

## LETTER FROM CAPE TOWN

Alfredo Jaar, *Six Seconds*, 2000.

# Crisis of Identification

Tensions surrounding refugees leave South Africa in a bind

BY SEAN O'TOOLE

**A**LFREDO JAAR, the Chilean-born information artist and New Yorker who in March won the 2020 Hasselblad Award (the world's most prestigious photography prize), has a strict morning ritual. During a recent visit to Cape Town, where he presented a lecture as a prelude to a show at the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, Jaar explained how, after breakfast, he spends two hours reading dozens of periodicals to which he subscribes: a mix of established newspapers (among them *Le Monde*, *El País*, and the *Guardian*) and “obscure publications” from places like Brazil, India, and Italy. He credits his socialist father with cultivating his reading habit and teaching him how to process news as information to be parsed and interpreted.

It was this studious routine that prompted Jaar to travel to the central African country of Rwanda back in 1994, just months after ethnic antagonism escalated into cataclysmic violence that left some one million people dead. Outraged by what he perceived at the

time as “barbaric indifference” among the news media and politicians in the West—and self-identifying as a “frustrated journalist”—Jaar journeyed to Rwanda to gather evidence that would figure in more than 20 artworks in the years to come, from street posters to elaborate photo-based installations that memorialize a notorious period of underreported trauma.

Scheduled to open at Zeitz MOCAA in March before a strict five-week national lockdown intervened, “Alfredo Jaar: The Rwanda Project” counts as the first comprehensive showing of this important work in South Africa. And with its sublimated warnings about xenophobia, it doubles as a timely cautionary tale for a country once viewed as a beacon of African optimism. “Rwanda is our nightmare, South Africa is our dream,” Wole Soyinka, the playwright, suggested in 1994. Now, more than two decades later, that much-quoted sentiment is, perhaps, truer in the inverse. Rwanda prospers, albeit ambiguously and under autocratic rule, while in South Africa—well, it's not pretty.



Last October, following another deadly outbreak of anti-immigrant violence from months before, refugees and asylum seekers staged coordinated sit-ins at the offices of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in Cape Town and Pretoria, the nation's capital. In Cape Town, protesters bore signs and banners with messages in voices of their own: “Refugees are not safe. We need solution,” “South Africa. You Killing Refugees.” The placard-waving assembly quickly morphed into a full-blown occupation, with the number of protesters at the Cape Town sleep-in swelling from 300 to 1,200 within two weeks.

The civil disobedience garnered widespread media coverage, and the reporting helped distill a set of grievances resounding in South Africa of late. Alongside bureaucratic inertia related to work permits and allowances for residency, in addition to a lack of access to housing, the migrants claimed that harassment and violence had made South Africa inhospitable, and demanded that the UNHCR resettle them elsewhere,

“For every emigré artist success story, there are more that show how integration can be slow and marred by violence.”



Left, Alfredo Jaar with his installation *The Silence of Nduwayezu*, 1997.

Below, African foreign nationals taking refuge inside the Central Methodist Mission church in Cape Town, January 2020.



preferably in Canada or Europe.

Caught flat-footed, the UNHCR released a statement defending South Africa as “a generous host country with progressive asylum policies and laws,” adding that the country was hosting 268,000 refugees and asylum seekers, mainly from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, and Somalia. (That figure does not account for the large number of economically destitute Zimbabweans in South Africa, who number between one and four million, according to various sources.)

Despite occasional deadly anti-immigrant incidents, most notably in 2008 and 2015, South Africa, with its relatively stable politics and economy,

continues to attract African migrants fleeing poverty and civil strife. And its robust art scene and the market around it have fostered talent among émigrés. Artists Patrick Bongoy and Maurice Mbikayi, both from DRC, have forged successful careers in Cape Town. Serge Alain Nitegeka, a Burundian exile who uses his art to narrate hard social truths about forced migration, has called Johannesburg home since 2003. But for every success story, there are many more that illustrate how integration can be slow and often marred by violence.

A month after the migrants occupied the UNHCR, Cape Town police used stun grenades, rubber bullets, and water cannons to drive them out. A core

of the group was subsequently offered refuge in the nearby Central Methodist Mission church, a well-known Cape Town landmark. Opened in 1879, the building is located on a busy square where, for the past two decades, foreign traders have sold wares bearing ambiguous symbols of Africa’s diverse cultures (chiefly woodcarvings, dyed textiles) to tourists. Its lineage is significant: in the 1980s, Central Methodist aligned itself with Nobel Peace Prize–winner Desmond Tutu and anti-apartheid activists, and Reverend Alan Storey—the last conscientious objector to be tried by the apartheid state for refusing mandatory conscription in 1991—remains the church’s current supervisor.

