



UAL STUDENTS HELPING TO DEBUNK STEREOTYPES

Creating work for the Refugee Journalism Project helped students challenge their own — and others' — perceptions of refugees. Dalia Dawood

How can creative practices positively contribute to the way refugees tell their stories and how they are perceived by Western audiences? This is what four UAL students who have collaborated with the Refugee Journalism Project have considered when applying their respective artistic disciplines to refugee stories.

Coming from different artistic backgrounds, the students responded to requests for illustrators, sculptors and writers to work alongside refugee journalists on the project, with the aim of enhancing their stories of censorship and exile creatively.

One is Arushi Gupta, a graduate from MA Illustration at Camberwell, who learned about the Windrush scandal while working on the project. Arushi was commissioned to create an animation that would accompany a written piece by RJP participant Michelle Fuller about the hostile immigration environment to which victims of the Windrush case, and others, were subjected.

Told as a mythical story, Michelle's article portrays then Home Secretary Theresa May — whose harsh immigration policies meant many people without legal paperwork were deported or detained — as a witch locking people up in 'dungeons' (aka detention centres). "The metaphor of the witch made it more creative for me to come up with the visuals," says Arushi. "I grew my own sense of awareness about what happened through illustrating the article, and I aimed to simplify this

complex story through the drawings.

"I see myself doing more work like this in the future: going into something that is incorrect in the world and trying to make it correct — or at least putting the idea out there for people to know about it."

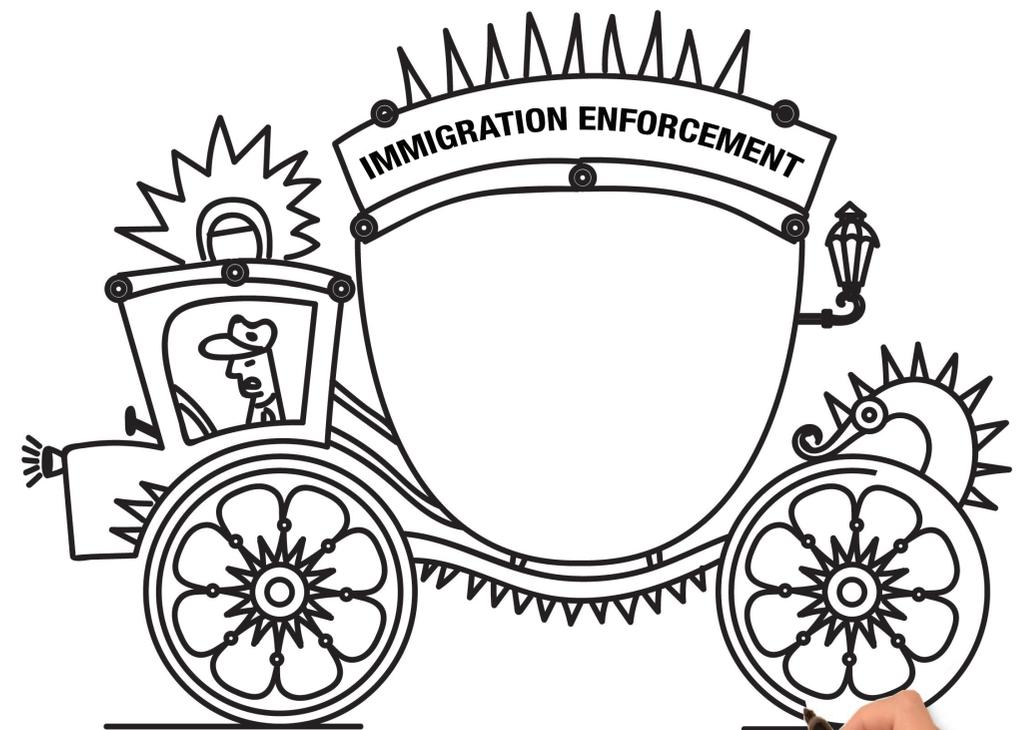
Nick Marcenaro Torres's self-described 'gritty' and 'semi-realistic' illustrations seemed the perfect fit as visuals for refugee journalists' articles, which is how he contributed to the Refugee Journalism Project. One of his drawings brings to life a story about obtaining immigration status and the crushing experience of having your identity reduced to one label: refugee.

