‘All Directions’, Fenix Museum, Rotterdam, the Netherlands (ongoing)

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‘All Directions’ exhibition, Fenix Museum, Rotterdam, with, in the foreground, Kimsooja, *Bottari Truck – Migrateurs* (2007), photo by Iwan Baan, courtesy of the Fenix Museum

Rotterdam’s new Fenix Museum is part a historical record of the emigration and immigration the city has lived, part contemporary art complex, and part – as the name suggests – a proverbial phoenix rising from its own ashes. Housed in a renovated warehouse originally designed by the architect Cornelis van Goor (1861–1945) and built for the Holland-America Line (HAL) in 1923, the museum opened its doors to the public in May 2025. The San Francisco Warehouse, as it was originally known, made up part of the largest warehouse in the world for cargo transfer when it first opened. Contents ranged from coffee beans, cocoa and wheat to iron, essential for the production of the steel that was crucial to the construction of post-World War I Europe.

Renovation of the site, which was partially destroyed by German troops at the end of World War II and later further damaged by fire in 1948, was undertaken by Ma Yansong, the founder and a principle partner of MAD Architects. Now puncturing the centre of the Fenix is the Tornado, a dramatic addition of reflective double staircases that lead to a viewing platform with encompassing views over the city’s port district, Katendrecht, and its busy river artery. Otherwise, the restoration has returned the building, which had experienced not only damage

The Fenix Museum, Rotterdam, photo by Mounir Raji, courtesy of the Fenix Museum

but also previous renovations in the past century, to its original clean lines and interior rhythm punctuated by concrete columns.

Today, the Fenix takes as its raison d'être the topic of migration. As a theme it is far from new, but Rotterdam's latest cultural landmark departs from a number of curatorial conventions. The inaugural exhibition, 'All Directions', draws exclusively from the Museum's new permanent collection, which now includes over three hundreds works by more than one hundred artists. The exhibition's content – much like the experience of migration – is not intended to remain static. Instead, as new acquisitions are made, works on display will be rotated. Next month's viewers may not see the same content that I saw. A further simple, but surprisingly rare, curatorial premise is also deployed: contemporary art, historical art and historical artefacts are displayed side-by-side.

This means visitors may find a wrapped UN Refugee Agency emergency tent, a small boat seized off the Italian island of Lampedusa and a portrait of Rotterdam-born Desiderius Erasmus (ca 1532) by Hans Holbein the Younger, all in the same space. A humanist, theologian and philosopher, Erasmus travelled extensively in Europe, often on the move because of the controversy generated by his writings. In a letter to the Swiss theologian Huldrych Zwingli, he explained with pragmatism: 'I am a citizen of the world, at home everywhere, or rather, a stranger to all.' Today, his name is used by the European Union's mobility programme, which Britain infamously left as part of the wisdom of Brexit in 2020.

Hans Holbein the Younger, *Portrait of Desiderius Erasmus* (ca 1532), 18 x 14 cm, collection of the Fenix Museum, courtesy of the Fenix Museum

Nearby, viewers with a keen eye may spot a postage stamp designed to celebrate the first direct flight in May 1949 between Amsterdam and Paramaribo, the capital of what was at the time the Dutch colony of Surinam. The aircraft transported airmail correspondence on its return journey across the Atlantic from the northeast coast of South America to the Netherlands. Depicted on the stamp are two women wearing the traditional dress of their respective cultures. However, Suriname's independence from the Netherlands in 1975 is not mentioned anywhere in the exhibition text.

The text accompanying Thania Peterson's *Rampie and Layer II* (2023) similarly omits colonial history, instead recounting:

> This tapestry illustrates Thania Peterson's family history, starting in Indonesia. At the top, she embroidered valuable Indonesian nutmeg, which played an important role in trade. The medieval monsters in the artwork represent European sailors. 150 years ago, they forcibly brought Peterson's ancestors from their native country to Cape Town, recognisable by Table Mountain.