But after months of rising tensions—among immigrant factions who assaulted churchmen as well as neighboring businesses angered by actions that swelled outside—the situation became untenable. Then it reached a breaking point in the spring, when the global pandemic shut Cape Town down—and police stormed the sanctuary and transported the migrants to a tented camp on the outskirts of the city.

## THE UNHCR OCCUPATIONS TRACE

back to events last summer, when police in Johannesburg targeted people and businesses thought to be involved in illegal activities from child trafficking and prostitution to trade in counterfeit goods. Hundreds of undocumented foreign nationals were arrested as part of a long-standing practice famously documented by South African photographer Jodi Bieber, who won a World Press Photo Award for her work related to the detainment of undocumented Mozambicans in 2001.

In contrast to the events nearly 20 years ago, the raids over the summer prompted aggressive pushback. But the death of a South African taxi driver in Pretoria, during an altercation with an alleged Nigerian drug dealer accused of harassing passengers, sparked a national wave of anti-immigrant violence.

Nigeria evacuated more than 500 of its nationals, and two young art galleries from Lagos—Revolving Art Incubator and 16/16—pulled out of a planned visit to the Art Joburg fair in the fall. In the empty space that was to have been the booth for 16/16, sympathetic locals expressing solidarity used black-painted letters evoking graffiti to scrawl “Thanks, xenophobia.”

The ugly persistence of xenophobia in South Africa refuses easy analysis. In

his 2013 book *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary During Global Crisis*, art historian T. J. Demos describes the refugee—generally, but in a way that resonates here—as a “repressed figure of the last century’s otherwise celebrated glorious nationalisms, utopian political projects, and vaunted technological achievements.”

But the catchall term “xenophobia” does not quite contain the whole of the plight of refugees in South Africa overall—and especially not in Cape Town, where racial identification remains spatially and culturally complex among three groupings: white, black, and a mixed-race population that constitutes the largest demographic in the city, at 42 percent. During the attacks last summer, Oby Ezekwesili, an economic adviser from Nigeria attending the World Economic Forum in Cape Town, characterized South Africa’s history of pogroms as evidence of an unusual sort of “Afrophobia” with roots on the continent itself.

The African “other” has long been an ambiguous presence in South African art. Portraits of prelapsarian Congolese and courtly Zanzibaris by expressionist painter Irma Stern from the 1930s and ’40s continue to outprice works by all other South African artists, living or dead. But the shift in focus from “exotic other” among apartheid-era white artists to

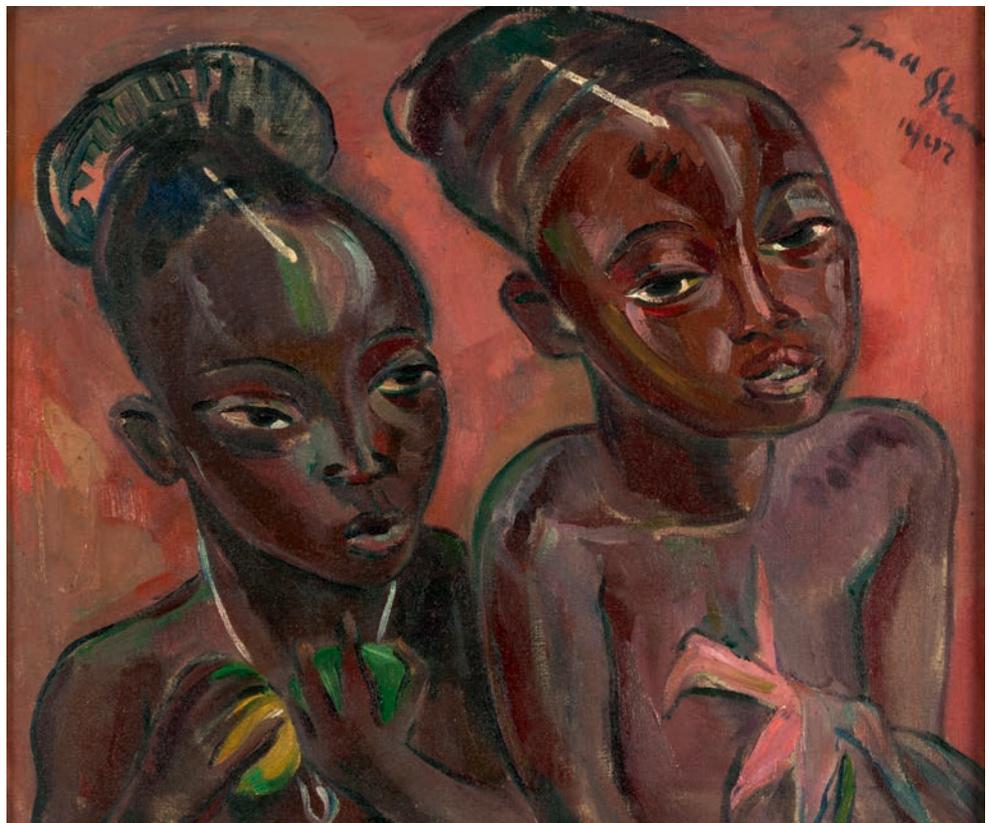
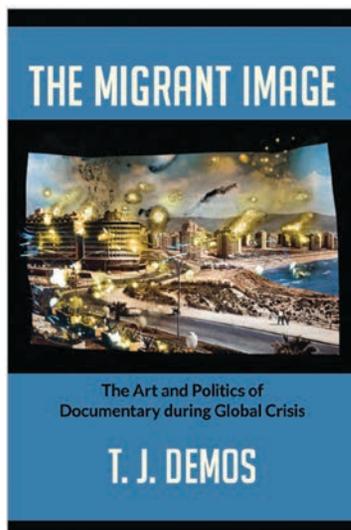
“proximate stranger” by a diverse range of contemporary artists is a more recent phenomenon.

