

Am I Home?

“No wonder we cannot appreciate the really central Kafka joke: that the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from the horrific struggle. That our endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact our home.”¹

— David Foster Wallace

What makes a home? Home is personal. Home is political. Home slips between real and imaginary, architecture and place, welcoming and threatening. During the pandemic, home took on more associations. Home was a refuge. Home was a prison.

In their 2020 essay, *The Politics of Housing Metaphors*, Laurin Mackowitz and Daniel Lorenz examine the implications of architectural metaphors. Their essay explores the patriarchal lineage of terms such as house and home and makes a case that “housing or architectural metaphors indicate a condition of insecurity and existential homelessness in the age of globalization.”² They go on to write:

The image of the house as a fixed reference point and space for private reflection and recreation contrasts with the unprecedented mobility as well as the alienation or emancipation of individuals from their familial surroundings, ethnic groups, and national communities. The phantasm of the house appears to express the key contradiction for the lamented as well as celebrated loss of an existential home.³

In other words, we are a society defined by the movement of people. People who simultaneously belong nowhere and everywhere. To this end, what role can metaphors of home play in defining our contemporary culture? Artists contribute to this vital discourse. Through critique, narrative, imagination, and poetic allusions, visual art can redefine traditional notions of home and speak to the lived experiences of our home-less-ness.

Through the selected works for the **19th National Juried Exhibition** at Axis, *Am I Home?* delves into ideas of self, community, migration, displacement and belonging. With 39 works by 27 artists, home hovers as a question. Where is home? What is home? Who is home? Am I going home? Am I leaving home? When am I home? Both overt and tangential, these questions in

¹ David Foster Wallace from “Some Remarks on Kafka’s Funniness from Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed,” in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*, (Back Bay Books, 2007).

² Laurin Mackowitz and Daniel Lorenz. “The Politics of Housing Metaphors: Challenging Images of Migration and Patriarchy” *On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture* 10 (2020).
<<http://geb.uni-giessen.de/geb/volltexte/2020/15787/>>.

³ Ibid.

many ways feel tethered to the aftereffects of the pandemic and the isolation it produced, but they also reflect today's global turmoil. Where do I now belong?

Works such as James Potterton's photograph *Dwelling Inside and Out*, Elliott Allen's image *Danger* and *Tent* by Safanasab Sanéz identify the slippage between house, home and shelter. Each work complicates the idea of home as a stable and permanent place. Potterton captures the contrast of a blanket left on the sidewalk with the signage of a real estate office. The image powerfully signifies the true inequities in today's housing crisis: homeless versus homeowner. Similarly, Allen's photograph *Danger* exposes another societal issue, in particular housing for aging populations within the United States. While the older laughing couple alludes to a planned or assisted living community, the construction zone behind the fence symbolizes a more foreboding future.

Taking a different approach, Sanéz's *Tent* plays with materiality and form. The artist's choice of "tent" as the title implies a temporary, portable structure yet the textiles and fibers in use suggest a celebratory or ceremonial purpose. The tangibility of the work brings us to an imaginative re-examination of how we perceive word and form.

Several artists address the "endless and impossible journey toward home."⁴ This group of works delve into what Mackowitz and Lorenz's identify as "existential homelessness." In the absence of a fixed definition of home, the artists use imagery that proposes dislocation and displacement as a reflection of lived experiences.

Janice Nakashima's *The Trouble with Cages* and *UNRWHA* present sculptural dwellings fully enclosed in a wire mesh box. The house and tent-like structures become stand-ins for the numerous refugee camps around the world, with a direct focus on the Palestinian plight. Nakashima implicates refugee camps as antithetical to home. They are neither permanent nor a haven. Instead, they become confines for the home-less.

Alejandra Carrillo, Dora Lisa Rosenbaum, and Joe Aki Ouye examine the movements of peoples across time and place. Carrillo's lithograph *Carril Sin Fondo* reveals the physical and psychological toll of migration while *Movers* highlights the displacement of an entire community, past and present. Dora Lisa Rosenbaum's *Burdens* series represents home as the things we carry with us. The handsewn bags and backpacks are filled with plaster and concrete. Their literal weight symbolizes the yoke of migration. For Ouye, moments of transition—figures boarding a subway car, a man on a moving sidewalk in an airport—occupy his paintings. These conveyances are the liminal spaces connecting home and elsewhere. Yet it is unclear if his subjects are coming or going.

