CORNERED

by Raquel Salvatella de Prada

Overview

Cornered is a video installation that represents the motivation and struggles of migrants leaving their home country and making an attempt, most often failed, to cross the border from Morocco to the Spanish cities of Melilla and Ceuta, the only European cities on Africa's mainland.

The visual imagery focuses on the ambitions and struggles of the migrants, from the journey from their home country to the many attempts to enter Spain, and the frustration of the perpetual effort to reach their dream - the dream of a better life for their families.

Immigration across Spain's Southern Border

Since 2015, the world has been extremely aware of the migration occurring from Syria and African countries towards Libya, Italy and Greece. Another common route, rarely discussed in the international media, is the route that sub-Saharans are taking to enter Europe, the crossing from Morocco to Ceuta (18.5 km²) and Melilla (13.3 km²), two Spanish enclaves situated on the northern coast of Africa, sharing a border with Morocco and the Mediterranean Sea. These autonomous cities are the only European cities on Africa's mainland.

The motives for this migration are varied, as is the socio-economic status of the migrants. Some migrate because of conflict in their home country, others in search of education or even adventure that can play the role of an initiation. The majority of people who attempt to cross are young men (14-35 years old) from West Africa who arrive in Morocco with little or no money, because what money they had has often been stolen from them. Many of them leave families behind that are desperately waiting for money they hope to send home upon finding employment in Europe.

The map on the right illustrates different routes by which people commonly arrive to Spain. The trip to reach Morocco is often strenuous and dangerous; sometimes it involves crossing the Sahara, which migrants call the second sea, and smugglers regularly take advantage of their customers. When migrants reach Morocco, they stay there for some time to earn money and wait for the right time to cross into Europe, often living in make shift shelters near the borders for months or even years.

Different modes of transportation are used to cross the border, including cars, planes, and boats, but the most affordable way to attempt the crossing is by climbing the fence that separates the Spanish enclaves from Morocco. The first fence between Morocco and Spain was erected in 1998. Additional

reinforcement and fencing was added over the years. In 2014, 80.000 illegal immigrants gathered in Morocco to try to enter Europe through Spain (in comparison, more than 200.000 that went through the Mediterranean routes). For instance, between January and February of 2014, more than 4000 people tried to cross the fence and 600 made it. Since 2014 migration from Morocco across Spain's southern border has increased drastically, even as the fences around Ceuta & Melilla have been reinforced yet again by increasing the layering of razor wire, as well as increasing the amount of cameras and guards. An extra fence has been added that does not provide handholds for climbing. These additions have made crossing the border more difficult but not impossible. For instance, migrants now climb the fences with with hooks attached to their hands and shoes.
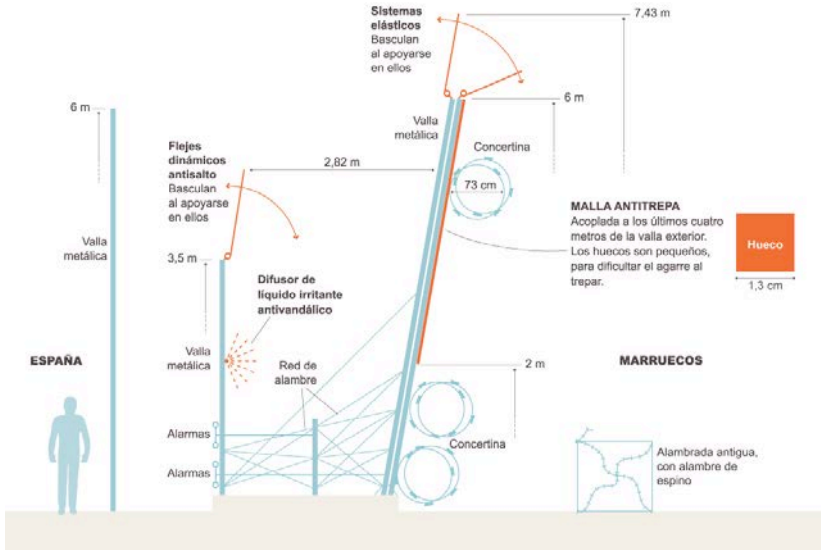
When aspiring immigrants fail to cross the fence, they are often beaten and have their papers taken away. Then they are sent hundreds of kilometers away, to Rabat, Fes or Casablanca. Soon they try again and fail, and try and fail, as if in an infinite loop that has no exit: They are trapped in Morocco, which they cannot leave towards Spain, and without papers they can't go back to their home countries, either. They are trapped in the forest where each day, they hide and run from the police. They are trapped, as they appear to be inside the dome created for this installation. They are trapped, but still they have hope.

