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CHRIS THURMAN: The unbearable lightness of being a refugee

Rwandan-born artist Serge Alain Nitegeka has different insights to offer about what migrants carry with them

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'Identity is Fragile IV, 2020. Charcoal and paint on wood, 120 x 90 x 4.5 cm. Picture: SUPPLIED/COURTESY STEVENSON GALLERY

To migrate is to carry. Some migrants, the unforced ones, have the good fortune of being able to pay shipping companies to do the carrying for them: furniture, kitchenware, décor, books and houseplants, all packed into containers and dispatched safely across the ocean. Others are not so lucky: fleeing with nothing more than the clothes on their backs, they carry memories and vestiges of belonging from the place they once called home.

An archetypal image of the refugee is, in our collective imagination, a figure carrying an object – a satchel, a parcel, a bundle, a sack. So familiar is this iconography that a fetish has developed among journalists and photographers

catering for the settled, nonmigrant media consumer: “What’s in the refugee’s bag?” is a subgenre of human-interest stories covering the phenomenon of forced migration. The poverty of the displaced person is romanticised, with a combination of pity and sentimentality attached to the notion of “a few cherished items”, salvaged by those escaping persecution or warfare and guarded like talismans.

The visual history of “luggage” from a century of refugee crises has in many cases been severed from the grim material circumstances and the violence that precipitated them. Think of the Ghana Must Go bag, now employed for fashion shoots, although it should also be a reminder of Nigerian xenophobia in 1983 (or, for that matter, SA xenophobia in 2008 or 2015 or 2019).

Rwandan-born artist Serge Alain Nitegeka, whose personal experience as a refugee making his way to Johannesburg informs his work, has a different set of insights to offer about what migrants carry with them. In his new exhibition, *Lost and Found* (at Stevenson Johannesburg until March 12), Nitegeka eschews the fascination with what is inside the bag and instead concentrates on the outside form. He recalls:



Installation view of *Lost and Found*. Picture: SUPPLIED/COURTESY STEVENSON GALLERY

“The objects they made came in all sorts of shapes and manageable sizes. No-one knew what the other had cocooned inside ... the contours revealed nothing save for abstract shapes ... old suitcases, buckets and basins. From daily use, wear and repair, the objects turned out complex and beautiful. Across the borders, [migrants] began to identify themselves with the objects they made and carried. Their objects belonged to everyone and to no-one, lost and found in time and place.”

For this body of work, Nitegeka has employed canvas and cardboard to stitch together various ambiguous shapes that quietly haunt the gallery space in which they are installed. The exhibition is a hybrid of the contrasting abstract and figural or figurative modes that the artist has previously adopted. These curious white forms, hovering in a white space, echo but do not replace the objects in Nitegeka’s recollection. They stand metonymically for the refugee experience, but not through easy symbolism – they conceal as much as they reveal.

These sculptures are complemented by a series of self-portraits in charcoal and paint. The artist-migrant portrays himself as if on the side of a wooden packing crate; his identity seems to merge with the wood, its grain scored across his skin. Nitegeka has used this technique before, but in previous iterations of the work he is depicted burdened by a heavy black weight. In the new images, he cradles versions of the white shapes, their three-dimensional seams morphing into veins or cracks on the two-dimensional surface.

There is still a struggle here, but also a sort of tenderness. The artist, too, has his cherished objects. As a migrant he forged and carried “objects in flux, fashioned by time and circumstances”, and having settled in SA he retains this baggage metaphorically – the objects now “vessels of memories” of his former self and “monuments” to who he has become.

Again, however, there is no cause for rose-tinted mawkishness. If heaviness has been replaced by levity, this is something akin to the philosophical concept of “lightness” given popular expression by Milan Kundera’s novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Here, lightness means insignificance and anonymity; the “light” object, or person, is unimportant and ignored. This marginality aptly captures the dilemma of those who experience forced migration and displacement. Nitegeka’s *Lost and Found* could thus be said to exemplify the unbearable lightness of being a refugee.

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