

Skye Louis Interview: A Meatpackers Immigration Journey Artworks

In 2021 ActionDignity partnered with [Trico Changemakers Studio](#) to test out an artist-in-residence program. We wanted to explore this option because we really believe that art can help propel social change. Through this pilot program we were connected with Skye Louise, a local artist in Calgary.

Over the course of 2021 Skye created two compelling images that visually highlight the stories im/migrant and refugees who have ended up working at meatpacking plants, from the Migrant Dignity Project Report. This report presents the findings from a community-university research partnership between researchers from the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University and ActionDignity. Data for this report comes from a survey of 224 im/migrant and refugee workers in Alberta's meatpacking industry and 17 qualitative interviews. The survey and interviews took place between January and May 2021. A team of multilingual researchers conducted first language interviews with 17 im/migrant and refugee workers who work in meat processing in Alberta. The interviews were transcribed and translated to English. The survey was available in five languages including English. The goal of this research project was to understand the conditions that produce vulnerability for im/migrant and refugee workers in Alberta's meatpacking industry.

Q: You have created these two compelling images of the meatpackers immigration journey. Tell me about your own journey in creating this artwork. How did they come about?

A: I was looking to do a portrait series about essential workers in their stories. My interest from that was about showing and highlighting people's unique selves and their full self, outside of their job. I think that when we see other people as part of a faceless, nameless group, like, say, essential workers, it can be easier to kind of dehumanize them. I wanted to do the opposite of that, and really showcase people's humanity, and all the things that make them unique and make them who they are. That was what I was exploring. Okay, how can we look at storytelling, all these conversations that we were having, where it was happening in the middle of, you know, major outbreaks of COVID, that were impacting essential workers.

We were hearing from workers who were dealing with a lack of sick leave, or overwork, to the point of exhaustion. It was disturbing to witness, really, from my point of view. It seemed like these workers were being seen as totally replaceable. Meriam and I started to talk about the larger systems in place that were contributing to this. We specifically started talking about this kind of pipeline that exists between the Philippines and Canada, which brings workers in to fill these kinds of employment needs, where there are other workers who don't want to do the work because it's dirty, difficult, and dangerous and that's kind of a technical term for types of work. For instance, some of the roles in the meatpacking industry.

So, we wanted to explore, how we could tell the story of migration and labor policy, so that people who have this experience could see themselves reflected in the story. And through that, we connected with [AS] who is incredibly open and generous with his personal story. He shared that story with us, and he really took some kind of leadership role in saying, 'Yes, I want to tell my story so that I can help to make a change.' I really respect that. I think there's a risk to anyone who does that and so not everyone can put themselves in that kind of a position but [AS] did and so we had a real person whose story we could tell. And through that story, we could get to some of the underlying themes and the patterns that impacted other temporary foreign workers in Canada.

Q: Both artworks depict the immigration journey visually yet they look different. What is the story behind this? What was the process like? Any divergence from the original intent? And how did you balance workers' experiences with your own artistic freedom and instincts?

A: I would say the main difference between these journey maps is that the temporary foreign worker story is based on one individual while the refugee story is a composite story. When I say a composite story, I mean that it's like a collage of different stories that are coming from different people. It's really showing a variety of experiences that people might have gone through before coming to Canada as a refugee, or along the way.

Something that really stood out to me during this process was this tension between how do we tell these stories honestly to represent the reality of what is happening and what has happened, but also being aware of the trauma behind some of these images and the stories and not wanting to create an image that causes further harm?

Just to give one example, like some of these stories include instances of human trafficking and torture. As an artist, I really had to question, who am I visualizing this for and what could be harmful in this. So, trying to kind of center that along the way and making decisions with that in mind.

This was also a back-and-forth conversation with the people we're working with in our community. We needed to ask, "What do you think of this?", "Does this relate to your experience?", "How do you feel about seeing this as an image?" It was really just a process of like, back and forth and I would say with any kind of story that you're visualizing like this, you would want to try to just make it a conversation. The whole point of the image is as a tool. It is a thing that we can talk about and use as a starting point for more conversation. It is just a starting point, and then you could change it, or you could go from there once you get feedback on it.

Q: And what were the challenges you encountered? What are you most proud of?

A: I think in terms of challenges, the hardest part would just be like getting in touch with people. Over the last couple years, it's been hard to bring people together. There were many times where we literally couldn't come together in one room just to talk and look at things in person, right? Because of COVID, and all these things, and because communities are not monolithic and there is a lot of different perspectives and different realities within one community. There's also this challenge of how do you tell all the

stories? How do you represent everyone's point of view? Or, you know, can you do that even? So yeah, just the investment that it takes, I think.

Q: Yeah, totally! And then the bonus question is, how can the community support racialized artists like you in the arena of systems change and policy change?

A: That's a great question. I think the first thing I think about is, you know, tell your story where you can. I think the more real stories we have, and the more voices that are present, the harder it becomes to ignore what needs to change. And, I think, especially in the last couple years, we've seen a lot of amazing community efforts, as people are working to support each other through difficult times. I think really building that momentum because it's also been hard to do, it's harder to get together, it's been harder to do lots of things. So, I think that is not to be taken for granted, just the power of people getting together and connecting. Just doing that will support that kind of change. And, of course, if there's racialized artists, support their work. Share it out and encourage people to come to their events and just show that they're valued and that the work that they're doing is making a difference. Because artists really like to know that.