

ARTICLE

# Narratives of Agency: Understanding the Refugee Experience through Paintings at the EU’s External Borders

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*Despite a burgeoning interest in “visual” migration and border research, refugees’ own representations of their experiences of struggles with/against borders through paintings remain underinvestigated. In this article, I provide a close and contextual understanding of refugee perceptions and their first-hand experiences of struggles with borders, while highlighting the political significance of refugee-produced artworks in borderlands. Inspired by critical border studies and visual approaches, I draw on qualitative analysis of 70 paintings produced by en route refugee artists at the Hope Project on the Greek island of Lesbos, dissecting the emerging visual narratives and refugees’ creative practices. Analysis exposes three common narratives of the paintings: the perilous journeys of refugees from their homes toward the European Union, their everyday life constrained in Lesbos, and their future aspirations in a tide of freedom and uncertainty. These common narratives illustrate a sense of continuity between the past, present, and future of refugee experience, interrupted by the European border(ing) regime. The narratives reveal that even seemingly depoliticized spaces, namely art workshops and paintings, can become hyper-politicized, recounting how refugees as socio-political agents challenge the state borders constructed to manage refugee mobility and defy the symbolic borders targeting their identity and political subjectivity.*

Keywords: refugee artworks, migrant agency, European border regime, bordering, Greece, Moria

## Introduction

“Seeing comes before words” (Berger 1972, 33). In contemporary society, our perception concerning refugees may be altered when we see their images on newspapers, social media, or television, portrayed as the victims of migrant smuggling, people in need, criminals, or potential terrorists (Malkki 1996, 377; Fassin 2005, 373; Chouliaraki & Georgiou 2022, chap. 4). Indeed, “the modern individual is usually trained to pay attention to what is visible to the eye or the camera” (van Houtum et al. 2005, 2). More than ever, that is the reason why we need to attend to the narratives told

by refugees themselves, such as in the artworks they produce, to make sense of their lived circumstances as “experiencing subjects” (Eastmond 2007, 249) and to make these experiences visible. In particular, visual artworks can tell us something about the lived experiences of their producers, namely artists, for purposes of research. Though not transparent windows to the realities of the world (Rose 2001, 6; Eastmond 2007, 252; Catalani 2019, 19), the visual narratives told in the artworks can shed light into the hidden contextual corners of manifold borders that affect refugee lives.

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In this article, I turn to visual artworks produced by refugees<sup>1</sup> “on the move” through reflecting on a study I conducted between May and August 2022 with the Hope Project Greece, a British non-governmental organization operating on the Greek island of Lesbos. I explore the narratives emerging from refugee-produced paintings representing their experiences of the European border regime, which has been reinforced after the summer of migration in 2015, and refugees’ visual practices to understand migrant political agency vis-à-vis borders, from a bottom-up perspective (see De Genova et al. (2018); Hess and Kasperek (2019) on the European border regime).

In the past three decades, migration, border, and legal scholars have paid considerable attention to the ubiquitous construction and enforcement of borders through the tools of migration management, namely bordering practices. These tools—including border fences or walls, visa policies, carrier sanctions, readmission agreements, safe country concepts, and the “hotspot” approach—aim at controlling the mobility of certain people and their access to asylum before, whilst, or after they reach their destinations (see Moreno-Lax 2017; Cantor et al. 2022; Osso 2023). In the European Union (EU) context, a great amount of this scholarship has focused on how and why restrictive laws and policies are operated, by whom, and at whose cost, mainly from the perspective of states or private actors (see Gammeltoft-Hansen 2011; Moreno-Lax 2017; Cantor et al. 2022). While this scholarship has provided immense insights, from this viewpoint, people affected by the operationalization of restrictive laws and policies, mainly refugees, appear as passive targets—or, to use Amigoni’s and Aru’s words, “objects to be governed” (2023)—and their perceptions and experiences are largely overlooked. Conversely, a burgeoning scholarship on migrant agency has endorsed refugees as active political subjects, highlighting their struggles and perspectives vis-à-vis omnipresent borders in Europe (Vaughan-Williams 2015; Mainwaring 2016; Georgiou 2018; Chouliaraki & Georgiou 2022) or elsewhere (Nyers 2006; Janmyr 2022). Yet, refugees’ representations of their experiences with/against borders through artworks, particularly paintings produced by refugees outside research, have not received considerable scrutiny, except by a handful of scholars (Lenette et al. 2017; Catalani 2019; Amigoni & Aru 2023).

Inspired by critical border studies (CBS) and visual approaches, in this article, I provide a close and contextual understanding of refugees’ perceptions and their first-hand experiences of their struggles with and against borders, particularly emphasizing the role of art as a medium through which refugees assert their agency and voice. The article contributes to a nascent body of research on the intersections of art, migrant agency, and bordering by highlighting the political significance of refugee-produced paintings in borderlands with an innovative case study in Lesbos. Lesbos has become

a space of simultaneous depoliticization and hyper-politicization for refugees (see Turner 2015, 145) due to its transformation into “a critical location of migration and border enforcement” since 2015 (Wagner Tsoni & Franck 2019, 8), and thus offers an interesting context to examine the narratives emerging from refugee-produced paintings. My analysis draws on the images of 70 paintings produced by 33 refugee artists at the Hope Project between 2018 and 2022, triangulated with a semi-structured interview I conducted with the Hope Project’s founders in May 2022,<sup>2</sup> written testimonies of three artists, and other contextual information regarding the situation of refugees in Lesbos after 2015. I respond to two questions: *What narratives emerge from the paintings produced by refugee artists en route regarding their experiences and perceptions of borders? What do the visual narratives emerging from refugee-produced paintings reveal about refugee political agency vis-à-vis borders?*

As the author of this paper, I am a migrant-artist myself. However, significant mobility inequality and a gap of privilege exist between me and the research subjects, who were compelled to confront multifarious bordering practices because they were denied “safe and legal routes” or could not get visas to countries where they intended to claim the recognition of their refugee status. As the experiencing subjects of these exclusionary structures, refugees and migrants are the protagonists, hence rightful narrators, of their own stories. Artists at the Hope Project intend to make their voices heard, and this article is a medium to convey their message to a wider audience. Of course, as Eastmond (2007) asserts, “[i]n all stories, the personal voice is always interwoven with those of many others, and in narrative analysis it necessarily includes that of the researcher” (261). Regardless, “we need to continue seeking ways of listening to and representing refugees’ experiences, in their great diversity” (261).

In the following section, I introduce the contextual framework concerning refugee-produced paintings in Lesbos. Then, I explain the research process for analyzing the paintings as a form of data, particularly expounding sampling, the sites of analysis, and the selection of coding categories. In the fourth section, I address the assessment of the paintings, from which I discovered three common narratives that recount the refugees (1) *embarking on perilous journeys with hope and leaving home in the past*; (2) *navigating everyday life despite the spatio-temporal constraints in Lesbos*; and (3) *reimagining a hopeful future within a tide of uncertainty and freedom*. The narratives, I argue, illustrate a sense of continuity between the past, present, and future of refugees’ migratory and life trajectories (Eastmond 2007). This assessment draws on the three elements of migrant agency discussed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) and Mainwaring (2016). These elements—habit (past), imagination (future), and judgement (present)—epitomize the process of how

refugees negotiate possible trajectories at present to continue their journeys toward desired destinations through reflecting on their past experiences and future projects. This linkage is particularly relevant as it helps to ascertain one type of how refugees' border struggles are temporally represented in their paintings. In the final section, I conclude by arguing that refugees' visual narratives expose that even the most mundane depoliticized spaces, such as art workshops and painting canvases, can become sites of politics and contestation over im/mobility, identity, and political subjectivity (hence, hyper-politicization). For, “politics occurs precisely when the prevailing order is disrupted ... by those who possess no agency according to sovereigntist accounts of the political” (Nyers 2006, 49). While visually narrating their struggles that surface despite and against manifold state borders, including physical/political and legal borders, refugee artists also defy the symbolic borders that revolve around the victim-villain binary.

