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‘The Power of Faces’ art exhibition humanizes the refugee crisis

A new photography exhibition sponsored by Brown University’s Art at Watson committee puts a human face on the international refugee crisis

PROVIDENCE, RI, Aug. 5, 2024—The Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs’ Art at Watson committee announced the opening of “The Power of Faces: Looking at the Global Refugee Crisis.” This exhibit of documentary photographs by independent humanitarian advocates Daniel Farber Huang and Theresa Menders will open on Sept. 19 in Stephen Robert ‘62 Hall at 280 Brook St. in Providence, RI. The opening will be followed by a reception at 5:00 p.m. On Oct. 9 at 5:00 p.m., a symposium featuring the artists and practitioners working to alleviate the refugee crisis will be held at 280 Brook St. Both events are free and open to the public.

In the exhibition, Huang and Menders have harnessed the power of faces through their skillfully executed photographs to remind us of our shared humanity with those displaced by the current international refugee crisis, the worst since the World War II era. Huang and Menders traveled the globe to photograph refugees in camps in Greece, Bangladesh, Mexico and the Ukraine border. For the portraits, the artists consciously decided to crop out the context of the refugee camps to focus attention on the refugees’ status as individual human beings. Photographs documenting the refugee camp conditions are also included in the exhibition for context.

The documentary photographs reveal the appalling conditions of refugee camps in Greece, Bangladesh, Mexico and Poland. But just as meaningfully, the carefully composed, beautifully executed portraits show us the faces of the refugees. They take the subjects outside the context of the refugee camp and portray them in all their humanity.

For Huang and Menders, putting a human face on the crisis is critical, given its overwhelming scale. “Between 2015 and 2023, over 117 million people have been forced to flee their homes due to conflict or persecution,” said Menders. “That equates to one person becoming a refugee every two seconds. We have a hard time picturing what numbers that massive even mean. And if we can’t picture this crisis, how can we work towards solving it? For us, we start one face at a time.”

The couple has taken hundreds of photographs of refugees; in each case, they provided their subjects with copies of the photographs to keep for themselves. These photos become cherished mementos for people living in highly challenging conditions, most of whom have lost everything, including the heirlooms, keepsakes and family photographs that bring comfort during difficult times.

“We do the work we do because we have been given the gift of using our voices on behalf of those whose voices have been silenced,” said Huang. “We don’t want anyone to use the excuse ‘I didn’t know’ as a reason not to take a stand against injustice.”

In selecting the exhibition, the Art at Watson committee recognized it would be politically timely, opening less than two months before Americans choose their next president in an election where immigration and asylum have become hot-button issues. Exhibition co-coordinator Pete Bilderback called the exhibition “an essential antidote to the toxic rhetoric surrounding the plight of displaced people in U.S. politics. It is a potent reminder that refugees are, in fact, human and that no politician or degrading system can rob them of their humanity, regardless of the horrifying conditions to which they are subjected.”

“The Power of Faces” is co-sponsored by Brown University’s Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Studies (CHRHS). Center program manager and exhibition co-coordinator Maggie Murphy said, “At CHRHS, we believe in the power of art to tell stories and build empathy. Teaming up with Art at Watson to exhibit ‘The Power of Faces’ helps us highlight the real experiences and resilience of refugees. We hope this exhibit sparks conversations and inspires compassionate action on the global refugee crisis.”

Copies of the artists’ recently published book of photography, “The Power of Faces: Looking at the Global Refugee Crisis,” will be available for sale at the Sept. 19 reception and can be signed by the artists.