

**Tanja Boukal**

\*1976 Austria

Kati Kivinen

ODE TO WHOM?

*Joy, bright spark of divinity,*

*Daughter of Elysium,*

*Fire-inspired we tread*

*Thy sanctuary.*

*Thy magic power re-unites*

*All that custom has divided,*

*All men become brothers*

*Under the sway of thy gentle wings.*

*Whoever has created*

*An abiding friendship,*

*Or has won*

*A true and loving wife,*

*All who can call at least one soul theirs,*

*Join in our song of praise;*

*But any who cannot must creep tearfully*

*Away from our circle.<sup>1</sup>*

Tanja Boukal's art revolves around people, their social circumstances and their various ways of coping in the face of adversity and unexpected challenges. She shows us life's fighters and survivors – most of whom are women – though not in conventional portraits. Instead, she focuses on the coping strategies they use when challenged in life. At heart her work is about the fundamental human quest for joy and happiness, whether alone or together.

Boukal's art is directly connected with women's lives not only in its content, but also in its medium and technique. She uses traditional craft-based mediums such as knitting, crocheting and cross-stitched embroidery in 'updated' new-millennium versions better serving the content of her work. By choosing techniques that are labour-intensive and time-consuming, Boukal underscores the

importance of each individual and the decisions they make in life. In doing so, she historicizes the documentary photographs and media images she uses as her raw material, transforming them into museum-ready pieces worthy of preservation for posterity.<sup>2</sup>

*The Melilla Project* (2014–2015) is about a Spanish enclave on the north coast of Africa that is separated from Morocco by a 3 m-high, 11 km-long border fence. Boukal has documented the barbed wire crowned barrier in *Melilla has a Fence* (2015), a series of embroidered images based on colour photographs, as well as *Rampart* (2015), an installation in which photos of the fence are woven into large panes that divide the gallery space from floor to ceiling, highlighting the fence's massive scale as a forbidding deterrent to free movement. For many sub-Saharan Africans this 13.4 km<sup>2</sup> enclave with its population of over 83,700 is a gateway to the north – a heavily guarded European fortress on the African continent.

Boukal first travelled to Melilla on a research trip in spring 2014 to meet with the refugees, both those waiting on the Moroccan side for 'the perfect moment' to jump the fence, as well as those who had somehow successfully crossed over, but were now stuck in limbo in the Centro de Estancia Temporal de Inmigrantes (CETI) Camp in Melilla.<sup>3</sup> Boukal wanted to meet with them to discuss their dreams for the future and how it feels to wait day in, day out for a new life to begin, without ever knowing what will happen next or when.

While visiting Melilla, Boukal worked with local NGOs helping with health care and food distribution on both sides of the fence and simply spending time chatting with the refugees. She has also organized workshops where she and the refugees have together manipulated photographic material from the local police. The workshops resulted in *Journeys* (2015), a series of images embroidered with colourful threads telling the story of the many imaginative ways the refugees had overcome the border fence and arrived in Melilla. Being involved in aid work helped Boukal build a trusted relationship with the refugees as they waited either for a migration permit, laissez-passer or an asylum decision. For most of them, jumping the fence is no guarantee of happiness: on the other side they must endure a long wait in an overcrowded camp where people are kept 'in storage' for indefinite months on end.

*Ode to Joy* (2014) features a series of photographic portraits of refugees in Melilla's CETI Camp. The refugees smile for the camera either alone or in groups wearing a white lace cloth hand-knitted by the artist. Knitted into the cloth is an excerpt from *Ode to Joy*, Friedrich Schiller's libretto used by Beethoven in the final movement of his Ninth Symphony, which has been adopted as the

Anthem of Europe by the European Union. Departing from the customary practice of only presenting the first verse – an ode to fraternity and egalitarianism – Boukal has also included the second verse, which acquires a wholly new subtext in reference to the long, hope-filled days of Melilla’s refugees. Schiller wrote that whoever is unable to join the joyous ode to fraternity must “creep tearfully away from the circle”. With this allusion, Boukal comments on the fate of Mellilla’s refugees, both those inside and outside the fortress: although crossing the fence is no guarantee of happiness or free passage to Europe, many Africans are still prepared to risk their lives in the hope of a better future.

**Notes:**

1

The first and second verses of *Ode to Joy* (‘An die Freude’) by Ludwig van Beethoven, with libretto by Friedrich Schiller.

2

Press release excerpt, Tanja Boukal, *Political Correctness*, Museum der Moderne Salzburg, 9.11.2013 –2.3.2014: <http://www.boukal.at/en/exhibitions/political-correctness/> (1.4.2015)

3

View more about *The Melilla Project* on the artist’s website: <http://www.boukal.at/en/the-melilla-project> (1.4.2015)