

Exhibition Critiques

Between Two Worlds: Folk Artists Reflect on the Immigrant Experience **An exhibition in the Mark Naylor and Dale Gunn Gallery of Conscience at the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, New Mexico**

by Gretchen Jennings, Douglas Worts, and Joan L. Saverino

Critique of *Between Two Worlds* by Gretchen Jennings

I first learned about *Between Two Worlds* in July 2014 when I was working on a blog about how museums might be involved in addressing the issue of unaccompanied immigrant children crossing the United States/Mexican border. When I sent out a request for information on any immigration-related programs in museums, I learned of the National Dialogues on Immigration project, coordinated by the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (www.sitesofconscience.org). Staff in the 20 or so museums that are part of the National Dialogues program are trained by Sites of Conscience to host museum conversations about immigration issues. The Museum of International Folk Art's Gallery of Conscience, whose current featured exhibition is *Between Two Worlds*, is a member of this dialogue

project. Established in 2010, the Gallery of Conscience is a permanent space that provides a framework for exhibitions on difficult issues.

The gallery's goals, exhibitions, and programs intrigued me, so I visited in September 2014. I didn't know at the time that I would be writing a critique, yet a number of aspects of the gallery have stayed with me in the intervening months. The photographs of fellow critics Joan Saverino and Douglas Worts have helped refresh my memory and illustrate my ideas.

A Dynamic Design

The overall gallery design conveys a sense of dynamism. Its consistently informal and somewhat unpolished aesthetic reflects the creators' intent to make the exhibition changeable and flexible without a great deal of expense. The introductory label at the exhibition entrance (fig. 1)

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We asked three professionals with varied expertise to write critiques using the following guideline: a critique is an individual viewpoint, shaped by expertise and experience. Its audience is the profession. It involves your analysis of the exhibition, and your assessment of its strengths and weaknesses from your personal and professional viewpoint, whatever your area of expertise.

The Editor

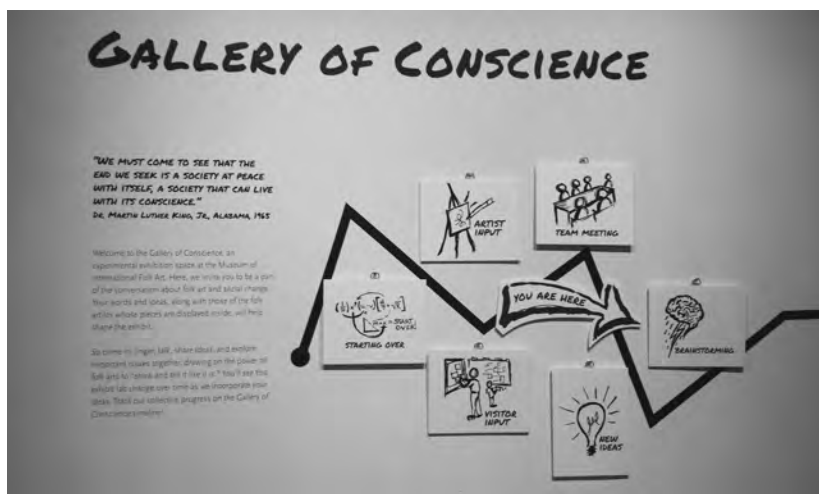


Fig. 1. The introductory label for the Gallery of Conscience calls attention to the experimental nature of the exhibitions it features; the current exhibition is *Between Two Worlds*. Photo by Joan L. Saverino

