

FINDING SANCTUARY

The For-Site Foundation asked 36 artists to design hand-knotted rugs on the theme of sanctuary. Malin Lonnberg pays a visit to the resulting exhibition



01 'Sanctuary' installation view

Photo: Robert Diversa Harrick, courtesy For-Site Foundation



Photo: Robert Divers Herrick, courtesy the artist

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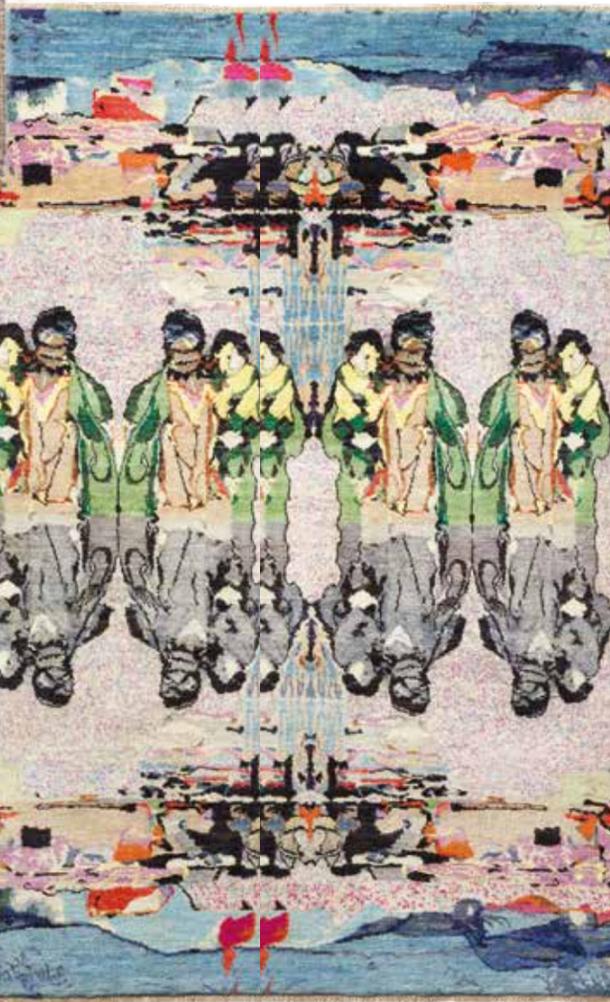


Photo: Robert Divers Herrick, courtesy the artist

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Photo: Robert Divers Herrick, courtesy the artist

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Photo: Robert Divers Herrick, courtesy the artist

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Photo: Robert Divers Herrick, courtesy the artist and Manianne Boesky Gallery, New York

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In San Francisco's desanctified Fort Mason Chapel, a former non-denominational place of worship, the concept of sanctuary is currently explored through a site-responsive exhibition. Organised by the For-Site Foundation, known for its projects on the theme 'art about place', 'Sanctuary' (until 11 March 2018) sees rugs designed by 36 contemporary artists from 21 countries placed side by side on the chapel floor in an installation where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Ideas of refuge and identity are burning topics in these times of migration and displacement, when the right to asylum is a divisive political question in the face of xenophobia and protectionism. The medium for the discussion, the hand-knotted rug, is apt since the format simultaneously unifies and allows for individual expression, but also due to its inherent properties and connotations. 'Rugs speak broadly to cultural heritage, family history, and transportable identity,' says Cheryl Haines, executive director at the For-Site Foundation. 'At a moment in time characterised by growing nationalism and isolationism, we must acknowledge the importance of recognising our common humanity, as well as the need for compassion and the provision of safe harbour for the displaced.'

The artists commissioned by the For-Site Foundation is a diverse mix, but significant is the fact that many of them have personal experiences of being a migrant, refugee or having roots in more than one culture. For Tammam Azzam, his former studio in Syria was a haven from the conflict around him that eventually forced him to leave his home and settle in Germany. Now safety and comfort must be sought in new surroundings. Hayv Kahraman's piece references a childhood memory of her family hiring a smuggler to flee Iraq for Sweden. Through these stories of relocation and readjustment, the For-Site Foundation recognises something in the nature of a rug: 'The space of the rug is necessarily mobile, temporary—able to be rolled up, transported, and deployed as needed.'

