

(Re)presenting the Muslim diaspora: Adaptation. Hybridization. Resistance.

By

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Abstract

This thesis project investigates how contemporary artists articulate their experiences and perspectives as diasporic Muslim women in Ontario. It questions the cultural, political and affective dimensions of establishing oneself in a new, or multiple locations– in this case from Pakistan and Iran to Canada. Featuring artworks by Sumaira Tazeen, Sheila Esfahani and Mariam Magsi, the exhibition *(Re)presenting the Muslim diaspora: Adaptation. Hybridization. Resistance* emphasizes the tension inherent in negotiating multiple cultural and individual identities. By focusing solely on Pakistani and Irani Muslim women artists in Ontario who deal with issues of representation in their own diverse practices, the exhibition challenges the normalization of the realities associated with being a Muslim woman in western society. In doing so, this thesis projects informs broader cultural understandings of both personal and universal dimensions of global migration and the Muslim diaspora.

Key words: representation, Muslim women, diaspora, identity and culture, Sumaira Tazeen, Soheila Esfahani, Mariam Magsi

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Curatorial Essay

(Re)presenting the Muslim diaspora: Adaptation. Hybridization. Resistance. explores processes through which meaning and identities are formed by diasporic Muslim women. Featuring artwork by Sumaira Tazeen (Pakistani-Canadian), Soheila Esfahani (Irani-Canadian) and Mariam Magsi (Pakistani-Canadian), this multidisciplinary exhibition highlights dual cultural identities and investigates shared experiences of displacement, marginalization and resistance. Through photography, video, sculptural and installation work, these artists utilize a diasporic language that merges traditional and contemporary influences that can be interpreted as acts of (re)presentation and refusal. Bringing together these artists' works, the exhibition illustrates the cultural, social and affective dimensions of moving to, co-existing with and merging Eastern and Western cultures.

Historically, Muslim women have been represented within popular cultures in an oppressive and stereotypical manner. These representations continue into the contemporary day and are often used to discredit the personal, embodied and cultural experiences of the women depicted. To counter these negative portrayals of Muslim women, this exhibition highlights the formation of identity as an ongoing process that evolves over time, place and through lived experiences. The exhibition emphasizes identity as “the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us as ‘one people,’ with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning”¹ as Canadian-Muslim women. Each of the works featured in the exhibition emphasize personal as well as larger social and cultural concerns regarding

¹ Hall, Stuart. 1997. P.222-3

identity, belonging and place in the diaspora. Tazeen, Esfahani and Magsi highlight counternarratives that challenge the authority and authenticity of representation of women that exist in the context of and are always positioned against Western ideals and values.

The exhibition employs the term ‘diaspora’ in relation to “the dispersal of a people from their original homeland.”² Through this depiction, the exhibition emphasizes a culturally and linguistically diverse Canada, highlighting individuals united in their displacement and immigration within the specificity of Ontario. In doing so, it illustrates the importance of place in order to understand the conflicts present in the everyday realities of Muslim-Canadian women. In particular, representations under the guise of multiculturalism force immigrant individuals to “develop a ‘distinct’ national Canadian identity that could be “presented as “fluid, open-ended and embracing.”³ By investigating the various processes and issues involved in immigrating and establishing oneself in a new location, the exhibition draws attention to the need by diasporic individuals to constantly translate, transform and therefore (re)present their own identity.

The exhibition considers how immigrant Muslim women come to understand themselves within their new social and cultural contexts. Tazeen, Esfahani and Magsi present work that share similar anxieties and experiences of navigating contemporary life as Canadian women and immigrants in Ontario. Through a (re)presentation of culturally specific objects, each artwork speaks to larger themes or phases immigration. Subsequently, the exhibition is organized around three themes – adaptation, hybridization, resistance - to open up space for counternarratives of diasporic experiences to emerge.

² Butler, Judith. 2013. P.189

³ Thobani, Sunera. 2007. P.153

Adaptation

Positioned within the category of new immigrant Muslim women in the diaspora, adaptation encompasses the countless initial challenges and struggles of moving abroad and starting life over in Ontario. Sumaira Tazeen's practice deftly examines the issues and underlying positivity required as a recent female immigrant in Western society. Her immersive installation *Sabz Bagh VII* (2020) consists of varying shapes, sizes and colours of vintage suitcases that have been carefully stacked up, dispersed across the floor and methodically altered by the artist. Tazeen skillfully places various devices directly inside these sculptural objects, that play audio and video recordings on a loop. In doing so, she brings together layered processes and meanings to create a cacophony of experiences that draw attention to the various contradictions and feelings of displacement faced by new immigrant women on a daily basis.

Tazeen meticulously cuts out patterns of sunflower discs from the surface of the suitcases. She metaphorically transforms these objects into vintage speakers that play various audio recordings through these perforations. The audio features interviews with new Muslim immigrant women to her hometown of Kitchener and were conducted (by the artist) through workshops and community-based engagements. Presenting these recordings in their original, English, Bengali and Punjabi languages, she emphasizes the intimacy of these conversations that highlight first person stories of immigration and adaptation told by newly diasporic women in search for a better life. Each interview addresses issues such as language, finance and education that affect the everyday and lived realities of these women. By keeping the original format of the interviews, the artist heightens the feeling of dislocation, particularly in relation to new Muslim women immigrants who may not even speak English. She brings attention to the diversity of

experiences and perspectives inherent in the initial stages of starting life over in a new, foreign land. Tazeen (re)presents the suitcases as objects of identification in the immigrant experience, that signify physical travel across borders and symbolically contain the identity, culture, possessions, memories and experiences of recent diasporic individuals.

Tazeen's experimentations with metaphors continue with two short video recordings, *Movement* and *All that Glitters*, presented on iPad's that have been embedded directly inside the suitcases. These video clips highlight seemingly different perspectives, landscapes and events. However, both showcase a form of natural beauty and festivities that everyday life in Canada has to offer.⁴ Tazeen explores her own personal experiences and encounters as a diasporic Muslim woman in her new, Western homeland. *Movement* depicts an abstract landscape recorded from a moving car, with the radio playing Fox news at a low volume in the background. Using a similar format, *All that Glitters* illustrates the artist's journey to an event in the city and features traditional Eastern music from the car stereo as well as the sound of fireworks and celebration. By highlighting these everyday activities and obscuring their specific contexts, Tazeen gradually reveals hidden meanings and possibilities of life abroad. In doing so, she creates symbolic connections between displacement and opportunity, that relate back to the title of the work. In particular, the expression Sabz Bagh originates from an Urdu proverb that literally translates to 'the grass is greener.' The artists use of the word 'Bagh' specifically, makes reference to Jannah—the Islamic religious and philosophical garden of heaven. Through these symbolisms Tazeen highlights a continued and exhaustive search by diasporic individuals for abundance, prosperity and peace through undertaking processes of immigration.

⁴ Ali, Amra. 2015.

Tazeen highlights the common misconception that life will be more successful abroad. The artist emphasizes that although immigrating may eventually improve the quality of life, it is not possible to accomplish without patience, perseverance and hard work.⁵ Through her investigation of the counter narratives present within a single object (the suitcase), she emphasizes the underlying message for any person who faces the initial struggle of adapting to remain optimistic— for only then they will be able to achieve success in their new life overseas. In doing so, the work provides an opportunity to thoughtfully consider the complex and contradictory emotions experienced by Canadian newcomers and therefore asks the viewer to consider how we can see the familiar through alternate perspectives.

Hybridization

Hybridization emphasizes the processes of negotiation, translation, transformation and amalgamation of contrasting cultures and identities as dual Muslim-Canadian citizens. The term is borrowed from Homi Bhabha's discussion of the conceptual 'third space' of in-betweenness and hybridity. He highlights the possibility of a symbolic site or 'place' where cultural difference can be destabilized, dislocated and combined to create more diverse and accurate forms of representations for diasporic individuals.

Soheila Esfahani's visual practice investigates this 'space' of cultural hybridity specifically reflecting upon issues of displacement, dissemination and reinsertion of one's own home culture and identity within a new, Western context. Her work in this exhibition, *My Grandmother had One* (2019) and *Variations on Willow Pattern Birds 1-25* (2019) are two

⁵ Tazeen, Sumaira.

separate yet interconnected series of blue and white china plates in varying sizes that serve as souvenirs. Esfahani re-fires these collected objects with symbolically charged and cross-cultural influences in an attempt to navigate, dissolve and make space for her own dual and often conflicting Irani and Canadian culture and identity.

