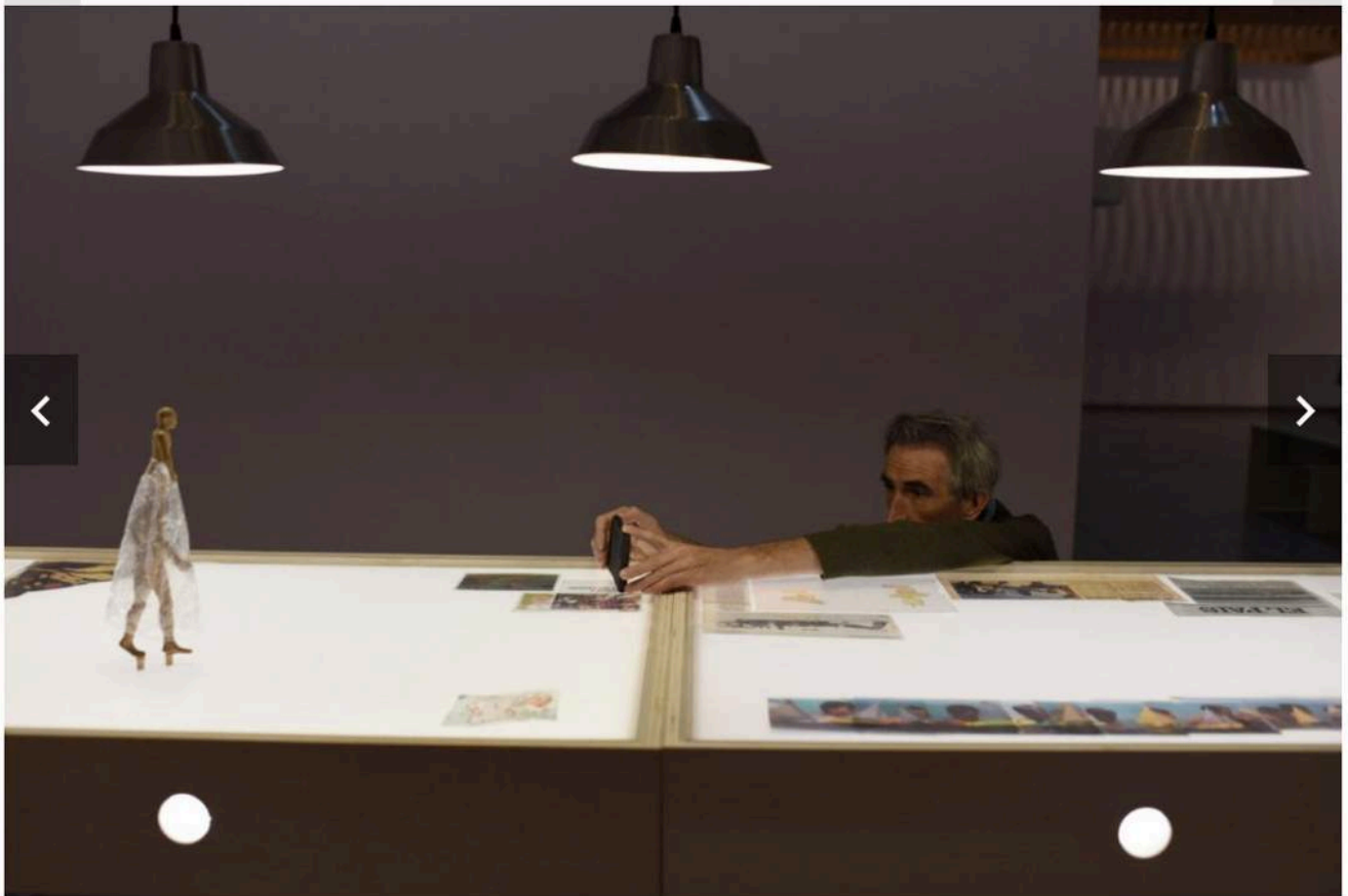


The Star, Toronto, December 10, 2016

For Francis Alys, a very fine line

The Belgian artist's socially conscious work treads razor's edge between wonder and chaos at the Art Gallery of Ontario.



