

Shimon Attie Statement on Night Watch

“For Night Watch, I created a floating media Installation that circulated in the waterways around New York City during the Fall of 2018.

Night Watch featured a 20ft-wide hi-resolution LED-screen which travelled the city’s waterways aboard a large, slow-moving barge and tug boat. Displayed on the screen were silent close-up video portraits of 12 new New Yorkers whose lives have been saved by recently being granted political asylum in the US.

The Installation combined contemporary LED-technology with dated, anachronistic modes of transport to create a complex and layered artistic and sculptural tableau. Night Watch activated and animated NYC’s waterways as both literal and metaphoric sites and landscapes for escape, rescue, safe-passage and the offering of safe-harbor for those most vulnerable. The artwork thus engaged one of the most urgent issues of our time – that of welcoming or closing our doors to asylum seekers and refugees.

Night Watch thus also reflected New York’s long history as America’s first port-of-call for those most in need. This included engaging and being in visual dialogue with some of New York’s most resonant and relevant landmarks, such as the Statue of Liberty, the Freedom Tower, the Empire State Building, and the Brooklyn and Williamsburg bridges, among others.

The artwork received major press coverage, including features in The New York Times, Hyperallergic, artnet News, and The Art Newspaper among others, as well as television coverage by BRIC TV, German State Television ZDF, and NY1.

During Night Watch’s run, the Installation travelled very slowly and closely hugged the city’s shorelines, allowing for intimate and sustained “I-thou” encounters with New Yorkers on shore. The piece also sometimes docked at pre-publicized locations and times. This allowed for longer viewings to take place, and was also timed and coordinated with related pre-planned events and symposiums on shore dealing with refugees and asylee issues. Needless to say, Night Watch represented a distinct counter-narrative to our current zeitgeist.

The individuals displayed on the screen are from 5 continents, and are largely members of the international LGBTQI communities, as well as unaccompanied minors, who fled tremendous violence and discrimination in their homelands. The individuals displayed in the work arrived from Nigeria, Honduras, Columbia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Jamaica and Peru.

The video documentation and still art photographs show how Night Watch functioned visually and aesthetically under a wide variety of environmental conditions. They also capture how the piece interacted with the natural landscapes of the Hudson and East Rivers, as well as with different elements of the near and far cityscape.

Finally, Night Watch was timed to overlap with the UN General Assembly Week, bringing the piece face-to-face with world and American leaders.

Night Watch was produced, commissioned and created in close collaboration with More Art, a New York City arts organization and non-profit. More Art focuses on creating socially engaged artworks in close collaboration with local New York City communities.

For Night Watch, More Art and I partnered with asylee and refugee legal aid organizations such as Immigration Equality and Safe Passage Project, as well as community empowerment groups including Queer Detainee Empowerment Project and RIF Asylum Support.”