Esfahani creates a stimulating dialogue between culturally specific yet relatable contexts, materials and techniques. In *My Grandmother had One*, the artist re-fires these souvenir objects with representational and abstract forms of traditional Irani patterns and floral motifs influenced by non-figurative Islamic art. She layers the existing patterns of blue and white china plates with blue, gold and black patterns that collide with, respond to and resist the original design. These dynamic interventions oscillate between intricate patterns, textures, bold planes of colours and scrupulously detailed mark making. The artist provides a certain ambiguity that obscures, emphasizes and translates the meaning behind the original blue willow (chinoiserie) pattern of the ‘china’ plates, which is itself a mass produced and commercial, ‘willow’ design “co-opted from the traditional blue motifs of Chinese ceramics.”⁶ Covering and therefore removing a crucial piece that completes the original story, Esfahani disrupts this appropriated design, providing a sense of mystery to the unidentifiable narrative that lies underneath.

Similarly, *Variations on Willow Pattern Birds 1-25*, depicts two of ‘willow’ birds (extracted from the chinoiserie pattern), in varying stages of flight. By hanging the plates in succession along the gallery walls, these designs create a feeling of movement among the birds as they slightly alter and transform throughout the series of plates presented. Various iterations of this same type of ‘willow’ bird, depict different perspectives of the same subject matter. In

⁶ Aritcheta, Allyson. 2019.

particular, they evoke immigration from one geographic location to another emphasizing her own– and diasporic women’s search for a unifying force across conflicting cultures and identities. Through these investigations into resignifying the souvenirs with new meanings, Esfahani visually represents the tension created by cultural appropriation, illustrating what happens when souvenir objects pass through geographic borders– meanings shift, symbols are seen differently and the origins of culturally specific objects eventually lose their original context.

Esfahani recontextualizes the meaning behind the blue willow pattern, inserting her own cross-cultural identity and influences. She represents the experiences of displacement as immigrant subjects suspended between cultural translation and separation. Through symbolic interventions, Esfahani examines the layered histories between the east and the west, to question ideas of authority and authorship over design. In particular, she references the etymological roots of translation, recontextualizing it as a “form of portable culture that can be carried across borders and nations.”⁷ She uses this to emphasize the influence of cross-cultural trade that allows objects to move across borders. By (re)presenting these familiar souvenir objects as forms of hybrid culture, she attempts to navigate, integrate and ultimately transcend existing cultural contexts. The artist symbolically dislocates Western perspectives opening up the possibility for new, inclusive meanings, memories and experiences to be created. In doing so, she communicates a hidden language integral to unify and hybridize the vast groups that comprise the Muslim-Canadian diaspora within Ontario. The work highlights a desire to abolish the traditional and limiting boundaries of culture and identity that implicates the need for the viewer

⁷ Esfahani, Soheila.

to take action against the oppressive and marginalizing effects of representations of cultural difference.

Resistance

Mariam Magsi's photographic series *Jahez / Dowry* (2018) highlights acts of resistance that confront and challenge the dominant regimes and representations of Muslim-Canadian women. By inserting her 'presence' within her work, she symbolically reclaims agency over specific and gendered roles expected of women. The photographs presented in this exhibition depict the artist shrouded in black cloths that resemble Islamic veils (niqab) as she interacts with various inherited, household and personal items— a rolling pin, a pot, a Balochi shalwar (pants), earrings and a silver ornament. In each image Magsi adorns and balances these objects around different parts of her head and the objects held rigidly in place simply through breathing exercises and postures. Through these gestures of veiling, the artist references the formal and symbolic qualities of the garments ability to hide and reveal the 'subversive' body underneath. Transforming the intended purpose of these symbolic and culturally specific artefacts into useless accessories and absurdist objects, she simultaneously emphasizes and metaphorically breaks away from the cultural, societal and familial expectations contained within each of these specific objects.

By listing each item contained in the photographs as accompanying labels, Magsi urges the viewer to engage in a closer investigation of the meanings contained within each object. In particular, the word 'Jahez' itself originates from the Urdu language and references the concepts of dowry, that "refers to the paraphernalia or goods that accompany the bride to her new,

matrimonial home.⁸ By utilizing this term as the title of the series the artist subtly reveals the complexity of the relationships and lived experiences contained within these inherited items. It specifically speaks to the five objects (re)presented as part of the artists own dowry that were given to her by her mother and has travelled a significant distance with her, across borders from Pakistan to Canada. Through establishing these connections to the places and practices of home, Magsi reflects upon these objects through silent acts of rebellion. In doing so, she questions the specific, domestic and gendered functions that are common within gifts received by women when they get married.

Through the use of photography as her primary medium, Magsi inserts her own presence within the work to create counter narratives that resist existing representations and roles of women. By placing herself as the subject of these performative photographs, Magsi (re)presents these items in new contexts and illustrates new ways of recognizing the complex meanings behind seemingly mundane objects of everyday use. She highlights various points of alignment between contrasting histories, experiences and perspectives of women, to emphasize mutual concerns particularly regarding notions of marriage and motherhood that symbolically accompany these objects. Relating her own personal and cultural histories, experiences and ancestral narratives, she emphasizes ‘presence’ as a form of resistance that can help keep a connection between who and what survives in the present and to control the way in which Canadian women are perceived within both Eastern and Western contemporary society. Through these bold acts of resistance, Magsi metaphorically releases herself from the weight of these

⁸ Magsi, Mariam.

tradition, once again encouraging the viewer to find something new within feelings of displacement.

Conclusion

In making artwork about their own diasporic histories, cultures, identities and lived experiences, Tazeen, Esfahani and Magsi communicate a shared language integral for immigrant individuals to navigate and succeed within Western cultures. These artists assert their agency and create counter narratives that are specific to each artist's understanding of culture, identity and what it means to be a Muslim-Canadian woman in Ontario. Each artist (re)presents symbolically charged objects— suitcases, souvenir plates and items of dowry through a range of methods that confront and contest dominant Western regimes and representation as well as provide a sense of belonging and hopefulness for any marginalized individual. Tazeen highlights the challenges and opportunities of moving and adapting to a new homeland; Esfahani opens up the possibility to dislocate and hybridize conflicting (Eastern and Western) cultures and identities; Magsi presents her own presence to resist traditional and gendered expectations. By presenting these works, the exhibition opens up the possibility to create new inclusive memories and experiences that trouble existing cultural and political implications of Western representations regarding the diversity of experiences and perspectives.

Support Paper

Introduction

(Re)presenting the Muslim diaspora: Adaptation. Hybridization. Resistance. explores the complex relationship between the various processes of immigration and the formation of identity, culture and meaning of Muslim women within Ontario. In particular, this project draws attention to and critiques dominant depictions of Muslim women as ‘Other’ homogenous and marginalized individuals in contemporary media and popular culture. These representations present traditional and culturally specific elements in new contexts that discredit Muslim women's individuality and lived experiences. In doing so, they facilitate the production of cultural and gender stereotypes and lead to mis-representations.

In exploring counter-narratives, I was drawn to the practice of three Muslim-Canadian artists who investigate individual and collective histories, cultures, experiences and perspectives across the Muslim diaspora in Ontario. The final project consists of an exhibition by three female Muslim artists whose work demonstrate a common diasporic language through gestures of (re)presentation that challenge stereotypical and oppressive representations of Muslim women in Western society and culture. The prefix ‘(re)’ in this project references actions of doing ‘again.’ (Re)presenting therefore highlights acts of presenting again, specifically to convey new meanings in new contexts. The project draws attention to the affective dimensions produced by each artwork to investigate how self-identity and meaning are produced and influenced by immediate cultural, social, political and geographic surroundings. In doing so, it hopes to inform a broader cultural understanding of personal and collective effects of immigration, particularly as it relates to representations of diasporic Muslim women.

Literature Review

Post-colonial and decolonial literature highlights the formation of identity and culture through a lens of Western-centric and oppressive systems of knowledge production. The writings of Palestinian-American post-colonial scholar Edward Said, provided a starting point from which to understand the colonial “lenses through which the orient is experienced, and ... shape language, perception and form(s) of encounter between the east and west.”⁹ In particular, his theorization of the ‘Other’ and ideas of ‘Orientalism’ highlight “tradition(s) of classification and hierarchy”¹⁰ that are positioned both against and within the context of Western society. These representations are made primarily through oppositions and differences as well as provide insight into how colonialism continues to serve as a tool of marginalization, consolidating Western authority over the supposedly belated East. Similarly, Indian-English scholar and critical theorist Homi Bhabha investigates, processes of the construction of the ‘Other’ and how “cultures come to be represented by virtue of the processes of iteration and translation through which their meanings are vicariously addressed to through an Other.”¹¹ Bhabha presents the notion of translation to highlight the conflicts produced through the (unbalanced) relationship between representations of differences and their effects on the everyday experiences, meanings, identities and cultures of minoritized individuals. These arguments actively call attention to the problematic production of cultural and artistic identities under colonial discourses.