Curator Rory Bester’s exhibition “Kwere Kwere: Journeys into Strangeness” was one of the earliest attempts to analyze migration and identity in post-apartheid South Africa. (“Kwere kwere” is an onomatopoeic sounding of a generic African language and a derogatory term for “foreigner.”) Initially presented in both Cape Town and Johannesburg in 2000, the exhibition’s focus on historical photographs, archival films, and footage of television news was expanded for a 2003 showing in Amsterdam to include works by contemporary artists, among them David Goldblatt, Berni Searle, Penny Siopis, and Jo Ratcliffe (the subject of a survey scheduled for this summer at the Art Institute of Chicago). The expanded show drew particular attention to how contemporary news photography reiterated South Africa’s colonial and apartheid tropes of otherness and black criminality, which continue to shape attitudes toward African migrants in the country today.

More recently, South African artists like Candice Breitz, Mohau Modisakeng, and William Kentridge have connected the country’s “crisis of citizenship”—the term coined by Cameroonian anthropologist Francis B. Nyamnjoh—with other difficult

Far right, Irma Stern, *Mangbetu Children*, 1942.

Opposite, view of Serge Alain Nitegeka’s exhibition “Black Migrant,” 2020.





migrant passages between Africa and Europe. Breitz's multichannel video installation *Love Story* (2016), included in shows programmed this spring at the Baltimore Museum of Art and SITE Santa Fe in New Mexico, is a sophisticated marriage of media critique and documentary testimony in the form of a two-part film installation featuring actors Alec Baldwin and Julianne Moore reenacting narrative fragments from in-depth interviews with six refugees. Among those interviewed were José Maria João, a former child soldier from Angola and a well-known personality in Cape Town.

Since his first gallery show in 2009, the Burundi-born, South Africa-based artist Nitegeka has used his sculptures and paintings to obliquely express his experience fleeing Burundi's civil war. For "Black Migrant," his solo show that opened this past February at the New York gallery Marianne Boesky, Nitegeka presented self-portraits painted on wood panels, as

well as an installation featuring rolled-up bedding, firewood, and various containers (buckets, suitcases) placed on a patch of soil. The work's evocation of the meager resources of refugees and its suggestions of itinerancy and homelessness rhymed with certain visions outside the Central Methodist Mission church, where protesters slept on worn foam mattresses and ate food cooked over flames.

The literalism of Nitegeka's installation raised questions relating to a long-standing criticism of art documenting social strife. "I just wish that the art world would stop being CNN," *Village Voice* writer Kim Levin once quoted a collector saying in response to curator Okwui Enwezor's socially engaged Documenta 11—which included work by Alfredo Jaar—back in 2002. Revisiting his Rwanda work during his time in Cape Town nearly 20 years later, Jaar spoke to me about "daily difficulties" that remain in relation to negotiating the content and the styling of his work. "Is it

too simple, too didactic, too poetic, too beautiful?" he wondered. "I always have to find this balance between information and spectacle, between content and poetry."

The struggle pertains to Nitegeka too. The color black is central to his work, and he attributes his appreciation for it to soil he saw in a refugee settlement near a volcano in DRC. Wandering barefoot around the encampment, Nitegeka marveled at how the gray-black volcanic soil covered his feet like a sock, hiding wounds and wear from walking on the bare earth.

"Black is like a primordial thing from a primordial time when there was nothing," he told me. "Black is ever present—it is constant, and you can rely on it."

While talking about what some consider just a color, Nitegeka also clarified how experience can be transformed by metaphor—or, as Jaar might say, how the realities of the world around us become the stuff of poetry. ■