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Immigrant Art and Culture in the United States

Daphne Stanford · Thursday, March 1st, 2018

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There is a long tradition of artists as visitors in distant lands—regardless of their country of origin. From the "The Lost Generation" that included Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein to later expats like Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin, American artists have long been seeking refuge abroad to slake their inspirational thirst.

But what about artists from other countries immigrating to the U.S.? There are funding opportunities for international artists who want to publish, play, or exhibit their art in this country. Recently, there was the SXSW deportation threat controversy—which prompted music festival officials to reword the language of their artist contracts.

Artists, writers, performers, musicians, and entrepreneurs may apply for an O-1 visa, which grants a three-year temporary stay to extraordinary candidates should they meet all the criteria for approval. There are also international artist exchange programs for those not confident they'll meet all the criteria for an O-1 visa. Navigating tax regulations and other requirements can be bewildering for international artists, so it helps to seek out liaisons and mentors in the U.S. to serve as points of connection.

International musicians visiting the U.S., for example, face many hurdles—including substantial overhead costs, fees for applying for an O-1 visa (if possible), and feelings of being disconnected from family, friends, and their home culture. However, some artists find it easier than others to make the transition.

Take, for example, cosmopolitan artist Li Huayi, who was born in Shanghai but lives in the Bay Area. Huayi claims he feels "more Chinese" than he probably would were he still living in China—perhaps, in part, due to the avant-garde proclivities of his early teachers.

Huayi, like many artists, has clearly mastered the art of self-invention. Most creative artists could easily be considered inventors. The steps to becoming an inventor include, first, having a creative idea; second, improving upon your idea; third, turning your idea into reality; and lastly, protecting your idea via copyright.

Another artist who mastered the arts of self-invention and improvisation was Yasuo Kuniyoshi, who supported himself in the U.S. not only via teaching but also through commissioned, anti-

Japanese posters for the Office of War Information during World War II.

The need to be creative in the face of overt discrimination and racial unrest is as prevalent today as it was then—especially considering current racial tensions reflected by the existence of Black Lives Matter and the relative absence of minority race identified mental health professionals.

Immigrant artists are especially crucial in places like the U.S.-Mexico border, where Mexican-born, U.S.-based artists are creating important work that speaks to the tensions and issues that complicate the experience of immigrants coming to the U.S. from Mexico.

In *The Immigrants*, Mario Vargas Llosa argued that immigrants cannot be stopped by police measures for a "very simple reason: In their home countries, the incentives for them to leave are more powerful than the obstacles put in their path to dissuade them from coming…" In other words, persecution is relative, and the rewards of relative peace and freedom from warfare and terrorism is worth the stress of negotiating life in the U.S.—even in the age of Trump.

The "potential of inclusivity" makes these risks worth the effort for Iranian artists like Nicky Nodjoumi, whose paintings are more fondly embraced in the U.S. than in his native Iran—in part because they might criticize the government or question the traditional role of women in Iranian society.

The lure of American opportunity is part of what makes it possible for 40 percent of New Yorkers to be foreign-born, according to a recent art exhibit in NYC's Times Square. Likewise, the Museum of Modern Art has a digital exhibit on its website featuring a slideshow of artists who immigrated to the U.S. from elsewhere—demonstrating the prominence of foreign-born artists within the art world.

The importance of international perspectives cannot be discounted. Indeed, it is part of what makes us more fully human—more fully able to embrace an understanding of life that is multifaceted and cosmopolitan in nature, rather than being confined to a U.S.-born perspective. Perhaps engagement with internationally sourced art can assist us in becoming more fully human and less cognizant of arbitrary borders and nationalities—seeing ourselves more clearly through the eyes of others.

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