

# SF WEEKLY

## Woven Resistance, in “Sanctuary” at Fort Mason

The FOR-SITE Foundation’s interrogation of the cultural specificity of carpets and floor coverings bumps against some of the most pressing contemporary social issues, from the Muslim ban to the refugee crisis.

BY Jonathan Curiel, Thu Feb 22nd, 2018

Art exhibits that spotlight rugs — like last year’s acclaimed Metropolitan show in New York, “[Carpets for Kings: Six Masterpieces of Iranian Weaving](#)” — are usually surreal because they treat the works as beautiful objects to *stare at*. Touching those carpets, a tactile sensation that’s an intrinsic part of the normal rug experience, is absolutely forbidden — and it’s practically impossible anyway, since the carpets are on the museum’s walls or behind glass.

That’s one reason why “[Sanctuary](#),” the [FOR-SITE Foundation](#)’s rug exhibit at Fort Mason Chapel, is such a welcome affair. Visitors can walk across each of the 36 carpets on display and feel the wool beneath their feet. Hell, you can even lie on the carpets and take a short nap. But if the medium is the message — and it definitely is with “Sanctuary” — the physical sensation eventually gives way to more emotional and intellectual sensations inspired by the carpets’ designs, which delve into such charged subjects as war, immigration, and international politics.

In fact, “Sanctuary” is as much a political exhibit as an art exhibit, birthed initially as a response to President Trump’s January 2017 travel ban against people from seven Muslim-majority countries: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Cheryl Haines, FOR-SITE’s founding Executive Director and the principal of **Haines Gallery**, expanded the exhibit’s purview to include several other countries, with each artist creating a carpet design that relates to the idea of sanctuary. Still, the exhibit is rooted in a practice that’s common in Muslim-majority countries: using rugs as a place of prayer and reflection. In her work travels to Iran, Egypt, and Turkey, Haines has stepped in mosques where carpets set the atmosphere for contemplation and dialogue. At “Sanctuary,” art-goers are asked to take off their shoes before entering the main space, where the rugs are connected in rows of six, aligned like a quilt.

“The conversations I have with friends and colleagues here often times makes me realize that perhaps they haven’t traveled to these countries. They haven’t had the experience of going into a mosque or even a Buddhist temple,” Haines tells *SF Weekly*. “Once one submits to that experience, that ritual of taking off one’s shoes and approaching the space with respect — whether you believe in the ideology that’s practiced there or not — is [moving].”

“The mere act of entering a space and removing your shoes, making your feet vulnerable, making your *body* vulnerable to that experience, and then stepping upon a rug and having whatever quiet moment of contemplation, [is] highly personal,” she adds. “Whether we’re talking about a prayer rug or a yoga mat. Whether you’re sitting there thinking or meditating, whatever it is — it almost doesn’t matter because it is a place that you can find space for contemplation.”



Familial Unfamiliar 2, by Rashid Rana. Courtesy of FOR-SITE Foundation.

Removing shoes adds to the possibility of contemplation at Fort Mason Chapel, Haines says.

“In a lot of cultures, the feet and shoes — because they touch the Earth — are dirty,” she says. “They are. There’s a practical reason I ask people to remove shoes when they enter my home.”

Each of the 36 artists made a design the FOR-SITE Foundation — working with traditional weavers in Lahore, Pakistan — turned into a four-foot-by-six-foot rug. One invited artist from Pakistan, Rashid Rana, made one of the exhibit’s most compelling works. *Familial Unfamiliar 2* embeds a traditional image of European royalty, a family outdoors with a young daughter, with smaller images of new migrants and refugees, many of them children. The image of a powder-wigged man and his offspring is the kind that august European museums display on their walls. The migrants resemble some of the millions who, since 2015, have risked their lives to get to Europe from Syria and other troubled countries.

Rana's carpeted juxtapositions ask art-goers to consider whether Europe and the United States have obligations to be a sanctuary for people fleeing conditions that Europe and the United States were partly responsible for.

Rana's carpet is a carpet with a conscience. So are the other 35 rugs, including Iranian-American **Sanaz Mazinani's** work of a kaleidoscope Persian pattern that's comprised of explosions, Iraqi artist Adel Abidin's haunting rug of soldiers on their way to war, Native American **Nicholas Galanin's** *White Noise American Prayer Rug* — which distills generations of cultural whitewashing into a mesmerizing sea of particles — Argentinian **Miguel Angel Ríos'** dense and intense depiction of natural Mexican passageways, and Syrian artist **Tammam Azzam's** collaged, abstracted pastiche of a man and his son, whose reflections are multiplied in what looks like the water before them.

Azzam, who left Syria in 2011, seven months after the country's uprising began, and now lives in Germany, tells *SF Weekly* that art and his art studio were sanctuaries for him in Syria, which is why the FOR-SITE exhibit has special resonance. His studio was located in Jaramana, a suburb of Damascus that has been both a scene of wretched violence and internal refugee settlement. Azzam shared pictures of that studio — a basement space with high ceilings, where Azzam painted, and where friends would gather to talk and create and celebrate. Like other Syrian expatriates, Azzam has tried to recreate his former sanctuaries in a country that he had never imagined living in — but is grateful for. Living in Germany since 2015, Azzam says his idea of “sanctuary” changed in the last three years — and that “Sanctuary” also affected how he thinks of the subject.

“The idea of sanctuary changed many times, in different aspects, but I'm still looking!” he says in an email interview. “The FOR-SITE exhibit [addresses] the bigger idea of sanctuary, and absolutely it has changed me.”

Mazinani says he “grew up on carpets. That's what they say in Iran. You play on it, and lie on it, and people just live on it. Those patterns become a certain part of your psyche in a way. My great uncle's family has a carpet-weaving workshop in Qom, which is Iran's most religious city. My roots lie in that history.”

She says she'd been thinking of making a carpet for “many years. But it's not an easy process, and it's hard to find to actually get it made that can translate art into rug-making. I was excited at the opportunity. I'd been thinking of a rug having to do with an explosion. I really fascinated by the war rugs that came out of Afghanistan over the years. I was thinking of the ephemeral qualities of an explosion — and how much commitment there is to making a rug, and having these two points meet somehow.”

(Besides “Sanctuary,” Mazinani has [art in BART stations](#), whose administrators chose her work to be, in effect, visual sanctuaries for passengers waiting for trains.)

Haines says the idea for “Sanctuary” crystallized after speaking with Chinese artist **Ai Weiwei** in Paris about his 2017 [documentary, \*Human Flow\*](#), which looks at the millions

of people who've fled their homelands for newer countries. Ai, who also has a carpet in "Sanctuary," was the focus of the FOR-SITE Foundation's 2014-15 exhibit on Alcatraz. FOR-SITE followed that in 2016 with a "Home Land Security" exhibit about security.

"Sixty-five million people are displaced in the world today — it's the most pressing global issue of our time," Haines says, citing Ai's film. "We began discussing it, and I realized that this was the next logical progression for a project. We'd talked about the walls and barriers, and how that was affecting people and their fear of one another, but then I realized that what's happening is because of those walls and barriers, because of the fear of other people, people are being forced to leave their homes. They're fleeing and disseminating their cultures around the world, and how extraordinary it is that this is happening."

The "Sanctuary" exhibit may travel to other art institutions and other countries, including England and Turkey. You don't have to be politically active to appreciate "Sanctuary." Nor do you have to be a rug enthusiast. But if you're both, "Sanctuary" is the kind of event that makes you feel — literally *feel* — that art can change perceptions of a world that gets more surreal by the day.