Here, too, the absence of any mention of Dutch colonisation (and the brief British interregnum) of what would become the independent nation of Indonesia, or of the Dutch and British eras of colonial rule in South Africa, feel like odd historical facts to omit.

Sue Williamson's *Stories for Children* (2023) restitches images from a children's colouring book depicting the Boer War of 1880–1902. The accompanying exhibition text is far more challenging in the face of South Africa's years of Apartheid rule, concluding with the question: 'Her [Williamson's] work poses a difficult question: which occupier has the most right to the land?' Absent is any acknowledgement of the role textbooks have, and continue to play, in the indoctrination of younger generations into particular versions of national histories.

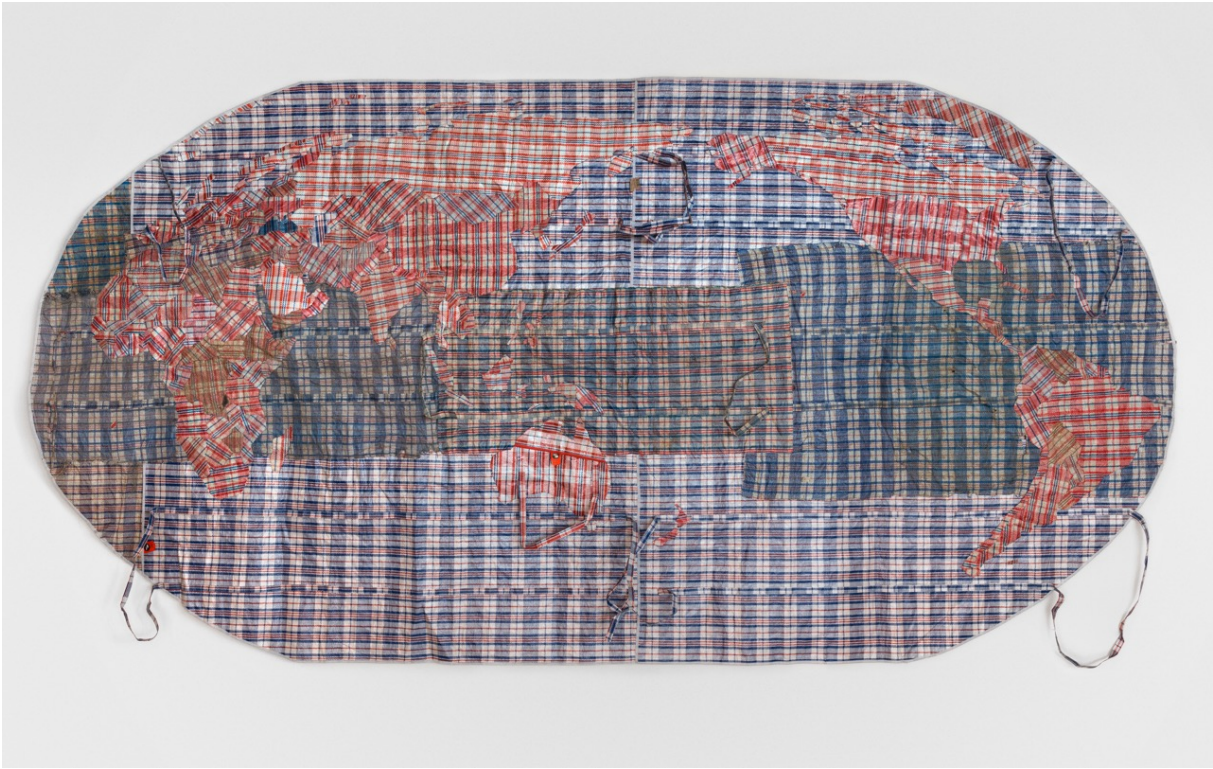
Suspended in the far corner of the exhibition, Jakkai Siributr's *The Outlaw's Flags* (2017) hang from a high ceiling and address more recent events. To create the imaginary flags, Siributr collected shells and beads from a Myanmar beach where the Rohingya people fled persecution, combining colours and symbols associated with Myanmar and the countries where they sought, and failed, to receive official residence (Bangladesh, Malaysia and Thailand). Not far away is a magazine from 1936 calmly advertising estate agents and moving/shipping companies to Jewish families in Germany, and a 1970s Scrabble board purportedly used to teach the Hebrew alphabet to Jewish families emigrating to Palestine. Yet, in keeping with the museum's apolitical stance, there is no mention of current events.