### The Context: Agency and “Hope” vis-à-vis Bordering

#### *Bordering within the European Border Regime*

As migration and border scholars have widely discussed, migrants and refugees often find strategies that subvert restrictive legislation and practices of migration management operated within and across the territorial borders of states (Mainwaring 2016; De Genova 2017; Hess & Kasperek 2019). While the mobility of refugees, particularly of those in irregular circumstances, produces and transforms borders, the borders reinforced by states in response engender more innovative ways of subverting these constructs (Mainwaring 2016, 294–295). This continuous, mutually-constitutive, and agonistic interplay between borders and migrant agency creates what is known as a “border regime” (De Genova 2017; Osso 2023). I understand “agency” as the capacity of navigating one’s life trajectories in line with their own terms and decisions, involving organized or spontaneous political action against structural constraints, such as borders.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, “border controls not only encourage longer and more dangerous migrant journeys, but also higher levels of ingenuity and agency from migrants and smugglers” (Mainwaring 2016, 303).

Such creativity and agency vis-à-vis bordering has become prominent particularly since 2015 at the EU’s external borders with the Balkan countries and Türkiye. These borders were tested considerably in 2015 with over 1.8 million “irregular” border crossings, over 880,000 of whom transited through the Aegean Sea from Turkey into the Greek islands (Frontex 2016, 6), including more than half a million into Lesbos alone (Wagner Tsoni & Franck 2019, 18). People fleeing from the conditions in their countries after the Arab Spring,

Syrian civil war, and other conflicts, risks of persecution, and poverty in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa arrived at Europe in search of safety and protection. This was proven by the number of asylum applications in 2015, surging to 1.26 million (Sahin-Mencutek et al. 2022, 1–2). The framing of this phenomenon as a “crisis” was mainly due to its occurrence outside legal rules and controlled frameworks, and, indeed, was used as reasoning for a more securitized migration policy agenda and increased criminalization and dehumanization in the EU context (Hess & Kasperek 2019, para. 17; Sahin-Mencutek et al. 2022, 4). In order to curb and prevent the arrival of people at the EU’s external borders, the EU and its Member States, also in cooperation with third countries, have employed various measures during 2015 and thereafter. Moreover, the portrayal of these people as destitute victims, security threats, or “enemies at the gates” (Catalani 2019, 4) in the European legal, policy, and media discourse has exacerbated their exclusion in host societies by creating an increasingly unwelcoming atmosphere for them.

The 2015 migration phenomenon cannot be explained with conventional theories on borders. While borders have been widely conceptualized as lines and visible objects dividing state territories, a performative concept of “bordering” coined by critical border scholars (van Houtum & van Naerssen 2002) better captures the contemporary tactics of migration management in the EU (Vaughan-Williams 2015, 6; De Genova 2017). Europe’s borders are not only material infrastructures of walls, razor wires, or barbed wired fences. They are also practices, such as the implementation of legal rules, or “legal borders” (Osso 2023), and discourses in laws, policies, and the media against certain migrants, or “symbolic borders” (Chouliaraki & Georgiou 2022, 5).

The period after the summer of migration has witnessed multifaceted repercussions of the European border regime for those coming to the EU’s external borders, who were indiscriminately framed as “irregular migrants” in the dominant legal, policy, and media discourse (Sahin-Mencutek et al. 2022). The EU and its Member States have handled the arrival of “irregular migrants” mainly by focusing on detention, deportation, and containment at the external borders, essentially manifested through the “hotspot” approach and the launch of the EU–Türkiye Statement of 18 March 2016 on the Greek islands (see Council of the EU 2015a, 2015b; European Commission 2015; European Council 2016). The EU–Türkiye Statement aimed to, *inter alia*, reduce the number of “irregular migrants” entering the Greek islands from Türkiye in return for EU funding for Syrian nationals under temporary protection in Türkiye (European Council 2016). The Greek hotspot islands have since become hubs for the spatial segregation and exclusion of refugees based on their nationality (de Vries et al. 2016, 5) and the temporal suspension of refugee lives (Osso 2023). Despite a significant drop in arrivals on the Greek islands through Türkiye

since 2015, the hotspot camps, initially created as a temporary registration and identification zone, have increasingly developed into quasi-permanent spaces of mobility control (de Vries et al. 2016, 5; Hess & Kasperek 2019, para. 20).

In particular, the Greek island of Lesbos, especially its Moria refugee camp, has become a space where refugee lives are stalled indefinitely in dire conditions (De Genova et al. 2018). A series of legal and policy measures implemented by EU and Greek authorities following the EU-Türkiye Statement has triggered the entrapment of refugees on the island. Greek authorities have inflicted a systematic geographical restriction (an obligation not to leave the hotspots for the Greek mainland) on all newcomers, even in cases of vulnerability, while asylum processing has started to take years (AIDA 2023, 41). Amid the progressively inhospitable socio-legal milieu in Lesbos, the material structures of Moria also shattered. The camp has suffered multiple fires and was destroyed with a final one in September 2020, after which most inhabitants were relocated to the new emergency facility in Mavrovouni (Kara Tepe) (AIDA 2023, 176). Both before and after the fires, Moria has hosted its inhabitants in abysmal and unhygienic conditions with lack of medical care and sanitation and significant overcrowding (Wagner Tsoni & Franck 2019, 11; AIDA 2023), with numbers reaching 25,000 at its peak in 2020, far above its official capacity of 3,100 (European Commission 2020).

The tightening of migration management after 2015 has not only affected refugees' efforts to receive international protection and enjoy their rights, but also their everyday lives and experiences in EU's borderlands. Indeed, as Scheel argued, "the European border regime permeates the everyday and intimate lives of both migrants *and* EU citizens" (Borrelli et al. 2022, 1152, original emphasis). Thus, there is an urgent need to explore the experiences of the Greek borderland, where inhabitants face substantial challenges due to EU's bordering regime, through a non-conventional and bottom-up approach.

### *The Birth of Hope Project*

In late 2021, I came across the works of a number of brilliant refugee artists who are the residents of the infamous Moria camp on Lesbos and produce artworks at the atelier of the Hope Project. The paintings strikingly illustrate the deep-rooted effects of the post-2015 European border regime, containing visual stories of refugees' migratory journeys toward the EU and their everyday life in Moria. So, I decided to take a deeper look at the paintings to make sense of the artists' reflections of their experiences and perceptions concerning the EU's borders.

Focusing on the empowerment of refugees in addition to providing support and aid, hence unclinking their

agency, the Hope Project Greece was founded on Lesbos amid the so-called "migrant crisis" in early 2015 by Philippa and Eric Kempson, long-term island residents and immigrants themselves. Their art project, which started in 2018, has become a venue of new beginnings and "political creativity" for hundreds of refugees (see Turner 2015, 144; Brambilla 2021, 100). Refugees subjected to extended waiting times at Moria can "actually find a way to express themselves through art", said Philippa (interview, May 14, 2022). From visual art to theatre to music and dance, "[this] comes in many different forms. The majority of it is painting and drawing" (Philippa Kempson, interview, May 14, 2022). Over the years, the Hope Project, particularly the painting atelier, has grown with the leadership and contribution of refugees. Some artists have had their paintings exhibited internationally, including in London, Berlin, and the Czech Republic, and in an exhibition curated by Norwegian artists in 2021 entitled "A Place in My Mind".<sup>4</sup>

The artists at the Hope Project endeavor to speak their minds through their paintings so that their voices are acknowledged by a broad spectatorship. Refugees leave their countries not only to seek protection from conflict or persecution, but also to live in a place where they can make their voices heard and have their rights respected. Thus, the silencing of refugees in legal, policy, and media discourse and their exclusion from host societies poses the danger of refugee voices going unheard. In this sense, art is the voice of the 'voiceless'. As Philippa said: "[n]ot only is [art] a way of expressing emotions and feelings [for] the people that are in the camp. It's also their voice; because if they speak, no one listens. They're actually afraid to speak because it will affect them" (interview, May 14, 2022).

