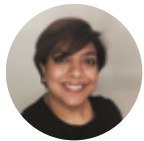


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Re-Imaging Art In The Pandemic - The Aga Khan Museum Provides Sanctuary Virtually



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Modern Aga Khan Museum facade architecture with black pond Toronto. (Photo by: Education ... [+]

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As Museums and galleries re-open following the period of lock down, how do they adapt to the global population's experience of the pandemic? On a practical level, schedules will undergo a complete review with international programming and the potential impact of further lock down on visitor engagement. The more complicated question addresses how museums connect with the experiences of visitors after the lock down. The overwhelming implications of the lock down are a greater need for social and emotional re-connection with families, communities, and wider society. Social distancing does not just refer to physical distancing but has also manifested in greater feelings of emotional isolation. The [Aga Khan Museum](#) in Toronto, Canada, has re-imagined its programs for the remainder of the year embarking on what Marketing Director Kelly Frances calls '[Rebuild 2020](#)'. Frances explains, "When it comes to our new theme, [Rebuild 2020](#) looks at re-connection, re-invigoration and restoration. People are looking for a sense of connection, but most important is feeling a sense of safety. The comfort of anyone who comes into the Museum, reconnecting with art and culture to nourish the mind and the soul that's something people are looking for. "

The Aga Khan Museum launched a new exhibition in March 2020, [Sanctuary](#), an exhibition showcasing immigrants' experience using rugs as a medium to share narratives to demonstrate stories, histories, place, and purpose. The exhibition comprises the work of thirty-six artists from twenty-two countries creating rug designs. The designs were woven into the rugs by artisans in Lahore, using traditional techniques to create each piece of art. In this exhibition, the artists include [Ai Wei Wei](#), [Mona Hatoum](#), and [Brendan Fernandes](#).



Sanctuary, the exhibition of Rugs depicting experiences of displacement at the Aga Khan Museum AGA KHAN MUSEUM 2020, TONI HAFKENSCHIED

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Cheryl Haines, the executive director of the **For-Site Foundation** originally developed the notion of *Sanctuary* as a theme for an exhibition. The current scale of displacement is immense and according to the **UNHCR**, a

person is forcibly uprooted every two seconds. [Michael Chagnon](#), Curator at the Aga Khan Museum, explains why this topic became a big focus; "We're living in a time of the greatest recorded displacements in history. In thinking about the theme of *Sanctuary*, we wanted to draw out broader narratives about the theme of asylum, and where these sorts of spaces can be located." The exhibition brings together artists to demonstrate creativity from the experiences of migration and displacement; Chagnon explains why; "no matter what circumstance one finds oneself in, there is this need to create."

In an interview with one of the artists, [Brendan Fernandes](#) we explore the importance of this subject for migrants. "For me, migrations—like my family's immigration to North America—are pursuits of freedom or sanctuary. With this work, I wanted to think about how freedom can be found through social and political movement" and how I could represent that through moving bodies. Within the exhibition there was also the chance to gesture towards the rugs that were also asking: what, in these times, is needed to create a sense of sanctuary now?"





In Trust, 2017, Brendan Fernandes. FOR-SITE FOUNDATION 2017

As a direct result of the pandemic, the need to create Sanctuary is more pertinent today across the global population. The pandemic's impact has created an urgent desire to find Sanctuary, addressing both physical safety and mental health. This shared global experience can help people develop greater empathy for the migrants who are searching for refuge. The [Aga Khan Museum](#) recognizes the shift in this approach. It has pivoted on the Sanctuary exhibition to create broader opportunities for the wider public to share their own experiences of finding Sanctuary during the lock down.

"The one key thing that we're also talking about is remembering. What we've been through, who or what we lost during this period." Frances explains the impact of this approach; "Whether it's through art, really looking at a way to express a creative vision for a better world, and rejoice and coming together to celebrate. People are looking for Sanctuary, a place to reconnect to rejoice, to be back with friends and family." Needing safety is a universal response to a threat. The pandemic's shared experience creates the opportunity for wider society to develop greater empathy towards the concept of immigration. Frances argues this lens is critical today; "the migrant and refugee experience is important, especially because we've seen that there have been acts of racism and aggression in society directed towards people who may be perceived differently in one way or another."

The agility of the Museum is particular to its inception and development, as explained by Chagnon; "Unlike many institutions, we are a young organization, we are incredibly nimble. We have a working model here that allows for a great amount of creativity and collaborative work. This is a sort of preface to the idea of working without mental borders, in a way that is full of experimentation and innovation." A core element of agility and innovation is embedded in a tighter working relationship with the community, meaning both visitors and the local community. "Some great ideas and great collaboration come from our visitors, who use our space as a sanctuary that inspires new and fresh thinking."

The shared experiences of fear during the pandemic have created a shared experience but can exacerbate barriers and boundaries towards different people and groups as social isolation reinforces idea of bubbles and protection. While we become physically more distant there is an ever

greater need to find opportunities and create conditions for challenging and constructive conversations. This first step described by Chagnon requires sharing ideas and being open requires the need to be fearless; "Within the space of the world, during the current pandemic, we've learned to fear bodies or fear each other. And so, we need to break down that notion of fear." The Sanctuary exhibition is considered an important opportunity to catalyze these conversations and so the museum is offering a [virtual tour](#) of the exhibition providing opportunities to engage with the discussions around 'otherness' and displacement. What better to discuss what sanctuary means for us and others and how we encourage fearlessness?

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