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## Escaping the Past, or Embracing It Before It Fades

By SUSAN HODARA APRIL 10, 2015

On the left side of Pepe Coronado's screen-printed diptych "U.S./D.R. A Love-Hate Relationship," small blue silhouetted maps of the Dominican Republic float in rows within a white silhouette of the United States. On the right side, a white silhouette of the Dominican Republic is the backdrop for rows of blue United States maps. The image is a visual interpretation of the entangled relationship between the nations. It is also an expression of the powerful connections Mr. Coronado feels to both the Dominican Republic, where he was born and raised, and the United States, where he has lived since 1989.

"U.S./D.R. A Love-Hate Relationship" is one of 65 works in "Crossing Borders: Memory and Heritage in a New America," an exhibition at ArtsWestchester's Arts Exchange. The show features 10 artists; nine are immigrants, one is first-generation American. Their paintings, drawings, prints, installations and mixed-media constructions address the challenges of integrating two separate cultures and the insistent grip of the past.

"Our intention is to recognize how much people who have come from elsewhere have contributed to our society," said Kathleen Reckling, ArtsWestchester's gallery director and the curator of the exhibition. "At the same time, it is to remind people that we all share this common story. We have our individual narratives and perspectives, but each of us is a product of somebody, somewhere, at some time crossing a border."

Ranging in age from their 30s to their 80s, the "Crossing Borders" artists arrived in America from countries that include Nigeria, Australia and South Africa. They were drawn by educational opportunities, economic prospects and political freedom.

The desire to escape the restrictions of one government for the promises of

another is captured in five selections by Peter Sis, an award-winning children's book illustrator and author and a 2003 MacArthur Fellow. Mr. Sis was granted asylum after coming to the United States from Czechoslovakia in 1982. In his painting "The Wall: Over the Wall," a winged man on a bicycle soars above an endless wall that separates a dreary landscape from a brighter one; in the distance, a tiny Statue of Liberty stands beside the Manhattan skyline. "Being free to go where you want, to discover places, to express yourself — that's what America represents," Mr. Sis said.

In a second painting, another flying man, this one composed of hundreds of white birds, was conceived to honor Vaclav Havel, the writer, dissident and statesman, after his death in 2011. Titled "Flying Man," the image was selected by Amnesty International's Art for Amnesty and, with funding from U2's Bono and the Edge, Peter Gabriel, Sting and Yoko Ono, was woven in Aubusson, France, into a tapestry that now graces the Vaclav Havel Airport Prague.

"For a moment he is there," Mr. Sis said of the figure, "but in the next second all the birds will fly apart."

Several artists featured in "Crossing Borders" investigate what fades and what persists across generations and societal shifts. Nazanin Hedayat Munroe's commissioned installation, "100 Destinies," is an exploration of what she called "cultural dilution."

To produce the work, Ms. Munroe, who was born in Michigan to parents who immigrated from Iran, immersed herself for 100 days in the Persian tradition of consulting the 14th-century poet Hafez for guidance, a form of bibliomancy, or book divination. One hundred poems written in Farsi (her "100 Destinies") hang on a wall, behind a dressmaker's form cloaked in a silk robe that Ms. Munroe painted with the Farsi word for destiny. One hundred red threads connect the robe to the poems. The outer layer of the garment is gray, representing traditions lost over time. The inner layer is red.

"The red is the core of the outfit, the vibrancy of my heritage," Ms. Munroe said. "In my core I'm still Persian."

With "Fasten Your Seatbelts, We Will Be Landing Shortly," another installation commissioned for "Crossing Borders," Nandini Chirimar conveys the duality of raising her two children in Manhattan while going regularly to India, where her relatives still live. The piece is an arrangement of 24 framed drawings, watercolors, prints and collages, many in tones of pink and gold. There are images

of household items like jars, bookshelves and folded laundry; there are maps of Jaipur and New York, some accompanied by handwritten lists pertaining to travel.

The choice to incorporate 24 pieces emerged from a life that straddles two far-flung time zones. “I’m constantly on a 24-hour clock,” Ms. Chirimar said. The layout of the items on the wall was a deliberate play on balance — like her life, she said, “it is symmetrical but not symmetrical, balanced but not balanced.”

One of the pieces is a rosy disk, half an inch deep, made of rolled-up trimmings from the edges of the other works. “It symbolizes my circular existence,” Ms. Chirimar said. “Sometimes I feel like I’m going round and round.” The circle also suggests a poignant moment on her trips home from India. “It’s early morning when we fly into New York,” she said. “I watch the sunrise from my window.”

When Ed Young immigrated to the United States from China in 1951, the border he crossed was national. When he created “Bird and Diz,” a continuous illustration, almost 30 feet long, for a new children’s book about Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, he crossed a different kind of border, this one into the world of jazz. It was a subject he knew little about, and he embraced the chance to learn. “I felt challenged to make the sound visible,” he said.

The result, which is unfurled in the gallery’s former vault, is a swirling explosion of pastels and Sumi ink that morphs between sketches of the musicians and pure abstraction. “The two of them become calligraphic,” Mr. Young said.

Mr. Young, a Caldecott Medal-winning artist, considers each of the nearly 90 children’s books he has illustrated a unique journey. “Every story has its own spirit,” he said, “and the mediums and techniques I use are completely different from one to the other.”

Though he arrived in America long ago, as an artist he has continued entering foreign territories. “I cross borders all the time with my books,” he said. “Each one is a new country.”

“Crossing Borders: Memory and Heritage in a New America” runs through May 2 in the Peckham and Shenkman Galleries at ArtsWestchester’s Arts Exchange, 31 Mamaroneck Avenue, White Plains. Ms. Hedayat Munroe will demonstrate silk painting techniques on April 18, 1 to 3 p.m. “Crossing Borders” is part of ArtsWestchester’s “ARTSEE Festival of New Work,” which includes more than 70 events hosted by 40 arts organizations. The festival runs through July and is among projects commemorating ArtsWestchester’s 50th anniversary. For more information: 914-428-4220 or [artsw.org](http://artsw.org).

