A voice for the voiceless: Diane Victor's representation of migrant women in *Suie et cendre* (*Soot and ashes*) (2024-2025)

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ABSTRACT

Diane Victor is a white female South African artist who, through her work, has stood up for victims of abuse, such as domestic violence and atrocities, which arguably, most consistently affect the lives of women. Victor's exhibition *Suie et cendre* (*Soot and ashes*) (2024-2025, LAAC Gallery, Dunkirk, France) responds to the plight of displaced francophone women from Africa and Iran residing in Dunkirk. The ongoing global news coverage of the 'migrant problem' has resulted in many extreme views about migrants, but Victor engaged with these women directly through a photovoice project aligning with the current decolonial feminist ethos to grant agency and voice to migrants themselves. This article analyses selected examples from the LAAC exhibition to show how close engagement with the migrants has influenced Victor's working method and iconography. I argue that Victor's photovoice project provides a platform for marginalised and suppressed voices to be heard, suggesting that their further exploitation is avoided by employing metaphorical imagery, created with ash and smoke, that responds to their stories with compassion and sensitivity. Furthermore, I suggest that the mythical aspects of Victor's drawings, where meaning resides as much in material and method as in her iconography, encourage an empathic response in viewers.

Keywords: Diane Victor, migration, sexual and gender-based violence, decolonial feminism, empathy, mythological iconography.

Dates:
Received: 2025-05-31
Accepted: 2025-07-11
Published: 2025-12-05

Published by

SCHOOL OF THE ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

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DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2617-3255/2025/n39a26

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Introduction

Diane Victor was born in South Africa in 1964. She received a BA in Fine Arts from the University of the Witwatersrand in 1988 and has had a prolific career as a practising artist,[1] while working as a part-time lecturer teaching drawing and printmaking at many well-known tertiary institutions in South Africa. On 21 May 2025, Victor was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Pretoria for 'her extraordinary contribution to the arts and society' (University of Pretoria News 2025). The award acknowledges the commitment to social justice that permeates her art and her profound social conscience, which has been most notable in her works on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)[2] in South Africa. In a recent exhibition called *Suie et cendre* (*Soot and ashes*),[3] Victor turns her attention to SGBV in a different geography – that experienced by women who migrated to France under harrowing circumstances. Victor was invited by LAAC (Lieu d'Art et Action Contemporaine) in Dunkirk, France, to produce this body of work, which was exhibited from 15 June 2024 to 5 January 2025 (Figure 1). The theme was Victor's response to her surroundings, arising from her knowledge that Dunkirk is a major centre for managing refugees in France.[4] Her work responds to the horrors that led these refugees to leave their homes and the tribulations suffered along the way. The context and veracity of their trauma is substantiated by news reports and many current well-researched social studies, which reinforce an understanding that the violence these women experience is, without exception, gender based.[5]

When Victor is depicting perpetrators of SGBV or other atrocities, her work can be difficult to contemplate, often expressing, in satirical or emotive details, her own trauma at the evidence of humankind's basest instincts.[6] In the exhibition *Suie et cendre* discussed here, however, Victor has employed a more empathic approach to the victims, one that acknowledges the debilitating nature of women's migratory experiences and the SGBV they suffer. These works are not a literal record of their plight, but consist of imagery couched in metaphor, where truth is evoked rather than stated, and where, as with most of Victor's works, meaning resides as much in material and technique as in any iconography of loss and trauma.[7] Her delicate use of line and tone in the charcoal and ash drawings, and the ghostly approximation of people drawn in smoke from a burning candle, seemingly dissolving before our eyes, express the sadness of wasted lives. These works weave humanity, imagination and symbolism into the experiences of migrants, who are often merely reported only as dry statistics or problems to be solved.

I begin this article with an overview of the horrors facing migrants who arrive in Dunkirk and elsewhere along the French coast, mostly on boats from Africa. This section includes Victor's work on the photovoice project and the information imparted by the volunteer

migrants, which ultimately informed the smoke, charcoal and ash drawings made by Victor for the exhibition. The second half of this article consists of an analysis and interpretation of Victor's iconography, as well as a discussion of how her use of different media adds meaning and impact to the imagery.