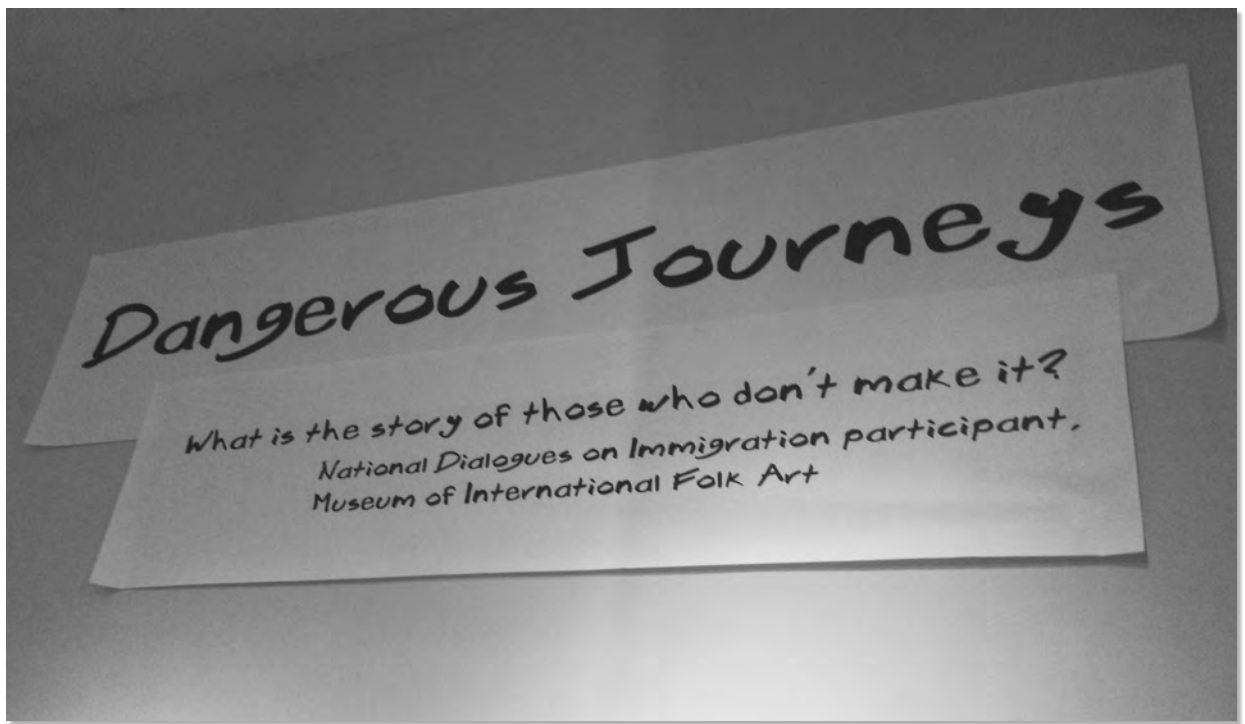


Fig. 2. The exhibition's subthemes are written on large sheets of paper. All relate to the two overarching themes—struggling to feel welcome and living between two worlds. Photo by Joan L. Saverino

The gallery's choice of immigration has allowed it to be both nimble and thoughtful in its current displays and programs.

announces its laboratory-like purpose in words and illustrates it through graphics, both of which communicate process and open-endedness. The lettering is set in type to look like handwriting, and main labels are shown on long strips of butcher paper affixed to the walls (fig. 2). Text thus suggests a flip chart sheet used in an exhibition development meeting. It's not the kind of labeling you see in the rest of the museum or in most museums—silkscreened and permanent. The main labels announce the major sections of the exhibition, such as “Leaving My Homeland,” “Dangerous Journeys,” “Where Is my Home?” and “Who Belongs?”

A Thoughtful Mixture of Art and Interactives

A nice mix of folk art—paintings, sculptures, textiles, and poetry—reflects on the immigrant experience. There are also low-tech, hands-on activities that appear to have been designed to invite visitors to consider their own traditions and imagine how hard it might be to leave them behind. As much of my work is about the development of meaningful, low-tech exhibits, I have the most vivid memories of the interactives. Especially

memorable for its simplicity and its potential to engage was a table with small paper plates and crayons. The instructions ask: “What is one food that you long for when you are away from home? Draw it. Describe it. Name it.” Dozens of plates of remembered flavors and colors are mounted on a nearby wall (fig. 3).

Participatory Development and Implementation

I have learned since my visit that all of the activities—and in fact the entire design of the exhibition—went through a number of iterations before the formal opening on July 6, 2014. *Between Two Worlds* opened unofficially in March 2014. Visitors were invited from the beginning to comment on the activities and were also observed and interviewed regularly by staff. The museum conducted five official “Dialogues on Immigration” informed by Sites of Conscience training, and these dialogues also provided feedback that shaped the exhibition that is on display today.