At the time I conducted an interview with Philippa and Eric in May 2022, the art center had 45 artists with diverse backgrounds and knowledge in art or painting. While artists originated from an extensive range of countries, including Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Sudan, South Sudan, and the Congo, most of them came to Lesbos to seek protection in Europe. Thus, the artists share the identity of being a refugee in Lesbos: nearly each painting carries the imprint 'Moria refugee'. The reason, Eric reminded, is that "Moria is worldwide. Everyone knows Moria. And it's the most disgusting camp that has ever existed inside Europe, which never should have existed" (interview, May 14, 2022). This has been the case also after the relocation of Moria inhabitants to Kara Tepe in September 2020 (AIDA 2023, 176-177). Eric continued, "[n]ow, a lot of us called the new camp 'Moria 2,' so still Moria refugee camp" (interview, May 14, 2022).

What the artists want at the Hope Project is more of a mental sanctuary, a serene, safe space away from the turmoil of the camp. This safe zone is also a space where the artists act as agents in their ephemeral everyday

life in Lesvos. One refugee always takes the lead at the workshops, running the routine at the art center. Additionally, the artists are not given any instructions for their paintings and come up with their ideas freely and single-handedly. Eric, an artist himself, refrains from influencing the artists' thought process and art. He only demonstrates to the refugees the basics of painting, such as how to use and mix colors and how to observe things around them in daily life. The rest comes from the artists, who have produced nearly 10,000 paintings so far. Eric and Philippa told me that some artists took their paintings when they ultimately left the island while over 1,500 paintings are physically stored or displayed at the art center. Many paintings are also exhibited on online repositories, such as Fine Art America and Hope Art Project's Instagram and Facebook pages.<sup>5</sup>

Before reflecting on the analysis of selected paintings, I turn to my reflections on data and methods in the following section.

## A Visual Approach to Narratives of Agency

### *Unveiling the Perspective of Refugees through Paintings*

Understanding refugee perceptions of borders and their experiences of struggles with/against borders necessitates contextual study that addresses these phenomena from the perspective of refugees. While a large amount of refugee scholarship investigating EU's migration management measures has focused on the perspectives of states or private actors in controlling migrant mobility (see Gammeltoft-Hansen 2011; Moreno-Lax 2017; Cantor et al. 2022), a growing literature has also dissected the effects of these measures on people on the move and their agency, with a focus on their border struggles (see Vaughan-Williams 2015; Mainwaring 2016; Georgiou 2018; Chouliaraki & Georgiou 2022). Inspired by the latter, in this article, I assert refugees as socio-political agents who can resist borders, and whose voices recounting their experiences of border encounters must be foregrounded. Revisiting Philippa's words (interview, May 14, 2022), art can indeed be a refugee's voice and help them express how they view and understand the world they live in from their own perspective.

Although refugee painting projects have thrived in recent years (see for example, Parater 2015; Hayward 2021), paintings produced by refugees inhabiting borderlands have not received sufficient scholarly attention in migration-border research. A significant and insightful body of scholarship has explored the implications of migration-border management through visual methodologies in the past decades, including the representation of borders in images (Amilhat Szary 2012; Staudt 2019; Kudžmaitė & Pauwels 2020; Aru 2023), bottom-up creative reactions against bordering

(Wagner Tsoni & Franck 2019; Moze & Spiegel 2022; Patteri 2022), and the construction of borders through images (Malkki 1996; Georgiou 2018; Chouliaraki & Georgiou 2022). While the existing literature exploring visual narratives of refugees or migrants has predominantly utilized participatory methods (Oh 2012; Lenette & Boddy 2013; O'Reilly 2020; Brambilla 2021),<sup>6</sup> a number of scholars have also paid attention to refugees' representations of lived experiences through images (mainly, paintings and drawings) created outside formal research and subsequently shared publicly (Lenette et al. 2017; Catalani 2019; Amigoni & Aru 2023).<sup>7</sup> Contrary to researcher-driven visual methods, attending to refugee-produced artworks without specific prompts and discovered by researchers enables observation of artists' visual reflections and practices in their natural, social setting without external influence.

An analysis of the paintings produced by refugees helps visualize the operation of borders and understand its implications for refugees in their complexities and particularities. This offers an understanding from refugees' viewpoints of the spatio-temporalities of refugee struggles and mobility as a process (in changing spaces, times, and situations) vis-à-vis restrictive laws and policies aimed at managing this process. Notably, "there is no fixed or unitary route that borders take" (van Houtum et al. 2005, 3). Borders are largely invisible and intangible, except when they are illustrated as lines on political maps or delineated through border barriers, such as walls, razor wires, or fences between two states' territories. Nonetheless, certain visual elements and narratives illustrated by refugees in their paintings can be interpreted as representing the borders they encounter. The artists' reflections can elucidate how they view, understand, and challenge the borders operationalized through restrictive legislation and policies, rendering the borders and border regimes visible or tangible (see Wagner Tsoni & Franck 2019, 8; Kudžmaitė & Pauwels 2020, although not directly on refugee paintings).

The analysis of refugee artworks also provides useful insights regarding how the artists engage with practices that defy the symbolic borders constructed against refugee identities and subjectivities. With emphasis on "voices from below", this entails the recognition of refugees' agency (Janmyr 2022, 4; see also Malkki 1996; Amigoni & Aru 2023). In their artworks, each refugee narrates their unique experiences of border crossing and migratory journeys from their subjective, creative, and cultural perspectives. With their storytelling, artists strive to assert their political subjectivities as "counter-narratives" against and despite dominant discourses portraying them as irregular migrants embodied as victim-criminals (Eastmond 2007, 260; Lenette et al. 2017, 56). In the face of growing disbelief toward refugees' stories in the legal-institutional setting (Eastmond 2007, 260; Malkki 1996, 384) and the media (Georgiou 2018, 48; Lenette et al. 2017), exploring the

struggles of art-making refugees promises to expose their lived experiences and the wider socio-political context within which borders have a profound place and impact. As Martiniello (2022, 10) rightly puts, this helps "rehumanize" refugees at the intersection of art and migration. It also enables shifting our focus to the practices of each refugee as a unique individual with agency and voice and as the rightful narrator of their unique story, rather than perceiving them as voiceless and destitute masses managed by borders.