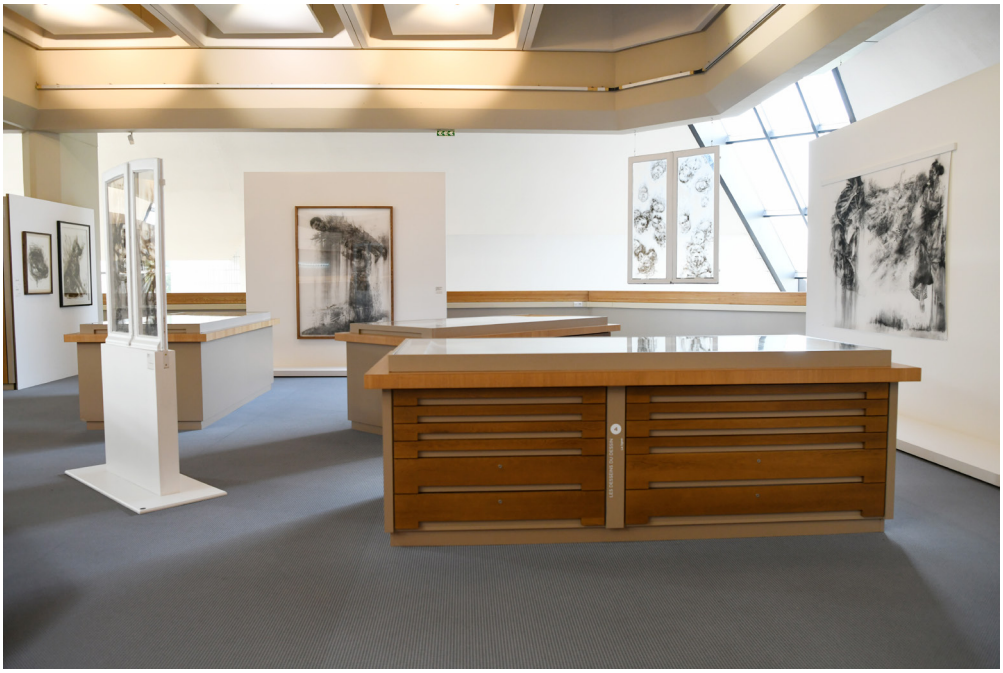

FIGURE **Nº 1**

Diane Victor. *Suis et cendre*. 2024. Central display area at LAAC with the large boxes containing the 3 *Sleepers* in the centre, the suspended window with smoke drawings of falling heads (*The falling ones*) on the right and a second window with smoke drawings standing on the left. Photograph by Cathy Christiaen/Ville de Dunkerque.

A world in flux

When Victor arrived in Dunkirk in 2023, she was introduced to the city's history as a port for forced migrants fleeing war and unrest in their own countries. The area near Dunkirk was home to a huge camp of migrants, by the railway tracks at Grand-Synthe (about a mile west of Dunkirk). It housed more than 1,500 migrants at the time that it was demolished by French police in 2021, but more continue to pour in and camp in the woods and fields in the area, with additional tents and people being added all the time. The year 2021 was also the year that twenty-seven people, among them seven women and three children, drowned in the Channel, cited in *The Guardian* newspaper as 'the biggest loss of life in the Channel since the war' (Adams 2021).

Both Dunkirk and Calais were notorious catchment areas as processing venues for migrants from Africa, Asia, and elsewhere. People could be trapped for twelve years or more in such refugee camps (Oliver 2017:182). These migrants were, in effect, prisoners, waiting for immigration interviews, waiting for papers to legitimise their presence, waiting to be allowed to work and make a new life. Kelly Oliver (2017:183) describes the appalling conditions recorded in Dunkirk and other refugee camps as recorded in 2016, several years before the implementation of continuous forced removals:

> Conditions in most refugee camps are dangerous and unhealthy, where people are forced to live in overcrowded makeshift tent compounds without adequate basic necessities like bathrooms, clothes, and food. For example, in Dunkirk camp in France, over 3000 refugees live in rat infested tents pitched in ankle deep mud and human waste with only two water faucets; one resident says "this place is for animals, not for human beings".

Women are infinitely more vulnerable than men in such situations. According to a report on global trends in forced displacement (Jolof *et al* 2024:2),

> A significant proportion of the global population consists of displaced women exposed to armed conflicts and forced migration, with 47 percent of the more than 82 million forcibly displaced persons being women and girls.[8]

The 2024 World Migration Report indicates that the ratio remains similar, although overall migration has increased (IOM UN Immigration, 2024). Anna Ball (2022:9) explains how the experience of forced migration is shaped and exacerbated by gender,

> In particular, sexual violence, sexual coercion, and sex trafficking emerge as prominent features of forced migrant experience for many women – during their journeys, and during their residency within refugee camps, or incarceration within immigration detention facilities.

