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At the Vanguard: The Work of Khatia Esartia

In her text “We Refugees,” the German-Jewish humanist thinker and Holocaust survivor Hannah Arendt writes about optimism in the face of death. “In spite of our outspoken optimism, we [refugees] use all sorts of magical tricks to conjure up the spirits of the future.”ⁱ Arendt goes on to describe the mechanisms used by Jews specifically to cope with their everyday lives after atrocity. These magical tricks are evident in the work of artist Khatia Esartia, which is characterized by bold colors, whimsical shapes, and fanciful narratives. But just as Arendt describes, all of these attributes are merely a veil, shrouding deep-seated darkness.

Arendt penned her ever-relevant text in 1943, during World War II, after fleeing Germany through Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, then France and finally resettling in the United States. How did she do it? Over the past forty-one days – since the start of Russia’s war in Ukraine – I have attempted to write – this essay and other texts, from the comfort and safety of my home, in the country in which I was born – with little success. I am not alone.

Esartia, too, is similarly afflicted. For six days between February 24 and March 1, she attempted to write an artist’s statement, concluding each to be a failure. On the contrary,

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these raw utterances chronicle Esartia's thoughts and emotions. A refugee herself, the artist channels her experience – at once personal and universal – in her artworks like the painting *Here We Go Again* (2022) in which the sweet potato protagonist of her escapist narrative packs up his bags and hits the road or the series of drawings “Interpol’s Most Wanted” (2022) in which the sweet potato encounters numerous compromising situations.

Esartia's works are allegories for the contemporary moment. As identified by the Palestinian-American literary scholar Edward Said, the refugee is the leading character in the narrative of the twentieth century “with its modern warfare, imperialism, and the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian regimes.”ⁱⁱ While unfortunate, modern culture has benefited from the plight of its countless displaced persons, who despite the challenges, lend “dignity” to this experience by immortalizing it in painting, poetry, literature, film, and other related disciplines.

Incorporating references to art history and deploying humor as a device, Esartia engages viewers in a spectrum of subjects from K-pop to geopolitics. The artist uses compositional techniques, namely patterns, to create a centripetal force, emanating outward. This is prominently seen in larger works, such as *Weapons of Convenience / Come On In, The Water's Fine* (2022), as well as more intimate works, such as *Love Poem to Marcel (Broodthaers)* (2022), that break up the grid, shifting one's perception of horizontal and vertical planes. This shift, a kind of disorientation, is befitting of our times.

Arendt concludes her text with the idea that, “Refugees driven from country to country represent the vanguard of their people.”ⁱⁱⁱ In art, “vanguard” is a loaded term, a immediate reference to the historical avant-garde of the early twentieth century – many of whom were, not coincidentally, refugees. As a word, vanguard is bandied as revolutionary and even made sexy. However, it is more complex than just that. It is not easy being first. With firsts come great unknowns and even greater responsibilities.

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ⁱ Hannah Arendt, “We Refugees,” *The Jewish Writings*, eds. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken Books, 2005) 266.

ⁱⁱ Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile,” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 199), 137-138.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 274.