Photo by José Palazón

Photo by Jesús Blasco de Avellana

Installation

Part sculpture, part light installation and video animation, Cornered is an immersive visual experience that represents the motivation and struggles of migrants leaving their home country and making an attempt, most often failed, to cross the border from Morocco to the Spanish cities of Melilla and Ceuta, the only European cities on Africa's mainland.

The installation projects an original dance performance interlaced with stylized visuals on an intricately patterned and light filled structure, which reminisces a carved Moroccan table, covered on top by a screened dome. The interior of the structure contains a short throw projector, with the dome as a rear-projection screen. The visuals and the original scores are experienced by walking around the structure, immersing the viewer in the light patterns that emanate from it to cover floors and surrounding walls.

The visual imagery focuses on the ambitions and struggles of the migrants, from the journey from their home country to the many attempts to enter Spain, and the frustration of the perpetual effort to reach their destination. The visual style of the video projection is based on African art from countries where the migration via Morocco often originates (Cameroon, Nigeria, Senegal, Mali to name a few). The color palette focuses on black silhouettes that are faceless placeholders for the many human beings in a similar situation. These silhouettes represent the darkness and frustration of the journey and at the same time reflect the physical beauty and skilled craftsmanship of the African people, some of whom use black to symbolize wisdom. The black figures are contrasted by incorporating vibrant colors that are familiar from African fabrics, patterns and paintings.
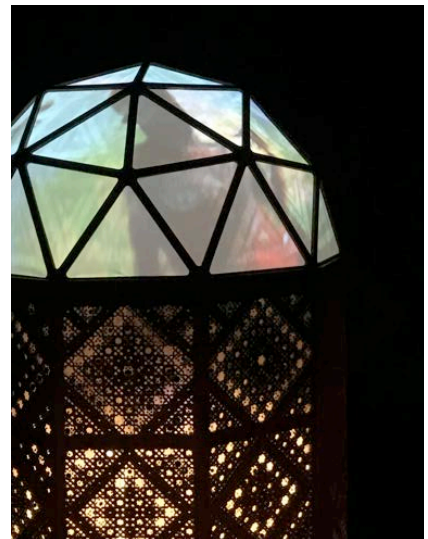
The video combines real footage and animation, and the projection scale varies by using different numbers of screens (the dome is framed with triangles). Sometimes, only one animation covers the entire projection surface. Other times, the multi-video utilizes each individual facet or just a few at a time. While the projection is playing, the light from numerous LEDs shines through the structure to paint the walls around the viewer with geometric light patterns. In this way, the installation inhabits the entire space it occupies.

Jonathan Henderson and his music group Diali Cissokho and Kaira Ba composed the musical score for the installation. Jonathan is a North Carolina-based multi-instrumentalist, composer, and producer currently pursing a PhD in ethnomusicology at Duke University. Diali Cissokho & Kaira Ba's music is steeped in ancient West African griot traditions, but propelled into the 21st century by the modernizing impulses of a rock band format.

Cornered creates an ambivalent atmosphere of frustration and hope. Through the video with dancers that are separated from identity, and the audio with the emotion of Diali's voice that is not translated from his native Wolof, Cornered provides an emotional perspective on the migratory issue, leaving the viewer with an impression of determination, deliberateness and desperation. The intensity and mood of the audio track and the video rise and fall, reflecting the back and forth between emotional highs and lows, and the 8-minute animation then repeats itself, further mirroring the repeated failed attempts to cross the border.