The overall message that I took away from the exhibition was a sense of the deeply felt traditions that anyone who immigrates must leave. Much of the

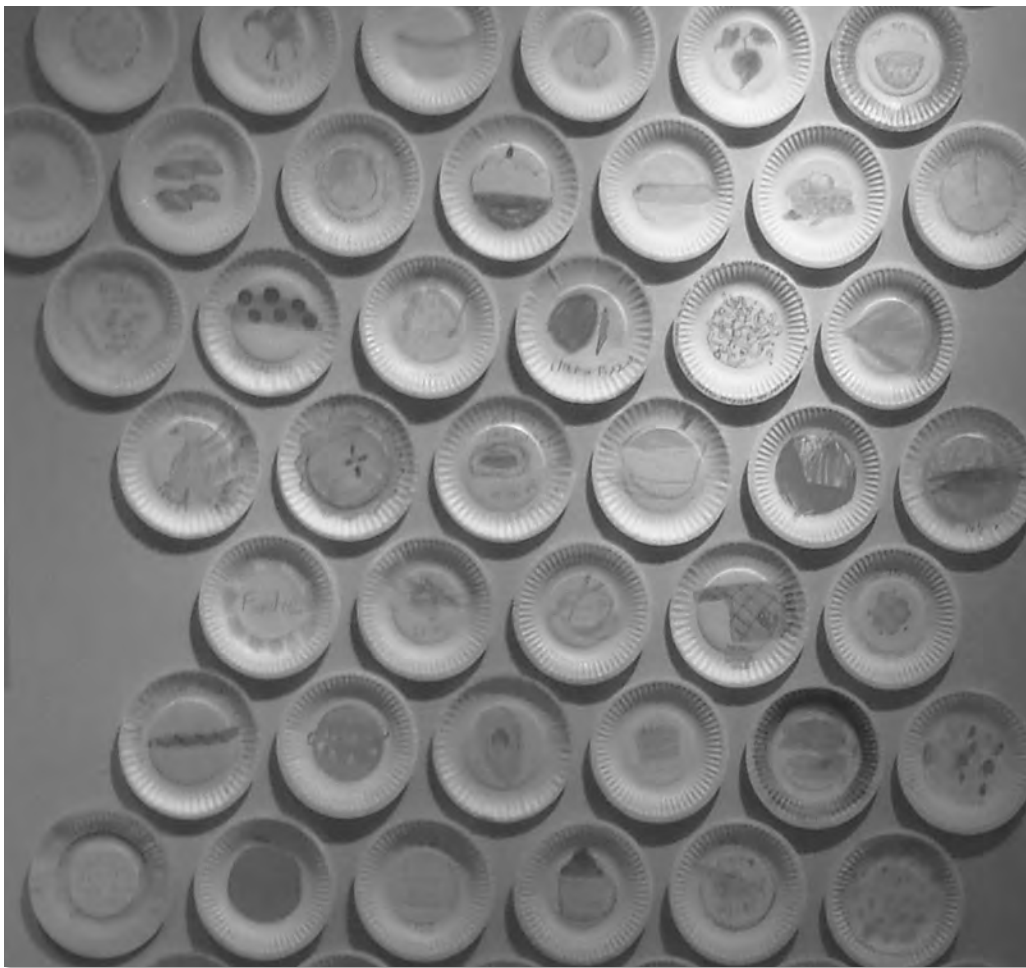


Fig. 3. Paper plates feature visitors' drawings of the foods they miss when away from home. Photo by Joan L. Saverino

art was very poignant and expressive of partings and long journeys. The activities reinforced this idea and made the abstract term “culture” concrete by evoking favorite foods and possessions left behind. I believe I gained a greater physical and emotional connection with the immigrant experience. I have since learned from curator Suzanne Seriff that the key messages (formulated through the staff’s dialogues with artists, recent immigrants from many countries, Native Americans, and communities of European origin whose families settled in New Mexico many centuries ago) revolved around “the struggle to belong in a place where you may or may not feel welcome, and the experience of living between two or more worlds.”¹ For me, the sense of loss for people who immigrate resonated more than messages about their struggles in their new lives.

A Nimble and Responsive Structure

According to its website, the Gallery of Conscience is “an experimental space

where the public is invited to help shape the content and form of the exhibition through interactive elements and facilitated dialogues. Each exhibition changes throughout its life in response to visitor feedback.”² The gallery’s choice of immigration has allowed it to be both nimble and thoughtful in its current displays and programs. New permutations of the persistent issue of immigration to the United States, and especially to the state of New Mexico, will continue to arise; I believe that the gallery is flexible enough in its physical design as well as in its iterative development to continue to address these until *Between Two Worlds* closes in January 2016. In this respect the gallery is a model of museum practice for the 21st century: it demonstrates acute awareness by museum leaders and planners of key issues in our culture, a sense of responsibility to address these issues through the collection and mission of the museum, and the creation of processes that allow for a timely response. ✨

Endnotes:

¹Suzanne Seriff, email message to author, December 11, 2014.

