



*QUEENS EXHIBIT SHOWCASES ARTISTS WHO CAME TO THE US AS CHILDREN AND TEENS*

by [Alexandra Smith](#)



Photos of artwork courtesy of Queens Museum of Art.

The experience of immigrants who come to America as adolescents is often ignored or considered unimportant compared to the experiences of adult immigrants and their young children. Generation 1.5, an exhibit at the Queens Museum of Art on view through December 2, highlights the work of artists from this group, who often feel torn between showing allegiance to their homeland and their new country.

According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 194,314 immigrant children between the ages of 10 and 19 gained legal permanent resident status in 2006. Allowing this large group to express the wide range of emotions that accompanies moving to a new country in their formative years helps us understand how they transform into contributing members of American society.

Generation 1.5 is comprised of works from eight artists whose home countries are just as diverse as the forms their artwork take. While the Queens Museum of Art has done several exhibitions of immigrant artwork, this collection is unusual because rather than focusing on an individual culture, “it binds multiple cultures together,” said Prerana Reddy, the museum’s Director of Public Events.

Pablo Helguera’s presentation of sketches and memorabilia is accompanied by a 27-minute recording of him reading from his boyhood journals. His words convey a difficult struggle to adapt and be accepted into an unforgiving new culture. His teenage troubles, however harrowing at the time, offer an insightful look into the experiences of a member of the 1.5 Generation who moved from Mexico City to Chicago as a young boy.

“Working on this exhibition had an almost therapeutic effect on me,” Helguera says, since he worked with boxes of personal items and notebooks of writings by his younger self. However, his experience is not unique, as he explains that it is becoming “the norm, rather than the exception,” for artists to be roamers and globetrotters.

Nari Ward, a Jamaican immigrant who moved to the United States at age 12, explained his frustrations with federal health issues through a “wheel-chair parade” sculpture that symbolizes a physical inability to find a spiritual, healing place in a new country.

Lee Mingwei emigrated from Taiwan to the Dominican Republic at 14 and later to the United States. In his piece, colored lights accompany music from his culture fused with music of Native Americans and African Americans. When you approach one of the lights, a section of the music stops, conveying a sense of longing for completion.

In a dark room containing only a bench, a short black-and-white film is projected onto the wall. According to an adjacent plaque, the dark piece, entitled *The Last Word*, is about a “woman’s struggle for individual freedom.” The heroin recites a Farsi poem to stop her oppressor’s terrifying verbal onslaught. After viewing the film, a piece by Iranian immigrant Shirin Neshat, Ann Sangiamo of Lakewood, New Jersey explained how she relates the woman’s struggle to the current world situation: “I sensed that it was also about all of the turmoil in the world. You can at least relate it to the situation of the world now with all of the war going on.” Similarly, many people can relate to Neshat’s film about her struggle to survive in a new, frightening environment.

Seher Shah, a Pakistani who immigrated to the United Kingdom for high school and later to the United States, used her architectural education to draw a series of large graphite pieces entitled “Jihad Pop Progression Series.” Her work, described in the exhibit as “a Godly view of Mecca inspired monoliths and lotus flower monuments,” shows a unique perspective on clashing Eastern and Western cultures. She explained in an interview on the Queens Museum of Art blog how her immigrant experience influenced her artwork. “I think that for me it is essentially problematic to separate influences and places I have lived in,” Shah said. “The connection of time, architecture, memory and music all are fused together in a hazy state and sometimes can be distilled through images.”

In “Untitled,” Rirkrit Tiravanija created a facsimile of his passport. An immigrant from Buenos Aires, Argentina, Tiravanija’s purpose, according to the exhibit guide, was to show an “optimistic work about the future of geopolitical relations” in which we can move freely throughout the world and appreciate different cultures.

Emily Jacir’s series of photographs holds perhaps one of the most time-appropriate messages within this exhibit. After moving from Saudi Arabia to Rome and finally to the United States, Jacir created “linz diary” in 2003 by placing herself in the frame of one of Linz, Austria’s urban web-cams everyday for several months. She captioned each of the pictures in a casual, diary-like way, but her message about the shifting attitudes towards public freedom is serious and important in our current era.

The final artist is Ellen Harvey, who moved from England to the United States as a teenager. She recreated every piece of artwork from the Whitney Museum of Art’s 2003 catalogue, *American Visionaries*. Her act of repainting the 282 pieces raises the question

of what it means to be an “American visionary,” and questions why different value is put on artwork from different countries.

Generation 1.5 at the Queens Museum of Art is worth seeing because the vastly different works are held together by common threads of adaptation and survival, subjects to which many can relate. The collection also allows the public to discuss the experience of a group of people who are often overlooked.

For Amir Parsa, a Queens artist who emigrated from Iran at the age of 10 and always questioned what generation he belonged to, the exhibition is a wonderful forum for further exploration: “I like that this framework exists,” he said, “because it allows for discussion and a deeper understanding of these issue.

*Paula Kupfer contributed to this story.*