

ROMUALD HAZOUMÈ  
All in the Same Boat





Kpadjè (detail), 2016.  
Lamda print, 80 x 120 cm.

## Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness . . .

*Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me...'*

**Emma Lazarus**, *New Colossus*, 1883.

Liberty is of ancient lineage. *Libertas*, the innate freedom possessed by virtue of being a citizen of Rome, was always personified as a woman, and many classical statues displayed in temples built in her honour underscored the essential role the notion of Liberty played in civic life. Part numinous deity, part allegorical symbol, the idealised feminine form of *Liberty* surfaces repeatedly through the centuries under different guises. Delacroix's well-known painting *Liberty Leading the People* commemorated the Parisian popular uprising that, in 1830, toppled the last Bourbon king. Delacroix's *Liberté*, portrayed as a bare-breasted, barefoot, young woman, became so ingrained in the French psyche that when republican intellectuals wished to present a celebratory gift to their republican cousins in America, they elected to send an immense, if less revealing, statue portraying her. Funded by public subscription, this commemorative gift was to mark the centenary of the American Declaration of Independence of 1776, that seminal tract asserting that 'Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness' were the 'unalienable rights' of all human beings. Standing 150 feet tall, this colossal woman, dressed in Roman tunic and sandals and bearing aloft a shining beacon, was sculpted from sheets of copper fixed to an interior frame designed by Gustave Eiffel. Originally entitled *Liberty Enlightening the World*, today, she is universally known as the *Statue of Liberty*.

The monument was finally installed overlooking the entrance to New York Harbor, in 1886. This inspired location ensured that 'Lady Liberty' achieved iconic status as the dramatic first impression for the massive influx of people arriving in the New World. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century waned, hundreds of thousands of immigrants disembarked in New York, following a wave of

republican revolts against established monarchies that had erupted across Europe. All these revolts eventually failed, leading to widespread repression and to an increasing number of disillusioned intellectuals and refugees emigrating to America. Furthermore, from 1845, a succession of potato crop failures triggered widespread famine in northern Europe that caused over a million Irish deaths and forced at least as many again to emigrate. Compounded by over-population and rising unemployment the accumulative effects of years of revolution, repression, famine, war and religious persecution in Europe, rendered the New World's wide-open spaces such an appealing prospect that millions embarked on the many ships streaming west in pursuit of a better life. But it was the New York writer, Emma Lazarus, reacting to the brutal pogroms against Jews in Russia and Eastern Europe that drove waves of Jewish immigrants to seek safety in America, whose poetry gave a meaningful voice to this mute symbolic statue. Lazarus' sonnet, *New Colossus*, that adorns the pedestal on which the Statue of Liberty stands, proclaims her '*Mother of Exiles*' and announces that '*from her beacon-hand / Glows world-wide welcome.*' This potent figure definitively expressed a big-hearted America, whose beacon guaranteed safe haven to the less fortunate of other lands where the lights of Liberty had flickered or died out.

Romuald Hazoumè's exhibition, ***All in the Same Boat***, can be read as one artist's attempt to seize by the horns the increasingly contentious topic of migration, analysing it dispassionately in the light of current developments. The so-called 'European refugee crisis' (actually a wider global phenomenon) has seen over a million migrants a year flowing into Europe, both overland and by boat, from a bewildering

variety of distant places. These modern migrants are also, like their forebears, victims of war, poverty, famine, overpopulation, religious persecution and environmental catastrophe. The size and rapidity of the influx is causing serious internal divisions for the states of the European Union, and only the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, has shown the moral courage to promote a 'welcome culture' in the face of mounting opposition from rivals and allies alike. Behind the barrier of numbing statistics, lie the harrowing everyday realities of countless individual journeys towards safety along an ever-steepening descent into horror. Media manipulation of 'human-interest' stories and outright propaganda ensure that most European citizens, at best, feel compassion fatigue at overly frequent reports of capsized boats, and at worst, open hostility. Occasionally, chilling images puncture this complacency, as when photographs of the lifeless body of a three-year-old Syrian child were published. Aylan Kurdi had drowned when the unseaworthy boat, aboard which his family was fleeing to Greece, sank. No one who's ever watched over a sleeping child can remain unmoved at the senseless waste of this and, by extrapolation, thousands of other innocent lives.

Each of the new installations in this exhibition takes a different approach to the tangled complex of issues surrounding migrant refugees. Each is unequivocal in its defense of the unalienable rights of every vulnerable individual caught up in this predicament. *Mutti* (2016), a life-size statue in bare wood, dressed in a flowing robe composed of a patchwork of salvaged sandals, provides a figurative overview of the current political debate. Standing firmly, with hands open wide in a gesture of tolerant acceptance, the sculpture draws upon the same conventional roots as America's Liberty statue. Yet subtle African influences, the natural and recycled materials, the serene gaze of an Ife head crowned by a sumptuously knotted mass of hair, reconfigure the classical elements to startling effect. As with most Hazoumè works, any association with western traditions can mask a provocative ironic twist, as seen in his earlier iconoclastic *Liberté* (2009). This bare-breasted *Mutti* figure harks back to that powerful icon of the First French Republic, *Marianne*, the armed emblem of the people rising to overthrow oppression, as epitomised in the Delacroix painting. Later, a more abstract form developed, unarmed and fully clothed, who characterised the notion of Liberty rather than the uncompromising real-life 'Freedom or Death' version. It was this conservative, more restrained model of Liberty that informed the Statue of Liberty erected on Liberty Island.

The title, *Mutti*, an intimate German word for mother – perhaps best translated as *mummy* – links this goddess directly to Angela Merkel. The approving nickname of 'Mutti Merkel' celebrates the tolerant approach taken by the only major European politician to stand up for the humane values inscribed at the centre of the European Constitution. Merkel's 'open-door' policy of offering asylum to the torrent of refugees was maintained at great risk to her leadership both in Germany and within Europe. Yet Merkel insisted that the German people were capable of integrating large numbers of migrants into a prosperous German society, just as America had done previously. Though evidently not a portrait of Angela Merkel herself, the sculpture still honours her instinctive response in supporting the refugees, reacting out of compassion for those in desperate need because, as with any Mother, she was incapable of acting otherwise.



**Liberté**, 2009.  
Found objects,  
31 x 51 x 25 cm. Collection of Queensland Art Gallery



**Mutti**, 2016.  
Wood, metal, plastic,  
182 x 180 x 190 cm.