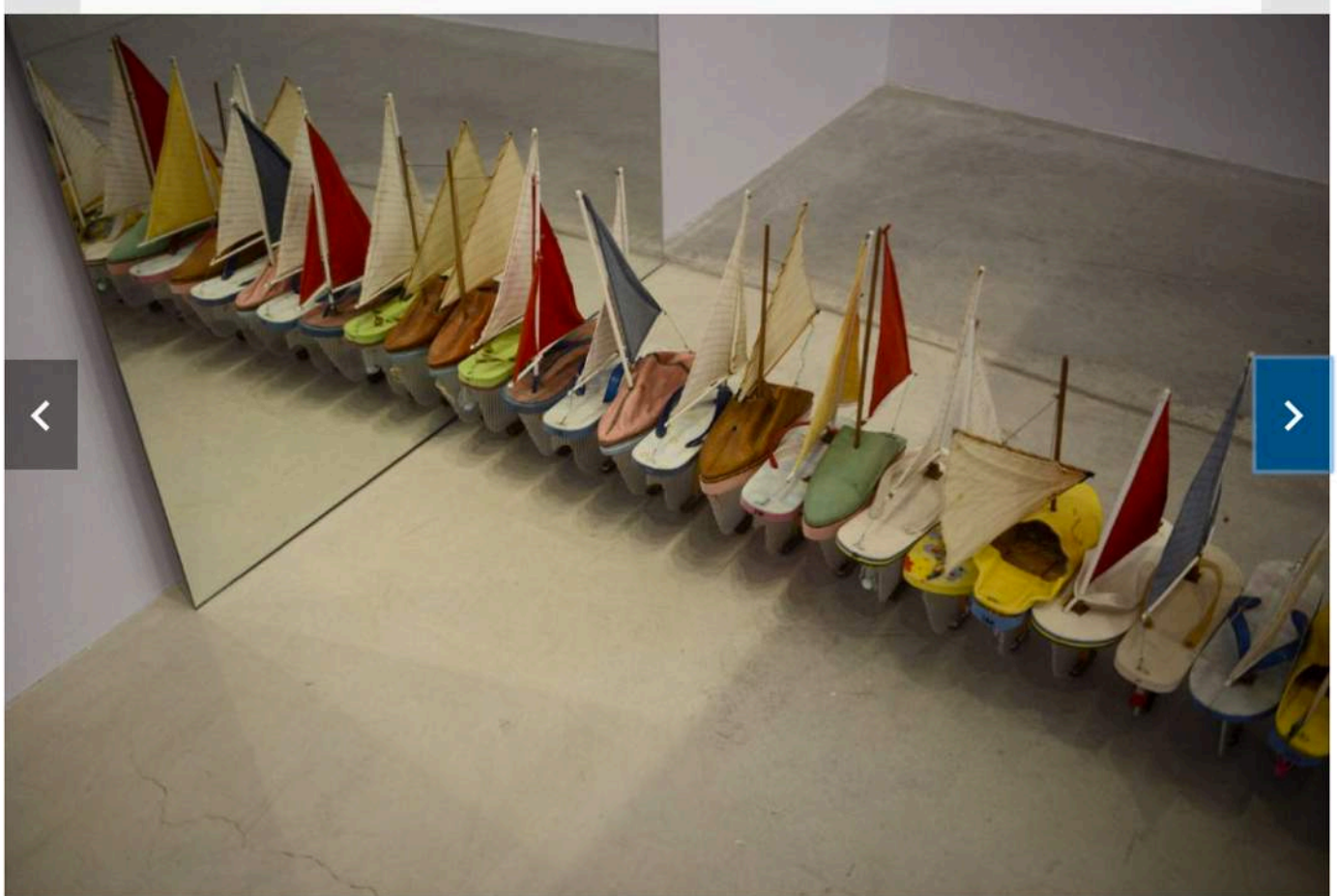
Francis Alys taking photos of his exhibition, A Story of Negotiation at the AGO. Alys, based in Mexico City, travels to trouble spots the world over, then processes his experiences and emotions into a myriad of different artworks. (MARTA IWANEK FOR THE TORONTO STAR)

By **MURRAY WHYTE** Visual arts
Sat., Dec. 10, 2016

What hits you first is the sound: Crashing waves and corkscrewing dust devils, the snap and click of semi-automatic weapons being assembled, the dissonant shrieks and laughter of children playing. Before your eye can catch a single glimpse of it, **the world of Francis Alys** burrows into your brain and serves notice: this will not be a passive experience.

It only seems fair, really. For the better part of three decades, Alys, the socially driven, Belgian-born artist whose work emanates from his home base in the roiling chaos of Mexico City, has been anything but passive himself. Most recently, Alys placed himself in Mosul, embedded with the Iraqi forces trying to protect civilians from an ongoing Daesh siege (Alys will contribute a work to the Iraqi pavilion at next year's Venice Biennale).

If there's a parameter of suffering for one's art, Alys has often seemed more than willing to explore its outer limit.



