

AI WEIWEI ODISSEY

Odyssey

The installation Ai Weiwei presents in the ZAC exhibition space is realised across a piece of floorpaper of around 1000m2 in surface area. It was born from a research project into refugees and refugee camps around the world, which he started in 2015.

The Odyssey installation is the result of careful investigation of the historical, political and social context in which the “refugee crisis” - which represents the focus of his research - has developed. It is a path that started from direct, personal experience and has been developed through the study of the topic in its current events and throughout history.

The iconographic motif for the wallpaper is made from a combination of images taken from social media and materials collected by the artist during the course of his visits to refugee camps, and it has been organised based on the graphic and stylistic elements from ancient Greece and Egypt that inspired him. Black-and-white figures appear juxtaposed, in the style of ancient Greek pottery, but morphed to represent the 21st century political realities of militarisation, migration and escape. The close dialogue between the didactic aspect of the ceramic iconography and the huge quantity and speed of images which modern man is used to, creates a direct relationship between a collective, historical memory and modern communication, growing one of the central themes in the research and works of Ai Weiwei.

It is a research project which has deep roots, as the artist himself explains: “I thought back on my

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April 23 – June 20, 2017



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own experience as a refugee. When I was born, my father, Ai Qing, was denounced as a ‘rightist’ and was criticised as an enemy of the party and the people. We were sent to a labour camp in a remote region far away from our home. It was an extremely difficult time being seen as a foreigner in your own nation, an enemy of your own people, an enemy of those my father loved most...” (Laundromat, Jeffrey Deitch, New York, 2016).

His interest in studying this matter started back in 2011, when Ai Weiwei was arrested, but only became possible in 2015 when his passport was returned and he was again able to travel outside China to visit refugee camps in various areas, including Greece, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Gaza, Kenya, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Mexico. «Between 2011 and 2015 - explains K. Smith - in the four years he was under house arrest he started to dedicate himself to art once again, using it as a prism through which he could both depict and exorcise his own detention».¹ In 2016 he filmed a documentary on the global refugee situation. The Odyssey installation is an artwork which is both terrible - for the power of the content - and captivating - for the cleanliness of the form. It is made using images collected in these years of research, across six different decorative themes.

Here follows a detailed explanation of the project, where the artist shows his research methods, his approach to the subject and the contents of the work:

“In the last year, I have been producing a documentary on the refugee crisis. I have traveled to over ten different countries across several continents, having visited dozens of refugee camps. I have

¹ Karen Smith, *Ai Weiwei: la libertà in azione* in Arturo Galansino (a cura di), *Ai Weiwei Libero*, catalogo della mostra (Palazzo Strozzi, Firenze), Giunti, Firenze 2016. pp. 32-33.

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interviewed refugees and others involved, such as local politicians and NGOs. The refugee crisis has a much broader context. There are different histories, regional and religious conflicts, economic pressures, and environmental crises that have contributed to what we understand to be the refugee crisis. My team and I studied this, beginning with the earliest human movements, stretching back to the Old Testament. With the wallpaper, specifically, we tried to come up with a visual language directly inspired by drawings found in early Greek and Egyptian carvings, pottery, and wall paintings. Within that context, we integrated the new conflicts, with images found on social media and the Internet, as well as images from my own involvement. Beyond the images, we also examined literature and the political conditions of the various periods. It took more than half a year to finish the drawing and it relates to six themes: war, the ruins resulting from war, the journey undertaken by the refugees, the crossing of the sea, the refugee camps, and the demonstrations and protests.”

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