⁹ Said, Edward. 1978. P.58

¹⁰ Ibid. p.57

¹¹ Bhabha, Homi. 1994. P.58

South-Asian literary theorist and feminist critic Gayatri Spivak further speaks to the after effects of colonization on gender and subject formation. Focusing on the context of the Indian subcontinent, she presents the ethical problems of codifying “legal practices of imperialism” and colonial production, highlighting the relationship between imperialism and patriarchy.¹² As she states “the figure of the woman disappears, not into pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization.”¹³ Spivak emphasizes the effects of displacement and invisibility caused by culturally specific representations. Focusing on women who face the double issues of race and gender, she highlights notions of violence inherent in representations based on hierarchies of power and violent acts against women specifically, that my project aims to problematize.

Through notions of voice, Spivak emphasizes self-consciousness as a way to assert agency and “mark the place of ‘disappearance’ with something other than silence and nonexistence, a violent aporia between subject and object status.”¹⁴ Spivak highlights voice as an important tool for marginalized individuals, with which to articulate and assert their own agencies, self-identities and cultures. These gestures of re-presenting and ‘speaking’ for oneself, provide the possibility for my project to render visible and articulate cultural production that includes the experiences, cultures and identities of marginalized women.

Additionally, citizenship and the performance of citizenship in multicultural Canada are integrated into the discussion of the making of the ‘Other’ by Tanzanian-Canadian sociologist,

¹² Spivak, Gayatri. 1994. P.82

¹³ Ibid. P.102

¹⁴ Ibid. P.102

Sunera Thobani. She foregrounds ideas of race and gender in relation to notions of power specifically within the context of Canada. Thobani emphasizes multiculturalism as a “regulatory mechanism (that) encouraged immigrants to imagine themselves in the same culturalist tropes nationalists used against them, thereby coming to see themselves through the eyes of the nation.”¹⁵ In particular, Thobani investigates multiculturalism’s link to a history of colonialism that remains in the interest of economic expansion (labour) and to “signify the western states commitment to valuing cultural diversity.”¹⁶ She also investigates the impact of these policies in relation to gender constructs, illustrating the struggles that women immigrants face in breaking away from patriarchal structures and frameworks of Western society— a disparity that is the basis of my exhibition.

The exhibition project employs the term ‘diaspora’ in relation to the “dispersal of a people from their original homeland.”¹⁷ In the context of movement and migration, the term diaspora connects the lived experiences of Muslim women in the West with the formation of identity as immigrant individuals. The term “is derived from the Greek verb *speiro* (to sow) and the preposition *dia* (over).” For displaced populations such as “...Jews, Africans, Palestinians, and Armenians the expressions acquired a more sinister and brutal meaning. Diaspora signaled a collective trauma, a banishment, where one dreamed of home but lived in exile.”¹⁸ Through

¹⁵ Thobani, Sunera. 2007. P.162

¹⁶ Ibid. P.144

¹⁷ Butler, Judith. 2013. P.189

¹⁸ Ibid. P.ix

grounding the exhibition on concepts and practices of diaspora, emphasis is placed on cultural and linguistic transformations that occur through the processes of immigration and displacement.

This project highlights place as an important factor in the creation of connections among these artists, focusing on the shared histories and perspectives of disparate Pakistani-Canadian and Irani-Canadian immigrants. British-Australian theorist Sarah Ahmad investigates ideas of place in relation to the migration of Muslim immigrants within the context of Britain. She highlights the impact of representations that favour collective subjectivities through the dissolution of individual identities, cultures and lived experiences of immigrant subjects. She states that migrants “are under increasing pressure to integrate, where integration is the key term for the promotion of multicultural happiness”¹⁹ Ahmad draws attention to the need for Muslim immigrants to constantly homogenize and transform their own identity and culture to fit in to new contrasting ideals and demands presented through an empty “promise of happiness”²⁰ that is offered to immigrant individuals by their new homeland. This understanding of immigrant and diasporic realities instructs the broader impact of social and cultural production linked to dimensions of global immigration. The notion of place is particularly significant for Muslim women in Canada, as multiculturalism regulates the ways in which immigrants take up their identity through the notion of the hyphenated subject who is never fully Canadian. In her discussion of the South Asian immigrant and the impossibilities of becoming Canadian, sociologist Sunera Thobani states:

Immigrants, are made responsible for importing their backwards cultural practices into the country (dowry, honour killings) along with their diseases (west

¹⁹ Ahmad, Sarah. 2010. P.138

²⁰ Ibid. P.158

Nile Virus, Asian Bird flu, Ebola) and their murderous hatreds (the Sikh/Indian, Tamil/Sinhalese conflicts, among others), and their criminal gangs (Colombian drug dealers, Chinese ‘snakeheads,’ Indo-Canadian gangs).²¹

She goes on to state that immigrants are called upon to dilute their former cultural identities in order to be considered respectable Canadians. It is this process of becoming “Canadian” that I argue connects Tazeen, Esfahani and Magsi’s practices.

Critical curatorial practice plays an important role in providing a vehicle with which to explore the cultural and social ideologies, power dynamics and themes that inform this project. It highlights how narratives produced by museums reproduce singular ideas of culture and identity. English Museologist Tony Bennett posits that museums assert their perspective within a given society through their exclusive status as cultural institutions. He provides critical insight into the history of exhibition spaces as sites of control of populations for the purpose of showcasing national achievements. He highlights museum displays as “vehicles for inscribing and broadcasting the messages of power ... throughout society.”²² These notions outline connections between the rise of museums spaces and the birth of nationalism and colonialism. The museum can then be read as a politically charged site of institutional power.

Danish Contemporary curator and critic Simon Sheikh responds to the role of the museum as a site of power in the making of the ideal subject, emphasizing the museum’s work to

²¹ Thobani, Sunera. 2007. P.4

²² Bennett, Tony. 1995. P.74

“represent and constitute a specific ... collective subject.”²³ He argues that historical modes of power and control are still present within contemporary exhibitions, even within alternate forms of curating and exhibition techniques such as the infamous ‘white cube,’ contemporary art markets and biennales. Sheikh emphasizes the need for counter-narratives and exhibition display beyond market and capital relations, outlining the possibility of the exhibition space for “imagining and the imagined through specific mode(s) of address ... that produce, actualize or even activate this imagined entity.”²⁴ Critical curatorial practice and scholarship highlight the historical constraints of museums as sites of display as well as strategies to challenge the formation of singular representations, identities and cultures within the space of the gallery.

Exhibition Review

This project is positioned within the framework of socially-driven and culturally specific exhibitions, which set a precedent for making visible the works of female Muslim artists. Most importantly, these shows have allowed me to understand some of the issues and frameworks taken up by curators engaged in presenting the works of artists who identify as Muslim women living in Ontario. Let us focus on three important exhibitions.

Connections and Contexts: Islamic Influences and Traditions (2018), was curated by Laurel McKellar at TheMuseum Gallery, Waterloo, Ontario. This exhibition presented the artwork of four multidisciplinary artists characterized as diasporic Muslim-Canadian women- Soheila Esfahani, Melika Hashemi, Jamelie Hassan and Sumaira Tazeen. The hybrid identities of

²³ Sheikh, Simon. 2011. P.178

²⁴ Ibid. P.178

these artists as both Pakistani-Canadian or Irani-Canadian as well as the issues taken up in the artworks were essential in informing this exhibition both in terms of the themes, aesthetics and the materiality of the artworks. By emphasizing Islamic art that is often associated with calligraphy, miniatures, geometry, patterns and designs, the exhibition effectively demonstrated how traditional boundaries regarding culture, identity and politics can be expanded and redefined. It therefore provided the framework with which to create connections between theoretical subject matter and contemporary art, particularly in relation to questions of what it means to be a contemporary artist of Islamic background in the political Canadian landscape, which is directly applicable to my project.

Conceived and curated by Zahra Agjee and Leila Fatemi, *(Mus)interpreted* (2016), was presented at Daniels Spectrum Gallery (Toronto, Ontario). This exhibition showcased the work of over twenty emerging and established artists in Canada, focusing on the theme of documentation and reflection of the lived realities of these artists. In particular, it interrogated the ways and spaces in which Canadian women are defined and continue to redefine these representations. *(Mus)interpreted* directly addressed the presence of a diverse spectrum of identities, experiences and perspectives to highlight connections between the artworks, that remains important to this project. Although the exhibition did not create a cohesive narrative, it successfully interrogated various histories inherent in the formation of identity and culture as a diasporic Canadian woman. In doing so, it provided a succinct overview of the concerns expressed by contemporary Muslim-Canadian artists in Canada today that this project problematizes.