Cornered was first shown on September 27, 2018 at the Rubenstein Arts Center at Duke University as part of an experimental exhibition about migration in and around Europe, which is being held at the Nasher Museum from September 2018 to January 2019. The completion of Cornered comes at an opportune moment, when it complements a broader awareness of the humanitarian crisis at Spain's southern border.
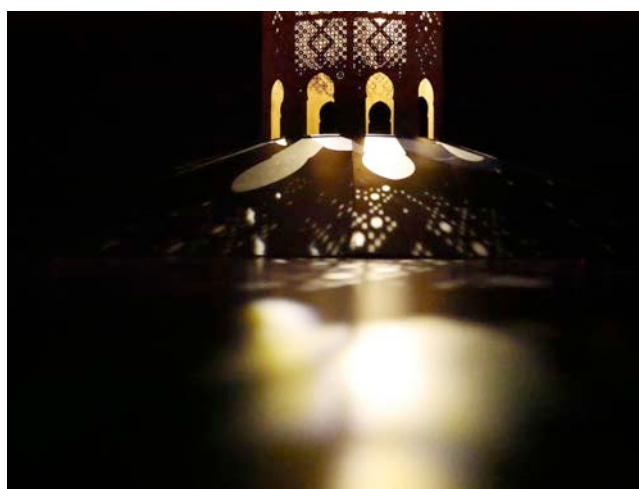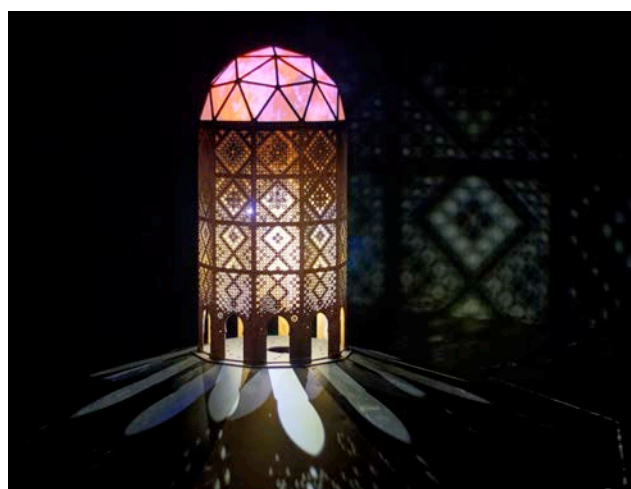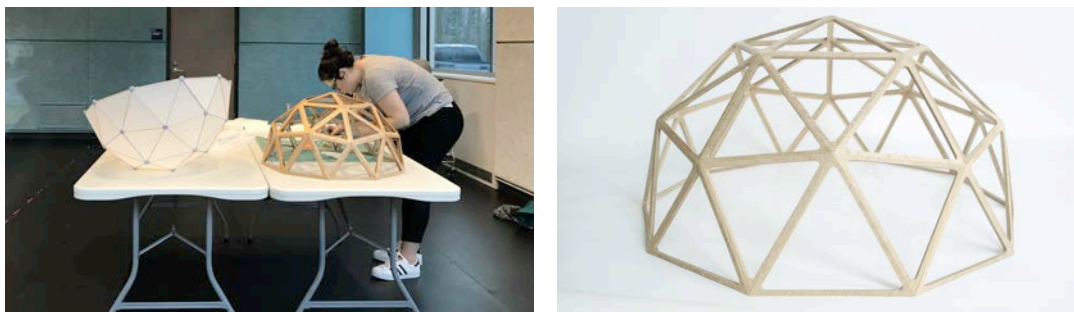
The Process

In researching the material for Cornered, I travelled to Morocco, as well as Melilla to see location and regional art, and to talk to aspiring and successful migrants and the people with whom they regularly interact. One aspiring migrant I talked to is Omar (fictitious name) a Senegalese now living in Dahkla in the south of Morocco. He had already made four attempts to cross the border near Nador. In his first attempt, Omar waited for a month before trying to cross. While camping in the Gurugú forest, he and his peers were chased frequently and had to run and hide. In one of his later attempts, Omar was on the top of the fence for 1h before being captured and sent to Rabat (300miles away). He then found employment in Dahkla, where he worked for about 3 months to earn some money to try again. In his last attempt, Omar was so badly beaten that he went back to his work in Dahkla to recover.