Finally, the analysis of refugee paintings enables access to the "inaccessible" worlds of refugees (Pauwels 2015; Kudžmaitė & Pauwels 2020, 12-13) and elucidate the hidden contextual corners of the operationalization of borders. Indeed, "visual perspectives provide avenues for deeper understandings than what can be offered through textual data alone" (Lenette et al. 2017, 47). Choosing the universal language of art (Catalani 2019, 4) over verbal and textual expressions also helps transcend the communicative and linguistic barriers that often emerge in research processes. Visual approaches enable an understanding of refugees' experiences of borders from their visually and culturally imbued viewpoints, in addition to disseminating their narratives to a wider audience. It is noteworthy that, as Rose (2001, 6) rightfully asserts, images are not transparent windows to truth, and the same applies to the narratives surfacing from images (see Eastmond 2007, 252). Narratives are "a form in which activities and events are described as having a meaningful and coherent order", which can be true or imagined (Eastmond 2007, 250). "They can [reveal] how social actors, from a particular social position and cultural vantage point, make sense of their world" (Eastmond 2007, 250). They enable "one way of understanding [refugees'] interpretations of particular events" (Lenette et al. 2017, 49). Yet, the visual stories refugees recount in their paintings provide valuable insights that "document their lives as told in their own voices" (Oh 2012, 282), such as the feelings, thoughts, and memories they develop through their encounters of displacement and borders. By analyzing refugee paintings, therefore, I access first-hand knowledge that very few scholars can obtain.

### *Curating and Analyzing Refugee Paintings*

For this study, I initially selected the images of the paintings that reflect the visual practices and border experiences of refugee artists at the Hope Project. Overall, I curated 70 paintings produced by 33 different artists (16 male, 16 female, and one collaborative artwork) between 2018 and 2022 from the Hope Project's online repositories on Fine Art America and Instagram. The sample includes 30 of 112 paintings (out of 148 posts available) on Instagram and 40 of 230 paintings on Fine Art America; 70 images in total, representing 20 percent of 342 images available in two repositories (as of November 8, 2022). Other emerging themes in the paintings not included in my

coding sample involve harsh critique of justice and refugee policies, human rights, women's rights, LGBT+ rights; past life, family, and cultural practices in artists' countries of origin; abstract, experimental, and colorful paintings. I selected the artworks which I considered to represent particular moments of refugee agency vis-à-vis various forms of borders, both within and beyond the Greek soil. The patterns in the paintings signify refugees' cross-border journeys toward Lesbos over the Aegean Sea between Greece and Türkiye (physical borders), their everyday life constrained within Moria (the EU's hotspot approach in the Greek islands as legal borders), and their hopes, dreams, and wishes, as well as uncertainties concerning their future. Then, I translated these patterns into coding categories, namely the units of data analysis and interpretation.

Considering two sites of analysis, the site of image itself, and the site of production (Rose 2001, 30; see also Ball & Gilligan 2010; Pauwels 2015), I focused on both what is visible within the frame of the paintings and what is invisible, beyond the frame. Using qualitative content analysis, I identified nine themes and coding categories, and coded each image of the painting accordingly. While the first six categories relate to the site of the image itself, the remaining three categories concern that of production:

- (1) central visual objects, signs, or symbols in the painting: for example, boat, lifejacket, lifebuoy, sea; camp, tent; barbed wire, razor wire, wall; skeleton, skull.
- (2) emerging narrative(s): what is happening in the painting?
- (3) dominant color: colors in a painting may represent multiple meanings depending on the context. In the context of Moria refugees, blue, for instance, is often used to illustrate the sea and their maritime journeys.
- (4) emotions, mood, action, and/or direction.
- (5) elements of borders: yes/no; visible/invisible; object, symbol, or practice.
- (6) elements of agency: past-oriented, for example, destroyed homes, departure, experiences of journey, border crossing; present-oriented, for example, refugees' surrounding at the camp, sea, island, their everyday life, refugee protests in Moria/Lesvos; future-oriented, namely visual elements representing the orientation of refugees' future based on past experiences, including search for safety/protection, hopes, wishes, and dreams, or the loss of those, such as uncertainty, death, despair.
- (7) artist's country of origin.
- (8) artist's gender: male/female.
- (9) artist's previous art education/knowledge: yes/no/no info.

Following the coding process, I interpreted the dominant codes and emerging narratives from the viewpoint of CBS, particularly employing the concept of border regime. This enabled me to decipher how the artists view, understand, and illustrate in their paintings the co-constructive interplay between refugee agency

and borders from their own perspectives. First, I sought to understand how the artists represent in their paintings their perceptions of the EU’s borders and their experiences of struggles with/against them. Second, I explored how the artists also challenge the symbolic borders that state actors and the media construct in the bordering of refugee identity. That said, the interpretation of refugee paintings without any texts or speech can be challenging for understanding the experiences of refugees. Thus, I reflexively focused on the selected artifacts and triangulated the narratives emerging from imagery with contextual knowledge, such as my interview with Philippa and Eric Kempson, other information about the context within which the paintings were created, and the written testimonies given by three refugee artists between July and August 2022, whose paintings I selected for exhibition in this article.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, my positionality as a migrant and a political cartoonist often helped me to address these challenges as it provided useful insider insights and in-depth understanding for artworks that translate their maker’s lived experiences. In the following section, I reflect on the findings of my visual analysis.

## The Entangled Narratives of Agency

One type of expression in narratives is the linkage between past, present, and future, creating a sense of continuity of the past in the face of the uncertainty of future (Eastmond 2007, 254). This sense of continuity is significant especially for refugees whose lives are radically disrupted due to their displacement from home and fundamental changes in their lives. Because “[r]efugees are in the midst of the story they are telling” (Eastmond 2007, 251), their unfinished stories can provide insights into the future they are imagining in their visual narrations. In the case of the refugees attending painting workshops at the Hope Project, their medium for telling their stories has been painting. In fact, as Philippa (interview, May 14, 2022) said, “some of [the paintings] were very political and slightly edgy” since most of the artists can only voice their struggles by visually narrating them in their paintings. That is why many paintings bear the traces of artists’ migratory journeys and become the visual frames representing their lived experiences. Philippa’s words were highly apposite: “[these are] people who have been through hell. Some of the stories are endless and heartbreaking. And they didn’t flee on a whim to try and get someone’s benefit or a nice house. It’s not a choice that they would make” (interview, May 14, 2022).

To understand refugee experiences of struggle vis-à-vis the borders constructed and operationalized through the EU’s exclusionary laws and policies, I decoded the moments of agency in the paintings of refugee artists and identified three common narratives: (1) embarking on perilous journeys with hope and leaving home in the past; (2) navigating everyday life despite the

spatio-temporal constraints in Lesvos; (3) reimagining a hopeful future within a tide of uncertainty and freedom. Through this analysis, I discovered a sense of continuity between the past, present, and future of refugees’ migratory and life trajectories in the emerging visual narratives. This comes in the face of EU and Greek law and policy aiming to contain certain refugees at the hotspots, disrupt their migratory journeys, and create intermittent lives. In visually narrating the refugee struggles with/against multifarious state borders, including physical/political and legal borders, the artists also tackle the symbolic borders constructed by states and the media that center on the victim-villain binary.

### *Embarking on Perilous Journeys with Hope and Leaving Home in the Past*

Memories and reflections about the past journey toward the EU soil and departure from erstwhile home are the most prominent depictions, making 43 of the 70 paintings I analyzed. I considered these paintings as relating to the past because they were created in the premises of the Hope Project on Lesvos while the artists inhabited the Moria camp. The paintings are vibrant and rich in terms of the visual objects, signs, or symbols they accommodate. While ‘sea’ is a leading visual element in the paintings, the richness of the elements regarding (sea) journey is striking: refugees in these paintings are portrayed on the move (walking, running, sailing) (Figure 1) while they confront manifold material or immaterial challenges—such as a barbed wire, a wall, a push back—and are often in distress, like drowning or dying (Figure 2). These elements are often supplemented with objects representing the tools or vehicles of a sea journey, including (inflatable) boats, dinghies, lifejackets, and lifebuoys that are widely visible in the paintings (Figure 1), or the wrecked remnants of these tools or vehicles which are reminiscent of a (un) successful sea journey (Figure 2).