Reaching for a Yonder Home (2016) was curated by Matthew Brower and Mona Filip at Koffler Gallery (Toronto, Ontario). This exhibition brought together a group of sixteen Canadian

artists from diverse cultural backgrounds whose works examine the immigrant condition by highlighting themes of intercultural translation, displacement and identity construction. The artwork was installed not only within the gallery space but also outside the building, over the ceiling ventilation system and in the staircases. It depicted a curatorial practice that brought together a range of multidisciplinary works, in terms of number, medium, scale, theme and perspective. In this way, it effectively provided the framework with which to integrate a diversity of perspectives and experiences to create a cohesive narrative of diasporic realities. The effectiveness of the design depended on the dialogue produced between the works, space and the viewer, which is also something this project hopes to achieve.

Methodology

Through a consideration of the three artists practices who identify as dual (either Pakistani or Irani) Muslim-Canadian women, the final exhibition *(Re)presenting the Muslim diaspora: Adaptation. Hybridization. Resistance.* investigates multiple cultures, identities and perspectives as co-existing, interacting with and influencing each other. The decision to present the work of these three diasporic artists as a group exhibition provided an opportunity to mobilize the affective nature of the work. By simultaneously presenting these multidisciplinary works, the exhibition creates an interpretive and productive tension for the viewer that brings attention to the everyday experiences and lived realities of Muslim-Canadian women and counters previously existing representations of these immigrants as the minoritized ‘Other’.

This project used a thematic approach, which applied critical research related to the dual cultural identity of diasporic populations to existing, contemporary immigrant art within Ontario. Homi Bhabha’s theory of hybridity provided the key theoretical model with which to visually

investigate the displacement, dissemination and reinsertion of culture and identity into a new, Western context. He illustrates that “it is the 'inter' - the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture ... and by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves.”²⁵ These notions highlight the possibility to disorientate, dislocate and dissolve the traditional boundaries of cultural difference that cause misrepresentations. Subsequently through these conceptual frameworks, the exhibition highlighted the potential of an intersecting space of culture that can create new and inclusive, counter narratives regarding the conditions of diasporic individuals, who themselves exist ‘in-between’ boundaries of specific individuals and cultural identities. All three artists in this exhibition draw on hybridity as a means of coming to terms with their own, dual Pakistani-Canadian and Irani-Canadian histories, experiences, cultures and identities as diasporic women in Ontario. Tazeen investigates the struggles of life in the homeland versus abroad while Esfahani uses her work to hybridize eastern and western cultural identity. Finally, Magsi examines the theme through interweaving the roles and representations of women in traditional and contemporary society.

The project outlines three specific stages of immigration: moving to, co-existing with and breaking away from oppressive and marginalizing narratives, cultures and representations, which are illustrated as processes of adaptation, hybridization and resistance. Although these themes emerged through a consideration of the specific artworks presented and is contextualized through the theoretical research, they overlap and intersect among the three artists’ works. Of specific interest is the way all three communicate a shared language in their respective practices, one that

²⁵ Bhabha, Homi. 1994. P.39

is integral to immigrant individuals navigating contrasting cultural codes by adapting and hybridizing, as well as resisting and (re)presenting. Let us briefly explore each of these processes in relation to the artworks in the exhibition.

Adaptation refers to the various challenges associated with the decision to move and reestablish one's life abroad. Highlighted through Sumaira Tazeen's installation *Sabz Bagh VII* (2020), this theme brings attention to the need for diasporic individuals to constantly adapt, belong and transform their cultural identity. In particular, she investigates the common misconception that life will be more prosperous overseas, emphasizing that although it may eventually become so, it is not possible without hard work and perseverance. Through references to suitcases and the symbolic gardens of heaven, Tazeen brings attention to the experiences of new migrant individuals in search of opportunities and better future. By relating her own experiences of immigrating from Pakistani to Canada with stories of recent immigrants to Kitchener, Ontario, she adds layered dimensions to the work that speak to maintaining positivity and hope for any individual who faces the struggles of adapting as a new immigrant in Western society.

The ideas of Homi Bhabha directly relate to the theme of hybridization that occurs as an important process of life between two cultures, but belonging to neither. These ideas are depicted through artist Soheila Esfahani's series *My Grandmother had One* (2019) and *Variations on Willow Pattern Birds 1-25* (2019). Through these objects, she investigates the process of translation across cultures in search of common ground for her own Irani and Canadian identities. By further recontextualizing commercially produced and highly appropriated china plates she draws attention to the layered histories between the East and West that have developed through cultural exchange and trade due to colonialism. China plates emerge as hybrid

metaphors of portable culture that dislocate and disrupt existing boundaries of difference, instead making space for a new hybrid culture that holds the possibility for a peaceful future and sense of hope for Muslim women through negotiation.

The theme of resistance highlights these artists empowering acts of assertion as a way to insert agency and control over Western centric perspectives of Muslim women. In particular this theme arises in Mariam Magsi's series *Jahez | Dowry* (2018), which investigates her own histories and experiences through objects of dowry to reveal a complexity of meanings contained within culturally specific and personal items (of her own dowry) that were given to her by her mother and brought with her from Pakistan to Canada after her marriage. Exploring these connections through references of Islamic acts of veiling she simultaneously emphasizes and resists the weight of traditional gendered roles and expectations placed upon women in relation to notions of marriage, motherhood and modesty. Magsi inserts herself as the subject of the work in an attempt to carve out space for and balance her own identity and culture in both Pakistani and Canadian society. In particular, it emphasizes the artist's 'presence' as the subject and creator of the work and highlights a way for diasporic Muslim women to resist and control how they are (re)presented within contemporary society.

Installation concept and design

(Re)presenting the Muslim diaspora: Adaptation. Hybridization. Resistance. emphasized the potential of curatorial practice as a site to investigate the formation of meaning and identity. By presenting these works, the exhibition opens up the possibility to create new inclusive memories and experiences that trouble existing cultural and political implications of Western representations regarding the diversity of experiences and perspectives. It challenged the

normalization of minoritized realities within the cultural and political landscape of Ontario. In doing so, it contributed to the larger conversations regarding issues of identity, culture, representation and meaning in the diaspora.

The themes used to organize the artworks in this exhibition allowed for conversations to take place across the works as well as tensions to emerge that highlight the lived experiences and feelings of displacement felt by immigrant individuals. The choice of works and their placement allowed the “experience of anxiety to be incorporated ... [for the] affective address of 'a world [that] reveals itself as caught up in the space between frame[s].”²⁶ In doing so, it emphasized new forms of representations and counter narratives that simultaneously merge, inform and resist each other. The work, presented in the exhibition together, provide a multiplicity of first-person narratives, experiences and perspectives that critically question the need by Muslim-Canadian immigrants to adapt, hybridize, resist and (re)present themselves within new contexts and meanings. Let us now take a look at how each addresses the conflicts and problematics taken up by this exhibition.

Mariam Magsi’s photographic series *Jahez | Dowry* (2018) was presented at the entrance of the gallery. These photographs subtly reveal references to the practices of home that challenge the immediate understanding and ways of seeing everyday objects. In particular it emphasized new forms of resistance to existing representations that are crucial in viewing and understanding each of the works included in this exhibition. Thereby, it provided the framework with which to (re)present these specific works through new and interconnected contexts and meanings. Soheila Esfahani’s series of blue china plates were two thematically and technically connected works

²⁶ Bhabha, Homi. 1994. P.213

placed along the remaining walls of the gallery (that runs along one entire length of one side the gallery as well as part of the opposite wall). Their positioning in succession along the walls of the gallery provided the opportunity for the gradual shift in perspective demanded by this work. Through an emphasis on hybridity it illustrated a common diasporic language (of translation, transformation and amalgamation) and allowed the simultaneous presentation of conflicting, dual identities, cultures and experiences of diasporic individuals to be achieved within the singular space of the gallery. Sumaira Tazeen's installation, *Sabz Bagh VII* (2020) was displayed directly on the floor of the gallery, which allowed the viewer to walk around the artwork and engage directly with the multimedia sound, video and sculptural installation. Thematically, this work highlighted issues of belonging and place within the context of new immigrants to Ontario. The placement of this work against the landscape of the city (outside) was therefore significant in connecting the artwork directly to the city within which it was displayed.

