

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Patron Magazine
Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor...
Steve Clarke
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Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor... Sarah Ball's Immigrant Series Headlines Kindred, Her Current Show at Conduit Gallery

While it may be a blatantly euphemistic understatement, it's safe to say that the United States of America, edition 2017, finds itself in "interesting times." And, as of this writing, nowhere is that more evident than in the interconnected arenas of immigration, migration, and refugee resettlement. So, call it timeliness, call it zeitgeist, or call it prescience on the part of Conduit Gallery and British artist Sarah Ball, but Ball's just-opened Kindred is a spellbinding, don't-miss exhibition that speaks volumes about the American experience, actual and mythical, past, present, and possibly future. Featuring 30+ meticulously painted immigrant portraits, as well as a series of drawings, it's a show for the season; it runs from April 1 through May 13.



Image: Sarah Ball, Immigrant Series French, 2016, oil on gessoed panel, 7 x 5 in.

Sarah Ball, born in 1965 in South Yorkshire, now living in Cornwall, observes trenchantly, "'Immigrant' is a word that has always been loaded with a meaning and weight beyond the dry dictionary definition. The word is a weapon, a political pawn, to the point that one might forget that we are dealing with human beings." The artist says she's continually fascinated with themes of identity, and typically works from historical photographs; her previous solo show at Conduit, 2015's *Accused: Part III*, was comprised of paintings extrapolated from police mugshots. But this time out, Ball's focus is on the faces of immigrants, sourced from photographs of new arrivals at Ellis Island in the early 20th century. The photos were shot by amateur photographer Augustus F. Sherman, a registry clerk at Ellis Island from 1892 to 1925. Ball's paintings, most of them a diminutive 9.5 x 7 inches,

are haunting realizations of her subjects addressing the viewer head-on with dignity, equanimity, and a shy curiosity. "I'm always looking around for photographs," the artist says, "and when I came across these it just felt so relevant, with the words and language and rhetoric that are going around at the moment. It felt like it was just poignant to what's happening now." The subjects of the paintings are adults and children alike, and hail from everywhere: India, Russia, France, Lapland, Norway, Holland, and beyond. Augustus Sherman, while a self-taught photographer, nonetheless had an intuitive sense of staging—he posed his subjects against plain walls, and often asked them to don their traditional ethnic costume, their "Sunday best." Ball says, "I think Sherman just seems to capture something. What's different to me is the look of the people and how it relates to what's

happening today. There's no background in the majority of them, no context really; it makes you concentrate on their clothing or the look on their faces—there's nothing to detract from that, and that really appeals to me."



Image: Sarah Ball, Immigrant Series Moroccan, 2016, oil on gessoed panel, 7 x 5 in.

Another key aspect of Ball's artistic invitation to engage her viewers is the small scale of the paintings. The works have a seductive magnetism that draws audiences into a one-on-one conversation, a dialogue of identities between observer and observed, intimate and universal. It's a relationship analogous to the notion that if you want someone to really listen to you, try whispering. "For me it feels very natural to work at that scale," the artist acknowledges, "although

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I am beginning to experiment with some larger pieces. A lot of times the subjects I'm drawn to are very quiet images—the draw for me is that they are often a very quiet thing, and it just feels (like) the most natural scale. And I also love the fact that you have to go in—you have to step in to the painting to really see it.”



Image: Sarah Ball, Immigrant Series Italian, 2016, oil on gessoed panel, 7 x 5 in. Courtesy of the artist and Conduit Gallery.

Close inspection of the oil-on-board paintings reveals another astonishing piece of Ball's aesthetic: the surfaces are immaculately brushstroke-free, her subjects seemingly emerging from a world away, as if conjured through some arcane alchemy. Her technique involves gesso prepping of the board, building up multiple thin layers of paint with very small brush strokes, sanding between the layers, and a varnish topcoat for a cohesive finish. The portraits speak eloquently of her technical mastery. Small wonder Ball was named Welsh Artist of the Year in 2013, among many other accolades.

“We're living through a period of mass immigration now,” the artist adds, “and the immigrants in the 1900s were met with just as much fear and xenophobia. They were considered to be backwards and they were examined for illiteracy, whether they were criminals, or whether they had money...I just feel that things have slightly moved on. I'm pretty sure that Brexit only happened because people played that immigration card to the point that they started believing it and became very fearful of something. So it feels like it hasn't changed, in a way.” As ever, Lady Liberty and Emma Lazarus have the last word: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...” The time is now—encounter your Kindred at Conduit Gallery.



Image: Sarah Ball, Immigrant Series Scottish, 2016, oil on gessoed panel, 7 x 5 in.