Each painting reveals “particular moments” of a refugee journey (see Mainwaring 2016, 291). Although it cannot be fully deduced from a single painting that portrays a refugee artist’s experience of their journey to Lesvos, the juxtaposition of paintings reveals narratives of the chronology of a refugee journey. While every story concerning refugee journeys is unique, there happen to be several similarities in refugee experiences, such as unfinished cross-border journeys from home to Lesvos, as seen in the paintings. This unidirectional and linear representation of a journey from origin toward destination captures the perceptions and experiences of refugees. Though, as many border and migration scholars argue, “[refugee] movements are often erratic and multi-directional, betraying conventional accounts of migration as linear movements from nation-state A to B” (Borrelli et al. 2022, 10; see also de Vries et al. 2016, 1). Each journey from home toward the EU starts with an involuntary and complex decision of departure despite all the perils (Borrelli et al. 2022, 5), passing through

a so-called transit country, then continuing with an onward movement until destination. Nonetheless, there may be several ‘pit stops’ throughout a cross-border journey, just like in Lesvos where refugees are contained and prevented from continuing their onward journeys. Waiting times at the stops may vary depending on the opportunities refugees obtain, who may eventually discontinue their journeys and decide to stay in that transit country, such as in Türkiye or Greece. Refugees may be deported to countries of transit or origin if they are found to have entered EU territory in a clandestine manner (Mainwaring 2016, 291) as per legal or policy instruments, such as the EU-Türkiye Statement.

Several paintings I analyzed reify what many border and migration scholars have argued, articulating that a decision about departure is not an easy task and requires agency oriented toward one’s future. As Mainwaring (2016, 292) puts it, agency is more than a single, one-time choice; it is about constant decision making, risk taking, and room for maneuvering within the restrictive structures of states. Some paintings depict an individual refugee or refugee families fleeing their homes due to war or conflict, with the visual elements representing fallen bombs or rockets, destroyed cities or towns.<sup>9</sup> Some narrate the challenges encountered on the move: refugees drowning in the sea, refugees illustrated near a capsized boat and/or asking for help while in distress (see Figure 2). These narratives also reiterate that borders can be both visible material constructs or invisible legal or policy decisions, both portrayed as structures that refugees attempt to overcome to reach safety. The paintings that depict encounters with ‘invisible’ borders usually take place in the sea, often illustrating refugees on a boat journey (Figure 1; Figure 2). This can be interpreted as border crossing over the Aegean Sea, namely the geographical, natural boundary between Greece and Türkiye. The paintings that narrate ‘visible’ borders clearly articulate visual elements of border barriers. These include the borders between Iran and Türkiye (flags of both countries at a border zone divided by razor wired fences are visible), between the EU or Greece and Türkiye (again, respective flags are visible), or imaginary barbed wires or walls that obstruct individual refugees or refugee families from continuing their journeys.<sup>10</sup>

Revealing how the artists perceive and experience border(ing)s, some paintings concerning past journeys also recount how refugees overcome these constructs, such as through border crossing. As these paintings depict, a significant number of refugee journeys are ‘successful’, articulating that refugees managed to cross various borders and arrive at the EU shores following an arduous voyage (Figure 1). The painting by Najibullah (Najib) Hosseini, an Afghan artist who resided in Moria for nearly two years, realistically illustrates the rubber boats arriving at the shores of Lesvos (Figure 1).<sup>11</sup> In this painting, Najib clearly demonstrates the landing



**Figure 1. Untitled, painting by Najib Hosseini, 2021.**  
Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

of boats packed with refugees wearing lifejackets to protect themselves from drowning during their journeys, as well as a number of lifebuoys along the shore as the remnants of earlier successful arrivals. That Najib and other refugee artists are physically present in Lesvos, engaging in creative practices at the Hope Project, manifests the success of their journeys in and of itself.

Najib, who was a third-year arts student at Herat University in Afghanistan but had to discontinue his studies after deciding to leave his country, told me about his decision and experience of coming to Lesvos: “I had to emigrate in the middle of 2018, and it took me three months to reach Greece with many difficulties” (Najib Hosseini, Instagram message to author, July 28, 2022). Taking the initiative, he risked his life by departing from home and covering a long distance to reach Europe. The difficulties he had faced during the journey—including the various borders between Iran and Türkiye and between Türkiye and Greece—did not stop him from continuing his flight, because he had hopes and aspirations for a better future.

Nevertheless, there are also many refugee journeys that were and are ‘unsuccessful’, as illustrated by an Iranian artist Nazgol Golmoradi in her painting entitled “Mr. Eric”, dedicated to Eric Kempson (Figure 2). On the one hand, the painting depicts Mr. Eric, a representative of a humanitarian organization, saving the lives of refugees who decided to embark on perilous journeys with wishes and hopes, seeking help to reach safety. On the other hand, it serves as a testimony to refugees losing their lives alongside their wishes, hopes, and dreams throughout their journeys piercing visible and invisible borders, for instance, the Aegean Sea between Greece and Türkiye (Figure 2). What is common in the narratives of (un)successful refugee journeys is that refugees were indeed able to cross the borders, wherever these borders were located and no matter how their journeys ended. Moreover, refugees embarked on the journeys with the goal of shaping their futures: the search for



safety and protection, as well as the pursuit of hopes, wishes, and dreams for a better life. This is the case for journeys that end successfully by reaching the borders of Greece and the EU or unsuccessfully due to a decision or an external factor resulting in their discontinuation.

Most of Nazgol's paintings carry her own inscriptions, both physically behind canvases and in the form of captions posted on Hope Art Project's social media accounts. In doing so, she endeavors to convey her first-hand experiences and struggles, as well as those of women, migrants, refugees, and LGBT+ individuals, all of whom are marginalized in society in some way. As she expressed in her testimony:

I love painting since I was a child, I painted many styles and various ideas, but I mostly paint about women's rights and immigrants' rights. Some of my paintings are taken from the real life of real people, and some of my other paintings are derived from the lack of rights. I also paint about LGBT rights. I think that women, LGBT people and immigrants do not have their full rights. I try to convey the voice of all those who are deprived of their rights to the world with my art. (Nazgol Golmoradi, WhatsApp message to author, August 6, 2022)

Akin to the narratives of agency she reveals in her paintings, Nazgol also acted with agency, her own decisions, and autonomy in everyday life, such as by continuing painting in Lesvos and thereafter. Through her art, she endeavors to voice her own struggles and those of others who are excluded from the state territories and host societies, and make these voices

heard and recognized by people across borders in the face of dominant, reductive discourses that dehumanize refugees. Furthermore, she challenges these discourses with her paintings, illustrating the reality of arduous migratory journeys, as well as the perseverance and vigilance that refugees demonstrate. Nazgol continued: “[b]ecause I am also an immigrant, I immigrated when I was 17 years old and now I am 22 years old. ... [W]ith my paintings, I will touch the souls of others and lead everyone to a colorful world away from war” (Nazgol Golmoradi, WhatsApp message to author, August 6, 2022).

*Navigating Everyday Life despite the Spatio-temporal Constraints in Lesvos*

The second most prominent narrative in the paintings produced by the artists at the Hope Project concerns their everyday life in limbo (temporally constrained) and within a “space of exception” (spatially constrained) on Lesvos (Agamben 1998; Hess & Kasperek 2019). This common visual narrative represents the artists' experiences of inhabiting Moria or ‘Moria 2.0’, the camp that was relocated to Kara Tepe (Mavrovouni). What is striking in these paintings is how refugees perceive Moria both as a constrictive and regenerative space and reflect their imaginations in their visual artifacts and creative practices. Akin to the paintings of departure and journeying, the paintings of limbo and exception contain rich elements that represent refugees' everyday encounters in Lesvos.