²“Exhibitions: Current,” description of *Between Two Worlds* and Gallery of Conscience at the Museum of International Folk Art, accessed December 12, 2014, <http://www.internationalfolkart.org/exhibitions/current.html>.

I was left wondering though, who would see, let alone appreciate, the emergent nature of the exhibition?

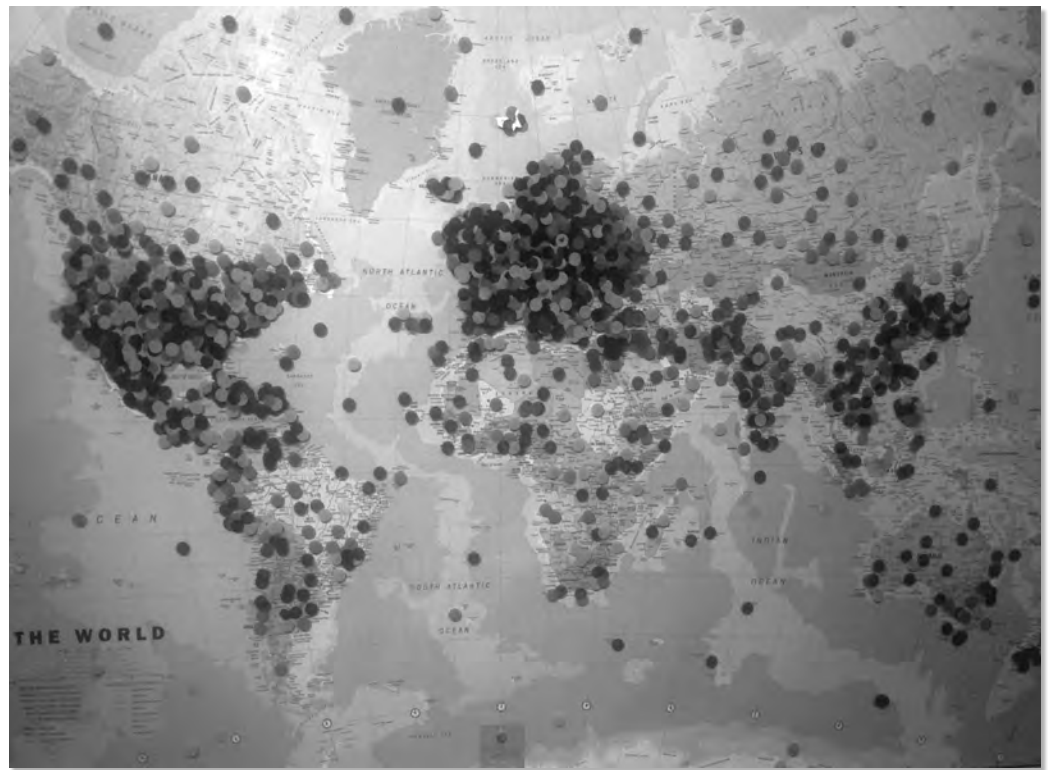


Fig. 1. Map asking, "Where are your ancestors from?" with dots added by visitors. Photo by Douglas Worts

Critique of *Between Two Worlds* by Douglas Worts

One of the most interesting developments in the museum world in recent times has been the emergence of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience. Involving a network of over 185 physical places, each site anchors public reflection and dialogue about moments in history when human behavior crossed ethical and/or moral lines. The Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe is one of these sites, specifically located within one of their galleries—the Mark Naylor and Dale Gunn Gallery of Conscience—which is referred to as an “experimental” space.

