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Clandestine Integration connects the Mediterranean

Naima Morelli

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Clandestine Integration's sailing boat Pacchia will leave from Seville on 15th June

"A sailing boat is not your town square, where if you have an argument you can just get up and leave," explains Maria Vittoria Pericu. "On a boat you are forced to stay and try to solve the conflict." She is the coordinator of Clandestine Integration, a project aimed at fostering cross-cultural dialogue between Africa and Europe. "Our idea is simple. We will take a small sailing boat, fill it with poets, writers and illustrators and sail it to Seville, Tangier, Algiers, Tunis, Mazara del Vallo and Cabras."

This project was started by Gabriele Di Pasquale and Giuseppina Deiosso, two cultural activists from Sardinia, Italy. "Clandestine Integration began as an idea among friends," says Pericu. "We are all sea lovers as well as educators sensitive to the theme of migration." It might look like utopia, but there is much more to it. "We believe in the educative power of the sea. A sailing boat is small and comfortless, so closeness and dialogue are inevitable. We will have artists from both sides of the Mediterranean on board."

The participating artists have not been chosen on the basis of artistic merit, but rather on their motivation to undertake the journey. The relevance of their personal history to the project has also been key. "The art is not the endpoint here," Pericu stresses. "We look at art as a tool for integration. We want the artists to express their feelings, emotions, fears and everyday difficulties through their art. The outcome will be secondary to the process."

Mina Wagih Wardakhan is an Egyptian artist living in 6th of October City, part of the urban sprawl of Cairo. Surfing the net for art residencies, he stumbled upon Clandestine Integration and applied immediately. The experience of sailing is not entirely new to him: "I sailed up the Nile for five days a few years ago with my then girlfriend/companion. We kept track of our journey by making sketches and drawings. We listened to stories from our boatman and went for short walks in the villages when we were moored at sunset." For Clandestine Integration he plans to sketch, take photos and jot down notes based on observations, stories, advice and directions.

"Art shows us the similarities where we think there is absolute difference, and highlights the differences where we think that it is 'just the same'," he reflects. "Through the exchange of works of art as gifts, peoples learn more about each other and find common ground for further exchange and cooperation."

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Mutual understanding is particularly important at a time of constant landings on European shores and the tragedy of refugees dying at sea. As it is clear from the name, Clandestine Integration marks a path in the opposite direction. "We want to launch a positive message, making a parallel journey to that of the migrations from Africa," Maria Vittoria points out. "We see plenty of politicians wanting to close Europe's doors to immigration. On the other hand there is very little investment to create integration. With Clandestine Integration we will make our small contribution to creating a bridge."

For Abdel Fetah, an Eritrean cultural mediator and activist, now based in Italy, the theme of migration is intensely personal. A few years ago he crossed the Mediterranean from Libya to Lampedusa on a small boat with 270 people. "I was born in Sudan because of the Ethiopian colonisation," he says. "In 1994 I went back to my homeland Eritrea after the liberation, but six years later the war started again, followed by the dictatorship. For a variety of reasons then, I went back to Sudan. There I had to fight for years to be recognised as Sudanese - and even then I found out that Sudanese citizens don't have the right to education, medical care, freedom of expression."

Overwhelmed by frustration, he crossed the desert with a group of immigrants from many different countries. After spending three years in Libya and witnessing the beginning of yet another war, he resolved to cross the Mediterranean Sea. He describes this experience as shocking. "That was one of the main reasons why I wanted to participate in Clandestine Integration. My plan for the trip is to look at the Mediterranean culture, sea and people with an open mind, without prejudice. I will then write about my own experiences and impressions as a neutral person coming from the Horn of Africa."

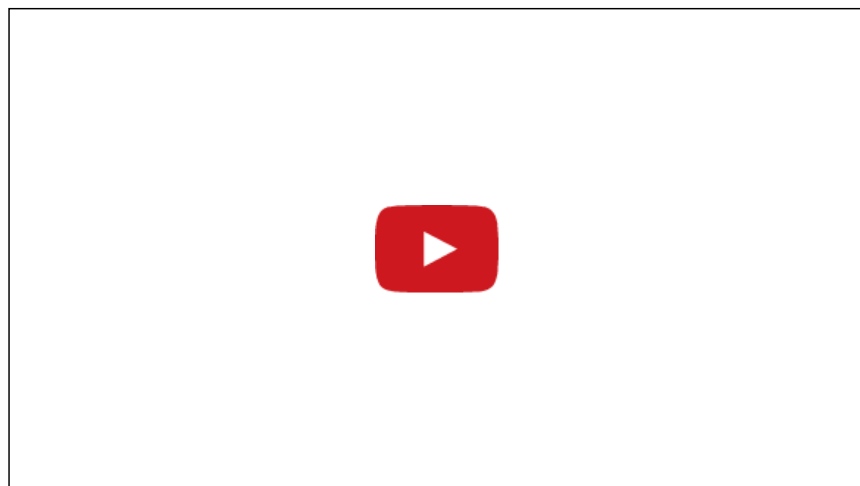
Although she has Tunisian origins, Takoua Ben Mohamed grew up in Rome. She has been creating political comic books since she was a teenager, tackling difficult themes connected to integration, such as Muslim women, the Arab Spring and Islamophobia. She now works as a graphic journalist and she is the author of a comic book about intercultural communication.

When she was contacted by the organisers of Clandestine Integration, she had no doubts about joining in. "With a dual background as a Tunisian and as an Italian, it will be exciting to contribute both points of view. I'll try to create a connection between the two shores of the Mediterranean through what I do best: comics. In every culture art has a central role, and I believe there are no two cultures without points in common. That is what I will work on."

The artists will sail in pairs for a two-week period, and will swap over in the main harbours where the boat docks. They will be accompanied by the captain, Gabriele Di Pasquale, and an anthropologist from the University of Seville, the project's academic partner conducting research on integration and social behaviour. Throughout the 60-day journey the artists will gather their experiences in a logbook. This illustrated book will be presented at the end of the trip in Cagliari and all around Sardinia. The boat's arrival is scheduled for 29th August in Cabras, where there will be a meal prepared with products from the countries visited.

Maria Vittoria Pericu hopes that this project will help people to see the Mediterranean as a cultural whole. "Art is a powerful instrument to show that the 'other' is not the enemy," she insists. "We are all neighbours. We don't yet know what the outcome of the trip will be, but one thing is for sure: this experience will change us for the better. It already has."

Clandestine Integration's sailing boat *Pacchia* will leave from Seville on 15th June.



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