Other considerations of home fall within explorations of self. Gary Barton and Bonaventure Ogbaugo's works emerge from personal reflection. Bonaventure's detailed drawing of a young man floating in the water beautifully captures a suspended state of being while Barton's

⁴ Wallace from *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*.

Personal Notes Reused, Reorganized, and Redacted simultaneously reveals and obscures the artist's inner thoughts. Dave Appleton's drawings present portraits of two individuals through the depiction of a scrap-booking activity in progress. Choice has become a politicized word, yet Appleton's drawings are open ended in how to decipher which choices have been made.

Yve Holtzclaw injects humor into their whimsical ceramic sculpture *Have you Heard of Lacan?* Playing off the French philosopher's theory of the mirror stage, the two-headed pigeon appears to be in the midst of self-realization. In contrast, Cooper Salmon's painting of a lounging figure may be a nod to the isolation of the pandemic. Or does the domestic scene portray the self-satisfaction of being surrounded by the comforts of home?

Politics undeniably play a role in relation to home. *America* by Norman Aragon highlights the nationalism equated with home and homeland. For the United States, this is currently a fraught topic. Yet, Aragon's image is ambiguous. The child wrapped in the American flag could be a pointed critique or a patriotic embrace. Similarly, Ting Wang's screenprints explore the struggle to belong when your cultural identity is a target and where you belong is questioned by others.

Several artists explore escape and fantasy as a strategy to locate home. Kellen Dyer imagines Mars as a tourist destination incongruously depicting a vacationer ready to skinny dip with her rooster floaty somewhere on the planet's red, ruddy terrain. Someone forgot to tell her that the water on Mars is frozen. Tori Olton reimagines the relationship between humans and nature as a complete merging of the two. The bucolic and somewhat campy setting of bright knitted flowers focusses on a central figure/flower. The contentedness and self-assurance evident in the figure make the utopian aspirations clear. In contrast, Edward Rubins presents a familial scene that is anything but serene. In Rubins' photograph, home has become a dystopian setting for chaos and a site for the uncanny.

The works of Linda Nunes, Richard Greene, Stephanie Langley, Deanna Dorangrichia, and Jiemei Lin are suggestive vignettes where the idea of home is on the periphery. Greene's stylized abandoned buildings stand out as the leftovers of another time or place, once teeming with life. In contrast, Nunes' organic abstract painting is full of whimsical color and line. The artist's markings are map-like, a blend of geography and treasure hunting. Deanna Dorangrichia also embraces organic forms in her white porcelain ceramics. The pristine porcelain vessels have been ripped and punctured, providing intimate openings to the interior. Is a vessel a home of sorts? Stephanie Langley, Jiemei Lin and Forrest McGarvey apply accumulative techniques with pattern, color, and collage to build amalgamations of memories and places.

But where will we be without the hope of home? The works of Pablo Bautista and Halff Bro hint at unexpected possibilities and new beginnings. For Bautista, the unyielding journey is countered by symbols of hope--a footprint in the dry sand improbably sprouts a lush green plant or a ladder and its shadow portend current and future paths. Similarly, Halff Bro paints an idyllic island landscape with a singular house off in the distance. The serenity of the scene becomes a symbolic placeholder to finding home.

When do we know we've found home? In Elaine Nguyen's video, *Jade Protection and Permanence* home is defined through an intimate portrait of a cultural tradition. The setting is a kitchen; a bowl filled with soapy water sits in a sink. As the artist's hands struggle to get a jade bangle on to her wrist, her mother's hands appear in the sink, helping to apply soap and molding her daughter's hand to squeeze through the bracelet. Nguyen takes us on her personal journey to embrace her self-identity—one that traverses family, domesticity, and ritual. Ultimately, home is where you choose to belong, and where your dad sings karaoke.

All of these artists succeed in guiding us towards our own definitions of home. Ask yourself: Am I home?