

DEBRA SCACCO

The Narrows

January 13 - February 17, 2018

Opening Reception: Saturday, January 13th, 6-8pm

Artist Talk: Saturday January 20th, 2pm

Catalogue Release and Closing Event: Saturday February 17th, 1-3pm

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Debra Scacco
SS Roma, 1920
2017
Glass, mirror, teak
11.25 by 7 by 3 inches

KLOWDEN MANN is proud to present *The Narrows*, the gallery's second solo exhibition with Los Angeles-based artist Debra Scacco.

Using historical material from the Ellis Island archives, *The Narrows* examines the liminal space of the immigrant journey, in which the future of the individual confronts the reality of politics and power. Composed of three sections, *The Narrows* discusses institutional structures of permission; physically, systematically and emotionally. The show consists of a series of sculptural drawings formed from engraved glass, mirror and teak; a spatial installation of thread and wood; and a projected film work. The exhibition will be on view from January 13th through February 17th, with an opening reception for the artist on Saturday, January 13th from 6-8pm. The gallery will hold an artist talk on Saturday January 20th at 2pm, and a closing event and catalog release on Saturday February 17th, from 1 to 3pm.

The Narrows refers to the thin stretch of water separating Brooklyn and Staten Island. Now connected by the Verrazano Bridge, this small waterway is one of the most significant gateways in American history. Between 1892 and 1954, over 12 million immigrants sailed through the Narrows to arrive at Ellis Island: the nation's busiest immigrant inspection station of the time.

In the first section of the exhibition, language drawings engraved in glass and housed in teak form a row along the gallery's length. The works number 29 as homage to the 29 questions that once formed the immigrant entry exam. The works are rooted in two key elements. First, the patterns directing the mark-makings' flow originate in Scacco's photographs of the water between Ellis Island and Manhattan. Second, the drawings' textual contours begin with the firsthand account of an individual who entered through Ellis Island in the early 20th century, when immigration at Ellis was at its peak. Scaled intimately at twelve by seven inches, the proportions of the engravings echo the windows of the building. The mirrored structure causes each mark to multiply —mirroring history in the present, and continually underscoring the multiplicity, consistency and ongoing relevance of these stories. Upon reading and listening to hundreds of histories, one quickly finds more similarities than differences. These stories of hope, fear, separation, love and loss do not, and have not, changed.

Once processed at Ellis Island, new arrivals were directed to a three-aisle stairway, commonly known as the Stairs of Separation. There were three possible outcomes: detainment on the Island, begin a new life in America, or entry denied and immediate return to the country of origin. This stairway is the basis for *Architecture of Separation*: a spatial installation reflecting on architectural structures of order and permission. The piece is composed of three sets of lines receding in space. Formed by a process of threading between two floating anchor points, each line traverses the two anchors seven times. This refers to the number of Scacco's immediate family members who immigrated from Southern Italy; three of whom passed through Ellis Island themselves.

Despite its mythical status as part of the American story, the history of Ellis Island is hardly exempt from the current politics of exclusion. Complete Asian exclusion began with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, rapidly expanding to restrictions on Japan and eventually all of Asia in 1917. The Immigration Act of 1924 (The Johnson-Reed Act) was primarily aimed at restricting immigration of Southern and Eastern Europeans (in particular Italians, Slavs, and Eastern European Jews). The 1924 Act was openly aimed at “preserving the ideal of American homogeneity”. The pseudoscience of eugenics, a movement aimed at improving the genetic composition of the human race, rose in popularity as a way to justify racist and exclusionary policy. Eugenics claimed “undesirable” traits including pauperism, alcoholism and criminality were hereditary; and were more common in immigrant, minority and low-income communities. These beliefs were perpetuated in effort to classify Southern and Eastern Europeans as of an inferior genetic make-up; and therefore unsuitable for inclusion in modern America. Shortly after the implementation of the Johnson-Reed Act, eugenics would play a key role in the rise of Nazi Germany.

In a precursor to the Johnson-Reed Act, the Immigration Act of 1907 coined the term “feeble-minded” in effort to quantifiably exclude “undesirables” from the new America. “The feeble-minded alien learns with difficulty, his attention may be at fault, he may exhibit peculiar and subnormal mental traits, all of which point to an landward mentality, which is beyond hope of much improvement. His appearance, stigmata, and physical signs may confirm such diagnosis.”* Feeble-mindedness was an unquantifiable guideline, often providing justification for discriminatory inspection practices. *Puzzle for the Feeble-minded* is a scaled replica of The Feature Profile Test, now found in the collections of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. The test was administered 1912 - 1916 in attempts to measure intelligence. Those who failed to assemble the oddly shaped puzzle correctly may be labeled feeble-minded, marked with an x in white chalk and detained on the Island for further mental testing.

The back room of the gallery holds *The Narrows*. Created by Scacco in summer 2017, the film presents, without temporal editing, the boat journey between Ellis Island and Manhattan. Available by headphones is a series of audio interviews from the Ellis Island Oral History Project. The viewer will hear first hand experiences of immigrants who gained access to America through Ellis Island in the 1920's, while simultaneously feeling the motion of this tiny body of water that promised both access and barrier to their hoped-for future.

While Scacco's work pays tribute to her own family's immigrant history, she also asks us to consider historic authorship of immigration narratives. Race, ethnicity, and civic agency all contribute to whether an immigrant story is deemed one of celebration, or one of condemnation. Given that dominant historical narratives continue to be authored from a white, patriarchal, colonialist perspective, our historical canon comprises of primarily countries with a dominant-white population. For so many, and for people of color in particular, the difficult truth of arrival and naturalization remain excluded entirely from the highly-mythologized “American dream”. In forgetting and/or disregarding our American history of “settling” (theft), colonization, forced migration and discrimination, we allow history to repeat itself with exclusionary policies perpetuated by fear. *The Narrows* draws a direct line between past and present. There is endless wisdom in our history, but we first must recognize the erasures and falsehoods within the dominant narrative.

Debra Scacco (b. 1976, New York) received a BA in Studio Art from Richmond University, London in 1998. She has exhibited extensively, including solo exhibitions at Klowden Mann and Marine Contemporary (Los Angeles), and group exhibitions at Royal Academy of Arts (London), Charlie James Gallery (Los Angeles), Patrick Heide Contemporary (London), and Royale Projects (Palm Desert). Scacco's work has been written about and featured in the Los Angeles Times, Huffington Post, and Art in America. In 2012 she was the first Artist-in-Residence at the Statue of Liberty National Monument and Ellis Island Museum. In 2009, she was nominated for the Jerwood Drawing Prize (UK). Her sculptural installation “Origins” is currently on view at the Los Angeles State Historic Park. Her work is held in private and public collections internationally, including Fidelity Investments, and The Hammer Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. She currently lives and works in Los Angeles.

* Ref: Mullen, E.H. 1917. Mental Examination of Immigrants. Washington, DC: US PHS