As noted in a report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2018), 'refugee women are more affected by violence against women than any other women's population in the world'.[9]

The context described above was instrumental in Victor's decision about her work for this exhibition. She typically responds to the environment in which she is working, aiming to connect with the local population and their context. As a relative stranger in Dunkirk, she was fortunate to receive support for this project from Hannah Alkemaa, the manager of exhibitions and collections at LAAC. Alkemaa assisted with background information about migrants in the Dunkirk area and their continuous arrival despite the implementation of regular raids and forced removals by authorities. She took Victor for a long walk along the coastline, showing her where the camps and the boats are hidden in the marshlands

(Victor 2024a). What Victor found was very similar to scenes described by reporter Tim Adams (2021), who visited the site in November 2021 and wrote about the desperation of families cramped in small tents in freezing weather, with no access to water and sanitation, and the continuous fear of forced removals.

Victor (2024b) explains that she was emotionally impacted by the context in Dunkirk, the history of desperation, and the plight of migrants. She decided to listen to the lived experiences of migrants by finding women who would be happy to talk to her and conducting her research as a 'photovoice' project.[10] In this case, she responded intuitively to one of the fundamental aspects of decolonial feminist discourse – which is not to speak *for* another but to listen carefully to others speaking for themselves (Kurtiş & Adams 2015:2). When applied to art, this discourse encourages the participants to actively engage in some way with their representation, their stories, and thereby influence the content of the exhibition through their input. Victor has always eschewed the application of a feminist label to herself and her work, but as a woman who has consistently responded to the plight of women afflicted by gender-based brutality and sexual violence, she embodies feminism in action. In this project in particular, she aligns with Francoise Vergès' (2021:6) definition of decolonial feminism, which is based in 'broad, transnational, pluralist, decolonial politics' and offers 'a multi-dimensional analysis of oppression'. Vergès (2021:19) explains how the complex of dominations pervades all human relations and interactions, 'even when the regimes associated with these phenomena have disappeared'. Most of the participants in this project fled from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a country previously colonised by Belgium. When discussing the reasons for their migration with Victor (2024b), it is clear that their home countries are now being re-colonised by major (Western) corporations for extractivist purposes (such as cobalt mining), dispossessing the original inhabitants and driving them from their homes in the process.[11]

Aided by Aureilie Guerard, manager at the local Adoma Centre in Dunkirk,[12] Victor was introduced to a group of female migrants who were living there in 2023, while she was in Dunkirk for her preparatory work towards the exhibition. She asked if they would be willing to share their stories and allow her to create artworks in response to them. Twelve women volunteered, most from the francophone former French colonies in Africa – ten from the DRC, one from Iran and one from Guinea (Victor 2024b). These women had applied for leave to stay in France because they could speak French. They were offered legal support to apply for refugee status and provided with a place to live at the Adoma Centre in Dunkirk. Victor initiated her photovoice project with the twelve volunteers, for which LAAC donated six disposable cameras (one camera shared between two women). Victor asked them to 'show me home', in other words, photograph anything that made them think of home or give meaning to their experience of flight and their loss of home. The cameras had the capacity to take approximately fifteen photographs (seven for each woman),

although each woman ultimately used only three or four images for the project. The cameras were then returned, and the images processed and returned to the women. With the help of Guerard's team, working as translators and scribes, Victor spoke to the women about their photographs and asked why they had chosen those topics to record. The photographs were a catalyst for the women, who lost their initial reticence and poured out stories of hardship, sexual exploitation, social and physical brutality, violence, and rape (Figure 2).

FIGURE Nº 2

Diane Victor, *Suie et cendre*. 2024. Detail of the Photovoice boards with images taken by the migrant volunteers and brief transcripts of their discussion with Victor. Photograph by Cathy Christiaen /Ville de Dunkerque.