An array of toy sailboats line up against a mirror at Francis Alys's *A Story of Negotiation* at the AGO. The boats, used in his video work *Don't Cross the Bridge Until You Get to the River*, are a symbol of the illegal migrant crisis between third and first world countries, often across dangerous bodies of water. (MARTA IWANEK FOR THE TORONTO STAR)

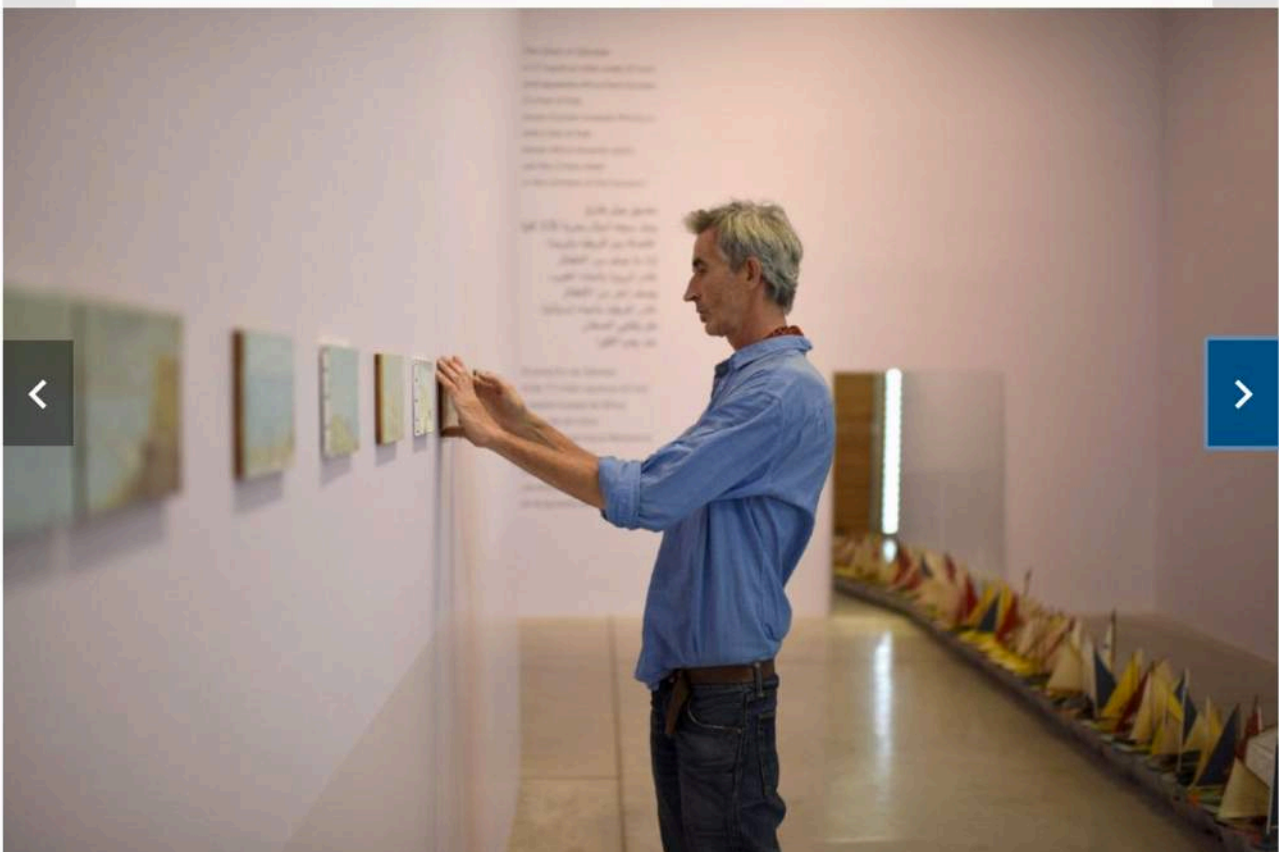
Over the years, his works range from anxious stunt to complex social negotiation. In one of his most famous works, in 2001, Alys strolled out of his studio in a rough quarter of Mexico City, gun dangling from his hand, to see how long it would take for police to react (he was arrested 11 minutes later).

That performance was preceded in 1997 by another, similar but less menacing, in which he pushed a giant block of ice through the superheated streets until finally, there was nothing left to push: the ice melted away, even the water left behind quickly evaporated, leaving no trace of the artist's herculean labour.

Solo actions gave way to group negotiations. In 2002, Alys recruited 500 Peruvians, each armed with a shovel, to shift a massive sand dune outside a Lima slum as an act of collective empowerment. Days and thousands of shovel-loads later, all that labour vanished in the shifting sands. He called it *When Faith Moves Mountains*.

It's with these expectations that you walk into *A Story of Negotiation*, the Art Gallery of Ontario's presentation of the very, very loud travelling Alys survey that's making a North-South circuit between its point of origin in Mexico City to Buenos Aires, Havana, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and here (the AGO is its only Canadian stop).

