

How an exhibition of prayer rugs aims to stand up against Trump's travel ban

Artists, including Ai Weiwei, have designed 36 rugs that symbolize the importance of migration, stating that 'borders themselves are a fiction'

By Anna Furman

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▲ Ammar al-Beik - Untitled, 2017 Photograph: Robert Divers Herrick

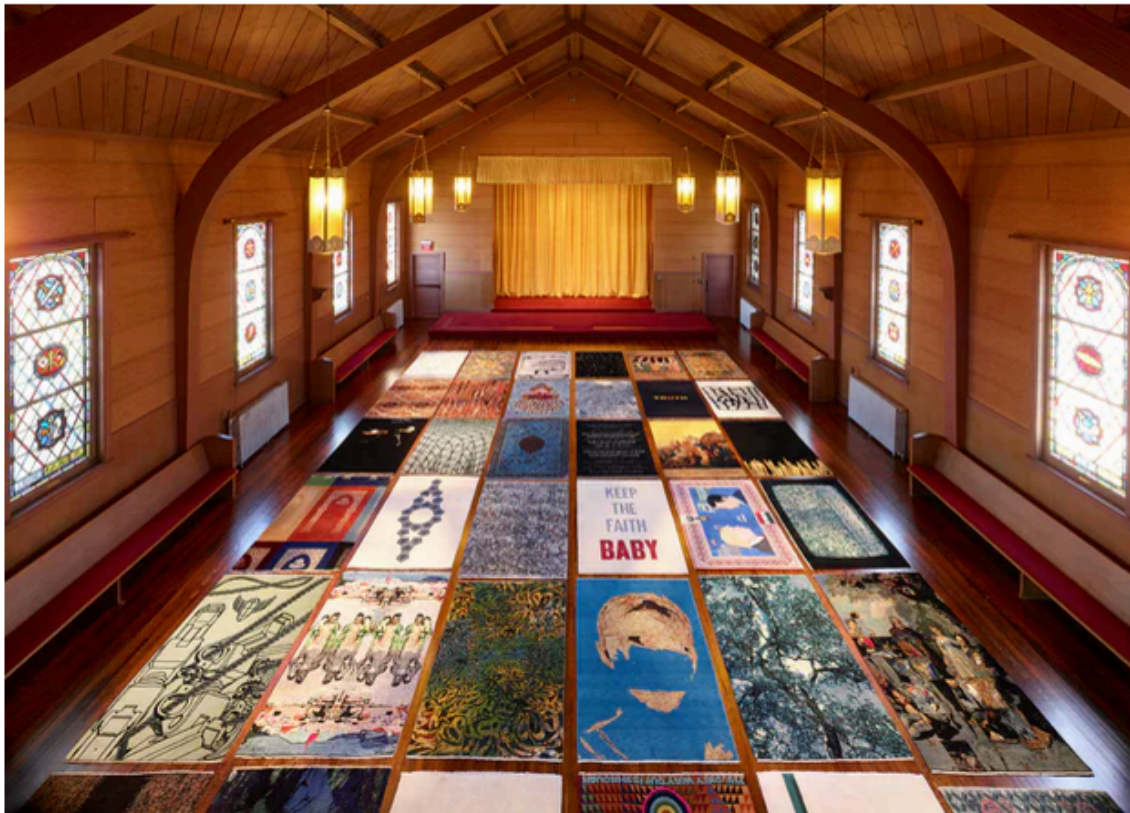
In a sun-dappled chapel perched atop San Francisco's decommissioned military base Fort Mason, the well-trodden wood floors are lined with prayer rugs. Shoeless visitors can traipse across, kneel or lay on the four-by-six wool rugs, which are kaleidoscopic in color, and neither spartan nor sumptuous in texture.

Designed by 36 contemporary artists – including Chinese dissident Ai Weiwei, Palestinian mixed-media artist Mona Hatoum and African-American conceptualist Hank

Willis Thomas – the rugs were hand woven in Lahore, Pakistan and express shipped to California for the exhibit [Sanctuary](#). Originally focused on artists from the six Muslim-majority countries on [Trump’s travel ban](#), the organizers expanded the list to include artists from Botswana, Syria, Mexico, and 17 other countries. (The installation was coordinated by the arts non-profit For-Site, who also organized [Ai Weiwei’s impactful Alcatraz installation](#) in 2014.)

In Syrian artist Ammar al-Beik’s rug design, cartoonish profiles of Donald Trump and Bashar al-Assad face each other with a nuclear bomb suspended overhead. In English and Arabic, the word “animal” appears between them – in reference to an [interview](#) earlier this year in which Trump called Assad an animal on Fox Business Network. In the background, a truck decorated with the Russian flag and a military-grade ship boasting an American flag intensify the already politically charged image.

In 1989, San Francisco became a sanctuary city, and this October, Governor Jerry Brown signed sanctuary state legislation – bringing another layer of resonance to this inclusive, globally focused installation. Tethered to an exhaustive news cycle in which a week often feels like a year, the installation will evolve in meaning over its six-month run. Implied in this exhibit are US border issues that are disparate but interrelated, including the ongoing criminalization of Mexican Americans as “illegals” and the false conflation of Muslim-Americans with radical Islamic terrorism.



▲ Sanctuary installation view. Photograph: Robert Divers Herrick



In the sprawling catalogue essay, writer and activist Rebecca Solnit connects subjects as eclectic as Buddhist's Three Jewels credo, the migratory paths of monarch butterflies, and theorist Edward Said's ground-breaking concept of "the other". Solnit has been [described as](#) an "oddball essayist," an unexpected "progressive icon, [and] a wise female elder". In contextualizing the current rise of Islamophobia in the US, Solnit reminds readers of historical precedents: anti-Irish violence in the 1840s, anti-Chinese riots in San Francisco at the turn of the 20th century, and the internment of Japanese Americans during the second world war.

"Borders themselves are a fiction, and every body is in motion," she writes. "The idea that some bodies are in motion and need to be arrested, literally and metaphorically, while other bodies are stable, is complicated." In Palestinian artist Emily Jacir's rug, Italian, English and Arabic text converge in opaque, monochromatic type. The work is a meditation on ongoing political violence in the Middle East and competing national histories in Israel/Palestine – made all the more urgent by [Trump's recent recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel](#). To commemorate the Palestinian intellectual [Wael Zuaiter](#), who was assassinated in 1972 by Israeli agents in Rome, Jacir references a line of poetry that Zuaiter quoted in his last published work.

From James Turrell's electric-lit installation in Berlin to Mark Rothko's meditative space in Houston and Louise Nevelson's sculptural chapel in New York's Saint Peters Church, there is certainly a precedent of contemporary artists transforming chapels into art experiences. But Sanctuary is distinct in its melding of faith-based practices, especially its integration of Muslim and Christian traditions – and in a former military space, at that.

"We're hoping to travel [the exhibit] to other communities," explained Cheryl Haines, executive director of the For-Site Foundation. "Not just on the coast, not just in the blue states. In places where this will really spark conversation." The foundation has partnered with local school groups to bring children to the site, and several college campuses have expressed interest in hosting the exhibit.

"We can build walls and have men with guns to keep people from moving, but the only natural division in the world, really, is between the land and the sea," Solnit writes. "And that changes all the time – at high tide and low tide and riptide and everything in between."