The SGBV that permeated their existence shocked Adoma staff who were helping Victor with translation; they were taken aback at having personal details of these horrors expressed in such a 'matter of fact' way (Victor 2024d). Gallery staff were also appalled at these traumatic accounts (Victor 2024d). Their response was to sanitise reports that accompanied the photographs for exhibition purposes. A twenty-minute discussion was ultimately condensed into a brief, two-sentence paragraph per photograph, in an effort by the gallery staff to make the material more child-friendly.[13]

The migrants' stories are indeed harrowing, beginning with their reasons for fleeing their homes, which are without exception framed by aspects of SGBV in all its forms. The

findings of a SEREDA report on forced migration and SGBV clarify factors such as socially and culturally embedded domestic violence; symbolic violence at the community level; and structural violence induced by factors such as conflict, religion, socio-cultural norms, and /or legal frameworks as catalysts for flight (Goodson *et al* 2021:6). Repressive social frameworks experienced in the home would include 'forced marriage, forced abortion or sterilisation, and … sexual violence, threatened or enacted' (Ball 2022:9). In many countries in Africa and Asia, they also include the fear of female genital mutilation, a reason given by one of the women from the DRC interviewed by Victor. The interviewee explained her older sister died from septicaemia after enduring the customary genital circumcision required for girls of marriageable age in their culture. Their mother was distraught and persuaded her younger daughter to flee the country before this procedure was forced on her. At the age of just sixteen or seventeen, this young woman was compelled to leave, without protection, with very little money, and no help from anyone. She travelled on her own from the DRC, across Africa and eventually in one of the refugee boats to Europe (Victor 2024b).

During forced migration, for many women, their only currency is their body, and this is exploited in every possible negotiation – for food, clothing, shelter, transport and so-called "safety". To illustrate this predicament, one of the women in Victor's project took a photograph of her feet (Figure 2). When asked why, she explained that she had nothing left, no home, no possessions, no family, no money, no country. She said that after all she had been through, not even her body was hers anymore. Her feet were all she had left, the only things she could trust and depend on to keep moving in search of a better life (Victor 2024d).

Several of the women at Adoma were from the notorious cobalt mining areas in the DRC. Amnesty International (2023) reported that entire communities have been forcibly evicted in the area due to the expansion of industrial-scale cobalt and copper mines, which enable the production of rechargeable batteries for so-called clean energy technologies. The process of eviction led to 'grievous human rights abuses including sexual assault, arson and beatings' (Amnesty International 2023). Due to subsequent job losses, many families had to eke out an existence as small-scale artisanal miners to make ends meet, enduring dreadful working conditions and contamination from toxic waste (Alexander 2024). The women explained to Victor that their task was to crush, sort, and wash the raw minerals while standing in badly polluted rivers that made them ill (Victor 2024b). Mia Alexander (2024) specifies that cobalt is toxic to touch and breathe and is usually radioactive. Cobalt mining is often undertaken by pregnant women or women alongside their children, none of whom have protective equipment (Alexander 2024). The women in Victor's group said they feared they would die if forced to remain in these conditions. One participant mentioned a saying in her community – that it was better to be born dead than to live like this (Victor

2024b). She linked this to her photograph of one hand, shaped like a gun, pointing to her head (Figure 2) and told Victor that this sign was a way of recognising other people from the same area (Victor 2024d). The many studies and reports on migrants (some already referenced in this article) indicate that what the women in Dunkirk have suffered both at their place of origin and *en route* is typical for women without money, protection, or power and is experienced by women migrants in general.

Victor's response

Ball (2021:20) warns against reductive presentations of forced migrants, ranging from vulnerable objects of pity on one hand, to symbols of superhuman, almost heroic resilience on the other. She questions how artists and other cultural practitioners who engage with migrants should engage with and represent migrants, without expecting them to 'affirm the discursive patterns and expectations of dominant cultural narratives in the global North' (Ball 2021:21). While acknowledging the value of access to the migrant's own voice as a form of agency, Ball (2021:21) warns against the refugee story becoming part of a salvational 'rescue narrative'. This point aligns with the decolonial feminist discourse, where a 'rescue narrative' might be identified as undermining the protagonist's own power and oversimplifying the complexities of her situation. I suggest that Victor's approach to creating art that responds to these migrant women's experiences manages to avoid many of the pitfalls imposed by the superiority of the global North. She does this by careful listening and avoids didacticism by not speaking on behalf of anyone. She instead interprets their experiences by presenting her response to their pain and loss through myth and metaphor.