He portrayed this visually as a group of people entering a building where they would claim refugee status. Their individual identities are clear: doctors, lawyers, journalists, enhanced through the use of colour. Emerging from the other side, with a sign above their heads saying 'welcome to the UK', the

people are grey, their mouths covered and labelled 'refugee'. "I wanted to make it clear to the audience that it's about transforming people into labels and taking away their humanity. I used comic book half-tones and two block-colours to emphasise the division," he says.

During the project, Nick became aware of his own 'misconceived perceptions' of refugees after meeting refugee journalists through the project. "I hadn't realised I had a stereotyped image of refugees in my mind, but seeing how professional and inspiring these journalists were changed my perception."

Nick made a connection to his own family, who had to leave Colombia when he was young because of the ongoing conflicts. "That made me think that I am not very different from a refugee: my family had to escape a horrible situation, too. I felt connected with the stories of these people; we have both been subjected to discrimination.



"I felt connected with the stories of these people. They are no different than me."

Images: Dalia Dawood, Arushi Gupta, Nick Marcenaro Torres



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Even feedback on his illustrations have helped Nick to rethink how he portrays people. "I was unconsciously falling back on stereotypes, which is the opposite of what this project aims to do, so I'm glad that it has made me more mindful — I felt humbled to work on this project; it opened my eyes."

BA Journalism graduate Brittany O'Neill wrote articles for the project blog migrantjournalism.org, including an interview with Ziad Ghandour, who fled his native Syria for the UK, where he began working with the BBC. "I wanted to support something that I'm interested in and to offer my skills," Brittany explains. "I have followed the refugee crisis in the news, but working on the project was the first time I had engaged with refugees. I felt grateful to meet professional people from different backgrounds and write about them."

The project inspired Brittany to volunteer at a refugee camp on a small island on the border of Turkey. "I wanted to do more to help. Working alongside professional journalists who are treated differently made me more frustrated at the state of the refugee crisis in the UK. These exiled journalists all have the same intention, but they're being silenced in their own countries and not given many opportunities here."

"That's why it's crucial to have an organisation like the Refugee Journalism Project, which helps to debunk negative perceptions that exist about refugees by sharing their stories in a positive light, which we don't often see. The media is usually demonising refugees, but I think they deserve more than that."

Going into his final year of Fine Art Painting at Wimbledon College of Art, Henry Glover welcomed his biggest challenge yet — literally — by making a life-size sculpture for the exhibition based on a brief from RJP participant Kerim Balci.

The task was to portray two figures, based on real journalists who have been sentenced to life for writing about the hostile conditions in their countries. In their prison cells, the two figures would be covered head-to-toe in banned newspaper articles that symbolise the danger of their professions.

It's quite a leap from what Henry normally creates: "I usually make small ceramic works, but this project appealed to me. They wanted my expertise on the types of materials that we could use and the practicalities of building something that could be dismantled and transported."

Henry's involvement also included his creative input to the art piece. "I suggested an alternative version, which sees the two figures embracing each other in a prison cell, or comforting each other." Bringing his interpretation to the work, Henry suggested evolving the piece to one that he feels would 'promote a hopeful image'. "I felt it would be less hard-hitting or shocking for people visiting the exhibition to portray it this way, without detracting from the important message about how the two journalists are being punished and censored for doing their jobs."

Pushing himself beyond his comfort zone was sobering, says Henry, as it teaches you to compromise. "You're doing something for someone else and you want to meet their vision even if you're more comfortable doing it differently. I've never dared to make something life-size until this point, or to take on a proper commission, but it's a pressure I welcome because I learn through the process." ■

The pieces from Arushi Gupta and Henry Glover will feature in Refugee Journalism Project's *Liminality* exhibition.