On a recent morning, amid the obligatory media conflagration, the artist himself was present, though not entirely. As curator Cuauhtemoc Medina from Mexico City's University Museum of Contemporary Art lead a tour from one high-volume space to the next, Alys, who is tall and rangy with a thick mop of salt-and-pepper hair and fine, pointed features, silently drifted in and out, taking pictures with his phone. Here and there, he fiddled with various objects on table tops, or lifted small paintings off the wall to examine the backs before putting them back.



Francis Alys repositions small paintings in his exhibition *A Story of Negotiation* at the AGO. (MARTA IWANEK FOR THE TORONTO STAR)

Leaving well enough alone seemed an unnatural state; for Alys, input and output are constants, and his work a forever unfinished journey, which he seemed happy to confirm. In one gallery space, an antechamber to a thundering video called *Tornado*, Alys lingered while the group moved on. It gave me the chance to ask him about what I saw as his intensely charged political work.

“If you want to look at it like that,” he said, in his affably awkward way. “But what I hope is that you can also see what I do as much more of a personal search.”

It was a fair point. The show is broken into three pieces, each anchored by an intensely imposing video: *Tornado*, where Alys himself chases down dust devils in the Mexican hinterland, slipping inside their swirling embrace; *Reel/Unreel*, a recent, clattering film shot in Kabul, of local children gamely racing an unspooling reel of film through the dusty streets; and *Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River*, a roaring two-screen video with the unnerving mix of children toting toy sailboats into chaotically pounding surf.

All around and in between are vitrines filled with various bits: sketches and storyboards, notes and newspaper clippings. It can be helpful: Alys's projects aren't floating in space but the product of very clear, often timely intentions.

Reel/Unreel was made between 2011 and 2014, when the push-pull for control in Afghanistan between NATO forces and a Taliban uprising resurrected the spectre of extremist control of images and information; *Don't Cross the Bridge*, from 2009, was made on the opposite coasts of Morocco and Gibraltar as an exploration of the ongoing (and now exploding) illegal migrant crisis (the toy boats, symbolically, represented a futile attempt to bridge the strait and deliver safe passage). *Tornado* floats a little more freely, but is tethered to the ground all the same: Alys envisioned it as symbolic of Mexico's tumble into chaotic, cartel-driven lawlessness.

Moments emerge — a wooden figure, front-crawling its way across a light-table atop a transparent baggie, unnerves in its frank evocation of the thousands caught in the wash between point A and B — but the display presents largely as garnish for the attention-demanding main course served up on the towering video screens.

Not so, however, the array of tiny paintings that cluster and scatter at points throughout. Alys, discomfitingly, pairs the urgent with the absurd and the poetic both. While it can seem a recipe for disaster (“It's a very, very delicate balance,” he smiles) the paintings, for all their small scale, serve as powerful counterweight to all that noise: stillness against the turbulence, contemplation amid the chaos.

On one wall, Alys is quoted as saying that his work is about “the eternal struggle between artistic fantasy and crude reality,” and the paintings here define that rift with unnerving clarity. Images of childlike figures spanning oceans and borders with a single step conjure a poetic distance between real and unreal. His *TRF* series, made while embedded with British forces in Afghanistan in 2013, use coded military symbols to obscure tiny paintings of daily life. Hanging near the *Tornado* series are a pair of paintings with no ambiguity whatsoever: of lynchings, vigilante justice carried out by angry Mexicans fed up with their neighbourhoods being run roughshod by gangsters.

Alys toggles back and forth between intense and playful, small and large, with such peripatetic ease that it's fair to wonder if there's anything that binds it all together. “Did I say that?” Alys laughed, as I read his own words back to him, on the gulf between the real world and the hectic and contemplative spaces he carves from it. It's almost as though he's so focused on his next move that he erases the ones before.

At the same time, threads emerge. Paintings and video works both serve as buffers from the world at hand. “It's a way of taking some distance from the reality of the situation,” he says, matter of fact, about *Reel/Unreel* and *Don't Cross the Bridge*. “It opens up a more poetic frame, to a certain point. A child's game is timeless, and that has become a major source of inspiration for me.”

The sense is of an artist who hurls himself into a flashpoint of chaos only to pick up the pieces, slowly and deliberately, over time and in the aftermath, with neither goal nor expectation of resolution. Both elements coexist. In *Don't Cross the Bridge*, children's laughter intertwines with the menacing churn of an indifferent sea — a world brimming with wonder and chaos in the same moment. For Alys, art happens in navigating the razor's edge between them.

Francis Alys: A Story of Negotiation continues at the Art Gallery of Ontario to April 2, 2017. See <https://www.ago.net/francis-alyis-a-story-of-negotiationago.net> for more information.