The three focal works in this exhibition are titled *Sleepers*. They are large (230x90 cm) charcoal and ash drawings of migrants, placed close to each other in wooden, glass-topped display cabinets, reminiscent of sarcophagi. The *Sleepers* lie horizontally within the sarcophagi, and the sides of the cases are relatively high, allowing viewers to look over and peer down at the recumbent figures, emphasising their helplessness (Figure 3). The glass tops provide a translucent barrier between the viewer and 'the other', whereby a psychological distance is created between observer and observed. The notion of a glass coffin is rooted in childhood stories where a damsel in distress, historically represented as a white woman, is trapped in some enchantment. One thinks of Sleeping Beauty, or Snow White, encased in a glass coffin awaiting the kiss of her prince to awaken her. Sadly, rescue is not an option for these *Sleepers*. They are informal travellers, forced by circumstance to sleep wherever they can, trying to remain unobserved, because we are at our most defenceless when lying down. As one looks down on these figures, it is clear

FIGURE **Nº 3**

Diane Victor. *Suie et cendre* 2024. Installation view of two of the *Sleepers* at the LAAC Gallery (*Drowning in sleep* in the foreground and *The mermaid* in the background). Commission for LAAC museum Dunkirk. Photograph by Cathy Christiaen/Ville de Dunkerque.

who holds the position of power. The viewer becomes the voyeur. The sleepers are revealed as vulnerable, and women asleep doubly so, both physically and psychologically. When sleeping 'rough', often the only traces of their passing are impressions in the ground and the burned ash that remains from small fires made to cook, or for warmth. Victor mixed ash and charcoal as her drawing material to evoke the realities of her subjects.[14] Both are unstable, loose mediums, the by-product of burning evoking the erasure of life (dust to dust …). Fine ash and charcoal powder are sprinkled over the drawings, blurring outlines and softening textures; effectively making these figures distort and fade as if under water, or under the first scattering of earth on their graves.

In the central image, titled *The mermaid* (Figure 4), the glass barrier doubles as a watery meniscus, as this *Sleeper* refers to the many migrants who have drowned *en route* to so-called "safety". One of the interviewees was on a boat, *en route* to France, when it capsized and sank. She was one of only three survivors, largely due to her ability to swim well. Having spent her childhood in the DRC, she had developed a strong swimming skill, often swimming in the river to help her family catch fish, as they were too poor to afford food. She was lucky, as a report on missing migrants from 2014-2024 cites: 'Nearly 60 per cent of deaths documented during migration are linked to drowning, with over 27,000 related deaths in the Mediterranean alone' (IOM 2024).[15]

FIGURE Nº 4

Diane Victor. *The mermaid*. 2024. Charcoal and ash on paper. 230 x 90 cm. Commission for LAAC museum Dunkirk. Photograph by Chris Saunders.

With the image and title of *The mermaid*, Victor interprets the realities of drowning in flight, referencing Hans Christian Andersen's famous children's fairy tale, *The little mermaid*.[16] Victor has drawn a woman from the back, as if she is falling away from us with too many arms and hands flailing desperately, perhaps trying to swim up to the surface, or grasp something to stop her descent into the sea. The mermaid allusion is created by what appears to be a huge fish swallowing the woman. Its wide-open mouth engulfs the woman's legs and buttocks, so her lower body resembles a fish tail, thereby 'becoming' the mermaid. Victor (2024c) has explained that she used differing sizes of bubble wrap like a monoprint, to create texture in these drawings. The bubble wrap not only approximates fish scales in this drawing but also conveys the protection of vulnerable and breakable items when they must be moved, making it an aptly metaphorical material for the journeys of migrants. The little mermaid in Andersen's story longs to migrate, to live on land, to be human, and has fallen in love with a human prince. In essence, she wants to migrate because she sees the possibility of a better life. Unlike the Disney version, where everyone lives happily ever after, Andersen's mermaid does not manage to assimilate with humans on land; she does not

win her prince, and ultimately casts herself into the sea in despair. While her wish to migrate is due to curiosity, not necessity, there are certain parallels in this story. These include the terrible physical pains inflicted on her as part of her metamorphosis into a human being; the difficulties and hardships of her life on land as an alien in a foreign country; and the lack of acceptance that leads to her death at the end of the story. Victor's 'mermaid' is also facing a tragic end merely because she wanted a better life. She transcends the harsh reality of identification as just another statistic in the litany of migrant deaths, however, because she is not a typical drowning migrant. Victor has mythologised her through her transformation, thereby distancing her from the dominant narrative on migration. She is a symbol of loss, but as an allegory, she also carries multiple layers of further meaning, including the hope of transformation or redemption that mitigates her plight.[17]

FIGURE Nº 5

Diane Victor. *Drowning in sleep*, 2024. Charcoal and ash on paper. 230 x 90 cm. Commission for LAAC museum Dunkirk. Photograph by Chris Saunders.