The main structure of the installation captures the beauty of Moroccan craftsmanship: it was inspired by tables, walls, doors and floor lamps covered in beautiful geometric design patterns, often used in Moroccan architecture. Contrasting this beauty is the impression that the structure encloses the figures that are projected onto the dome, holding them captive, as they are captive in Morocco.
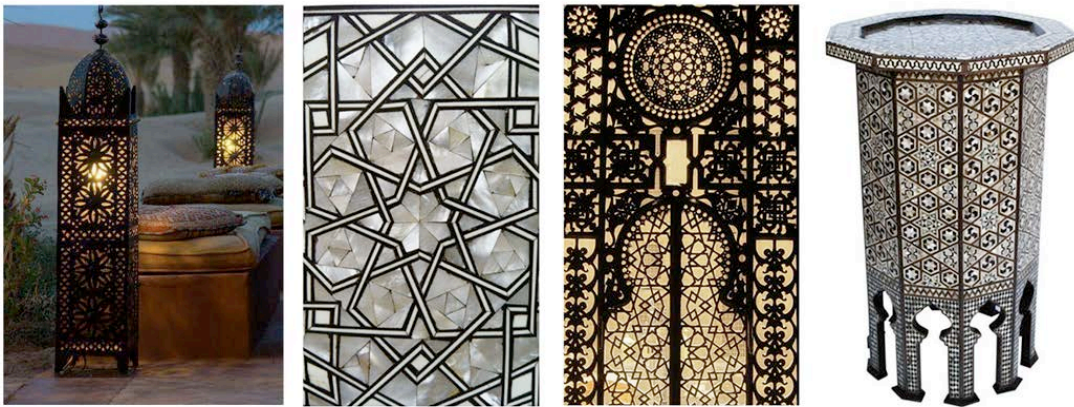

For the first iteration of the installation, the dome structure was created using a 3D-printable geodesic connector system with hardwood dowels. Trace paper was used as the rear projection screen. The second iteration was created using plywood and the final piece was built using oak, often used in Moroccan woodwork. To reduce the possibility of fire hazards, a professional rear screen projection film was chosen that is reminiscent of silk, which is an often-used fabric in Morocco.

