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# JR & Art Spiegelman: The Ghosts Of Ellis Island



## Synopsis

In August 2014 the French artist JR received an unprecedented invitation to work in the Ellis Island Immigrant Hospital, a building on the south side of the island that has been abandoned and closed to visitors since 1954. About ten percent of the millions of migrants who passed through Ellis Island, having been deemed not healthy enough to enter the United States, spent some time in the hospital. For *Unframed • Ellis Island*, documented in *The Ghosts of Ellis Island*, JR chose about 20 archival photographs of the hospital's patients and staff and wheat-pasted these images around the abandoned building, creating haunting scenes that bring the history of these rooms back to life: a family looking out at the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor, a small boy lying on an empty bed frame, patients staring out of the caged "psychopathic" ward. The work, which is accessible by guided tour, will remain up "until it decides to disappear." Along with images of JR's photographic interventions in the hospital, this publication includes new illustrations by legendary cartoonist Art Spiegelman, who collaborated with JR on illustrated narratives about Ellis Island's immigrants. JR (born 1983) is best known for his monumental, wheat-pasted street portraiture projects. His ongoing project *Unframed* involves installing archival images and images from anonymous photographers in new contexts. JR has carried out *Unframed* projects in Marseille, São Paulo, Vevey, Atlanta, Baden Baden and Washington, DC. In 2014 he worked inside the theater of the NYC Ballet creating a 6,500-square-foot composite image of NYCB dancers depicted nearly life-size that, when seen from above, forms a giant eye. JR won the TED Prize for 2011. Art Spiegelman (born 1948) is an American cartoonist, editor and comics advocate based in New York City, best known for his graphic novel *Maus* (1991). His work as coeditor on the comics magazines *Arcade* and *Raw* has been influential, and he spent a decade as contributing artist for *The New Yorker* where he made several high-profile and sometimes controversial covers.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 112 pages

Publisher: Damiani (May 26, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 8862083955

ISBN-13: 978-8862083959

Product Dimensions: 8.7 x 0.6 x 10.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars Â Â See all reviews Â (5 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #289,915 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #43 in Books > Arts & Photography > Other Media > Graffiti & Street Art #60 in Books > Arts & Photography > History & Criticism > Themes > Portraits #61 in Books > Arts & Photography > Painting > Portraits

## Customer Reviews

Awesome book about Ellis Island where my widowed grandmother brought in her 6 yr old daughter (my mom), 4 yr old son, and 18mos old baby boy. Last July (2015) I had visited the island and took the Hard Hat Tour of the hospital wing which showed these fantastic pictures along with everything else and this book keeps those memories out there!

This is predominantly a photo book but there are some stories intermingled throughout. The story that is the most heartbreaking is one of a woman from Russia who immigrated to the United States with her two children. Her husband had previously immigrated to the United States and they had plans to join him. She contracted an eye infection which made her blind and she stayed in the Ellis Island hospital for a period of time. Her children were reunited with her husband, but when he was unable to afford to pay her hospital bills, the woman was shipped back to Russia where she remained until her death. It's such a sad story. Regarding the photos, the author took old photos of people on Ellis Island and intermingled them in different locations on the island. They were very fascinating. I traveled to New York City in 2011 but didn't have a chance to stop at Ellis Island. I hope to travel to Ellis Island one day but until then, this book is the perfect replacement!

For those whose ancestors came to America during the early twentieth century, Ellis Island evokes images of men, women, and children fleeing penury and oppression. The United States did not open her arms to everyone, however. Doctors and nurses examined the newcomers, looking for contagious diseases and mental disorders that might disqualify them from staying in America. Those who failed to pass muster were sent back to Europe. The time came when Ellis Island Hospital, which had opened in 1902 in a grand building on the southern half of the island, was no longer needed. In 1954, "the U. S. government declared Ellis Island surplus government property." The site fell into disrepair. "The Ghosts of Ellis Island" shows to what extent this massive building deteriorated, with its crumbling walls; broken windows, fixtures, and furniture; and rust and decay everywhere. The unrestored portion of the hospital stands in marked contrast to the old black and white photos of spotless wards and operating rooms populated by stiff looking doctors and nurses in starched white uniforms. The refugees were probably bewildered and frightened. Would they be

allowed to stay or be forced to leave, just "a stone's throw from Paradise"? A French artist named JR created an exhibit, "Ellis Island Unframed," that opened to the public in 2014. "The Ghosts of Ellis Island" gives us a taste of JR's vision and creativity. The book has stunning photographs in both black and white and color and drawings by Art Spiegelman. There are haunting images of refugees displayed against the hospital's derelict background; it is as if their spirits still occupy the hospital that once housed them. This is not merely a reminder of a bygone era. It is also a statement about what America stands for now. Is Lady Liberty still a benign figure for those seeking better lives? Or, as depicted in a drawing by Spiegelman, is she a fire breathing dragon aggressively ordering foreigners to leave? It would be a mistake to exploit Ellis Island's history to make a political statement. It is far better to remember and record, and let the pictures speak for themselves. Thanks to JR's artistry and essays by contributors such as Jane Rosenthal, we can visualize what it must have been like for immigrants coming to these shores seeking safe haven. This evocative and poignant volume takes us back to a time, approximately a century ago, when "huddled masses yearning to breathe free" came to America to make a fresh start in the land of opportunity.

Saw this extraordinary video and had to have the book. I'm a great fan JR!!

good

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