The sarcophagi on either side of *The mermaid* contain two couples. *Drowning in sleep* (Figure 5), on the right-hand side, continues the theme of drowning, depicting a woman clinging to a man as they sink into the water. The title signals the ambiguity in this image. They could be sleeping, wound in bubble wrap, which functions in this instance as a form of comfort, like a blanket. The bubble wrap also alludes here to the protection of precious items in transit, but, ironically, it cannot help these people as they drown. The woman is naked while the man is clothed, possibly indicating the nature of exploitation for women in migrant situations. Victor has sprinkled ashes and charcoal over the drawing to create marks that approximate bubbles arising from the man's head and his clothes. The ash creates a soft blurring of outlines on both figures, which follows the trajectory of heavy bodies sinking while water and air rise around them. Their calm demeanour evokes the moment of acceptance, when drowning people give up striving for air and accept the inevitable. Victor has caught this exact moment, as their faces show peace, yet their bodies have not yet released each other. Victor's use of bubble wrap for texture in this interpretation visually links this couple to the drowning mermaid's transformation, and perhaps, like her, they are also about to transform. Perhaps this is the first stage of a 'sea change',[18] an enforced metamorphosis that will ultimately rob them of their humanity.

The cabinet on the left, titled *Resting in flight* (Figure 6), depicts a mother and child, entwined in each other's arms, visually contained by a map that enfolds them like a shroud. Victor (2024c) describes the map as 'fantastical' as it depicts an imaginary landscape encompassing different terrains traversed by migrants on their way to Europe. The substrate is studded with the tools used to plan a journey, including map pins and contour lines, a compass, and occasional place names. Some of the map lines approximate spider's webs, alluding to the migrant's status as prey for every predator *en route*. The size of the map alerts viewers to vast distances that need to be covered to reach safety. Above the woman's head, Victor has drawn a recognisable outline of the coast of Dunkirk, their current destination, with its easily identifiable harbour area and adjacent part of the town (Victor 2024c). The viewer would be looking down onto the image in the same way as one would look down to read a map. The two figures thus become informed by their journey, as landscape details, hills, roads, rivers, and forests are interspersed, seen through, or overlapped with limbs and bodies. The woman wears a head covering typical of northern Africa. It signifies a last link to her home and culture when everything else has been taken away, including her sense of self and home. There is a passing allusion to the many Biblically inspired images of the Holy Family's 'Flight into Egypt', but this reference serves to highlight differences rather than similarities, as this mother does not have a donkey to ride on nor a male protector. Instead, she and her child appear alienated, cut off from other human contact by the map which encircles but does not protect them. This image emphasises the common experience of each woman interviewed by Victor – that they travel *without* any protection, must strive to be self-sufficient, and cannot depend on help from anyone.

FIGURE Nº 6

Diane Victor. Resting in flight, 2024. Charcoal and ash on paper. 230 x 90 cm. Commission for LAAC museum Dunkirk. Photograph by Chris Saunders.

While visitors to the exhibition look down onto figures within the sarcophagi, they are joined in their scrutiny by a myriad of bodiless heads filling a window suspended above the display cabinets (Figure 7), with their reflections appearing in the glass positioned directly over *The mermaid*. The window frame was taken from a demolished building in Dunkirk, and the windowpanes are the substrate for these apparently falling heads (Victor 2024a). Each head was drawn with smoke from a burning candle and details carefully scratched away with a fine paintbrush while the glass was suspended above Victor's head.[19] Drawing with smoke enhances both the meaning and "affect" of the portraits

FIGURE Nº 7

Diane Victor. *The falling ones*, 2024. Smoke (carbon) drawing on a found window. 186 x 131 cm. Commission for LAAC museum Dunkirk. Photograph courtesy of Atelier Le Grand Village.

because the result is extremely fragile; the merest touch can destroy an image, evoking the frailty of migrants who have lost everything. The images are so easily damaged that they cannot be placed where the public might touch them; hence, the window's suspension is high above the exhibition space. Each face appears to be falling from the sky, seen in the gallery window behind. Perhaps they, too, are falling from a boat into the water. The falling heads become metaphors for the migrants' experience of worlds and societies falling apart. They symbolise the loss of everything that anchors a person, whether it is place, family, or humanity. Even their bodies have been lost, and their smoky faces are diluted and rendered ghostly by the light shining through them. They express impermanence, as if they are in the process of dissolving into spirits as we watch.