In these paintings, refugees conspicuously recount the spatio-temporal constraints on their migratory and life trajectories arising from EU and Greek exclusionary laws and policies operationalized in Moria. In material terms, the artists understand Moria as a ‘prison’, a segregated space of waiting and detention, surrounded by walls and barbed wired fences, which they must escape to continue their onward journeys (see Figure 3; Figure 4). The artists also powerfully illustrate their perceptions of ‘waiting’, with visual elements such as skulls, skeletons, or the grim reaper, and emotions such as crying or being silenced.<sup>12</sup> These elements and narratives can be interpreted as the artists' understanding of waiting as a condition of “in-betweenness” (see Agamben 1998, 39; O'Reilly 2020, 81), representing how the artists experience their spatial exclusion and the postponement of their migratory and life trajectories in Lesvos.

Refugees come to Lesvos through dangerous journeys, typically by rickety boats from the Turkish shores. So did Abdullah Rahmani, an Afghan refugee who had resided in Lesvos for two-and-a-half years. Though, as revealed by the narratives in the paintings about refugees' everyday life in Lesvos (see Figure 3), the landing of refugee boats at the Lesvos shores is only the beginning of yet another challenging experience. Abdullah's journey halted in Lesvos, where he had to live through appalling conditions for a quarter decade:

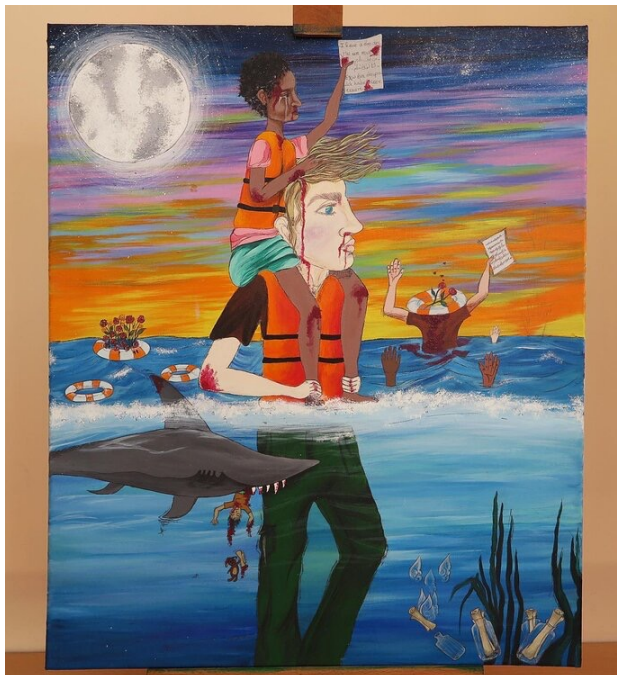


Figure 2. “Mr. Eric”, painting by Nazgol Golmuradi, 2021. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

Lesvos (Moria camp) ... was very bad for refugees. When I was there, we were about 23,000 people in a camp. So, of course out of bathroom, toilet, and food. We were staying in line for 2 hours to receive food. I was waiting till 3 o'clock in midnight to take shower. (Abdullah Rahmani, WhatsApp message to author, July 20, 2022)

As Abdullah expressed, the Moria camp is a space of exception where refugees are reduced to their 'bare life', a biological condition that denies their political subjectivity and considers refugees as voiceless, destitute victims incapable of acting autonomously (see Agamben 1998; Turner 2015, 143; Georgiou 2018, 48), where only their basic needs are provided, such as washing, eating, and sleeping in overcrowded facilities. The spatio-temporal suspension of refugees' lives and rights in this space of exception aims to prevent refugees from continuing their journeys and creating a life with agency, and leaves them exposed to the charity and humanitarian compassion of state authorities (see Malkki 1996; Fassin 2005).

Nevertheless, this suspension and the interruption of refugees' journeys in the camp do not necessarily mean that refugees are shorn of agency. "[They] do not simply accept the conditions of the camps as passive victims, and many do struggle to overcome them" (Gündoğdu 2015, 144; see also Turner 2015, 143). Many refugees tend to reject the charity and compassion of EU and Greek authorities, as the visual narratives in some paintings reveal. Although refugees are portrayed in the camp, surrounded by walls and barbed wired fences for their containment and segregation, they continue to engage with daily activities, such as playing at the campsite, washing clothes, attending art workshops at the Hope Project, and running errands.<sup>13</sup> These paintings also depict the temporariness of the camps in which they are residing, with visual elements illustrating makeshift tents within unhygienic surroundings (for example, a debris of solid waste, as illustrated by Najib, see Figure 3), and indicate how refugees adapt to the changing life situations at Moria, regardless of the challenges they encounter. As Turner (2015) argues, "[as r]efugees adapt to the life of the camp, ... [their a]daptation may ... lead to new social forms and opportunities" (143), and "for individuals to remain socially alive, they need to be able to imagine a meaningful future for themselves—however miserable their present-day situation is" (145).

Many refugees also engage with artistic projects in their everyday lives, such as attending art workshops at the Hope Project, while waiting for the processing of their asylum claims on Lesvos. Creative practices allow refugees to reflect on their past and "reinvent themselves" to give direction to their future endeavors (see Oelgemöller 2011, 409; Turner 2015). The workshops have been a retreat location for many refugee artists, such as for Abdullah:



**Figure 3. Untitled, painting by Najib Hosseini, 2021.** Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

I learned painting in Afghanistan. I heard that Hope Project is a place where artists can paint for free ... After that, I was always there for being far away from the camp (Moria). I did many paintings there and showed my feelings through the painting. (Abdullah Rahmani, WhatsApp message to author, July 20, 2022)

A significant number of paintings also depict the fire that destroyed the Moria camp in 2020, indicating that the incident has left a big mark on the refugee artists' memories, imaginations, and their visual practices (see Figure 3). Some paintings realistically demonstrate that the fire took place during the Covid-19 pandemic; this can be interpreted through the visual elements of refugees wearing masks (see Figure 3). Illustrating a refugee family escaping the fire at the Moria campsite, for instance, Najib skillfully shows the strong emotions in the eyes of a refugee woman holding her child while trying to save herself and her family's lives with her husband (Figure 3). Running away by the walls and fences of the camp and carrying only a few bags of belongings (Figure 3), it can be interpreted that these refugees did not choose to stay in Moria. Rather, they were subjected to the practices of containment and segregation in the Moria camp, within makeshift tent structures surrounded by visible, physical barriers. Possibly, many refugees considered the fire as an escapeway to improve their conditions, though, were transferred to another camp in Lesvos ('Moria 2.0') with equally appalling conditions.

Ultimately, many refugees at Moria intend to continue their journeys upwards toward other European countries as they see no future for themselves in Lesvos or Greece. Judging by their past habits and future projects and venturing to encounter the borders along their journeys, they evaluate the alternatives and take the initiative to leave Moria (see Mainwaring 2016). For them, the journey that halted in Lesvos is unfinished, as Najib utters in his story:

I was in Greece for almost two years, my asylum application was rejected twice by the Greek immigration office, which forced me to leave Greece as well. I currently live in Switzerland. (Najib Hosseini, Instagram message to author, July 28, 2022)

Reminiscent of what Abdullah did to overcome the burden of degrading conditions in Moria, Najib engaged with painting in Lesvos to visually narrate his first-hand experiences of the European border regime and empathetically recount those of other refugees. His agency first led him to continue painting while on the move, notwithstanding the challenges he had encountered in Moria. Second, akin to his visual stories, he gave a future direction to his life and decided not to stay in Lesvos or Greece. As his efforts to be legally recognized as a refugee in Greece failed, he then embarked on another risky journey to reach and reside in Switzerland for safety, better chances, and a life with dignity and human rights.

