

shelter

A mixed-media installation

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Displaced

A patchwork essay on *Shelter*, a mixed media installation by Tulu Bayar and Xiaoze Xie

Inside the tent structure on the cold gravel floor sits a carefully folded and arranged stack of clothing. The stack is vibrant and patterned with woven fabric from Africa, brightly dyed material from Asia, striped garments from the Middle East, and other clothing from many regions with refugee populations around the world. The cloth takes the form of a shallow grave: a simple marker of piled stones on top of a mound, the size and shape of a Muslim child's.

Similar to epidemics, it is the most vulnerable: the elderly, the sick and, most of all, the children, who are likely to die from the hostile living conditions. For example, at Maslach IDP (Internally Displaced People) Camp, which existed in Western Afghanistan for less than one year in 2002-2003, most of the thousands of graves in the makeshift cemeteries that proliferated next to the camp were for children who died from starvation, illness, and exposure to the elements.¹

Like many makeshift shelters in camps where people are forced to seek refuge, *Shelter* provides minimal protection from bitter cold, wind, and rain with fabric stretched over a simple wood structure. The installation is architecturally clean and simple. Pieced fabric stretches over an A-frame, creating a floorless tent with doorways open on each end—a universal form found at camps throughout the world.

As many as ten families crowd into a single mud building or tent at refugee and IDP Camps.

Upon entering *Shelter*, the viewer stands among a crowd of refugees. Scores of people seeking refuge cover every surface in grainy black and white images, forming a loosely gridded patchwork. Illuminated by low and intimate light in this contemplative space, faces are given to invisible children, women and men who are living and dying in these precarious circumstances.

Simply stated, refugees are people fleeing persecution. According to the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) in

Washington, DC, the definition of a refugee is "an individual outside of the country of their nationality due to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion."² It includes mass flight from war, and those seeking refuge outside of their country due to external aggression, foreign occupation or domination, or events seriously disturbing the public order. It may also address gender-based factors such as physical harm of girls and women, subservient treatment, and loss of rights and persecution for sexual orientation.

Shelter sits atop a large track of gravel, reminding viewers of the camps' hard and severe environment. From inside, the stones become an uninviting floor; there is no place to sit, lie down or get comfortable. After exiting through the triangular doorway, the gravel seems to extend well into the darkness.

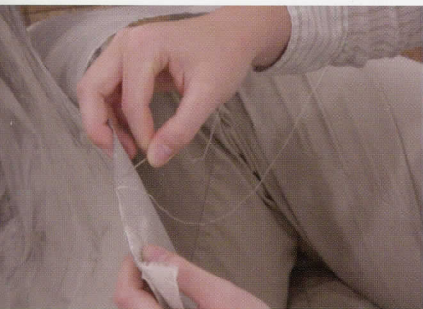
Camps are often located in uninhabited and inhospitable lands.

Joining other viewers already walking on the surrounding gravel surface, the resulting sounds of footsteps reverberates, filling the gallery with the echoes of walking on the harsh earth in this simulated night.

Additional internationally accepted definitions for people seeking refuge according to the MPI:

"Internally displaced people" (IDPs) are people who moved for the same reasons as refugees but did not cross an international boundary.

Blustery wind and footsteps emanate through the darkened gallery via an ambient audio track. Combined with the sounds of people walking, the recording creates a forbidding atmosphere and fills the space the way noises carry at night: further, and often menacing.



"Forced displacement" or "forced migrants" are people who moved due to natural disaster rather than persecution.

"Asylum seekers" are people who have arrived in a country seeking recognition as refugees.

Shelter is a beacon, with light spilling through the doorways and through the fabric, illuminating the gallery and announcing itself as a place offering some comfort from the elements. Some protection is better than none; the structure appears solid, and the light implies warmth and hope.

"People in refugee-like situations" are stateless or denied the protection of the government in their countries of citizenship or habitual residence, but who have not been recognized as refugees.

From the outside, the photographic images cover the tent in rows like film stills: a woman and children gathered around a small pot on an open fire, a man crouched inside a tent, a woman wearing many layers of clothes seated outside of a tent, people walking on the harsh and barren land, a makeshift graveyard filled with recent tombs—mounds marked with stones, extending into the distance. The photographic images are derived from many news sources and transferred onto the pieced fabric using liquid light. Grey and sometimes ghost-like and cloudy, these photographic images capture and allow light to pass through the cloth with a sense of mystery and a melding of details. Stitched together and sometimes overlapping, the fabric forms a patchwork of images representing the millions of people currently seeking refuge. *Shelter* is a symbol of human tragedy.

The precise number of refugees worldwide is a subject of debate and not known for certain. In addition to the difficulties of counting millions of transient people fleeing persecution, many seeking refuge do not meet the above definitions as commonly accepted by international

governments. However, when refugees and asylum seekers are added together, the number explodes to 20 million or more. According to the United Nations there were 17.1 million refugees, asylum-seekers and others of concern in 2003.³ According to the US Committee on Refugees and Immigrants, in early 2005, there were 11.5 million refugees and 21.3 million refugees and IDPs combined.⁴ And Human Rights Watch reports there were an estimated 14.9 million refugees in the world in 2001, and an additional 22 million IDPs.⁵

With this powerful mixed media installation, Tulu Bayar and Xiaoze Xie invite the viewer to project themselves into the environment of a refugee. *Shelter* displaces us from the comforts of our own domestic world, and compels us to consider the plight of so many people who have nothing, not even adequate shelter from the elements.

Dan Mills, Director
Samek Art Gallery

¹ Hadi Ghaemi, Human Rights activist and researcher, Lecture, Bucknell University, March 24, 2005.

² Sharon Stanton Russell, "Refugees: Risks and Challenges Worldwide", *Migration Information Resource*, Migration Policy Institute, Washington, DC, November 1, 2002. <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?id=64>

³ "Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2003," United Nations, New York, 2004.

⁴ "CRI Releases World Refugee Survey 2005 with Groundbreaking Inventory of Refugee Rights," Press Release, US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, Washington, DC, June 15, 2005

⁵ "Refugees and Displaced Persons," Human Rights Watch, November 2005, http://hrw.org/doc/?t=refugees&document_limit=0,2



***Shelter* installation in progress,
March 16 - 24, 2005.**

