

Hearts Along the Shore

Toronto artist Libby Hague was creating an installation for Gallery Stratford about human interconnectedness when stories of Syrian refugees shocked the world. In 2015, the wrenching photo of drowned Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi could not be ignored. Some countries took in waves of Syrian refugees; others could not.

Global concern about refugees did not start or end then, of course. The Syrian refugee crisis is still growing. Millions of others forced into migration – by natural disasters, political turmoil or climate change – pulse toward the Myanmar-Bangladesh border, the Mexico-U.S. border, and more.

It can feel pitiless to think about art and atrocities in the same heartbeat. Or, it can feel compassionate and complex. Hague took that second route and formed *Every Heart Can Grow Bigger: Make Room*. The work is a generous opportunity for feeling and thinking through some of the overwhelm.

An established printmaker, during her career Hague has embraced installation, animation, puppetry and sculpture. For her print-based installations, Hague makes dozens of woodcut prints, from a few inches to several feet tall. She reconfigures them for each new exhibition and “draws” scrolling narratives through the gallery space.

Hague’s lines are graceful and lithe throughout *Every Heart Can Grow Bigger*. She hired dancers to pose for her. She wanted to draw strong lively bodies, women lifting and carrying each other. From there, watercolour sketches, and finally woodcut prints of humans whose joints may be cousins to articulated puppets.

Colours cluster in some spots, while other scenes are starker black-and-white. Quotes in blocky all-caps strips punctuate the space. “GOD MADE BIG PEOPLE, & GOD MADE SMALL PEOPLE, BUT COLT MADE THE .45 TO EVEN THINGS OUT. DON DELILLO.”

Like a musician or poet, Hague uses repetition to loop and layer metaphors. Walking through, visitors pass paper bodies in motion: sprinting, skipping, tripping. Early on, a woman freezes in four running poses. A guard with a gun walks confidently on her left and she sprints toward a man directly pointing a gun at her, though she hasn’t seen him yet.

This and similar sequences read like frames in a stop-motion animation. People, mostly women, are trying to move into safer lives, but so much is stacked to injure them.

Water, there’s so much water. “NOT WAVING, BUT DROWNING. STEVIE SMITH.” Waterfalls, tides, tidal waves. Drops of water, tear drops turning into black rivers turning into waterfalls from ceiling to floor. Dark puddles, possibly puddles of oil, with baby dinosaur bones below. Many ships ride these waters. One a Noah’s ark toy, its fat bottom small against swirling surf. Are these disasters so enormous that rescue must come from mythological gods? Ancient vessels of trade, 16 sails to the wind. Metaphor for humans on the move for millennia, for good or ill intent.

Then come here-and-now rickety boats packed tight with tiny people waving for help. They hover over whitecaps that froth here with knots of barbed wire. Impassive and ornate as Hokusai’s Great Wave, the water simply doesn’t care.

The Gallery Stratford (summer 2019) version of *Every Heart Can Grow Bigger* had a strong vertical pull up the 15-foot-high walls. Solid black sections pressed tightly above many of the swimmers. Barriers loomed higher for beings to climb. In the ODD, Hague’s images flow more in horizontal bands. The current and the viewers can move in the same direction.



Displacement affects both those on the move and the humans, flora and fauna receiving them. In the gallery’s deepest corner hunch a rabbit, a fawn, a fox, a bear. The furred carefully watch, wearing human-face masks in attempts to understand our species. Or attempts at camouflage? Their defense will be learning to avoid the careless behaviours of the ape-descendants.

Hague uses her images as modular fragments. Between the two versions of *Every Heart* she showed *On This Wondrous Sea* at the Karachi Biennale (November 2019). That festival theme: eco-disasters caused by dense urbanization.

All three shows explore “what seems like a natural right of people to try to move to a better/ safer life,” Hague says. “In Stratford I extended this to the #metoo movement and women trying to improve their lives, but I anticipated (correctly) that in Pakistan female nudity would not be allowed so I shifted my focus to the flooding and swimming characters.” The evolution in Dawson is the theme of animal displacement.

Throughout the show, connections are the only hope. They don’t always save; several drowned paper people are carried too late. But some connections do. A sturdy man lifts a swimmer to safety on one wall, and across the gallery a shore-walker wraps a blanket around shipwreck survivor. And *Every Heart Can Grow Bigger: Make Room* begins and ends with restful pastel clouds and people calmly conversing in groups.

The greatest constrictors of generosity are pain and fear. Hague’s loose narrative ends with a picnic. A simple event outdoors. All need a place to sit down and eat and talk with friends after so much dreadful running.

Hague doesn’t suggest global conflict would end if we could only cooperate. Her part of public dialogue is to hold space for processing some difficult truths: space sustained within the opening words FOR BETTER OR WORSE and the closing, hopeful YES. BE KIND.

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Meg Walker is a Dawson City-based interdisciplinary visual artist and writer. She continues those pursuits with an ever-deepening passion for northern creativity and wilderness, especially now that average annual temperatures north of 60 are rising at about triple the global rate. It remains to be seen whether we’ll welcome climate refugees up here, or if we’ll be heading south for help.



Libby Hague

*Every Heart Can Grow Bigger:
Make Room*

ODD
GALLERY

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