*Reimagining a Hopeful Future within a Tide of Uncertainty and Freedom*

The last common narrative emerging from the paintings recounts refugees’ futures, reflecting on their wishes, dreams, hopes—or the loss of those—as well as their search for safety in Europe. Usually, refugee artists use bright colors in the paintings that depict their future aspirations, as well as visual objects such as a lightbulb, or metaphors, such as the light at the end of the tunnel and flying birds.<sup>14</sup> These elements could be interpreted as representing refugee hopes for their emancipation from onerous and squalid conditions in Moria. While “imagining a future, planning one’s life trajectory and acting accordingly in the present become seriously challenged” due to camp’s ephemerality, most refugees seek a life beyond the camp in the future (Turner 2015, 145). In this sense, the imagined future is often a better version of what refugees have been through throughout their journeys toward EU territory and their everyday life on Lesvos.

This is, of course, in no way to overemphasize that all artists portray the future in their paintings as bright. Several artists also illustrate the uncertainty of refugee journeys toward safe soils, as well as that of life in Moria associated with their elongated waiting in the camp. In particular, a painting that illustrates a number of refugees heading toward a dark tunnel, the end of which is invisible and uncertain, can be interpreted as suggesting that the journey is unknown, yet worth taking risks in order to reach safety and a better life.<sup>15</sup> Another painting illustrating a child at the seashore looking at debris of lifejackets and at the opposite shore (possibly Türkiye) can indicate that his perilous journey toward Lesvos is in the past, and he successfully managed to enter EU territory.<sup>16</sup> However, it can also be construed that a child, a refugee that would be considered a ‘minor’ in legal terms, may be unaccompanied and

waiting for his parents who could not even make it to Lesvos. The future looks perturbing; the child refugee is at risk of being part of a ‘lost generation’ if he fails to gain access to fundamental rights, such as the rights to an adequate standard of living and to education. This emerging narrative indicates the brutality of invisible borders both towards refugees *en route* and those contained in Moria, creating an anxiety of uncertainty and nescience regarding their future.

Recounting refugees’ continuous struggles between freedom and uncertainty, Abdullah visually narrates how borders affected him and other refugees coming to Europe. “I want to share my ideas about suffering of refugees in Europe through my paintings”, said Abdullah (WhatsApp message to author, July 20, 2022). Some of his ideas and feelings in his paintings concern the future, portraying himself in one of them as flying on a dove through barbed wired fences opening toward the road ahead (see Figure 4). These fences can be interpreted as representing the borders that he had encountered in Moria and, perhaps, also during his journey from home to Türkiye toward Lesvos. Abdullah expresses that if borders were open, or if he could somehow overcome them, he could then continue his journey. Here, there is a future-oriented element of agency: Abdullah wished to move freely, though he had then been residing in Moria and attending art workshops at the Hope Project.



Figure 4. “Peace and Freedom”, painting by Abdullah Rahmani, 2019. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

In view of some paintings depicting the future, it can be interpreted that refugee artists envision a hopeful future where they can freely and single-handedly navigate their journeys toward and in their desired destinations. This is contrary to their past and present settings where state actors attempt to control them and their lives through borders. Such an imagined future is not one where refugees succumb to the Greek bordering practice of deportation to Türkiye under a set of law or policy tools, such as the EU-Türkiye Statement, or back home, but one where they rebuild their own migratory and life trajectories. In pursuit of these trajectories, Abdullah did not stay in Moria, reminiscent of his painting illustrating his emancipation from the camp. By reflecting on his past experiences to navigate his future in his own terms and wishes, he decided to leave Lesvos and its squalid conditions for Germany. He first arrived in Athens, mainland Greece, to access the North Macedonian border near Thessaloniki where he had unexpected encounters:

After [Athens] I went to Thessaloniki to enter [North] Macedonia [where] unfortunately I [had an] accident on the border with a train and unfortunately, I lost my left leg. Now I am [an] amputee, Europe changed my life. Now it's [been] about 2 years ... but still I am feeling disappointed. I was five months in a hospital in Greece. ... Now I am in Rome, [a humanitarian organization] made my prosthetic leg and gave [me] a place to stay. (Abdullah Rahmani, WhatsApp message to author, July 20, 2022)

Despite the accident Abdullah had while crossing the Greek-North Macedonian border, he could finally make his way to Rome, a place where he could settle and direct his life in accordance with his future endeavors. It is very likely that this is not what Abdullah had imagined in his paintings and in reality. The borders of Europe altered both his migratory trajectory, that he ended up in Italy instead of Germany, and his life trajectory, that borders cost him a part of his physical body. Now, Abdullah continues to paint in Italy: "I want to be a professional artist", he said, "to show refugees' suffering, happiness, [and the] ways which they passed [through] to the people of Europe" (Abdullah Rahmani, WhatsApp message to author, July 20, 2022). The creative practices he once engaged in Afghanistan, as well as in Moria despite the spatio-temporal suspension of his life, certain rights, and his journey, have developed into his profession. Abdullah wishes and hopes to make his voice and unique story heard by others in a common world where he is acknowledged for his art and as a unique human being, and not by his country of origin or his status as a refugee.

## Conclusion

"Thank you for being my voice and being people like me, it makes me proud" (Najib Hosseini, Instagram message to author, July 28, 2022); these were the words

of Najib when he urged me as a researcher and a fellow migrant-artist to convey his story and art to the world. The issue at stake not only concerns whether refugees have a voice, but also whether their voice reaches a relevant framework. Because "the excluded, those who have 'no part' in the social order ... have to interrupt not just to be heard, but to be recognized as speaking beings" (Nyers 2006, 54). To be seen and judged as "people with agency and voice" (Eastmond 2007, 253), the venue of expression the artists at the Hope Project chose was art. At the Hope Project, artists were able to express their selves, experiences, and aspirations in a manner that transcends the boundaries of state territories and of communication through the universal and uniting impact of art. In Philippa's words (interview, May 14, 2022), rather than "showing sad pictures of the camp and things", in this article I have elucidated refugees' creative practices and imaginations to understand their lived experiences concerning borders in their own voices. In doing so, I have shown that even seemingly depoliticized spaces, namely art workshops and paintings, can become "hyper-politicized", precisely through refugee artists' subtle contestation over im/mobility, identity, and political subjectivity vis-à-vis the European bordering regime. Therefore, this article offers significant insights into the role of art as a medium through which refugees assert their political agency and voice while advancing the current debate on the interplay between migrant agency and bordering by highlighting the political significance of refugee-produced paintings in borderlands.

In the article, I dissected how, in the face of exclusionary structures fabricated by a set of laws, policies, and discourses of migration management, refugees, as the experiencing subjects of these structures, understand the momentous changes in their lives and recount these changes in their paintings. Exploring the post-2015 European border regime in the second section, I argued that although the EU's borders have been reinforced and diversified after the summer of migration, refugees have found new tactics to overcome the borders located both within and outside EU territory. Additionally, many refugees have continued to engage with creative activities in their everyday life in Lesvos. Attending art workshops at the Hope Project has helped them to reflect on their past experiences, remain "socially alive" at present (Turner 2015, 145), and "reinvent themselves" for their future endeavors (Oelgemöller 2011, 409). In the third section, I discussed that migration-border research would benefit from assessing the artworks produced by refugees as a form of data to understand and disseminate refugees' cross-border experiences. Visual analysis of refugee-produced paintings helps us understand refugees' border imaginations, visualize the often-invisible and intangible borders, and push refugees' voices to relevant frameworks.

