

# Moving Stories in the Making

*Pia Singh*

**‘Moving Stories in the Making: An Exhibition of Migration Narratives’** showcases the work of eight artists navigating the liminalities of cultural identity, as individuals addressing socio-political temporalities between the West and a multitude of elsewhere, places they consider ‘home’. Whether forcibly displaced by war, climate change or by choice, toward educational or economic aspirations; each artist wears a State sanctioned identity beholding a certain ‘borderline’ consciousness that creates a productive tension in a space of emergent identity formation, performing feats of cultural survival through storytelling. Drawing a dis/continuous view of social difference and cultural displacement, **Arleene Correa Valencia** (San Francisco/Puerto Vallarta), **Janna Añonuevo Langholz** (St. Louis/Philippines), **Mee Jey** (St. Louis/India), **Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya** (Atlanta/Thailand), **Kiki Salem** (St. Louis/Palestine), **Rafael Soldi** (Seattle/Peru), and **Laurencia Strauss + Zlatko Ćosić** (Miami/Argentina + St. Louis/Yugoslavia) present large scale photographic, fibre-based, sculptural, and participatory installation works curated by the collective, **Moving Stories**, for **The Luminary**, the exhibition is a culmination of a year long initiative instituted by the **Incubator for Transdisciplinary Futures** at Washington University, St. Louis.

Post colonial thinker and feminist critic, Trinh Minh-ha describes the metastatic divide within and between migrant cultural communities in her book ‘elsewhere, within here’, pointing out how the (dis/re)articulation of identity and difference reinforce, fabricate, and claim boundaries that enclose the migrant desire ‘to be free’. Drawing upon the potency of storytelling to understand how the account of personal narratives (as byproducts of cultural and linguistic exchange) help us gain a better understanding of those who seek to be free, Minh-ha reveals the contingencies of emancipation and empowerment, exploring the historical necessity of lived narratives. Freed from enforced boundaries and categorization, or reductive read of multi-cultural norms, participating artists in **Moving Stories** delink themselves from being markers of a singular culture, people or country, building instead solidarities of their own.

Conditionally included and excluded across socio-political, bureaucratic and economic lines, selected works mark acts of translation, as artists ‘re-create’ their identities (Bhabha) in order to fit where one is oft un-welcomed. This break in continuum between past and present places that lead to an experience of a ‘borderline’ identity, ultimately leads to an unfolding of a poetic voyage, captured conceptually and materially through stories and shared accounts of the self. Gathering firsthand and inherited memories, names of those forgotten or overlooked, the artists carve routes to their collective survival, creating a sense of home, within and without.

But where did their journey begin? Did it begin with first breath, or does it precede us? Did it begin at the crossing of a border or has it traveled from generations before (and after)? Or, does it begin within the viewer who is receiving these works, listening in on their messages, adjusting their position within narratives shared in the exhibition?

In *‘Pāpalōti: Soñadores en Búsqueda de Amor / Pāpalōti: Dreamers in Search of Love’* (2023), Arleene Correa Valencia tells us a story of the multigenerational effects of migration. Moving away from narratives of distress linked to the plight of immigrants at the U.S.-Mexico border, Valencia shares her story of growing up as a child in Puerto Vallarta.

Escaping cartel related violence, the artist and her siblings crossed the border, entering the unknowable world of waiting over 25 years to be legally recognized as citizens in America. Graduating from California College of Arts in San Francisco in 2020, Valencia sought to decolonize her background in academic painting, turning to Mexican embroidery traditions as embodiments of living histories. Recreating family photographs and images of children waiting to be reunited with long-lost parents, Valencia repurposes garments and textiles from personal family archives, incorporating kite motifs of Monarch butterflies, migratory birds, and Axolotl as elemental migratory beings, reconstituting signs and symbols that inscribe her cultural identity, overturning hegemonic representations of scarcity by celebrating the possibilities of a conflictual, yet dynamic space. Charting aspirational routes to escape violence and impoverishment in Hispanic Californian communities, her practice seeks to keep communal inquiries alive (for example, through communal mural making) as a celebration of survival, surfacing another way of acknowledging troubling border politics.

