

November 29, 2025 - January 31, 2026

The multimedia three-person exhibition *Challenge* (2025) marks a decade since the 2015 refugee crisis in the EU. On display are three arresting works in different genres: documentary videography, a satirical short film, and contemporary figurative oil painting. The artists were all born around 1980 but come from diverse backgrounds. What brings them together here are their works addressing the subject of migration and confronting the spectre of European racism and xenophobia.

Slovakian artist and filmmaker **Tomáš Rafa** (born 1979, Žilina) is known for his high-octane videos. And *Refugees Are Welcome Here* (2020, revised 2023, 96 minutes, colour and sound) is no exception. An audiovisual onslaught, it documents 'the dramatic journey of refugees caught in the tension between empathetic volunteers and hostile state and societal forces', offering 'a visceral experience of the refugees' struggle for freedom amidst precarious circumstances.' It is the artist's clearly dangerous physical proximity to the events that makes the work stand out from news footage on the subject, for instance. His method—in which he positions himself in the midst of conflict and strife—intentionally collapses any illusions of maintaining a safe distance. Then standing in the artist's shoes, viewers witness closeup fathers carrying frightened children being crushed against an improvised border fence, or in another sequence, share a stage with a right-wing politician spouting virulent hate speech to an adoring, shaven-headed, flag-waving mob.

Pointedly, Rafa leaves such painful scenes and many others—shot over several years on location at notorious Eastern European hotspots during the most intense phase of the crisis—without commentary or the comfort of political and moral certainty. This is a conscious and contentious artistic decision, one that raises ethical questions. There is always a danger of perpetuating human rights abuses—through dehumanization, lack of meaningful consent, or the dramatization of suffering—in the filming and framing of such events. But then again, simply ignoring or looking the other way is no solution. (And might not moral qualms actually be the wish of the privileged not to be disturbed?) On a fundamental level, Rafa's work remains open to interpretation, even misuse. But the genuine unease this creates is art's contested territory; its retort to propaganda. Brief interviews at refugee camps and help stations with young, exhausted volunteers provide a needed moral touchstone.

The contrast between Rafa's heightened realism and the black humour of British artist **Patrick Goddard** (born 1984, London) could not be more pointed. In his recent short film *Whoopsie's Dream* (2023, 20 minutes, colour and sound) the artist lampoons the mean-spirited world of xenophobic suburban Britain through the eyes of Whoopsie—a fluffy and bigoted little lapdog who can talk. The toxic and opinionated pet has a gravelly voice and thinks of herself as 'G-O-D' presiding over her train set world. In the film, encounters with perceived external threats morph into a slimy nightmare in which giant snakes invade. In a memorable scene, Whoopsie secretly observes a snail orgy through a window and admits illicit desires for the sexualized 'Other'.

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The dark humour at play dovetails with its surreal imagery with British ironic style—think Monty Python, *The Goodies* (1970–1982), or Peter Greenaway's *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985). Goddard's practice also encompasses environmental sculpture and installation together with his films. When the film was first exhibited, eerie and familiar sculptural models of English villages accompanied it. As Whoopsie herself notes, 'The home is, after all, defined by the ability to limit the presence of other living things.'

Completing the triad is an iridescent, large-scale oil-on-canvas composition by Paris- and Madrid-based painter **Xie Lei** (born 1983, Huainan), which also lends the exhibition its title. The work *Challenge* (2015) stands out in the artist's oeuvre, marking a period when his painted motifs addressed the geopolitical world as seen through a stream of incongruent fragmented imagery. Originally part of the solo exhibition *Sans Rivage* (2015), the painting *Challenge* depicts a trawler whose deck is full with people, rendered in bright pink on a dark and brushy indigo ocean. The haunting work was no doubt inspired by the unceasing images of irregular migration on sea routes. A strange and deep ambivalence pervades the image, a profound sadness evoked by the facelessness of the figures and the work's overall dreamlike or liminal quality. This is of course an artistic response. No direct political statement claims the foreground despite the rhetorically ambivalent title or the 'history painting' scale of the work. As one commentator noted, the artist 'refuses to exploit these events, this sometimes tragic immediacy; he imposes a distance on himself and knows how to use the infinite subtleties of painting to express it.' The 'challenge' presented in the exhibition then is also an artistic one, asking by what means a subjective response to a complex world might take form.

— *Text by Dominic Eichler, Berlin, 2025*