

**PERROTIN**

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**PRESSBOOK**

JR

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**Art Fairs**

# How JR's Audacious Armory Show Installation Fooled Ellis Island Into Making a Statement for Syrian Refugees

"So Close" smuggles contemporary struggles into classic images of "huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

**Sarah Cascone**, March 8, 2018



JR with his work, shown by Jeffrey Deitch, at the Armory Show. Photo courtesy of Sarah Cascone.

With a late winter storm bearing down on the city, New York seemed anything but hospitable during the opening of the Armory Show. But it was also marked by a monumental gesture of welcome: Visitors to the Piers were met by larger-than-life images of immigrants, a piece by the street artist JR titled *SO CLOSE*, part of the fair's Platform section.

The black-and-white figures are duplicates of a similar installation on the exterior of one of the abandoned hospital buildings on Ellis Island. The French street artist had first worked at the famed immigration facility back in 2014, using historic images of immigrants to the United States, pasting them in various rooms throughout the crumbling buildings. Last year, Ellis Island asked him back, this time to do something outdoors, facing the ocean.

“I said, amazing, let’s talk about the current moment,” JR told artnet News. “Immigration was how America was built. Let’s talk about how we’re looking at immigrants now—not as a strength, but as a problem.”



JR, *Ellis*, (2017). Photo courtesy of JR Studio.

However, when he proposed incorporating images of modern-day migrants, Ellis Island balked. Undeterred, JR took the original archival photos from Ellis Island to the Zaatari camp on the Syrian/Jordan border. There, he sought out people who resembled the figures in the pictures.

“I said, ‘can you pose like that, hold your arm like that?’” JR recalled. After careful Photoshopping the pictures of the Syrian refugees to enhance their similarities with the older figures, the street artist secured approval for a mural. The blown-up images essentially sneak present-day reality into the classic, sympathetic depiction of “huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”



JR, *SO CLOSE* at the Armory Show 2018, presented by Artsy and Jeffrey Deitch. Photo by Silvia Ros courtesy of Artsy.

The work has remained for some six months on Ellis Island, slowly deteriorating due to exposure to the elements. "No one ever noticed any difference!" JR said.

"You'll be able to tell, if you look closely, that some of faces are a little bit less blurry and more in focus because the photography is more up-to-date and high resolution," Jen Mergel, vice president of programming for the Association of Art Museum Curators and the curator of Platforms, told artnet News. She selected JR for the exhibition in part for his ability "to raise open-ended questions without making didactic statements."



JR, *SO CLOSE* outside the Armory Show. Photo courtesy of Sarah Cascone.

The Armory Show took active use of the Piers on Sunday, which didn't leave a lot of time to install its site-responsive sculptural installations. "JR and his team were working to wheatpaste the metal structure in advance, and then it was assembled and bolted into the sculpture," Mergel added. "All of the installations for Platform have to be completed in 48 to 72 hours, so it's crazy that they're only on view five days!"

The deadline was especially tight because JR only flew into New York Tuesday, the day before the fair, having attended the 90th Academy Awards in Hollywood over the weekend. He had been nominated, along with filmmaker Agnes Varda, for Best Documentary for *Faces Places*. The film didn't win, but you wouldn't know it from the attention he was receiving as he made his way down the aisles of the Armory's Pier 92.

It took a good 10 minutes for JR to make his way from his booth with Jeffrey Deitch back to the entrance, chatting with friends and acquaintances, including Brooklyn Museum director Anne Pasternak and his longtime gallerist, Emmanuel Perrotin.

"Can I have an autograph please?" Perrotin begged, jokingly.

"Who are you?" JR teased.



Artist JR. Photo courtesy of Henri Neuendorf.

Even though JR is showing here with another gallery, there was no tension between the two, said Perrotin. “It’s a great confirmation of JR’s talent,” the dealer explained, calling Deitch a legend. “We are not selfish. We want our artists to be happy, and when they collaborate with good people, it’s always good for everyone.”

It’s certainly good publicity for Perrotin’s next project with JR, which promises to be the artist’s largest gallery show to date, taking over two floors of his New York space. It is set for this June.



Installation view of JR’s booth with Jeffrey Deitch at the Armory Show. Photo courtesy of Jeffrey Deitch, Inc.

First, though, is the Armory Show, where Deitch's booth is dedicated to JR, with new photographs printed on etched German glass, and high-tech computerized model trains that run back and forth in unison on a short, wall-mounted track.

One of the train pieces had already sold, according to Deitch, to a private museum. (JR debuted his first train works late last year at Château La Coste in France, but this is their first showing in New York.) The offerings range from \$22,000 to \$148,000.

"I'm interested in artists who take on issues in our world today, such as the refugee crisis," Deitch, who worked with the Armory Show and Artsy to organize *SO CLOSE*, told artnet News. "The image looks identical to the archival photo, so it is a subtle message. Immigrants from 1900, who are the forebears of so many New Yorkers, are not that different from refugees today!"



One of JR's new glass works, based on archival Ellis Island photographs, on view at the Armory Show. Photo courtesy of Jeffrey Deitch, Inc.

Having worked outside for so much of his career, JR was unconcerned about the bad weather. "I love it!", he exclaimed. "I'm going outside to see if there's snow on it. It's not going to damage it."