The various multimedia, sound and visual elements of this exhibition bring together layered processes and meanings to create an experience whereby the collective focus is upon the central concept of and emotion behind the constant and fluid navigation of a displaced life. The work, together, mimics the complex and contradictory emotions of such a life and allows for the gradual revelation of hidden meanings and an exploration of the possibilities of a life caught in the diaspora. The visuals, combined, are symbolically charged representations of cross-cultural influences that portray an attempt by each artist to navigate, dissolve and make space for a dual, and often conflicting, Muslim-Canadian culture and identity. The dialogue between these diverse works, each set within the context of opposing cultures, opens up the possibility of a cross-cultural unity and acceptance of complex identities while simultaneously allowing for a deeper exploration of these complicated lives. Through this experience, the exhibition highlights the

many points of alignment and intersection between a set of contrasting histories, experiences and perspectives stemming from both the East and the West.

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Images



Image 1.

Sumaira Tazeen

Sabz Bagh VII; Installation view

Video and sound pieces installed in vintage suitcases

2020

Image courtesy of the artist



Image 2.

Sumaira Tazeen

Sabz Bagh VII; Detail of video and sound pieces installed in vintage suitcases

Video and sound pieces installed in vintage suitcases

2020

Image courtesy of the artist



Image 3.

Sumaira Tazeen

Sabz Bagh VII; Detail of video and sound pieces installed in vintage suitcases

Video and sound pieces installed in vintage suitcases

2020

Image courtesy of the artist



Image 4.

Sumaira Tazeen

Sabz Bagh VII; Detail of video and sound pieces installed in vintage suitcases

Video and sound pieces installed in vintage suitcases

2020

Image courtesy of the artist



Image 5.

Soheila Esfahani

My Grandmother Had One; Installation View

Mixed media on collected ceramic plates

2019

Image courtesy of the artist



Image 6.

Soheila Esfahani

My Grandmother Had One; Detail of plate

Mixed media on collected ceramic plates

2019

Image courtesy of the artist



Image 7.

Soheila Esfahani

Variations of Willow Pattern Birds 1-25; Installation view

Custom ceramic decals on ceramic plates

2019

Image courtesy of the artist



Image 8.

Soheila Esfahani

Variations of Willow Pattern Birds 1-25; Detail of plate

Custom ceramic decals on ceramic plates

2019

Image courtesy of the artist



Image 9.

Mariam Magsi

Jahez / Dowry; Installation view

20" x 24" Photograph

2018

Image courtesy of the artist



Image 10.

Mariam Magsi

Jahez / Dowry; Black hijab veil, yellow embroidered Balochi shalwar from the village of Jhal Magsi in Balochistan, Pakistan

20" x 24" Photograph

2018

Image courtesy of the artist



Image 11.

Mariam Magsi

Jahez / Dowry; Black hijab veil, silver table ornament

20" x 24" Photograph

2018

Image courtesy of the artist



Image 12.

Mariam Magsi

Jahez / Dowry; Wooden rolling pin to make roti, black and silver embroidered man's kurta, black hijab veil

20" x 24" Photograph

2018

Image courtesy of the artist

Appendix A: Artist Biographies

Sumaira Tazeen

Sumaira Tazeen is a Canadian visual artist, educator and curator of Pakistani origin. She received her BFA in Miniature painting and Sculpture from the National College of Arts, Lahore in 1996. Since then, her work has been exhibited in established group and solo exhibitions across South Asia, the United States, Canada, Europe and the Middle East. Tazeen is the recipient of a number of awards including the Haji Muhammad Sharif Award for Miniature Painting (1996), the Charles Wallace Trust Fellowship (2004), the Department for International Development Scholarship Award (2003-2004) and Ontario Arts Council's grant for Emerging Artists (2014, 2016).

Sumaira was an Associated Professor at the Department of Miniature Painting, Faculty of Fine Art at Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture Karachi (2005 - 2012). She has been selected as 2018 Artist in Residence for the City of Kitchener. She has curated a show at Royal Ontario Museum on South Asian heritage day (2013) and conducted specialized art workshops at Aga Khan Museum, Toronto (2015), Kitchener Waterloo Art Gallery and University of Waterloo (2018) Her work is part of International public and private art collections.

Soheila Esfahani

Soheila Esfahani grew up in Tehran, Iran and moved to Canada in 1992. She received her Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Western Ontario and her BA in Fine Arts from the University of Waterloo. She is an award-winning visual artist and

recipient of numerous grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Ontario Arts Council and the Region of Waterloo Arts Fund. She is a recipient of 2016 Waterloo Region Arts Awards and was nominated for the Jameel Prize at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, UK in 2015. Her work has been exhibited across Canada from Vancouver to Halifax and collected by various public and private institutions, including the Canada Council's Art Bank. Currently, she is a lecturer at the University of Waterloo and is a member of the Red Head Gallery in Toronto.

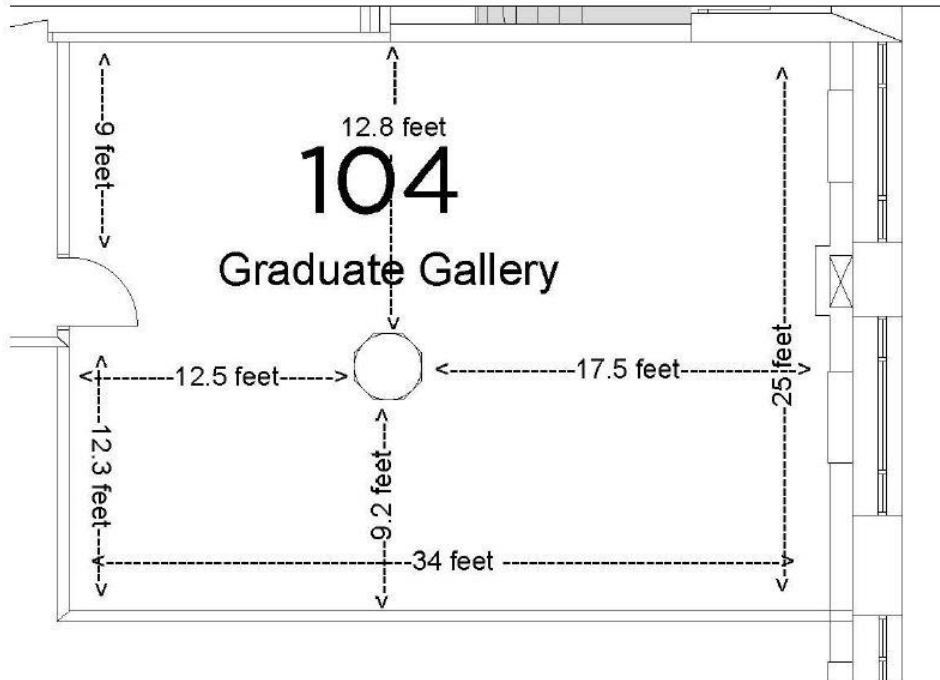
Mariam Magsi

Born and raised in Pakistan and currently working in Canada, Mariam Magsi is a Multidisciplinary Artist working in Photography, Performance, Video Art, Installation and other arts. Using lens-based mediums, multimedia immersive installations and sensory experiences, Magsi creates surrealistic works of art that are symbolic, political and relevant to her identity as a diaspora artist. Magsi's practice, amongst many issues, focuses on unpacking Islamic cultural and religious practices as influenced by the Indian subcontinent, intersectional feminism, migration, assimilation and more. Magsi holds an MFA from OCAD University in Interdisciplinary Art, Media & Design and a BFA with Honours from University of Toronto in Studio Art & English Literature. Her works have been published in renowned magazines and media channels such as VICE, CNN, She Does The City, Toronto Star, Scene Arabia and she has exhibited her works in renowned galleries and festivals such as the Art Gallery of Ontario, Art Gallery of Mississauga and Pride Photo Awards, advised by World Press Photo.

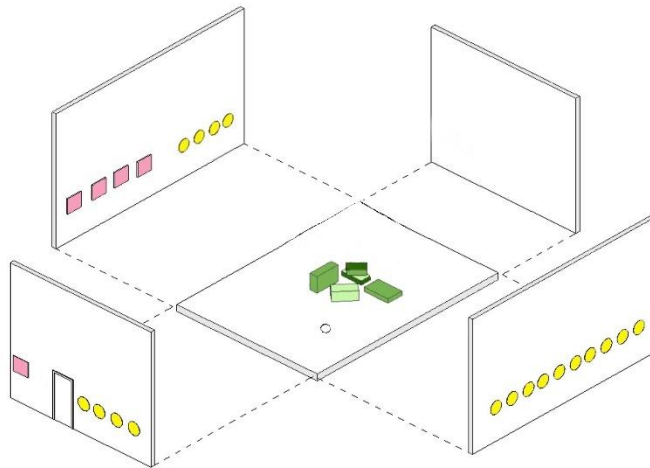
Appendix B: Gallery floor plan

Gallery Map

The dimensions of the Graduate Gallery are 34' x 25' with 10'6" ceilings.



