a carcinogen, at 900 levels above WHO guidelines.²

Ogoniland was especially ravaged. It was the location of Ken Saro-Wiwa’s offices, a focus of his activism, and, twenty years later, the region where *Karikpo Pipeline* was filmed. In 1995 the Nigerian military government executed Ken Saro-Wiwa. This fact adds an additional layer of significance to the installation work. One can sense the artist’s endeavor to mitigate the pain and complexities of mourning her father with an affirmation of the continuing powers of traditional culture. The Karikpo dancers project life-force and human energy, joyfully leaping and flipping on the useless decomposing oil infrastructure ruins.

Together the artist and the dancers — also artists — elaborate a lively genre that attests, Zina insists, that “Ogoni is still Eden, only with pockets of Hell”³

Once one has an understanding of the background of the piece, *Karikpo Pipeline* acquires subtle depth and meaning on top of the pure pleasure of the wild dance performance in its post-



John Smith, *Lost Sound* (2001), frame enlargements. Courtesy the artist.

apocalyptic setting. Many of the works in the *Migrating Worlds* can be described similarly: rich and complex, each navigating particular issues in its own way.

In comparison to *Karikpo Pipeline*, Zineb Sedira's *Mother Tongue* is almost understated. The French-born Algerian artist lives in London, her triple national identities forming the basis for this three channel installation. Each monitor contains the profile view of a face-to-face dialogue between two people: the artist and her mother, the artist and her young daughter, and the girl and her grandmother. The dialogues are straightforward interview sessions, the younger of the two characters questioning the older. The artist speaks French to her mother, who replies in Arabic, the daughter English to her French-speaking mother and to her grandmother. Each video monitor is equipped with separate headphones. The highlight of the piece is the third monitor on which the youngest of the three gently, in colloquial English, questions the oldest about her schooldays. But the old woman just looks at the girl, smiling lovingly but without comprehension. The two of them do not share a language. The import of the piece is basic and moving, highlighting a common consequence of migration. The generations are unable to communicate, with the implication that the lacuna is not only linguistic.

John Smith is a prolific London filmmaker, well-known for his genre-stretching *Girl Chewing Gum* (1976)⁴. His *Migrating Worlds* contribution is *Lost Sound* (2001), a single channel piece presented as an installation on a monitor. Like many of Smith's films, it was shot in formerly working-class London neighborhoods, and on one level is a document of life on the streets of uncelebrated parts of the city. Every scene, a precise cinematic composition of the dynamic metropolis, includes discarded audio tape, mostly unraveled from cassettes, but also some 1/4" snarls — floating in a puddle, caught on a lamppost, entangled with barbed wire or wind-blown in the branches of a tree. Smith and his collaborator Graeme Miller mixed an extra fragment of audio with the natural sounds of the city scene — a proposal for what may have been recorded on the discarded tape: scratchy bits of music, TV or radio conversation played forward and backward, and other apparently random elements adding an element of musicality, of narrative, of pathos and mystery to the image. Levels of temporality infuse the work. Was it an ironic curatorial gesture that the work mirrored the audio problems I identified earlier? Extra audio spills into a street scene, but in this piece it was an elegant counterpoint, rather than an annoying interruption, an affecting sense of closure to a remarkable show, encouraging me to forgive what I saw as its single flaw.

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Notes and citations are online at:
<http://www.mfj-online.org/weinbren-migrating-worlds-notes/>