After finding a projector that could throw the image at a sufficiently short distance, one of the biggest technological challenges was to keep the image from getting distorted by the shape of the projection screen. The process I used to achieve this is called UV Mapping, which is a technique borrowed from applications where a 2D image is mapped to a 3D model's surface for texture mapping. UVs are two-dimensional coordinates that correspond to the vertex information of the geometry of a 3D object. They are basically marker points that control which pixels on the image/texture correspond to which vertices on the 3D mesh, thereby providing the link between a surface mesh and the application of images to the surface. The process begins by laying out the UVs by creating a 2D representation of the 3D object, as if it were unfolded and flattened out. Then, working with a software such Isadora that is mostly used in theater for projection mapping, the original flat image is deformed to align with the triangular segments of the flattened dome. That way, when projected onto the actual 3D dome, the image does not appear deformed anymore.
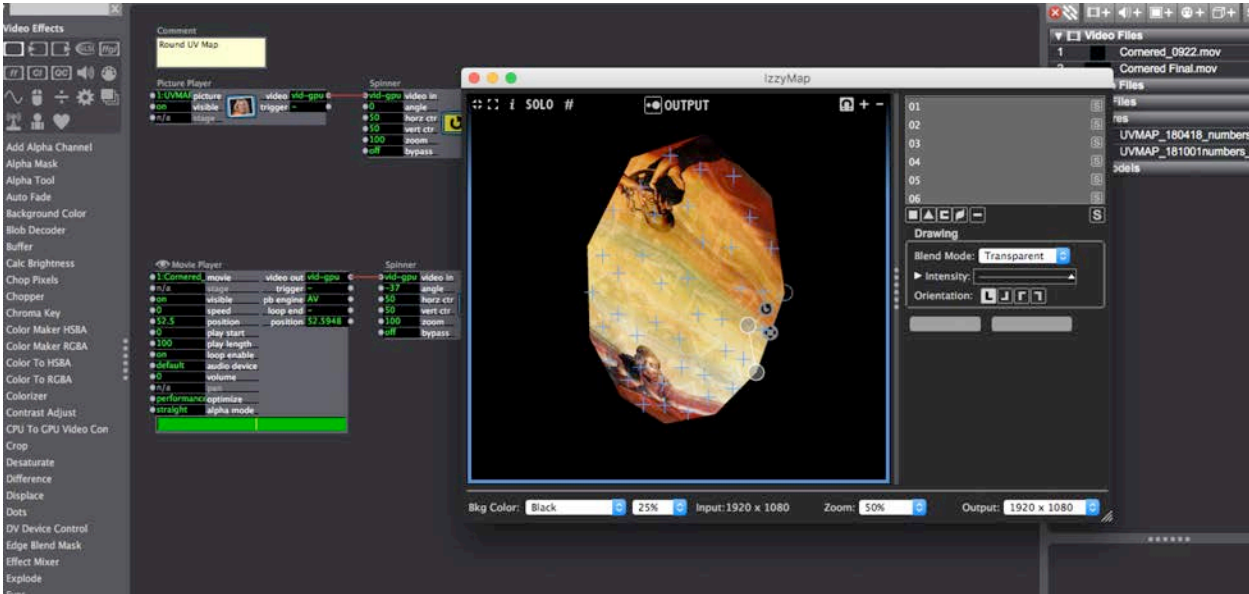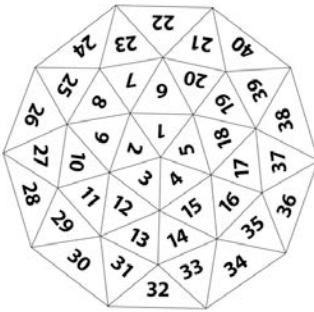
The geometric patterns engraved into the body of the structure are an original design that takes inspiration from patterns frequently found on Moroccan doors and furniture. In particular, the design is a variation of one that can be found on a door in Madrasa Bou Inania, an educational institution founded in AD 1351-56 in Fez.
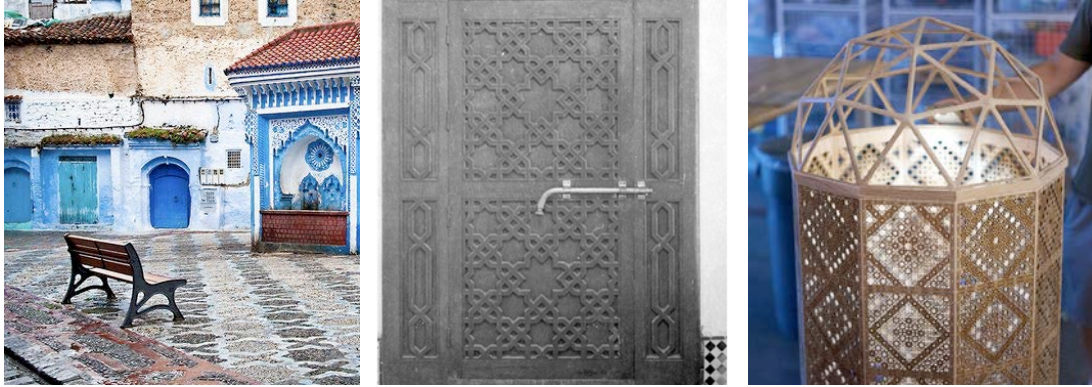
The pattern I created using Adobe Illustrator, a vector graphics software, stacks up intricate variations of the original pattern in order to give the impression of changing size, thereby emphasizing the projection dome atop the structure. Fading of the pattern towards the bottom further strengthens this emphasize.
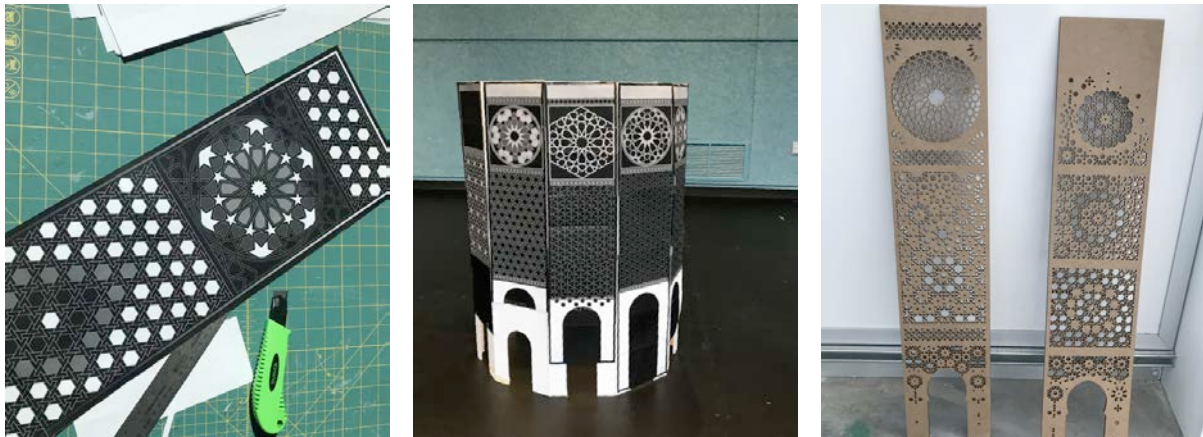