Appendix C: Exhibition Layout model



■ "Pattern (dis)placement" - Sohfiia Esfahani
50 plates in varying sizes

■ "Jahez/Dowry" - Mariam Magsi
5 photographs - 20" X 24" each

■ "Sabz Bagh VII" - Sumaira Tazeen
Vintage suitcases + 2 video + 3
Audio installations

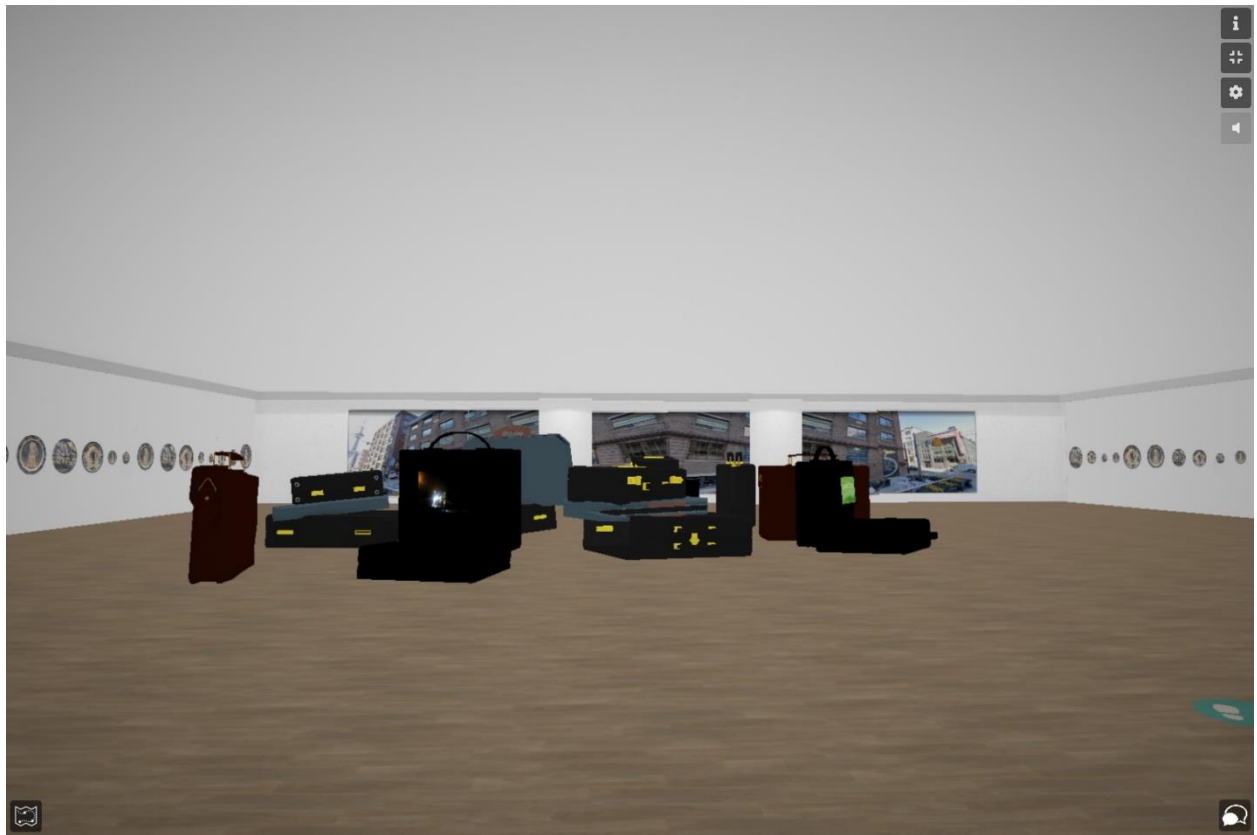


Layout for Digital Exhibition

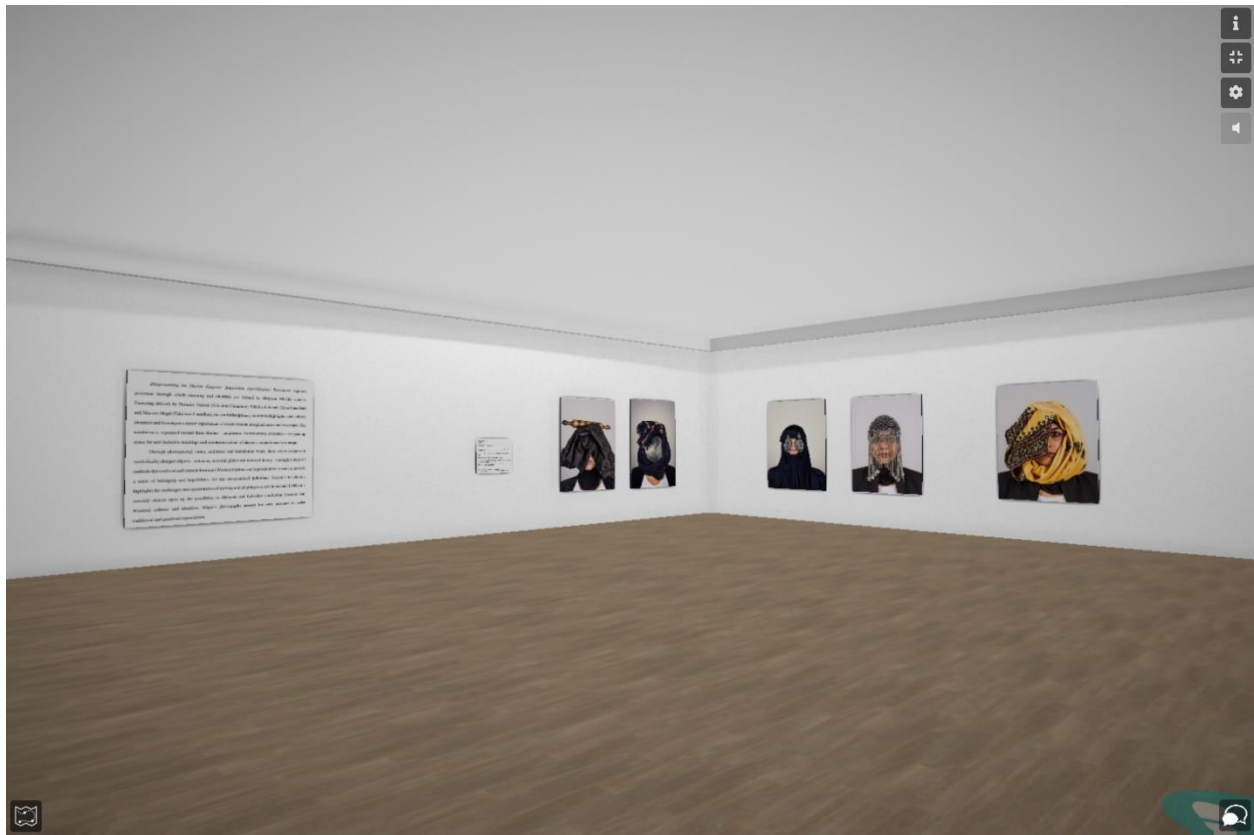
Appendix D: Digital Exhibition Documentation



Installation Shot, *(Re)presenting the Muslim Diaspora: Adaptation. Hybridization. Resistance*