In the fourth section, I addressed what refugee artists at the Hope Project reveal in their visual artworks regarding

their perceptions of borders and their experiences of struggles with/against them. Uncovering three common narratives from the paintings, I ascertained that these narratives illustrate a sense of continuity between the past, present, and future of refugees' migratory and life trajectories, during which refugees confront the state borders that obstruct their journeys; hence, these narratives also defy symbolic borders. In stark opposition to over-generalized and dehumanizing legal, policy, and media accounts and images concerning refugees in host societies, refugees are capable in their visual stories of "emphasizing agency and ability rather than victimization and disability" (Eastmond 2007, 254; see also Martiniello 2022, 10). Refugees' visual practices and narratives have the power to reflect and emplace refugees as socio-political agents in a world surrounded by borders.

By exploring narratives of agency in refugee-produced paintings, this study provides an intimate and contextual understanding of refugees' perceptions of borders and their first-hand experiences of struggles with/against them. Research scrutinizing the implications of border regimes for refugees *en route* from refugees' visually and culturally imbued perspective can help elucidate the intricacies and idiosyncrasies of their experiences of borders in context. Despite rising cynicism toward refugees' narratives, this promises to expose refugees' lived experiences and struggles from below as well as the wider socio-political context within which borders have a profound place and impact.

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## Notes

- 1 The term "refugee(s)" in this article refers also to "asylum seekers", people who are not yet recognized as refugees under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol but intend to apply or wait for status determination, or remained in the country where they applied for asylum after their claims were rejected.
- 2 I decided to do the interview online mainly because of the

issue of access to refugee sites given the Covid-19 situation and the construction of a new Closed Controlled Access Center in Lesbos (see AIDA 2023, 39).

- 3 A certain body of CBS scholarship refer to migrant agency as "the autonomy of migration" (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015; De Genova 2017; De Genova et al. 2018). I prefer the term "agency" to emphasize the continuous contestation and ambivalence within a border regime, rather than the primacy of migrant mobility over state control (see Mainwaring 2016, 294). On this account, refugees still act with agency even though they do not succeed to overcome the borders or reach destination states.
- 4 For the exhibition with Norwegian artists, see <https://www.instagram.com/kunstenaahjelpe.no> (accessed April 11, 2024).
- 5 For online repositories on Fine Art America (a platform to support living artists across the world), see <https://fineartamerica.com/profiles/thehopeproject-moriarefugees>; Instagram, see <https://www.instagram.com/hopeprojectart>; Facebook, see <https://www.facebook.com/HopeProjectArt> (accessed April 8, 2024).
- 6 For example, Oh's (2012) participatory visual ethnography explores the everyday life of children in Umphiem-Mai refugee camp at the Thai-Burmese border using photo elicitation method. Lenette and Boddy's (2013) research embarks on a visual ethnography with single refugee women in Brisbane, Australia through a variety of visual methods, such as digital storytelling, photovoice, and photo elicitation. O'Reilly's (2020, 95-136) work explores the everyday subjective experiences of ten refugees in Ireland through creative methods within a participatory photography project. In her work, Brambilla (2021) dissects the political presence of young people in their everyday life at the Italian-Tunisian borderscape using collaborative visual methods.
- 7 By analyzing two drawings created by refugee children and found in a human rights report and a newspaper in Australia, Lenette and colleagues (2017) address the dearth of research on refugee children's own perspectives on their conceptualization of lived experiences of detention. Using visual semiotics method, Catalani (2019) explores the narratives of displacement, cultural traditions, and longing for home found in the paintings produced by Syrian refugees and are available on online repositories, such as Facebook. Through examining around 120 migrant-produced drawings and writings at the French-Italian borderland in Ventimiglia, Amigoni and Aru (2023) explore the traces of undocumented movements to and through Europe and endorse the need for migration narratives from a bottom-up perspective.
- 8 I have exhibited four of the images of the paintings. Although all images, including those displayed here, were publicly available, I obtained the permission of respective artists for the reproduction of the images and publicizing their full names in the body of this article. My selection of three artists and their testimonies followed a heuristic process. Before selecting the 70 paintings, I randomly chose about ten paintings that strongly addressed my research questions. I sought guidance from Philippa and Eric on contacting the artists, but only Abdullah's contact was available. After contacting Abdullah, he provided Instagram accounts of five other artists, two of whom had paintings in my initial selection. I then reached out to Najib and Nazgol, who agreed to feature their paintings in my article. Although initially unplanned, Abdullah expressed interest in sharing his own journey to Europe and painting. I agreed to incorporate his story and painting into the article, ensuring him of a broader audience upon publication. Nazgol and Najib also shared their short stories with me under similar

assurances. While acknowledging the limitations in data representativeness, I utilized the testimonies only to supplement my primary data, namely the paintings.

- 9 See the painting at <https://www.instagram.com/p/CNniB02nzVn> (accessed July 5, 2024).
- 10 See the paintings at <https://www.instagram.com/p/CTAXBqLKEUE>, and <https://www.instagram.com/p/CJLH-xQsrGA>, and <https://fineartamerica.com/featured/borders-the-hope-project-moria-refugees.html>, and <https://fineartamerica.com/featured/journey-the-hope-project-moria-refugees.html> (accessed July 5, 2024).
- 11 As written in the caption (description) of the image of Najib's painting, posted on Hope Art Project's Instagram page, this shore is in the north of Lesvos. See [https://www.instagram.com/p/CL40qPWn\\_HT](https://www.instagram.com/p/CL40qPWn_HT). With an online search, I found that this is most likely the Eftalou Beach; its high proximity to the Turkish shores makes it a frequent landing destination for many refugees transiting through Türkiye into Greece. See for example, the following video available at Wikipedia: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:20150824\\_Syrians\\_from\\_Turkey\\_plastic\\_boat\\_Eftalou\\_Beach\\_Lesvos\\_Greece.ogv](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:20150824_Syrians_from_Turkey_plastic_boat_Eftalou_Beach_Lesvos_Greece.ogv) (accessed April 11, 2024).
- 12 See the paintings at <https://www.instagram.com/p/CMO BKXBHa9y>, and <https://fineartamerica.com/featured/the-waiting-game-the-hope-project-moria-refugees.html>, and <https://fineartamerica.com/featured/tears-of-a-refugee-the-hope-project-moria-refugees.html>, and <https://www.instagram.com/p/CRGclXnH36C> (accessed July 5, 2024).
- 13 See the paintings at <https://www.instagram.com/p/CTNIOTkkP01>, and <https://fineartamerica.com/featured/life-behind-the-wire-the-hope-project-moria-refugees.html>, and <https://www.instagram.com/p/CLrwoSbnux4>, and [https://www.instagram.com/p/CWWec5NK\\_sf](https://www.instagram.com/p/CWWec5NK_sf) (accessed July 5, 2024).
- 14 See the paintings at <https://fineartamerica.com/featured/wanting-the-hope-project-moria-refugees.html>, and <https://www.instagram.com/p/CH7USMonoWd>, and <https://fineartamerica.com/featured/1-guiding-hand-the-hope-project-moria-refugees.html>, and <https://fineartamerica.com/featured/freedom-the-hope-project-moria-refugees.html> (accessed July 5, 2024).
- 15 See the painting at <https://fineartamerica.com/featured/un-certainty-the-hope-project-moria-refugees.html> (accessed July 5, 2024).
- 16 See the painting at <https://www.instagram.com/p/CGXVtkrllSr> (accessed April 8, 2024).

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