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Immigration Status (Art Print)

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While on our faculty seminar in the Netherlands we studied issues of immigration and human rights. Prior to our return to the United States, the Netherlands held general elections in which right-wing politicians, running on an anti-immigrant platform, gained additional seats in government. In our own country, anti-immigrant sentiments are again on the rise. A northern suburb of the Twin Cities passed an "English Only" ordinance that is not only unwelcoming, but anti-immigrant and racist at its core. Ignoring the First Amendment Right to Freedom of Religion, the former governor of our state has joined other right-wing pundits in declaring where mosques shall and shall not be built. Clearly some people are freer to practice their language, culture, and religion than others.

While traveling in Europe, it became obvious that the people cleaning my hotel rooms, changing my sheets, sweeping the sidewalks, and tending the bathrooms were mostly non-white and non-European. In the Netherlands, many workers at low-level jobs came from former Dutch colonies. Fleeing war zones, natural disasters, and worldwide recession, "guest worker" programs have provided a large, willing workforce for the least desirable jobs.

Everywhere I travel, with my money, privileges, and status, I am treated as a welcome guest. Cheery signs in hotel rooms address me as "Dear Guest." Yet residents of these countries and my own who labor so hard to make my transient hotel stay enjoyable are labeled "immigrant" in pejorative terms and told to "go home" or "speak Dutch" or "speak English."

I made this print, titled "Immigration Status," to highlight the question of just who is the guest and who is the immigrant. The choice not to portray particular hotel staff members but rather their tool, the ubiquitous vacuum cleaner, allows the viewer to map a worker of any ethnicity, nationality, race, or religion onto the scene. Surely all people who work and pay taxes need to be treated equitably. Not doing so ensures the continued social tensions that second-class citizenship and apartheid always bring.

Dutch art from the seventeenth century was a component of our seminar study. One can see that issues of coloniality, work, and human rights run throughout Dutch art history. As my teaching specialty is printmaking, my independent research took me to revisit Rembrandt's house and museum in Amsterdam. I also toured CBK, a new intercultural, mainly non-Western art center located in the same city, but as my Surinamese taxi driver told me, existing "far off the tourist maps." I decided to use traditional Dutch printing techniques and equipment in the making of an original print created specially for this seminar. I employed "Rembrandt's Etch," a Dutch mordant of mild acid and salt and traditional acid-resist processes, tools, copper plate, ink, and paper. I ran a small edition through a hand-printing press at Macalester College, which Rembrandt himself would have recognized.

Many of these issues are still being grappled with by contemporary printmakers in the United States and abroad. In the fall of 2011, I will be co-hosting the Mid-American Printmaking Council Conference in the Twin Cities, titled "New World/Old World." My print is one contribution to this ongoing discussion.

Immigration Status, 2010, etching, by Ruthann Godollei