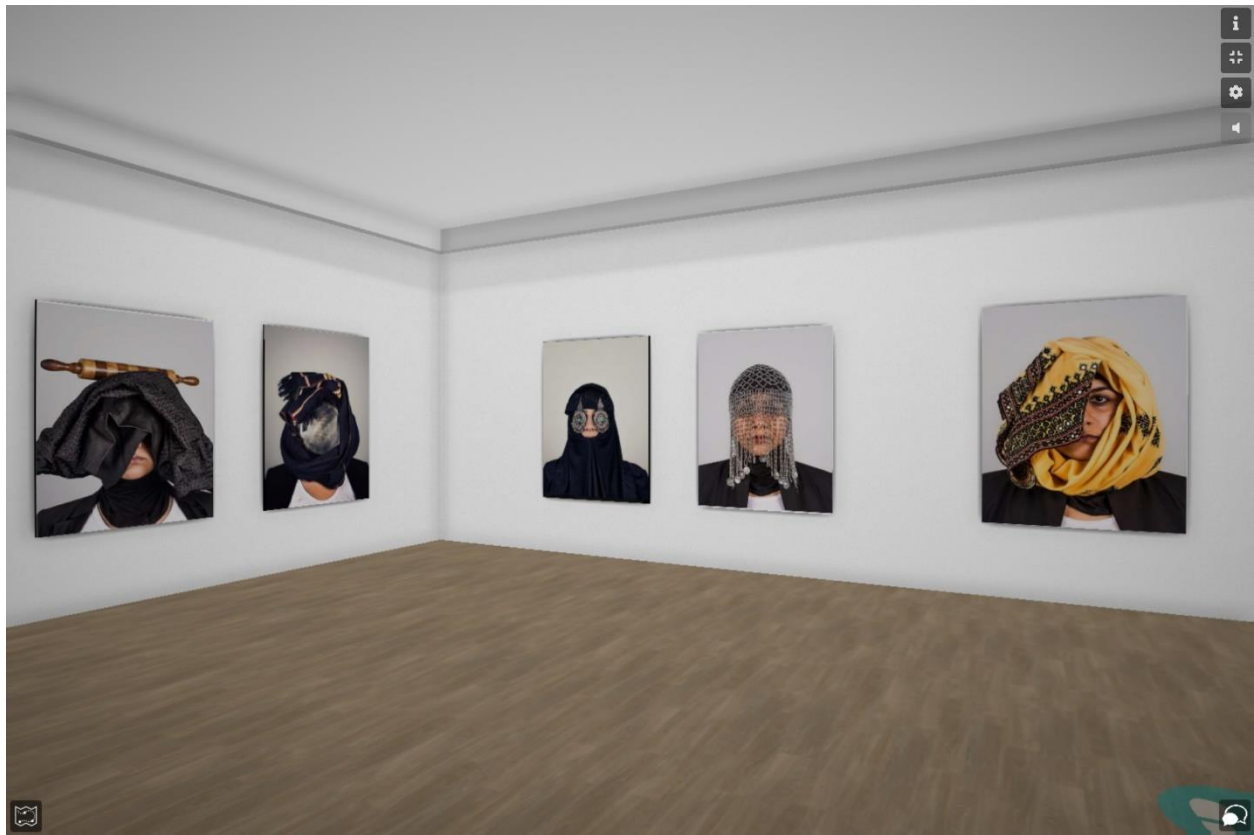


Installation Shot, *(Re)presenting the Muslim Diaspora: Adaptation. Hybridization. Resistance*



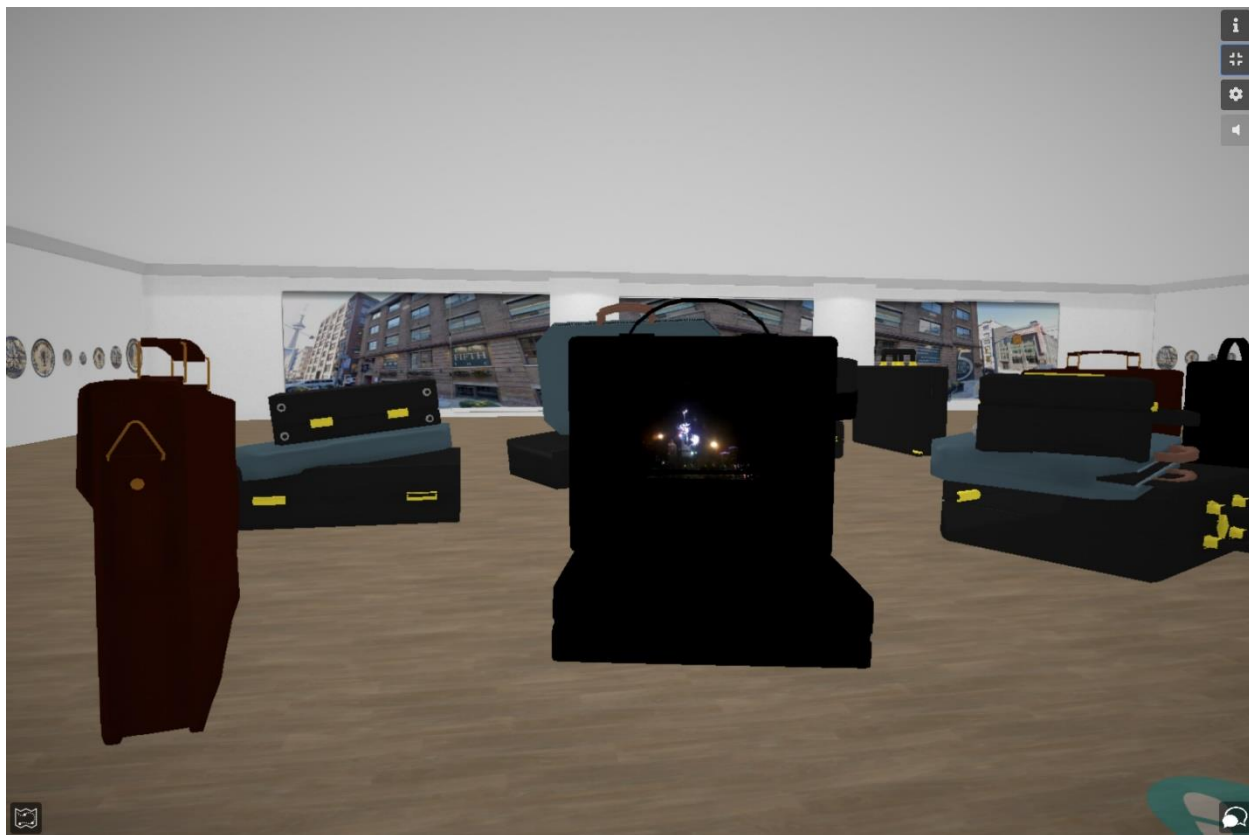
Installation Shot, *(Re)presenting the Muslim Diaspora: Adaptation. Hybridization. Resistance*

Mariam Magsi, *Jahez / Dowry*, 2018



Installation Shot, *(Re)presenting the Muslim Diaspora: Adaptation. Hybridization. Resistance*

Mariam Magsi, Jahez / Dowry, 2018



Installation Shot, *(Re)presenting the Muslim Diaspora: Adaptation. Hybridization. Resistance*

Sumaira Tazeen, *Sabz Bagh VII* (video: *All that Glitters*), 2020



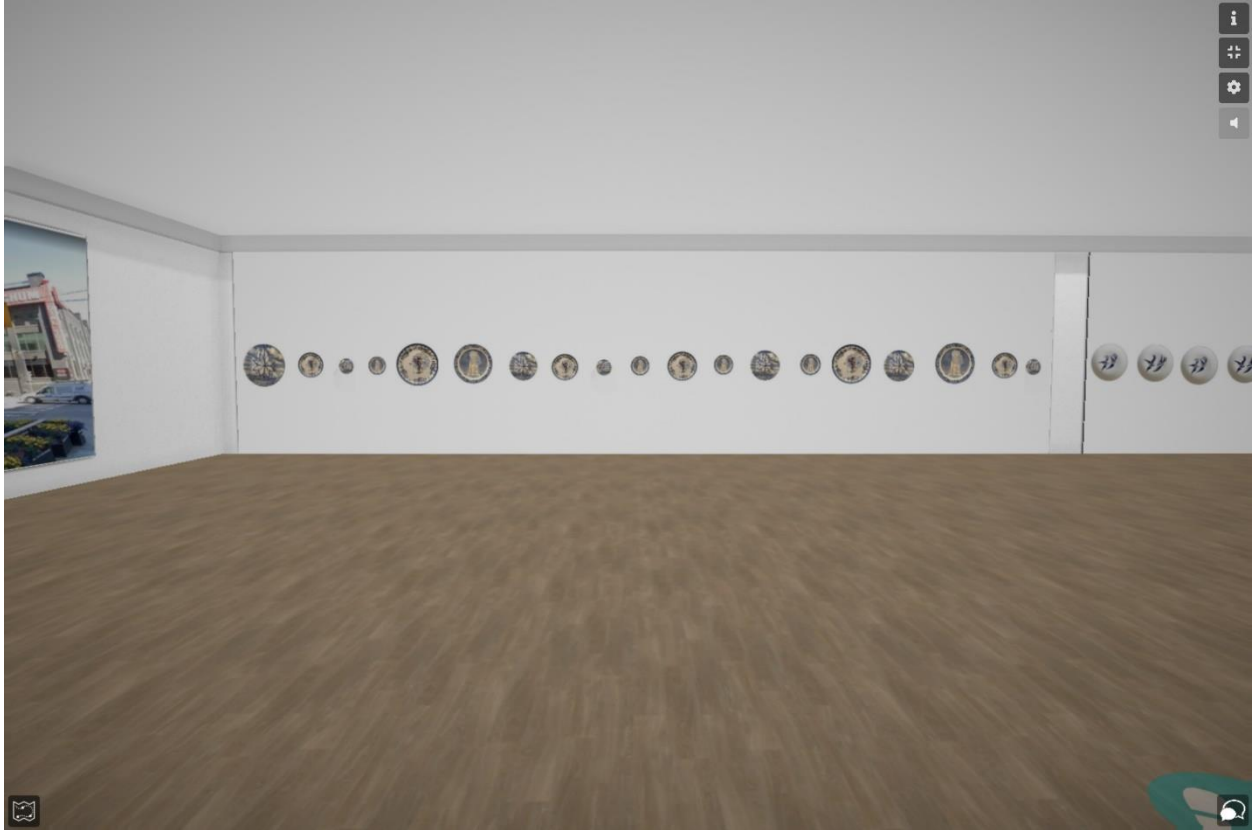
Installation Shot, *(Re)presenting the Muslim Diaspora: Adaptation. Hybridization. Resistance*