In the lower register of the window, two figures are wearing animal headpieces on their shoulders. A hyena from Africa on the left, and a bear from the Ukraine on the right, both dangerous, aggressive animals representing the dangers of the countries from which many people have fled. These animals embody the type of people who mete out the

tribulations that refugees encounter along the way, bestial creatures referring to violent, inhumane people who cause misery and suffering in the guise of 'helping' migrants (Victor 2024a).

FIGURE **Nº 8**

Diane Victor. *Untitled*, 2024. Smoke Portraits of some of the migrant volunteers. Smoke (carbon) on paper. Each 59.4 x 42cm. Commission for LAAC museum Dunkirk. Photograph by Cathy Christiaen / Ville de Dunkerque.

The photovoice project, which informed this body of work, was placed on boards with the photographs and their captions, to one side of the main space containing the artworks (Figure 2). Victor (2024b) asked the participants if anyone would be willing to have their photographs taken by her so she could make smoke portraits of them. Six of them agreed, and these smoke portraits were exhibited in vitrines below the photovoice displays (Figure 8). Smoke drawings on paper cannot be fixed (the fixative dissolves and distorts the carbon marks), so, like the smoke on glass, these works are extremely fragile and must be protected from touch. They are very difficult to move without damage, much like the women they represent. For Victor (2022), part of the importance of drawing with smoke is the uncontrollable nature of the medium. It is impossible to produce accurate likenesses of people; at best, it can form an approximation of the subject. Smoke is affected by the slightest breath of air, so it inherently transcends the act of creation. Victor finds herself having to "collaborate" with the smoke rather than controlling it. The result captures the essence of her subjects, it individualises them, while simultaneously helping these women retain their privacy. Despite the approximation of their features, these portraits assert their humanity and underline the reality of experiences recorded for the photovoice project.

Conclusion

In *Suie et cendre*, Victor has successfully traversed a fine line between sensitively communicating the experiences of women migrants and creating empathetic works of art. In her book on representing migrants, Agnes Woolley (2014:3), speaks of the ambivalent relationship of forced migrants to their representation in films and literature where they 'oscillat[e] between invisibility and overexposure in the public sphere'. Woolley (2014:3) acknowledges the importance of directly accessing the voice of migrants as a 'vital aspect of cultural and political agency'. Victor, as discussed, has followed this contemporary imperative, which has been adopted as a paradigm by decolonial feminist scholars, Vergès, Ball, and Woolley. I feel, however, that art has an advantage over films and literature, which can be biased towards narration. While informed by the stories of these women, Victor's artworks are metaphorical and symbolic, rather than didactic depictions of distressing factual experiences. Her techniques and interpretations ensure that the images are emotive without being sentimental, allowing for an interweaving of fact and myth that stimulates reflection and encourages empathy. Victor's interpretations provide the opportunity for their pain to be felt and understood, without exploiting them further, thereby attesting to the fact that by both listening and responding empathically through her art, she is providing a 'voice for the voiceless'.

Notes

1. For information on Victor's career, see the Art.co.za website under 'Diane Victor' or the biography included in the latest book on her work (Von Veh & Faroux 2022). This article on the *Suie et cendre* exhibition is the first research that has been published on Victor's work with migrants and is also her first use of photovoice as a method for engaging with vulnerable people.

2. SGBV is defined as sexual, emotional, psychological, physical and socio-economic violence and includes harmful cultural practices that are gender-specific (Simon-Butler & McSherry 2019). Examples of different kinds of SGBV perpetrated against adults include: rape, sexual assault, transactional sex, solicitation of transactional sex, exploitative relationships and trafficking for sexual exploitation and abuse (United Nations 2017).

