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# A diaspora in miniature: Sculptor depicts Syrian refugee crisis

By STEVE PFARRER

Staff Writer

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The Syrian Civil War has been the world's bloodiest conflict over the last five years, leading by some estimates to over 400,000 deaths and perhaps 11 million refugees and displaced persons outside and within Syria.

It's a complicated struggle involving the Syrian military and an array of rebel forces, including the radical Islamic group ISIS, with geopolitical ramifications for the Middle East, Europe and Russian-American relations.

But at its heart, says Harriet Diamond, the story is a much simpler one: families torn from their homes, and sometimes forced to bury their loved ones.

Diamond, a Florence sculptor, has shaped her latest project around the Syrian diaspora. Using dozens and dozens of ceramic figurines, her exhibit, "Driven From Their Homes," which opens today at Northampton's Oxbow Gallery, depicts an epic journey of people from a bombed-out city to a possible escape by water.

In between the ruined buildings and the boats that some refugees are climbing aboard, the exhibit's main section, "The Long Line," stretches 28 feet: a chain of tiny men, women and children who carry what few possessions they could save, or push them in handcarts and wheelbarrows.

"I see [the exhibit] as anti-war, in that it shows us the victims of war," said Diamond during a recent interview in her Easthampton studio, where she was making her final preparations for the Oxbow show.

"You can see a range of emotions here — fear, sorrow, determination, courage — as people react to their lives being turned upside down," added Diamond, who spent over 20 months creating her new work. "It's a very basic response to the ugliness and inhumanity of war: People are trying to save their families."

Diamond's exhibit, which runs through March 26, is just one of a

number of events taking place this month that are designed to raise awareness of the plight of Syrian refugees. The Valley Syrian Relief Committee, a local group formed to help victims of the civil war, is hosting a panel discussion, a film screening, and other activities (see sidebar).

## Trying to understand

Diamond, 66, has based her previous exhibits around specific themes, like her 2013 show, "Letting the Days Go By," in which she used numerous lifesize papier-mâché models to depict family life, including her sons as they grew from boys into men.

"Driven From Their Homes" began along different lines, she notes. She had initially conceived of a show, using small figurines, that would reflect on some passages in her own life. At the same time, she was getting more and more caught up in reading about the bloodshed in Syria.

"My story just paled in comparison to this," she said. "It was so big, just impossible to take in, to really understand. I kept looking at the images [of destruction] and saying 'How can I make sense of this?'"

Over time, the idea of depicting people forced to leave their homes took root. For Diamond, that meant sculpting, firing and painting well over a hundred figurines, some as small as three to five inches, others about 10 inches high.

These aren't detailed works. Diamond has always considered herself an expressionist, and her figures are loosely modeled, with a soft touch designed to create an overall impression.

Yet within those stylistic parameters, the exhibit has several sharply delineated scenes. By a ruined apartment building, a man carries a dead child in his arms, his face a mask of pain. In a threadbare room with a chest of drawers, one woman seems to plead with a seated older woman to leave; outside the room, several other people are trundling away household goods piled in wheelbarrows.

Surrounding these figurines is a desolate but imaginative landscape that Diamond has constructed out of large sheets of styrofoam, which she's stained with different colors. She's fashioned some of the material into ruined apartment towers, their facades stripped off like doll houses; rubble litters the ground, along with cocoon-like figures that represent corpses wrapped in sheets.

The scene stands in for the heavy destruction inflicted on Aleppo, which before the war was Syria's most populous city.

Other styrofoam blocks are stained in earth tones, like the desert that covers large parts

of Syria, across which Diamond's small figures walk. Some carry bundles on their heads and shoulders, or small children in their arms; others, minus a leg, limp along on crutches. A few even hold cell phones.

"That contrast, of modern technology and the way war can reduce life to just a bare struggle for survival — that really struck me," said Diamond.

## **A subject new and old**

This isn't the first time Diamond has used her work to speak out against war. Her 2006 terra cotta and wood sculpture, "No War! From Northampton to Washington," featured tiny figurines protesting the fighting in Iraq; it was inspired by the regular protests held outside the Hampshire County Courthouse in Northampton.

And "The Pit," from 2010, showed long columns of soldiers, tanks, and trucks loaded with artillery shells marching down a spiraling causeway into a deep crevasse — a metaphor for the country's seemingly endless wars.

Part of the appeal of her work is the narrative it provides. At the Oxbow show, visitors will first see the end of the long line of figurines, as some climb aboard small boats (Diamond has used foil backing from her styrofoam boards to represent the ocean). The line of marching people then runs to the back of the exhibit, where the ruined homes are located.

Diamond says she sees that arrangement as somewhat akin to tracing back a person's life to his or her childhood. "I think it's more poignant to look at how someone got to a certain point in their life — what decisions did they make, or what happened to them, to bring them to where they are?"

It was just a few months ago that Diamond ran into Judson Brown of Northampton, an old friend and a member of the Syrian Relief Committee, and told him about her latest art project. After Brown viewed the work in Diamond's studio, he asked if she'd be willing to tie her exhibit to the committee's events; that was an easy decision for her.

"I'd like to think that in my own small way, I'm doing something to help people who have had this catastrophe come down on them," she said.

**Steve Pfarrer can be reached at [spfarrer@gazettenet.com](mailto:spfarrer@gazettenet.com).**

"Driven From Their Homes" will be on view at the Oxbow Gallery, 275 Pleasant St. in Northampton, through March 26. An opening reception takes place March 10 from 5-8 p.m., and Diamond will also talk about the work on March 23 at 7 p.m. at the exhibit. For visiting hours and additional information, visit [oxbowgallery.org](http://oxbowgallery.org).