

Extract from review by Katy McCormick in Black Flash

"Scene as Space Across Time: Presence, Passage and Transition"

SCENE 6: Dover, UK: Border Country

*In the first place when I just come to England, and I heard many times from English people "sorry about this," "sorry about that" "sorry!" "sorry!" and "sorry!" . . . to me it seems not natural to use "sorry" so many times about anything . . . Yeah now I understand it's polite, to be polite, just say "sorry!" and that's it, but that means that you don't mean it. You saying "sorry" just because you have to say "sorry" not because you mean it. Sometimes you even don't know what you said "sorry" for, just as a habit, "sorry" and that's it. And so many times I saw here in Dover Removal Centre, people talking about problems and some very important questions and all you got is "sorry!" So you know . . . to me and to some people that I spoke with, it just make us laugh now. You know, you know that now any minute that person gonna say "sorry!" to you and you just waiting for that "sorry" and then [clicks fingers] there you go "sorry!" and you just laughing 'cos you know you get nothing else but "sorry."*

—Andrei

*In this gallery we are greeted by a low hubbub of voices. These voices form a network of presence, mapping the gallery space with breath, vibration and tone. The tenor of these voices shifts with each testimony, with each recollection or reflection. The rhythm of these voices changes from the inflections of Pakistan and Bangladesh to the inflections of Byelorusse and Nigeria. These voices belong to asylum seekers and "failed" asylum seekers – men and women appealing against their unsuccessful judgments – due to be "removed" from the UK back to their home countries. We hear the flinty anger in Andrei's astute observation of English politesse. We hear the sadness and resignation in Zimba's voice, a refugee from Zimbabwe, as he recalls the last conversation with his son. Lillian, of Kenya, reflects on the notion of justice, asking, "Who is the judge to say, "You, you can look for a better life?" Who is more human than the other? Why? Why should it be that way? Why can't I look for a better life? Hamlaoui, an Algerian, patiently describes the nightmare that emerges, not from persecution in his own country but from the waiting in detention, the in-between: "I have this kind of like, fear, in the morning when I get up. I have a kind of fear, of anxiety, because I am going to repeat the same day. So I am shocked . . . In the morning I start the day in a shocking way . . . I say, 'I am going to repeat the same day as yesterday.'" This moribund state is also a kind of "change mummified." Duration here becomes a contest of mental and spiritual endurance. It is life-like, breathing, shivering, but not life. Aiming for passage, transition, escape, freedom, these refugees have all been arrested in their journeys. Held, suspended, they are forced to relive the same nightmare of belonging – neither here, nor there, no-where.*

*The Domestic Visits Room in Harmondsworth (located adjacent to Heathrow airport) is typical of its sort. The architecture of the room bespeaks its function: control and containment. Impersonal, these spaces are meant to be temporary holds against likely removal. Documents posting rules and strictures are placed on the wall and pillars around the room at approximately every five feet. Rows of chairs and tables divide the large institutional space. Each row is an arrangement of three seats covered in blue upholstery opposite a single chair. This chair's red seatback speaks volumes; there is no mistaking the stop/go seat, the here-today, gone-tomorrow seat meant for detainees. Devoid of inhabitants, such rooms are serenely calm and perfectly ordered. In stark contrast, the voices that speak out from Border Country remind us that fear, alienation and anger, are universally felt responses to systemic injustices. Despite the focus of the photographs on the institutional spaces, it is the particular, intimate, day-to-day thoughts and aspirations of individuals caught in a situation outside of their control that demands our attention. In multiple interviews conducted between 2003 and 2007, artist Melanie Friend provides a listening ear. If the beauty of her photographs is disarming, the riveting testimonies of her subjects appeal not only to our capacity for empathy but also to our sense of collective responsibility.*

*The apparently absent spaces resonate with scenes of torture, struggle and longing. Located outside several English cities, the Immigration Removal Centres (IRC) are places where asylum seekers await judgment on their futures. Caught in a nightmare, powerless to "Just Do It," Friend's confidants may have possessed the possibility of self-determination at one point in their lives but no longer do. In an age of borderless travel, and unlimited access to the information highway, Border Country interrogates considerations of human rights in a global economy and more particularly probes questions surrounding freedom of movement. These questions must also be appreciated in relation to the larger issues of immigration and globalization on one hand, and the West's post-9/11 protectionism and rendition practices on the other. Finally, in an age of trauma fatigue, characterized by images of insurgency, genocide*

*and permanent war, Friend presents us with banal scenes, mostly of institutional sitting rooms, where a seemingly calm space is invaded by heartrending testimonies as a means of awakening an embodied sense of justice. Not claiming objective truth, Friend orchestrates a set of testimonies, offering us the possibility of finding our humanity in an unexpected moment or circumstance; she sets the scene and leaves the rest to empathy.*