3. The title, *Suie et cendre*, refers to the graphic media she uses to create her works.

4. Works discussed in this article are limited to new works made for the exhibition in response to the migrants in Dunkirk. Older works by Victor were displayed as part of this exhibition and others were exhibited concurrently at the Musée du dessin et de l'estampe originale de Gravelines (2024-2025) titled *Les raisons de la colère* (*The reasons for our anger*). Works in both exhibitions respond to gender-based violence, homelessness and the plight of women. I selected the works for the purposes of this article, as they provided a particular focus on SGBV in the experience of migrant women.

5. A resource for research on SGBV in migrant experiences can be found at The Institute for Research into Superdiversity at the University of Birmingham, which is leading the SEREDA Project, funded by the Wellcome Trust, Volkswagen Stiftung, and Riksbankens Jubileumsfond through the Europe and Global Challenges Initiative. I have also referred to several other sources in this article which can be found in footnotes and the source list.

6. For example, Victor's satirical series of etchings titled *Disasters of peace* (2001 - ongoing) respond to the worst examples of political and social ills that have been reported in the South African news. A discussion of this series can be found in Bronwen Law-Viljoen (2010).

7. Victor's use of medium to create meaning is a fundamental aspect of her artmaking. For discussions on her use of different media see Von Veh (2023; 2024) and Rankin & Von Veh (2008).

8. These statistics were quoted by Linda Jolof, Patricia Rocca and Tommy Carlsson in their research review titled 'Support interventions to promote health and wellbeing among women with health-related consequences following traumatic experiences linked to armed conflicts and forced migration: a scoping review' (Jolof *et al* 2024:2).

9. See Pouilly *et al* (2018), Refugee Council Report (2009), and Dobbs (2008).

10. Photovoice is an increasingly used qualitative research method, developed initially by health promotion researchers (Wang & Burris 1997). By utilising photographs taken and selected by participants, respondents can reflect upon and explore the reasons, emotions and experiences that have guided their chosen images. The aim of this method is to empower community members to document and share their stories and communicate their situations and experiences (Wang & Burris 1997; Castleden & Garvin 2008).

11. This is discussed further below as part of the information on the photovoice project.

12. Adoma is a French Governmental organisation that assists refugees, stateless people and asylum seekers in finding suitable housing. The women Victor engaged with had applied for refugee status, and the Adoma Centre in Dunkirk was helping them with their application for official papers (Victor 2024d). They also facilitated the legality of Victor's interaction with them, including obtaining legal and ethical clearance and ensuring that psychological help was available for the volunteers afterwards (Victor 2025).

13. Victor was unhappy about this as she had expressly wanted to give these women a public voice and felt that this amounted to censorship but the gallery staff remained adamant, citing the presence of children and their need to make the material more appropriate for them (Victor 2024b).

14. This is a method Victor used before, partly for the textural effect that softens her imagery (as in this work) and partly to evoke a sense of loss that fire and ash evoke. Unlike this work, some earlier works used material to produce the ash that was important for the meaning for the artwork (for example an old woman made with the ashes of a book that she had loved reading).

15. The IOM Report, titled *A decade of documenting missing migrants* was released on 26 March 2024. There have been several other recent reports of drownings, see for example the Reuters report by Yves Herman and Hannah Ellison (April 2024), BBC News report by Thomas Mackintosh and Hugh Schofield (12 July 2024), and BBC News report by Gianluca Avagninga (22 August 2024) among others.

16. Hans Christian Andersen is a Danish author who wrote *The little mermaid* in 1836. It was first published in 1837, in Danish, by C.A. Reitzel as part of the collection titled *Fairy tales told for children*.

17. The mermaid in Andersen's story, for example, throws herself into the sea to drown, but is instead transformed into one of the air spirits who watch over the earth. Her transformation holds the promise of ultimate redemption in heaven after 300 years of service (Andersen 1836).

18. The 'sea-change' refers to a line in the second verse of Ariel's song, from Act 1 Scene 2 of *The tempest* by William Shakespeare (1863). It speaks of changes wrought by the sea on the drowned father of the protagonist:
    Full fathom five they father lies;
    Of his bones are coral made;
    Those are pearls that were his eyes;
    Nothing of him that doth fade,
    But doth suffer a sea-change,
    Into something rich and strange.

19. For a more detailed explanation of this process see Von Veh (2024:17-19).

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