Peruvian born artist-curator Rafael Soldi’s *Entre Hermanos* (2018) studies the intimate intersection of migration, memory, and loss in relation to queerness and masculinity. Inviting collaborators into a recreated photo-booth ‘confessional’, Soldi captures a transient sense of the self as shared with other queer, male-identifying Latino immigrants at *Entre Hermanos*, a non-profit organization providing educational and social services to queer immigrants since the onset of the AIDS epidemic. Building upon navigational tools and artistic frameworks he conceived of over the course of three years, Soldi builds a space of trust and generosity with each participant; a stranger historically subject to exclusionary, harmful behaviors. Naturalizing them in an experience of being present together within the confessional, the artist invites them to relax into a natural posture, seated with their eyes closed. Guiding each participant through an incantation, Soldi performs a ceremonial mediation to access an affective archive, placing the camera trigger in their hands. *“I invite you to think about the future you imagined as a child, and the one you imagine today, and release what no longer belongs here”* he soothes. At a moment of complete surrender, he invites the participant to release the trigger, relieving them of any further forms of confinement. Voyaging through layers of fraught spatial and cultural memories, each portrait thus captures a quasi-utopian, self-representational image. The source of the representationally singular image- a self-determined, chosen moment unifying the individual with their authentic selves- capturing the length of their long lives in the single release of a cable.

The migrant condition is known to be branded by the mark of distance (Guha). The diaspora migrant finds themselves an ‘apostate’, someone whose citizenship makes them a defector by nationalist and filial rhetoric, in one way or another. Performance artist Janna Añonuevo Langholz falls out of linear time to revisit the spirits of kinfolk in *Zoom Call with Ancestors* (2021). Re-animating images from their personal altar, Langholz summons family members dating back to the 16th century, placing an AI generated portrait of themselves- cheek to cheek. In this act of resurrection lies the simple recognition of the edges at which their existences touch. As members of the diasporic community, navigating being both kept away from native land and native tongue, Langholz attempts to communicate between worlds; past and present, above and below. Challenging the potentialities and limitations of the cognitive space of Zoom and similar virtual gathering spaces as tools in

developing alternate consciousness outside human limitations, she awakens a connection to ancestral experiences and anxieties, raising worthy questions on generational, spiritual intelligence, and emancipation. An appreciation and critique of technological advancement as AI grows increasingly integrated into life, producing a discontinuous time-lag of representational semantics.

Multidisciplinary artist-mother, Mee Jey, dips into autobiographical references to reanimate experiences of childhood in one’s ‘home country’ through fiber, textiles, and large scale participatory installation. In *Souvenir* (2021), she offers visitors an opportunity to preserve memories, feelings, and wisdom, for children displaced or lost in violence and war. Moving to St. Louis as a student, she grapples with the precarity of unending legal processes, “I became an alien *here*” she points emphatically. Traveling away from her homeland, carrying part of it across within her self, Jey’s sculptures attempt to translate the fragmentary nature of displacement and the loss of memory, security, and of ever-shifting language imposed by legislation; translating the experience of disjunction through abstraction. Her practice builds space for audiences to enter a splintered consciousness through the warm fabric of memory, materially co-creating a public installation, casting prayers for the survival of generations to come.

Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya also applies the vitality of textile and generational handloom traditions within a new large scale, site specific participatory installation, *Of Soil and Sky* (2024). Threading lessons passed down from foremothers through an immersive study of handloom textiles in her hometown and neighboring towns in Thailand, Phingbodhipakkiya attempts to uplift the unrecognized beauty of struggle, shifting the frame to the emancipation of women and indigenous textile artisans who precede her. Holding space for generational knowledge and narratives from the past set in the present, she extends ‘care’ beyond the aegis of the nuclear family, delving into weavers songs and stories to build a space for a certain kind of hospitality that is ethically compelled to think of wellness of the other, as wellness within oneself. Inviting members of the St. Louis community to offer one small vessel encapsulating memories of belonging, home, or places marked by time and difference, the artist aspires to journey across cultures and imaginations through this interactive installation in order to test the frontiers of who or what belongs, and who is deemed a stranger, as we all hold elsewhere’s within (Minh Ha).

