

Art:

Proteus Gowanus exhibit sparks a conversation about migrations, both forced and otherwise

by Elizabeth Graham

The black and white photos on Lado Pochkhua's studio wall are raw, almost grainy. But the quality of the images, which document the sweeping move of nearly 300,000 people fleeing their homes during the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict in the early 1990s, is a sincere reflection of the hardship suffered during the somber migration.

Pochkhua, a young art student at the time, documented the movement using an old camera and expired reel film he found at a flea market. He shot hundreds of rolls of the low quality film from 1994 to 2003, before moving to the United States and eventually settling in Carroll Gardens.

The photographs, part of a migration-themed exhibit at Union Street gallery Proteus Gowanus, show the faces and landscape of the Georgian territory of Abkhazia after it was torn apart when Abkhazia tried to establish itself as a separate country.

Pochkhua, 41, the artist in residence for the first exhibition of a three-part series on the migration theme, felt right away that his project was a perfect fit for the show.

"For me what's important is the condition of people, their transit," he said.

The sweeping move signified enormous change for the people fleeing violence and intrusion by the Russian military. Many who were forced to leave had lived their whole lives in family homes passed down through generations. Abkhazia's dramatically varying climate – cold and mountainous in one area to nearly sub-tropical in another – posed special hardships for people who made their living off the land and suddenly had to contend with unfamiliar weather patterns.

Pachkua's images show the stark landscape – a pile of firewood covered with snow, a white-covered mountain, and the bare branches of trees. But they also reflect a sort of carrying on – girls in traditional dancing costumes, old ladies drinking tea out of fancy cups that are easy to imagine as family heirlooms, and young boys grinning as they peer up at the camera.

Artists selected for the Proteus Gowanus exhibition explore migration in a number of ways with work expressing how sound, people, animals and brain waves travel.

A formation of textured white paper feathers occupies much of one wall, trailing around and over part of the exhibit. Its creator, a Tokyo artist, says the feathers change the migration of sound as it travels through the paper.

Brooklyn artist Nene Humphrey's flesh-colored embroidered pieces show brain wave activity, while Aileen Bassis, another local artist, created a project focusing on the migration of Muslims to America.

Another intriguing piece illustrates the



The migration of people and human touch is explored in these pieces at the current exhibition at Proteus Gowanus. Photos by Elizabeth Graham

far reach of human touch. Objects that were made in China were purchased in the United States, carefully unwrapped, dusted for fingerprints and photographed under blacklight, revealing prints that were likely made by someone in a Chinese factory.

Peppering the show with varied interpretations on its theme is a reflection of the value the gallery places on ideas, director Tammy Pittman said.

"Like any migratory animal I guess you never really know what you're going to encounter along the way," she said. "We are deliberately as open-ended as we can be, we want it to be a community conversation meant to spark creative thinking. We don't try to over-curate or over-direct."

Starting Nov. 1, the gallery will show films exploring various forms of migration every first Tuesday of the month. The first night of the series will feature a series of short films about data migration, or information's journey from one



Georgian native Lado Pochkhua is the artist in residence for the first of three exhibitions on migration at Proteus Gowanus.

medium to another. Films later in the series, which is programmed by Park Slope filmmaker Sean Hanley, focus on human, animal and space migration.

Visitors to proteusgowanus.org can submit their ideas and reactions to the show at the gallery's blog, Proteuscope, which tracks the migration-themed year.

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