



Installation view of TIFFANY CHUNG's "Unwanted Populations" at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York, 2017. Courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

## Unwanted Populations

### Tiffany Chung

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Tyler Rollins Fine Art

What separates art from data, a painting from a graph? Or lines on a map from strokes of a brush, the form of a sculpture or the space defined in an artist's installation? Data is often perceived as being objective, whereas art is thought to be imbued with emotion, a visceral and material response to one's environment. In recent history, the many refugee crises that have occurred—persecution of Rohingya in Myanmar, Syrians fleeing war, even the mass evacuation following the Vietnam War in the mid-1970s—have all been met with an outpouring of data and art. Yet both art and data are problematic, with statistics effectively sterilizing a moment of trauma, with art often “missing its mark.”

Tiffany Chung, whose family was part of post-1975 mass exodus of Vietnamese refugees, has returned to the ordeal to offer a new response. To do so, Chung employs data in the form of cartographic drawings. Upon these, she renders patterns, many of which are minute in scale, mapping out what appear at first glance to be dazzling stitchwork or organic microcosms akin to those found in a petri dish or under a microscope. These are superimposed upon the familiar shapes of continents and coastlines. It is only upon closer inspection that each pattern—

sometimes each dot—represents a statistic that Chung has painstakingly researched, itself a recorded moment where agony or injury has occurred.

On view in Chelsea’s Tyler Rollins Fine Art were Chung’s most recent works. “Unwanted Populations” was an exhibition that highlighted not only the refugee crisis that impacted the artist’s own kin, but also more recent flashpoints, from the attacks by Boko Haram that have displaced thousands in Nigeria, to the ongoing conflict in Syria. In *Mapping a Conflict Without Border: Areas of Influence in Syria and Iraq* (all works 2017), we see how the constructed borders of nations are made inconsequential by the spread of the so-called Islamic State within Syria and Iraq, represented by red and black dots rendered in acrylic, ink and oil on vellum. Under the artist’s treatment, the map looks chaotic, in flux, and marked by the advance and ebb of violence, with ground held or lost by ISIS appearing as if it is still being redefined by momentary occupation.



**TIFFANY CHUNG**, *IDMC: Numbers of Worldwide Conflict and Disaster IDPs by End of 2016*, 2017, embroidery on fabric, 140 × 350 cm. Courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York.

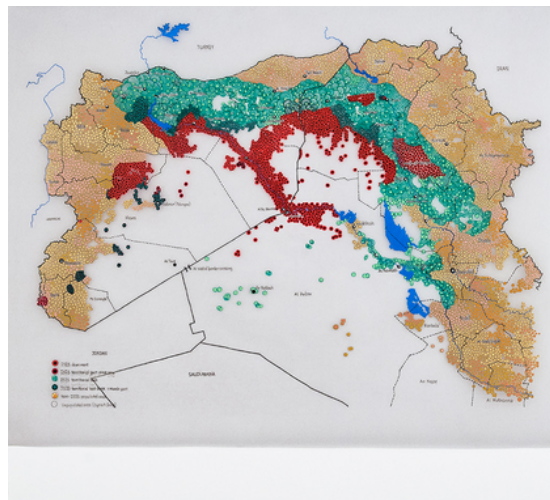
Similarly, *IDMC: Numbers of Worldwide Conflict and Disaster IDPs by End of 2016*, looks at the global amplitude of internally displaced persons—individuals whose statuses do not legally qualify them as refugees since they have not fled their home countries. Rendered with metallic gold, red and blue embroidery on black fabric, the continents appear jewel-like against the dark void upon which they are stitched. In contrast to the organic forms of the landmasses, red and blue discs mark areas where natural and manmade disasters have forced people to abandon their homes.

As one viewed the works in their totality, it became difficult to miss the emerging patterns that the artist’s cartographic interpretations display. Installed across the span of an entire wall, *Al-Shami, Leila & Yassin-Kassab, Robin: Burning Country – Syrians in Revolution and War* is an all-encompassing vision of what has become the hardship that is now faced by Syrians. Each image is a vignette of the various aspects of the war in their country, again offering a top-down view of moments that comprise this history, from casualties of armed conflict to the movement of populations and refugee camps.

In *Water Dreamscape – The Exodus, the Camps and the Half-lived Lives*, Chung employs watercolor paintings to transmit the obscured histories of refugee crises. Yet, again, she does so in a way that involves an intense process. Rather than paint the images herself, she has called upon groups of Vietnamese art students to painstakingly duplicate scenes in photographs that

were taken during the mass evacuation after the Vietnam War. Many of these images have been banned by the Vietnamese government, which means the students' participation in Chung's project was the first time they saw these images, and the process of reproducing those pictures provided the opportunity to become intimately familiar with their abridged past.

The process of researching an event that eventually becomes just one in hundreds of thousands of dots on a map requires the artist to become intimately familiar with the stories of these junctures in time, as well as the overall patterns of history that emerge. What may have first appeared to be a geographic outline becomes a record of pain. Chung's works are a call to those who wish to look closely, beyond the shapes and lines on the surfaces that document her research, to acknowledge the forces that are steering some of the world's extreme misery.



**TIFFANY CHUNG**, *Mapping a Conflict Without Border: Areas of Influence in Syria and Iraq*, 2017, acrylic, ink and oil on vellum and paper, 51 × 56 cm. Courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York.



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*Tiffany Chung's "Unwanted Populations" is on view at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York, until October 21, 2017.*