

Juan delGado is a London-based artist and film-maker and a media artist whose work focuses on issues of migration, violence and trauma. His latest works explore the experiences of people trapped in besieged areas of Syria, as well as those who have fled and are adapting to a new life. He spoke to Saphia Crowther.

Your own artworks and the projects you are involved in focus on migration. Where does your interest in documenting migrants and refugees stem from? Was there an experience in your own life that prompted this? The first time I was living in Valencia, Spain. In 1989, while living in Valencia, Spain, I met by chance a young man from Nigeria named Frank. Frank told me that he was an agriculture engineer who used to run a farm with his father and brothers. The area was very fertile and his family had been cultivating there for generations. Then, the oil company Shell arrived and their lives were turned upside down. Many young men left their farms to started working for Shell. Frank's father resisted and continued farming. However, the land became contaminated by oil residues, and after his father complained to local authorities, he was killed. This tragedy prompted the family to flee and Frank's mother and young brother went to Senegal. He decided to try to cross into Europe. Indeed, he was one of the first young men who crossed into the Straits, in Southern Spain, well before the huge exodus began.

The *Qisetna: Talking Syria* project gives Syrians outside of their own country a voice. Please can you describe the aims of this project and the reason you decided to become involved? In 2013, I initiated a project called *Qisetna: Talking Syria*, an online platform which aims to counteract the images we receive through mainstream media of war and destruction. In collaboration with a group of young people from very diverse backgrounds, we designed a plan to encourage Syrians both inside the country and those who live in exile or are crossing, to share a story with us. We were aware of the challenge to ask people who were living under tremendously difficult circumstances to write something positive about a place they had left, or which was no longer there. Yet, we were determined to bring back the human side of Syrian life that was being completely overshadowed by TV and media. A group of students of Arabic at SOAS [the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London], offered to translate into English, on a voluntary basis, the stories written in Arabic. Young journalists helped by editing the texts and maintaining the social media aspect of the project, including the Facebook page and blog, and we also got support from Syrian artists who are exiled and wanted to support this initiative. I am personally interested in ideas about displacement, territory and personal narratives. *Qisetna: Talking Syria* is the result of my commitment to produce art that questions and examines the reality around me

You recently ran a project with children in the Yarmouk district in Damascus. What are the key moments and stories that stood out for you? Do you think that the experience of telling their stories helped the children to cope with their traumatic experiences? After having worked on the project *Qisetna: Talking Syria*, our small team decided to continue our goal of reaching more people and initiated a creative writing workshop with a group of young people living in Yarmouk [an area that has been under siege for several years and where the population suffers great humanitarian need]. The project was done with no funding and with help from the Syrian storyteller Bassam Dawood, based in Berlin. Using Skype we delivered a six-week workshop, which was extremely challenging yet very successful in terms of participation and engagement. An evaluation was produced and we are currently looking for funding to produce another workshop with youngsters living in the district of Jaramana, near Damascus.

Working closely with people who have experienced human rights violations can be traumatic for the listener too. How do you cope with this? Do you allow your films/projects to reflect your own feelings, or do you try to maintain objectivity? We are aware of the tremendous impact that working with people who have been exposed to traumatic experiences will have on ourselves. Personally I have previously produced works which involved interviewing people who have been subjected to violence, rape and psychological abuse. I started in 1997 with a project entitled *The Wounded Image* which attempted to explore the representation of trauma. It was a photography project in which I staged the story based on real accounts of traumatic experiences. This project was a graphic representation of violence which captured the attention of the panel who were selecting works for the John Kobal Photographic Awards in 1997. It was a personal exploration of my own trauma of having been exposed to violence as a child. After this project finished in 2003, I decided that I should try to produce a story from an observational perspective and a phenomenological approach. The following works responded to this decision: *Don't Look Under the Bed*, 2001, was my response to the reality of bullying and homophobia in the educational system in the UK backed up by Clause 28 [an amendment to UK law that censored the "promotion" of homosexuality; fully repealed in 2003]. *The Flickering Darkness*, 2009, was my response to the reality of social stratification in Colombia in which people who have been displaced from their hometowns end up in Bogota with no protection, working in the largest food market of the Latin American continent. This work won an Unlimited Award in 2014 and premiered at the Southbank Centre, London. *Fluctuations on Time*, 2011, was a project developed in Nablus [in the West Bank] as a result of an invitation by Artschools Palestine. In collaboration with students from An-Najah University we explored ideas about freedom of movement, territory and individual narratives. *Terminal Sur*, 2014, is a single-screen installation which investigates the reality of many people in Colombia who have been through violence in rural areas. This work premiered at the Refugee Week exhibition *Dis/placed* curated by Counterpoints Arts. Then there are my current projects: *Altered Landscapes* (in production), and *Troubled Waters* (in pre-production).

Altered Landscapes looks at the ongoing refugee crisis in the Mediterranean. How can art help us to understand this huge human tragedy? The work will be designed to draw the viewer in to reflect on the refugee experience. I am currently in touch with many Syrians who have crossed the border either by land, air or by boat (and even swimming and walking). This project is a reflection on this reality; I will journey to Greece to meet more people on the ground in Athens and Thessaloniki, and to record their experiences to share with audiences back in the UK through an installation at the Watermans Arts Centre from March to May 2016. The project is supported by individuals and organisations such as the Refugee Solidarity Movement in Greece. My aim is to film the traces left on the landscape by refugees travelling through Greece, record the ambient sounds in the location, and photograph the places and monuments that refugees encounter on their journey. I will add a reflective narration from my perspective to the work after I have visited Greece; the work will not present the moving bodies of refugees; rather I am focusing on a spoken script in which the narrator

feels how his body and identity is mutating and becoming inhuman. This work is raising questions about how we are responding to the extraordinary issues of this tragedy.

In your work with migrants and refugees, have you had a turning point, or a moment where you decided to take your work in a different direction? How have your interactions with refugees and migrants informed the direction your art has taken? My "accidental" encounter with Frank triggered my interest to use my art to enquire about issues of migration, displacement and personal narratives. His story had a massive impact on what sort of images I would produce; the work *Fleches Sans Corps* was produced in 2003 to highlight the tragedy of many people who perished crossing from Morocco into Spain; a tragedy that had never been known in Europe. Later in my encounter with many Syrian artists who are now living in the southern part of Istanbul, Kadikoy, I had the experience of learning from them how they don't want to be labelled as refugees. They want to be seen as artists who obviously have been forced to move to Turkey and struggle to make a living with their art. This is a huge lesson of extraordinary humanity for me as a European artist.

What's next for you as an artist? I am currently in the pre-production of *Troubled Waters*, the second part of a trilogy in which I examine the trauma many thousands are experiencing when forced to leave their hometowns and risk their lives crossing from Syria into Europe, walking all the way through Greece, Macedonia, Serbia and Hungary to Germany, Holland, Sweden, and finally encountering an environment which requires their identities to "adjust" to the new status quo.

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