Between Two Worlds: Folk Artists Reflect on the Immigrant Experience, on display in the Gallery of Conscience from July 6, 2014 to January 17, 2016, examines the challenges of moving to and fitting into another culture and the myriad obstacles immigrants face within that culture. What makes this exhibition different is its focus on using both folk arts and visitor input to tell the stories that make up the show. By inviting visitors to contribute

to the exhibition, organizers anticipate that the experience would become more personalized and meaningful because visitors would become exhibition co-creators. And content provided by visitors would enable new stories, issues, and discussions to be generated for the benefit of others—enabling the richness of the immigration theme to emerge over time. I was left wondering though, who would see, let alone appreciate, the emergent nature of the exhibition? Is the audience for this show primarily locals, or tourists? It makes a difference, because only repeat visitors will actually engage the conversation in an iterative way. Because Santa Fe is a small city, and because tourism is a large part of the local economy, my guess is that tourists compose the bulk of the audience.

Many people had visited *Between Two Worlds* before I did—made evident by a displayed world map (fig. 1) on which visitors are invited to use dots to identify their family’s ancestral homeland. The map shows that the families of exhibition visitors have come from virtually every corner of the Earth, but most are from North America and Europe.



Figs. 2 & 3. *Fiesta at the Border* by Luis Tapia, 2008. Photos by Douglas Worts

Artworks can embody issues in powerful ways and the works in this show are no exception. The central image of the exhibition is an elaborate story cloth that provides a glimpse into the exodus of the Hmong people from Laos at the end of the Vietnam War. A second memorable artwork, *Santo Niño de Atocha ex-voto*, is a painting offered as a “thank you” to Santo Niño for helping a Mexican mother and her nine-month old son survive a crossing of the borderlands into the United States.

Fiesta at the Border (2008), a sculpture by Luis Tapia, depicts a border crossing between Mexico and the United States (figs. 2 & 3). The figures’ body language revealed stark differences in mood and reality, depending on whether one was looking from the Mexican or American side. The object label asks several questions: “What are some of the borders

you can think of? Are they physical or metaphorical? Are they from the past or the present?”

Although none of these questions sparked my curiosity at the time, later review of the exhibition materials in preparation for this critique led me to think I might have discussed them had I viewed the exhibition with other people. Because there were very few visitors in the exhibition during my visit, I could not assess, even anecdotally, how visitors interacted with the installation. Moreover, since the exhibition offers no space in which visitors might share their answers to these questions—which could conceivably provoke other visitors to reflect upon and discuss them—the questioning seemed easy to gloss over.

One element of the exhibition that both invited and received significant visitor

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Fig. 4. "What would you take?" suitcase exhibit. Photo by Douglas Worts

contributions revolved around a collection of objects that immigrants had brought with them when they left their homeland (fig. 4). A sign read, "If you had to leave your home, and could only bring what you could carry, what would it be? What would be hardest to leave behind?" Hundreds of notes carried a wide range of answers, including: "Hope," "My children & photos," "Hard drive," "My brother," "Passport, journal, pencil, money, water, fav clothes/hat, phone, nuts, backpack," "Courage," "Hope," and "My dog Humphrey."

Having been involved in many visitor co-creation initiatives over the years, I have come to see the value of this approach from two perspectives. The first is the vantage point of the visitor who makes the contribution. In the best of these situations, there is a process of reflection that takes an inner pulse related to the issue or object being focused on, followed by a creative response that connects the individual to the anchor point of the exhibition. These creative connections often seem idiosyncratic, but, when amassed, trends and patterns often emerge. The second vantage point is that of the visitor who is reading the contributions of fellow visitors and perhaps finding in them new insights or triggers for discussion. From my visit, I could not judge how well the questions in

this exhibition have stimulated reflection and dialogue. However, the general tone of these visitor contributions seems quite superficial. Given the expressed, if somewhat vague, reference to the "experimental" nature of this space, I am curious whether organizers are collecting data from visitors and adjusting the installation with a view towards "continuous improvement."

Personally, I found the most moving co-created material in the book where visitors write their family's immigration story. Here, contributors spent both time and effort composing their stories—and these stories spurred me to think about my own ancestral immigration in the 1830s from England to Canada. Following are a couple of excerpts from the visitor book:

In the 1910s, my four grandparents each came independently to NYC from Mayo, Kerry, Cavan, and Armagh counties in Ireland. One came to avoid an unwelcomed marriage; others for economic opportunity. They were helped by family already here, and helped others who came after them....

My family came across the Bering Sea thousands of years ago and never left—Native American Indian. My great grandmother rode a boat from

Given the highly charged issue of immigration today, it is appropriate that the Museum of International Folk Art tackled this theme with its exhibition. . . .

