

CHANGING PLACES

NATIONAL WATERWAYS MUSEUM
CHESHIRE

11.08.17 - 17.09.17

TEXT BY STEVEN BODE



National Waterways Museum, Ellesmere Port, Cheshire. Photo: Jill Jennings

The National Waterways Museum is located in an area of nondescript edgeland near Ellesmere Port that was, in its heyday, one of the primary hubs in the old waterways network – a place where the long, narrow ribbon of the Shropshire Union Canal met the widening expanse of the Mersey estuary; to be joined, a century later, by the mercantile superhighway of the Manchester Ship Canal. The top of the cobbled slipway at the side of the site provides a perfect vantage point to survey this confluence of waters, while the ramp's slow descent towards what used to be the river's edge ushers us gradually but inexorably into the past.

The artefacts and photographs on display in the museum's buildings are graphic reminders of what a hive of activity this place used to be. The various canal boats moored around its margins are equally vivid remnants of that time. Some are newly painted and shipshape, while others are still in the midst of being salvaged. Forty years ago, this whole site was more or less derelict – its transformation into a popular visitor attraction that commemorates a distinctive chapter of Britain's industrial history the result of the sweat and tenacity of a legion of volunteers who rescued it from further decay and potential demolition.

It is one of the iron laws of industrial development – places spring up in the boom years, only to go under in the down times; but occasionally they resurface, in different guises. The temporary gallery space in the Museum's Island Warehouse is an ideal place to contemplate the fate of the gargantuan power plant in Guwahati, North India that is the focus of Desire Machine Collective's video, *Residue*. While the museum's buildings have been reclaimed and restored, the power plant has been completely abandoned; the stark edges of its utilitarian architecture now wreathed in verdant foliage, the repetitive thrum of its engines replaced by insect noises and birdsong.

Nature has insinuated itself into the National Waterways Museum in the form of the host of summer swallows that populate the site, their swooping, darting arcs contrasting with the dead-straight paths of the canals that ferried humans to this spot. People say that time is a river: circuitous, meandering, drifting out of sight, and beyond our comprehension. But maybe it is more like a canal: a human construction, arrowed towards its ultimate destination; artificially imposed on the natural world around us.



Boat *Bigmere*. Photo: Zofia Kufeldt

As I walk over to the *Bigmere*, the vintage steel barge where two other video works are showing, I am told the story of a group of metalworkers from Wolverhampton who walked the length of the canal in the early twentieth century to find work in this newly prosperous part of the country. Economic migrants, whose accents and demeanour would have marked them out from the locals, they made their fortune here, and made their place here.

Their story reverberates as I watch Yasmin Jahan Nupur's video, *Away from Home*. A portrait of contemporary migrant workers who have moved from Bangladesh to Mauritius, it offers a sobering account of the conditions of their labour. Unregulated, of course, in terms of basic health and safety, their contracts with their employers are nonetheless full of rules and stipulations, restricting what each worker can and can't do. The siting of the piece in the confined setting of the barge adds further nuance. The footage of the group of workers crowded together on their bunks lends them a stowaway, below-decks quality; hidden from sight, but tacitly accepted, like much of the thankless, unseen, often migrant labour that keeps the globalised economy ticking over.



Away from Home, Yasmin Jahan Nupur, installed on *Bigmere*
Photo: Mariam Zulfiqar

Away from Home shares screen-time with Bani Abidi's *The Distance from Here*. A trenchant parable of the narrow channels that people are forced to move through in their physical passage through today's ports and airports, as well as through the parallel corridors of officialdom and bureaucracy, its vision of people waiting in lines to be processed is an augury, perhaps, of the log-jam and confusion that may await us in the aftermath of Brexit. Watching Abidi's video again in early August, in the light of many documentaries marking the 70th anniversary of Indian independence, you could hardly miss the symbolism of how an earlier dream of national self-determination ended in the blunt reality of division and partition.

The videos also share the space – amazingly – with a nest of baby swallows; almost ready to fledge, and, like Abidi's protagonists, waiting to fly. Birds of passage, these tiny creatures will travel half the world to get to their next place in the sun. The distance from here to there does not trouble them. Nor do the arbitrary lines of national borders. They move freely, on impulse and instinct, in search of the place they call home.



Swallows nesting on *Bigmere*. Photo: Mariam Zulfiqar

Find out more at fvu.co.uk

Changing Places is a Film and Video Umbrella touring exhibition, supported by Arts Council England, Canal & River Trust, National Trust, City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council, Hastings Museum & Art Gallery, Phoenix Leicester, Feltech, Links Signs and Heritage Lottery Fund. Curated by Mariam Zulfiqar.