Jakkai Siributr, *The Outlaw's Flags* (2017), courtesy of Flowers Gallery

Also included are further reminders of egregious mistruths that drove immigration. For example, certificates dating from 1827 confirm ownership and stock holdings in the fictitious country of Poyais in Central America. This was an outright scam peddled by General Gregor MacGregor (1786–1845), who dreamt up a fictitious parliament structure and banking system 'validated' with an equally fake coat of arms and sold property deeds and stocks. Half of the 250 migrants to Poyais died after arrival. The country they had invested in did not, in truth, exist in any formal sense of the infrastructure or ownership MacGregor had fabricated on paper.

‘All Directions’ does what the title says, and this sprawling exhibition resolutely refuses to offer one message. At times this feels inspired; elsewhere it has an uncomfortably ‘light’ touch, and in moments risks causing offence – flashpoints that are likely to vary in visitors’ responses. Red Grooms’s *The Bus* (1995), a size-accurate fabric replica of a New York bus, drew crowds during my visit, crowds who patiently waited their boarding time for a walk-through, no-touch immersion inside the sculpture. What remains unspoken are the changes the United States has witnessed in the treatment of immigrants to the country in the thirty years since the work was made, more poignant now than ever before. Elsewhere breadth trumps depth. Giant blue slippers by the artist Hana El-Sagini, for example, felt disappointingly selfie-driven and banal.

A large T-segment of the Berlin Wall offers one of the least surprising responses to the museum’s theme (although it is a formidable section of the wall to encounter intact). Nearby, a wooden toilet door marked ‘Colored’ from North Carolina connects the violence of segregation to the histories of the forced migration of enslaved peoples to the Americas. In fact, the show is packed with stories that are adeptly told through materials. Dan Halter’s *Patterns of Migration* (2015) and *Rifugiato Mappo del Mondo (China)* (2019) convert large woven synthetic carrier bags into sculptures and maps. The bags themselves carry connotations of economical and urgent travel, referred to in various contexts by names that expose local xenophobia. *Patterns of Migration* (2015) seems to suggest that this transient movement can become an identity itself, obscuring, or perhaps homogenising, all other distinguishing features of an individual.



Dan Halter, *Rifugiato Mappo del Mondo (China)* (2019), 183 x 380 cm, photo by Matt Slater, courtesy of WHATIFTHEWORLD Gallery and Dan Halter

Cornelia Parker's flattened silver teapots, *Endless Tea* (2022), and Danh Võ's fragments of a copper replica of Lady Liberty, *We The People (part A5.2)* (2011–2016), speak to the thwarted expectations held by the domestic and the monumental. Parker made use of a 250-ton press to squash artefacts intimately tied to British colonialism. Recreating the Ellis Island icon, Võ separates rather than flattens, but in sectional pieces the artist has dispersed around the world – a copper diaspora of sorts.

Material-driven messages continue with the 220 thin sheets of porcelain Esther Kokmeijer used to create *Agreement with Nature* (2015–2020). The work reproduces four international agreements that focus on the Global Commons (the four zones of Antarctica, the world's oceans, the atmosphere and outer space, which do not fall under national ownership) in the six languages of the original texts (English, French, Spanish, Russian, Chinese and Arabic). Materially, they announce the utter fragility of such agreements. In contrast, at the opposite end of the museum, Shilpa Gupta's *Untitled (Gate)* (2008–2009) slams shut every thirty minutes, slowly cracking the wall it hangs against. The clang intrudes on the peaceful thrum of the galleries – an insistent reminder of the violence and damage of migration that usefully encroaches into the largely aestheticised world of the gallery.