Norway. She came to farmlands. She is part of the heartland now, with her dust and faith—U.S. Citizen.

One of my lingering questions related to *Between Two Worlds* is what the organizers consider to be their measures of success. Integrating opportunities for visitor participation is a laudable strategy, but given the critical issues related to immigration in our world, what are the desired outcomes? Is it shifting personal beliefs, attitudes or understanding? Are there goals related to changing societal systems to address immigration issues? I would have liked to see part of the project related to the exhibition theme within the Santa Fe and New Mexico contexts. This could have offered an enhanced opportunity to engage the local community.

Overall, I applaud the organizers of *Between Two Worlds* for two main reasons. The first is for creating a program space dedicated to reflection, dialogue, and creativity. These are core dynamics of culture and will help to build relationship bridges within and across communities. Secondly, I support their commitment to experimentation. In this situation it is not entirely clear to me just what the “experiment” involves—which would be good to make more explicit to visitors (e.g. by providing details about hypothesis, variables, outcomes, etc.). As museums increasingly strive to become as relevant and publically engaged as possible, experimentation will be essential for adjusting the why, what, and how of museums to meet the needs of our changing culture. ✨

Critique of *Between Two Worlds* by Joan L. Saverino

Given the highly charged issue of immigration today, it is appropriate that the Museum of International Folk Art tackled this theme with its exhibition, *Between Two Worlds: Folk Artists Reflect on the Immigrant Experience* (fig. 1).¹ In keeping with the subtitle, the gallery maintained the focus on the art and the artists; I saw a wide selection of media including dioramas and tableaus of international immigration and migrant



Fig. 1. Introductory wall of the exhibition. Photo by Joan L. Saverino



Fig. 2. Santo Niño de Atocha ex-voto, 1990, artist unknown, made in Mexico (left) and Santo Niño de Atocha retablo, 2005, made by Ellen Santistevan in Los Lunas, New Mexico (right). Photo by Joan L. Saverino



Fig. 3. Retirantes, ca. 1991, made by Antonio Rodrigues in Alto do Moura, Pernambuco, Brazil. Photo by Joan L. Saverino

experiences as well as contemporary renditions of traditional objects (fig.2). Overall, the exhibition is visually remarkable, and strikes a good balance in the way it 1) includes a range of artists with regard to immigration period and point of origin; 2) raises questions pertinent to immigration and issues of dual identity; and 3) creates a model for visitor interactivity.

The exhibition included artists whose ancestors emigrated from Spain to the

Southwest hundreds of years ago, and still identify as Hispanic. Other artists immigrated only recently from Tibet, Peru, Mexico, and Mozambique; others, apparently, were refugees within their own countries (fig. 3). On each label, the artist made a provocative statement or asked a question. Also, under each subtheme label on the wall, a quotation appeared. Under “Where is my Home?” Catalina Trunk, identified as a *papel picado* (cut paper) artist from Albuquerque, wrote, “When I die, throw my ashes in the



Fig. 4. Kimimila Immigration Cradle, 2014, made by Thomas “Red Owl” Haukaas in Tampa, Florida. Photo by Joan L. Saverino

Rio Grande.² The ashes will decide where I belong: Mexico or the United States.” The Native American Lakota artist Thomas “Red Owl” Haukaas appropriated a traditional object—the beaded cradle—to convey his message. On the cradle, beads spell out: “We did not cross the border, the border crossed us” (fig. 4). As for interactivity, multiple opportunities were offered to the visitor to contribute ideas and to respond to questions and statements.

Although I was on the whole impressed with the exhibition, I did have a few concerns. First, no general explanatory panel introduced the exhibition. I was initially confused as to the focus of the show and how the pieces were organized. While the entry featured a panel with graphics to indicate the iterative process, it was unclear how such a process functioned in practicality (see fig. 1 on page 69). I would have liked to have known more. Only after talking with the curator did I find out that the version I saw was the second one. Also, I would have appreciated information on the medium and material of the works—details I expect in an art museum.