A rug can be a transporter and repository of motifs and culture, and conjure up far-away places, be it in space or in time. Diana Al-Hadid's *An Evolution* references the *Pazyryk Carpet*, the world's oldest known pile rug in a work which among other things questions how context influences meaning and identity. Ala Ebtekar also draws on archetypal carpet imagery in the form of niches, floral motifs and winged figures. His *Makan (A Sense of Place)* integrates a manuscript illumination of a divan by the Persian poet Hafez with a photo from the Hubble Space Telescope. Standing on the rug, the central medallion appears to be an opening into another universe. 'The piece provides a contemplative space where the personal psyche can connect with the cosmic spirit, where the earthly and the celestial can meet, and where ancient tradition can intersect with imaginings of the future,' comments Ebtekar.

02 *Untitled* (detail), Sherin Guirguis, 2017. Wool; 121.9 x 190.5 cm (48 x 75 in.). Commissioned by the For-Site Foundation

03 *Erasure* (detail), Ana Teresa Fernández, 2017, from the series *Erasure*, 2016. Wool and viscose; 124.5 x 188 cm (49 x 74 in.). Commissioned by the For-Site Foundation

04 *An Evolution*, Diana Al-Hadid, 2017, based on the sculpture *The Extinction*, 2016. Wool; 121.9 x 182.9 cm (48 x 72 in.). Commissioned by the For-Site Foundation

05 *Untitled*, Tammam Azzam, 2017, based on the series *Paper*, 2016. Wool and viscose; 124.5 x 190.5 cm (49 x 75 in.). Commissioned by the For-Site Foundation

06 *Here We Die* (detail), Aimé Mpane, 2017, from the series *Here we die*, 2010. Wool; 127 x 185.4 cm (50 x 73 in.). Commissioned by the For-Site Foundation

07 *Untitled*, Cornelia Parker, 2017, from the series *Worry Lines*, 2008-present. Wool; 124.5 x 180.3 cm (49 x 71 in.). Commissioned by the For-Site Foundation

08 *Untitled*, Ammar al-Beik, 2017. Wool; 121.9 x 182.9 cm (48 x 72 in.). Commissioned by the For-Site Foundation

Ebtekar's words pick up on another curatorial thread. Like a traditional prayer rug outlines sacred space and serves as a bridge between the material world and the spiritual realm, the rugs on display are woven islands providing tangible as well as conceptual room for reflection. In that sense, 'Sanctuary' is very much conceived as an interactive exhibition. Visitors remove their shoes at the entrance to the chapel, and are then free to walk and sit on the rugs, and really spend some time with the artworks. It is not often that one is allowed, or even encouraged, to touch a piece by Ai Weiwei, Cornelia Parker or Mona Hatoum—it is a good way of taking advantage of the tactile qualities of a rug, and especially meaningful for those unfamiliar with the feel of a hand-knotted carpet.

The rugs commissioned by the For-Site Foundation were woven in wool in Pakistan, using a traditional technique. The makers of the rugs are named in the exhibition catalogue, which is to the project's credit. In addition, alongside contextualising essays by writer and activist Rebecca Solnit and academic Mino Moallem sits a photo essay detailing the rug-making process. From dyeing the yarn to warping, weaving and cutting the finished rug of the loom, the reader is taken through the various stages of the age-old methods; it is a welcome inclusion in a publication that otherwise leans towards theory. These acts fit into a larger narrative within the sphere of handmade carpets, where a number of companies producing rugs have undertaken to challenge the conventional anonymity of the weavers.

Rugs have an inherent tendency to bring people from across the globe together. Here, the For-Site Foundation in California, artists from different places in the world, and the weavers in Pakistan have collaborated to create something where shared humanity is at the very centre. www.for-site.org

Rugs speak broadly to cultural heritage, family history, and transportable identity



Photo: Robert Divers Herrick, courtesy the artist

07



Photo: Robert Divers Herrick, courtesy the artist

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