Sumaira Tazeen, *Sabz Bagh VII* (video: *Movement*), 2020



Installation Shot, *(Re)presenting the Muslim Diaspora: Adaptation. Hybridization. Resistance*

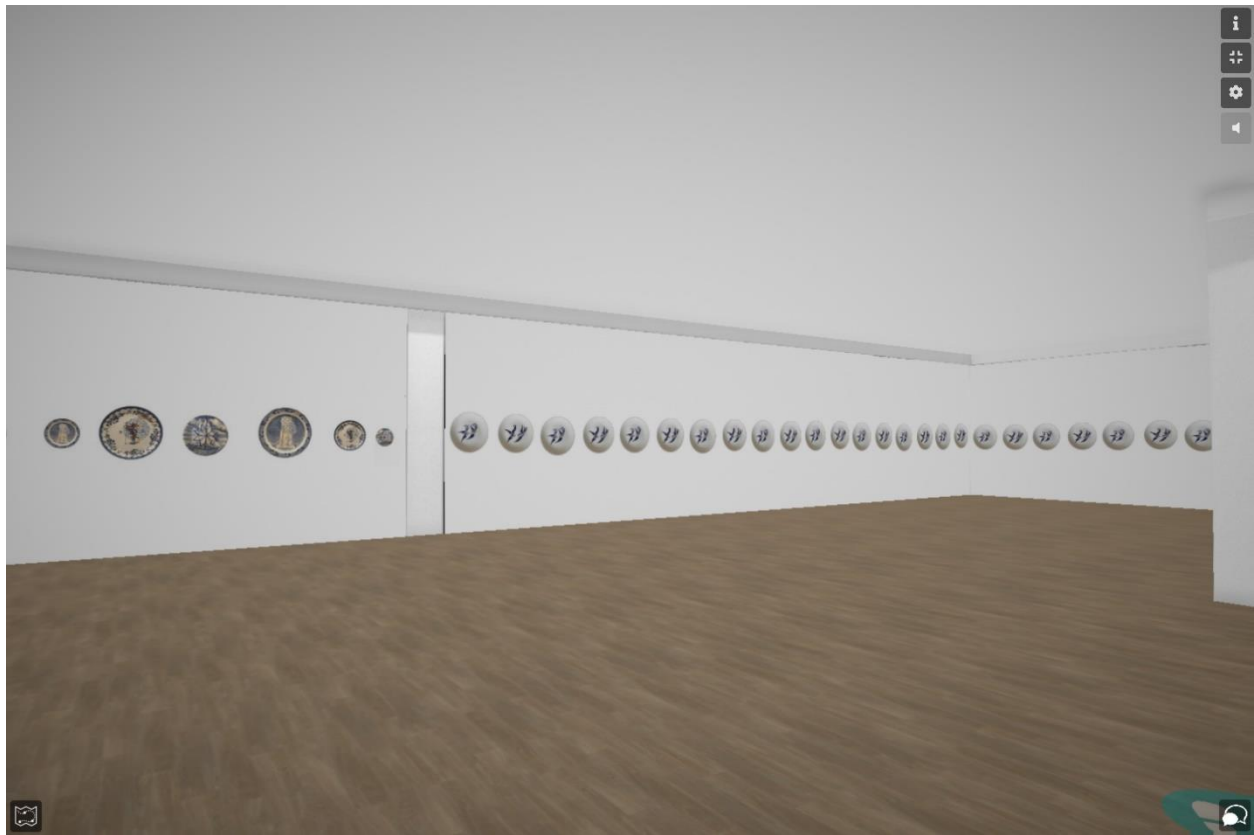
Sumaira Tazeen, *Sabz Bagh VII*, 2020



Installation Shot, *(Re)presenting the Muslim Diaspora: Adaptation. Hybridization. Resistance*

Soheila Esfahani, *My Grandmother Had one*, 2019

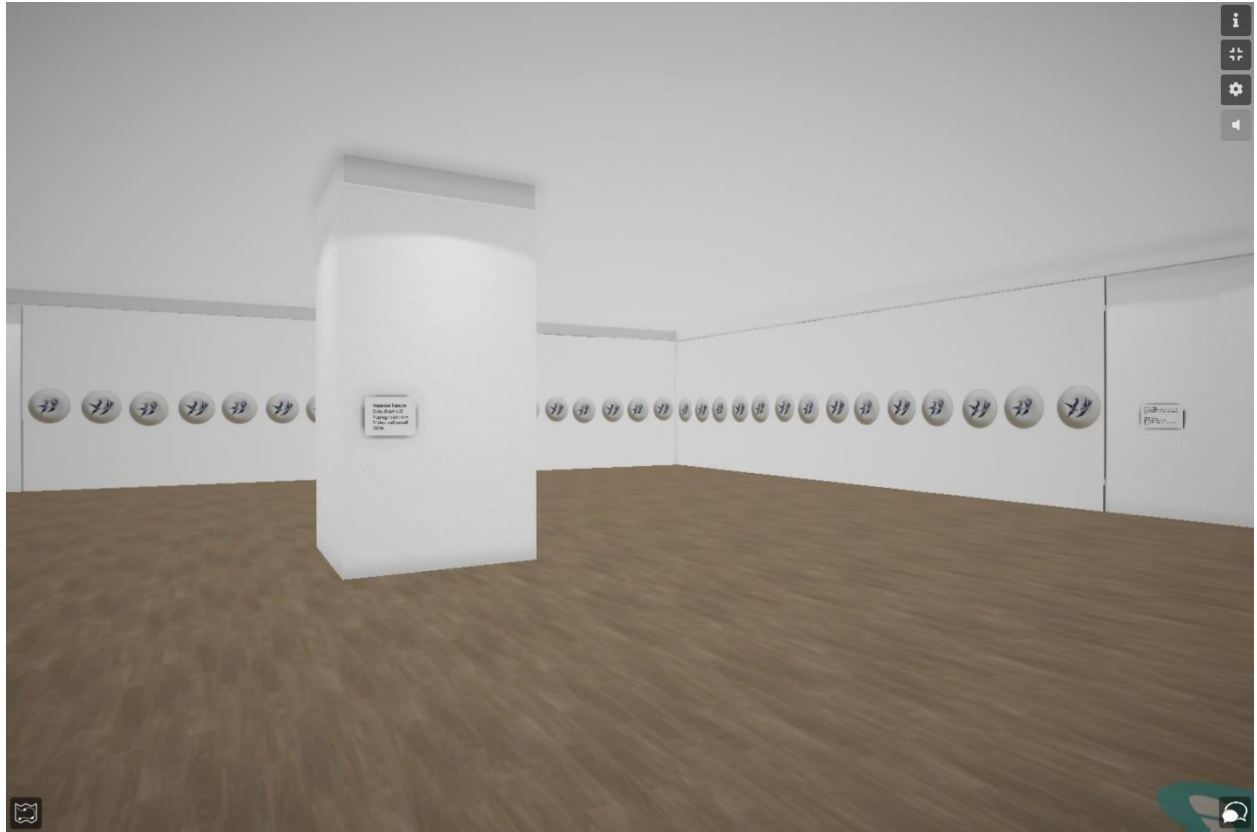
Soheila Esfahani, *Variations of Willow Pattern Birds 1-25*, 2019



Installation Shot, *(Re)presenting the Muslim Diaspora: Adaptation. Hybridization. Resistance*

Soheila Esfahani, *My Grandmother Had one*, 2019

Soheila Esfahani, *Variations of Willow Pattern Birds 1-25*, 2019



Installation Shot, *(Re)presenting the Muslim Diaspora: Adaptation. Hybridization. Resistance*

Soheila Esfahani, *Variations of Willow Pattern Birds 1-25*, 2019