Growing up between Dayton, Ohio, and Palestine, Kiki Salem creates experimental weavings to speak of territories seized, impossible to reach, and impossible to escape. In acknowledgement of her paternal heritage, Salem weaves razor wire, steel, aluminum and crochet threads in silvers, olives and greens in, *The Silver Lining We Don’t Need* (2020). Addressing the encroachment of land (and resultantly, Palestinian identity inside and outside Occupied territories), Kiki tells the story of the false separation of life between Gaza and the West Bank. Marking the distance between Palestine, her self, and her extended family; the infinite web of Israeli military checkpoints and barriers, Salem indicates the forced separation of Palestinian peoples from blue skies, shorelines and waters, as settler colonists clear and claim the Mediterranean coast for their own. Moving to the Midwest as a teen, Salem has borne painful witness to the ongoing genocidal (il)logic of settler colonialism, seized temporalities, and the phantasmic space of endless possession that eschews the disavowal of native agency. A dense razor wired curtain obscures any view of the ‘other side’. Learning crochet, considering the histories of her incarcerated grandmother (who was a dressmaker) from Brazil, the artist criss-crosses internal craft based resistances, sharing generational stories on multiple timelines. Cutting both ways, a defunct security alarm repetitively blinks, warning viewers of so-called indiscretions of those martyred. A reimposition of maximum security, a no longer illusory screen (between human and animal treatment), *The Silver Lining We Don’t Need* observes an atmosphere of uncertainty and collective loss being experienced by millions of native

citizenry across the world at this contemporary moment.

Engaging with the vast experience of climate-based displacement, Laurencia Strauss and Zlatko Ćosić bring their project *Movement Strategies* (2021-2024) to St. Louis. Drawing a line towards the future as climate impacts and rising sea levels threaten to engulf Miami-Dade County, in *The Bubble Pops* (2017-ongoing), Strauss creates a provocative exchange meant to be experienced by nose and tongue, warning participants and St. Louisans of an imminent, considerably warmer future. Conceiving of the project as a means to exchange knowledge between strangers, Strauss sought the advice of over 2500 individuals on how they have previously adapted to change - across experiences of migration or climate crises - engraved on each popsicle stick. Popsicles are then traded for advice in their new context, melting as they’re exchanged or consumed, with each stick and its communication withstanding the forces of temperature and transience. In *Movement Strategies* (2021-2024), the artists’ videos of melting popsicles and language gathered through *The Bubble Pops* are juxtaposed with scenes of moving water and a rapidly depleting coastline, drawing the sameness and otherness of immigrants and North Americans through words exchanged in person and through visual and audio testimony. Moving shortly after the war in Yugoslavia, Ćosić’s practice connects themes arising from cultural conflict, socio-political in/justices, and an unshakeable sense of strangeness linked to one’s adopted ‘home’ country. Strauss, a first generation North American, is equally committed to how immigrant communities and cultures journey across generations, adapting and germinating through narrative exchanges, mitigating every day displacement. Freezing ordinary day-to-day cues to survival within the ordinary, they preserve and pass on what has never belonged to them.

Eight extra-ordinary tales and perspectives held by eight extraordinary artists, circulating on Cherokee Street at a time of global distress, **Moving Stories in the Making** aims to highlight contingent spaces at which storytelling and artistic practice hold the capacity to speak of shared experience, of both of pain and pleasure, over and above the reception of artwork as representational force. Departing from the notion of ‘home’, countries, and reconnecting to knowledges that precede their own, artists featured in **Moving Stories** declare an acceptance of a different kind of practice; one that is autonomous from systems of ethnocentric control, building reciprocal conversations between experiences alike and opposite to theirs, questioning and building solidarities in canonical blind-spots, working from the margins to the center through differing, but interconnected political struggles toward ethical representation and shared liberation.

*Pia Singh is an art writer and independent curator based in Chicago. Born in Mumbai, her proposed research investigates community-engaged arts practices at the intersection of contemporary art and design thinking. Her writing has been published by ArtIndia, Cultured, Sixty Inches From Center, and NewCity Magazine. This essay was produced as a part of her role as The Luminary’s 2024 critic-in-residence.*

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