Works by five artists – Beya Gille Gacha, Raquel van Haver, Hugo McCloud, Chae Eun Rhee and Efrat Zehavi – are exhibited for the first time as part of 'All Directions'. More common, considering the vast size of the show, is the inclusion of existing artworks. Artists whose work has long addressed the topic of migration, over-familiar to some viewers but in fairness useful to include, have made the cut: Yinka Shonibare's *Refugee Astronaut IX* (2024) is cast as a nomad now born of climate change; Do-Ho Suh is included with a small work that replicates door locks in some of the artist's former homes; while Kimsooja's *Bottari Truck – Migrateurs* (2007) packs an aging white Peugeot 404 to the brim with bundles of *bottari*, a traditional Korean wrapping cloth. In stark contrast to Kimsooja's humble materials is the inclusion of Willem de Kooning's loosely painted *Man in Wainscott* (1969). The late artist holds particular local relevance for the collection. Before his fame as an Abstract Expressionist painter, the Rotterdam-native travelled to the US in his twenties as a stowaway from the city. The Christie's auction house website lists the sale price realised on 16 May 2024 for *Man in Wainscott* as USD$ 8,690,000.

'Art and tangible reminders' is the phrase the museum website uses to describe the reach of the art and artefacts on display. The paintings by de Kooning and Hans Holbein the Younger appear alongside ephemera such as a genealogy booklet dated 1847 titled *De Kaapsche Landverhuizers of Neerlands Afstammelingen in Zuid-Afrika Door Den Hoogleeraar Lauts, Met Eene Kaart* (*The Cape Emigrants or Dutch Descendants in South Africa By Professor Lauts, With a Map*). It is hard today to disassociate the latter from President Trump's 'Mission South Africa', and its fast tracking of refugee status in the US for fifty-nine Afrikaners this year.

In addition to 'All Directions', two temporary exhibitions currently occupy the ground floor galleries: a photography show, 'The Family of Migrants', and an installation with audio,

'Suitcase Labyrinth', are both open to the public with ticket-free access. The latter smacks a little of summer holiday entertainment, with young visitors scrambling between the rows of luggage, but the content is poignant: two thousand used suitcases and their stories have been collected by the museum. The earliest, from 1898, journeyed to the Netherlands on the Trans-Siberian Express. The most recent is a Samsonite suitcase owned by someone fleeing the Russian invasion and ongoing war in Ukraine. The site also houses 'Plein', which is touted as a hub for gatherings by Rotterdam's diverse cultural groups (the city is home to upwards of 179 nationalities).

Framed in the gallery windows above the ground floor are views of the first Holland-America Line headquarters on the Nieuwe Maas River. Dwarfed against Rotterdam's skyscrapers, the building is now the Hotel New York – a nod to its earlier incarnation as accommodation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for Europeans beginning their sea journeys westward. The prominence of the original Holland-America Line headquarters is far from coincidental. Founded in Rotterdam in 1873, HAL was sold in 1989. The Fenix is funded by the Droom en Daad Foundation, a private initiative led by Wim Pijbes, which focuses on arts and culture in the city and is financed by a family who own/ed shares in HAL.

Taken as a whole, the Fenix positions examples of migration that are a harrowing testament to persecution cheek-by-jowl with poetic stories of migration born of desire and hope. On the one hand, it feels disingenuous not to confront the politics of migration today, but on the other, an expanded take on migration unyokes the term 'migrant' that has now been co-opted by particular far right political agendas. As a whole the message is jarring – as it should be.

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