

Hope, amidst the bleakness — powerful art by a refugee

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Lucien De
Guise



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THE UK government is getting even tougher than usual on refugees. The latest piece of festive cheer is the stepping up of police patrols and gunboats to defend the Sceptred Isle from the imagined millions making the short but terrifying journey across the Channel. It will be about as effective as Trump's wall, albeit a bit cheaper. Mexico will not be asked to pay.

The most dangerous journey for refugees and other migrants is not the Channel or the Rio Grande. Getting out of Africa is where the real terror lies. Hollywood may make the Mediterranean look like a pleasure cruise, but it's more like a non-Disneyland Splash Mountain.

It's the Med that took the life of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi, washed up on a Turkish beach in 2015. It's also the anonymous backdrop to some of the most powerful paintings I have seen in a while.

The artist is Teowodros Hagos, from the Horn of Africa, a region that was once the world capital of piracy and marine hijacking. It now has people smugglers. His inspiration, though, was that photo of Aylan. *The Desperate Journey* is a series of paintings of the thousands, who attempt such crossings every year, driven by despair rather than greed.

On the English coast there are now individuals poised with binoculars seeking out migrants in their flimsy vessels. They are all ready to report them, not for medical assistance but in an attempt to send them back.

These are unlikely to be the people drawn to Hagos' work. There are obviously many who are, because every painting in the exhibition was sold soon after its opening. There must be a caring side to local art collectors in the corner of Southwest London, in which the Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery introduced this Ethiopian artist to the public. Being in the middle of a lockdown and serious economic decline might not seem the best time to air other people's problems, but it certainly worked in this case.

OF HOPE AND PRIDE

The paintings themselves are majestic as well as alarming. Most feature migrants of Sub-Saharan origins looking as washed up as their inadequate transport. Many are seen wearing the rescue blankets that have become standard for those who make it to some vaguely sympathetic destination.

The shimmering gold or silver of these otherworldly lifesavers contrast dramatically with the dark skin of faces that have been battered by everything that adversity has to offer. Whether old or young, they have clearly endured lives that few of us can imagine. Their pride is the last thing they can hang on to. Maybe there's a little hope, too, but that's less obvious.

There are still plenty of privately funded organisations dedicated to saving the lives of those imperilled in the Mediterranean. The elusive British artist 'Banksy' funded one of these ships himself. The Ethiopian artist has seen the forbidding places that migrants and their rescuers frequent. They are a distant world from sipping cocktails in Monte Carlo.

There are few painters who can convey the hostile emptiness of the sea. The scene becomes more forbidding when the only colour amid the murky greys and blues is the red of empty lifejackets. Who knows where the wearers are. Did they make it and then discard their jackets, or are they invisibly in the swelling still?

DRAMATIC FORM

Paint can bring mood to life much better than most photographs. Overloaded boats silhouetted against a dismal sky are another of Hagos' memorable images. Less raw than the sight of those close-up human faces, they show the commonality of mankind struggling against the elements and then finding that humans can be just as unforgiving as nature.

These works are not just compelling; they remind me of those paintings by the Romantic school that are so out of fashion, it must be time for a revival. Who goes to the Louvre to admire Gericault's Raft of the Medusa?

It's all about gawping at the Mona Lisa. The Raft may be less popular but it has been far more influential. It relates to a true story of shipwreck, despair, class disparities and cannibalism, starting a dramatic form of art that went with the Bohemian, Romantic lifestyle.

Hagos is also about ditching the rational for the passionate, with a heavy mixture of hopelessness. A further connection between Gericault and his Ethiopian successor is that the 19th century Frenchman was fiercely for the abolition of slavery and a believer in the rights of all men.

It is conspicuous — and not entirely approved of at the time — that the person offering the most hope in this bleak scene is a black man waving a flag at the ship that saved them after two weeks without food or water. There were only 15 survivors on a raft that had started with 147.

There will be another exhibition of Hagos' paintings next year.

Follow Lucien de Guise on Instagram @ crossxcultural.

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