Fig. 5. Close-up of portion of Story Cloth, 1985-89, made by Zoua Vang Lor in Ban Vinai Refugee Camp, northeastern Thailand. Photo by Joan L. Saverino

At the very least, exhibitions should clarify terms used. The basic difference between an immigrant, a refugee, and a migrant was never articulated.³ For instance, at the gallery’s entrance was a story cloth made by Zoua Vang Lor, a Laotian Hmong who spent seven years in a refugee camp in Thailand before settling in Rhode Island (fig. 5). In the accompanying label, immigrant and refugee appeared together. The piece made by Camurdino Mustafa Jetha from Mozambique (fig. 6) was entitled “refugees,” but in the label they are called immigrants. The Brazilian *retirantes* referred to as “refugees” in the label are neither emigrants nor refugees but are migrants within their own countries.⁴ An introductory label with a brief overview of the different issues faced by immigrants versus refugees, as well as a clear and consistent use of terms, could have solved the problem at the outset. For those wanting more information, a fact sheet would also have been useful.

Most importantly, the visitor was expected to make some big knowledge leaps that I saw as problematic. I felt concerned that visitors could potentially experience this gallery, even appreciate the art, but never have challenged any of the misconceptions they might have about this hot-button topic. Finally, the exhibition also never addressed the elephant in the room—American xenophobia and the more stringent laws that reflect a long history of maltreatment of new arrivals to the United States.

Endnotes:

¹See “Museum of International Folk Art,” International Coalition of Sites of Conscience website, <http://www.sitesofconscience.org/members/museum-of-international-folk-art/>. For the purpose of the experimental gallery, see Museum of International Folk Art, <http://internationalfolkart.org/exhibitions/betweentwoworlds.html>. Both accessed December 17, 2014.

²*Papel Picado* “literally means ‘punched’ or ‘perforated’ paper. This traditional cut paper folk art is found throughout Mexico and the former colonies of Spain as well as in the folk traditions of many other countries.” Museum of International Folk Art, accessed January 31, 2015.

³“Refugees Flowing Across Borders,” Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c125.html>, accessed January 25, 2015.

⁴“Retirantes—Migrants,” Museu Casa Do Pontal, accessed January 24, 2015, <http://www.museucasadoportal.com.br/temas/retirantes-migrantes>.



Fig. 6. Refugiados (Refugees), 2013, made by Camurdino Mustafa Jetha, Santo Domasio, Mozambique. Photo by Joan L. Saverino

Endnotes continued:

⁵Suzanne Seriff, personal communication with author, December 30, 2014.

⁶Kathleen McLean, “Whose Questions, Whose Conversations,” in *Letting Go?*, ed. Bill Adair et al. (Philadelphia: Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, 2011), 70-79. This approach requires altering the way we interpret the concepts of “authority” and “power” in order for true change to occur in museums’ relationships with their visitors.

⁷A dialogic approach ensures the expression and inclusion of multiple voices in a respectful atmosphere that is based on egalitarianism, not hierarchical power structures.

After I saw the show, I spoke with Suzanne Seriff, the gallery curator. She said that when she arrived at the Museum of International Folk art three years ago, she held strategic planning meetings to discuss how the gallery could be “responsive to multiple communities.”⁵ She formed a team (three staff and three consultants) that included folklorists (Seriff and Laura Marcus, who is the community engagement coordinator) and Kathleen McLean, known for her innovative exhibition work. They adopted a prototyping model whereby the team responds to multiple kinds of feedback and observation in the galleries. They also formed a community advisory committee comprised of immigrants, refugees, and immigrant artists, as well as immigrant service providers, all of whom were central to the process.

The team implemented a model of “shared authority” using Kathleen McLean’s “reciprocal” engagement method, which urges museums to abandon the “novice-expert” dichotomy while not relinquishing hold on “expert” knowledge.⁶ Long a part of folklorists’ training, these ideas are relatively recent to museum practice and

draw on dialogic learning theory.⁷ The combined expertise of an interdisciplinary team in which each member brings a complementary perspective has resulted in a unique collaboration. The team has created an exhibition that is never finished but is in a constant state of responsiveness and reinvention.

The team’s goal was not to create a particular point of view but to create a “safe” space. Seriff judges the project’s success by the fact that people have visited who had never set foot in the museum before. And, the ancillary programming and the dialogic workshops have resulted in discussions of contentious issues. A dialogic approach is not for the faint of heart because it requires being willing to relinquish some control, which can feel uncomfortable. Especially important is that this sort of project requires appropriate training in how to accomplish and sustain diverse community outreach. Overall, the exhibition was a thoughtfully executed experimental collaboration. The model the team has created is excellent and sets a high bar for others who might attempt such projects. ✨