OBJECTS OF RESILIENCE

During times of adversity we are drawn to things that strengthen our resilience and evoke happy memories. Vivienne Francis

Turning the delicate handle of the music box triggers the chords to 'La Marseillaise'. For journalist and activist Zozan Yaşar, this simple rendition is an important reminder of the struggle of her people. "As a Kurdish woman with all my experiences, getting a music box with a revolutionary song was very important as Kurds have been fighting for their revolution for decades."

Two years ago, Zozan came to the UK fleeing persecution. As a young woman separated from loved ones and facing the immense challenge of rebuilding her life, the music box became her way of keeping connected with home. "My friend gave it to me. She is a very close friend of mine and it was very important to have this as a gift from her."

During times of adversity we are drawn to those things that strengthen our inner resilience by transporting our minds to a different place, or that help us evoke memories of happier times. Feelings that can give us the strength to positively adapt to our circumstances.

The term resilience is frequently woven into the complex narratives of migration. Understandably so. Surviving torture, imprisonment, homelessness or conflict, and then starting again in an unfamiliar, possibly hostile new country takes a depth of resilience that fortunately most of us will never require.

Resilience can be drawn from religion, relationships, or physical endeavours, but it can also be found in small seemingly insignificant objects which, for a few precious moments, can help us find comfort and stability.

Last summer, some of the participants on the Refugee Journalism Project took part in a video production workshop at London College of Communication where resilience was the central theme. Lecturer Errol Murray invited the group to construct short interviews and sequences based on an object that gave them strength in times of adversity. From a miswak designed to magnify the impact of daily prayers, to a stone painted by a child 20 years ago during a holiday to the Crimea, the result was a rich

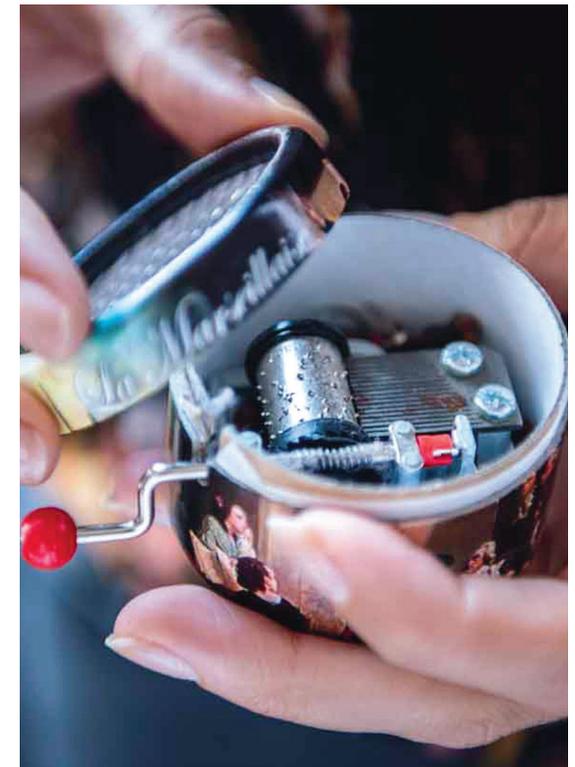
collection of stories about personal treasures.

"The students took the workshop as an opportunity to expand on their technical and storytelling abilities," says Errol. "But the workshop also gave them a window to look back at their extraordinary experiences over the past few years, and to recognise the changes in their lives."

Reflecting on the workshop he concludes: "It was humbling and heart-warming to work with people who have overcome such overwhelming circumstances, and yet were ready to put their experiences aside and continue working in the professions that they love. Surprisingly to me, the students' stories were generally not based within conflict, but of passion, and warmth and hope."

Inside Zozan's precious music box, there is an additional layer of resilience — a few fresh cloves. "Cloves mean love and eternity of love, so when I smell it, I smell Kurdistan and love. In London, I often miss my country, and when I do, I take this music box, smell it and feel better. This is something of my family, my homeland and my experiences." ■

Photography: Veronica Otero



A selection of the films will be screened at liminality at London College of Communication.