Engravings were created using a laser cutting process. First, many different design drafts were printed on paper. Second, a small selection of drafts were laser cut in cardboard for more efficient experimentation. Finally, the engraving of the final design in wood was fine tuned in many iterations.

To fill the structure with light, LEDs were placed inside it. Each LED was behind a covered lens to reduce the amount of stray light that would otherwise diffuse the visuals projected on the screened dome. The light shines through the engravings to create patterns of light and shadow on the floor and walls surrounding the structure, enveloping and drawing in viewers so that they themselves become part of the installation.

Swirling patterns of bright colors are an integral part of the video animation. They were generated by filming ink billowing and sliding in water. Video of the swirling ink was merged with patterns inspired by African fabrics to create a contrast to black and faceless human silhouettes.

To create the silhouettes, dancer Tristan Park was filmed against a white background, and the video was composited with the rest of the visuals in post-production. The sequencing of colors and evocative body language work together to reflect on the migrant's journey, where the color palette follows the course of a day, from bright blues to the deep reds and oranges of sunset.
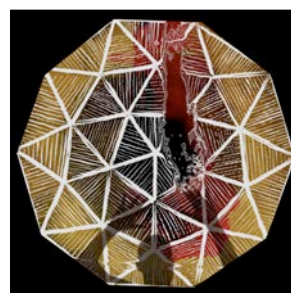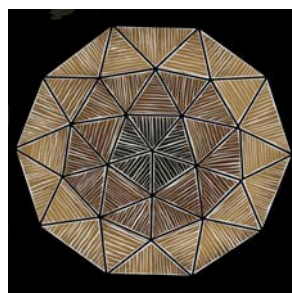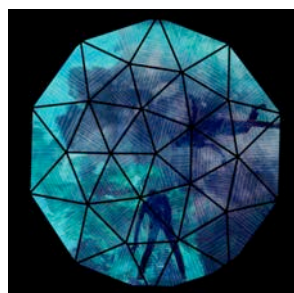
The video was shot as footage that would later be fragmented and reassembled to create the story line and a mood oscillating between hope and desperation. This process was crucial in integrating video and soundtrack. In fact, the soundtrack was created by Jonathan Henderson before the post-production of the video took place, constrained only by the need to capture the increasing emotional tension experienced by migrants, as well as the geographic distance between the African plethora from where the migration originates and the Moroccan forest where migrants take their last stand before attempting to enter Spain. The audio begins with sounds of the forest, such as voices, crickets, running steps and the wind, which Jonathan Henderson recorded in the field in Senegal. These sounds are blended with Northern African instruments and melodies, followed by a variation of a traditional Senegalese song and the recorded voice of Diali Cissokho, a Senegalese musician. Diali has family members that attempted the crossing and speaks about their experience in his native tongue. Matching the video to the finished soundtrack made it possible to reflect the changing mood not only via images, colors, and the body language of the dancer, but also by creatively cutting, duplicating and blending video footage in the rhythm of the music.

Collaborators

Jonathan Henderson (Music)
Tristan Park (Dance)
Dimitri Titov (Geodesic Dome)