



this is **NOT** a drill
An Expedition in Iranian Diaspora Through Photography, Calligraphy and Poetry

The thesis, this is NOT a drill, tries to shine some light on the less seen Iranian diaspora corners. It includes homesickness, loneliness, depression and heartbreak, love, solace, belonging, development, and enrichment. The name of the project comes from a story that I once heard from an Iranian diasporic subject. During the Iran and Iraq war, there were many emergency alerts that warned people to hide in shelters. These alerts always started with "this is not a drill". Iranians had to go to shelters with distress and anxiety, thinking of a chance of being bombed and killed. But there is more to this story. The narrator of this story fell in love with a boy she met while sheltering in their building basement. This created mixed feelings toward the alerts; the feelings of love, passion, and enthusiasm to see the lover, wrapped in hatred, anxiety, and distress about the attacks and bombs. These mixed feeling situations are prevalent for Iranian diasporic communities. Living away from home in a hybrid space creates a hybrid emotion of love and hate. The dispersed members create and shape a community based on the collective memory and history of the homeland, which is romanticised. Memories establish a connection between our individual and collective past. The past consists of our origins, heritage, and histories, and defines our present, meaning that it is always with us. However, there is a tendency for the past to be remembered in an idealized and glamorized version – something we want it to be and not what it really is. This act of romanticization of the past helps us deal with unpleasant situations and achieve a positive outlook. This is why we have a sentimental longing and wistful affection for home.

When I started this project, I was aware of what I want this project to consist of, but I did not know how different parts could complete each other and create a cohesive thesis. The work, "My Thesis" was created at the time when I had all the tools but not the blueprint for making it. Language can be a good metaphor in this context, in the sense that I had all the letters and words, but I needed to communicate with full sentences to transfer meaning. To create this work, I literally spelled all the ideas and titles I had at that time in Farsi and arranged them into the design.

MY THESIS
print media
2020





BLUE IRANI
print media
2020

Living in diaspora means being in the state of homelessness and in-betweenness of migration. You put your whole life in two 23kg travel bags and leave your homeland to live in a miles-away to-be-home country. The cultural identity that you carry all the time in an unfamiliar society makes belonging harder. "I am not Iranian. I am not Canadian. I don't know who the hell I am?" as the subject describes it. A genderless subject becomes part of the word Irani (means Iranian) while standing in the middle of the text. The text consists of words that are part of the implications of being Iranian for me. The subject is passing through some and facing some other in the in-betweenness state that the immigrants live. This causes sadness and a "blue" feeling, which is why this work is "Blue Irani".

STORMY SEA
print media
2020



The theme of being alone and distant is part of any conversation regarding diasporas. This also applies to all of my communications with my participants. They were all feeling it at the time of our talks. They sometimes described the feeling as living on a deserted island in the middle of a stormy sea. The traumatic act of dispersal creates all kinds of experiences and emotions, which surround the diasporic subjects. The diasporic subjects need to swim in this dangerous sea to get to the safe shore, which translates to the first step for enriching life in the host country. This image describes all the hardships the diasporic subjects and communities have to go through to better integrate into the soon to be new home, as Rumi states that this way we chose we are full of joy and enthusiasm but alone with many difficulties and hardships.



GREY SLEEPLESS

print media
2020

onds of language, religion, culture, and a sense of a common history and fate can bring diasporic subjects closer to each other. The beginning or even the rest of living in the diaspora is full of homesickness, loneliness, and depression. Therefore, looking for some human connections or as I like to call them, bridges, between people can be a peaceful remedy. The mutual sense of distinctiveness, the transmission of a common cultural and religious heritage, and the belief in a common fate can make these connections stronger, leading to some intimate friendships. These connections are more pleasant and attractive than what is waiting for diasporic subjects outside, in the host country's less-familiar and less-friendly society. Yet, it can be more pleasant than sleeping and may create a sleepless state for them. As the poem by Hossein Monzavi in the works explains, there is no sleep for the person who thinks about these friendships. The subject in the work who is eagerly moving toward this circle of an unstable sleepless state placed in the sea of the unknown is more than a memory for most diasporic subjects.



GREY SLEEPLESS
print media
2020



BLUE LOVE
print media
2020

"I will love you 'til the end of time
I would wait a million years
Promise you'll remember that you're mine
Baby can you see through the tears?"

The Iranian diasporic subjects in their 30s who left their homeland for a better future have experienced love back home. Some may leave a lover or try to keep their love fresh while being away. As American singer and song-writer Lana Del Rey states in the "Blue Jean" song, there are always tears in love next remembrance of love, and that is where the name "Blue Jean Love" comes from. Love in the diaspora can be more than a literal translation of feeling for a lover in the homeland. It can be anything, parents, neighborhood, city, or even a smell. "You sometimes miss the smell of your friend", as my subject said. The typographic design is based on the poem of Hafiz, the great Iranian poet who explains that it is easy to start to love but there will be lots of hardship in the path for its existence.



GOLD OCCURENCE

print media
2019

There is a tendency for the past to be remembered in an idealized and glamorized version – something we want it to be and not what it really is. It means that we remember a different version of memories that our biased brain has chosen to recall and not the events' actuality. These home sweet home memories and stories keep you busy in a waiting state, expecting them to reappear. Even if a similar incident happens after a while, you miss it because now you are so lost in your memories that you cannot see events around you, and you space out. Life is a collection of small memories and events while we wait for big and superb, or better called, a gold occurrence to happen. Waiting for a good change is a common theme of diaspora for many diasporic subjects, just before realizing that “we are alone, and nobody comes to save us”, as the subject in this work said. The quote in the artworks is from Ibn Arabi who explains that everything starts and finishes with this waiting.



ALONE MOON
print media
2020

We all heard or read about how social media kills friendships and makes people alone. But what happens when it is the only way to connect to your family and close friends? For many diasporic subjects, Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, and so forth are the only way of connecting to an important part of their life, their homeland. However, social media's negative effects such as increased depression and anxiety and feelings of loneliness can even worsen their feelings of homesickness, disconnection, and loneliness caused by immigration and relocation. Another negative feeling caused by social media is FOMO, fear of missing out. FOMO can turn into a vicious cycle of comparison and inaction. Worse, it may cause users to live other people's relationships on social media. Instead of enjoying quality time with friends and family or even trying to find new friendships and relationships in the new host country, the users watch others' stories and videos with their friends and family. Instead of engaging in meaningful hobbies, they watch others engaging in the hobbies they wish they could have. This type of spending time on social media can result in neglecting life. It can make the users disconnected and alone, causing even more social isolation for diasporic subjects. The poems in this work come from an ancient poet, Rumi and a contemporary poet, Sohrab Sepehri. Rumi talks about how he is in search of a real human. In contrast, Sepehri talks about how we should acknowledge that we are alone but the moon shines on our loneliness and brings us light.



PURPLE MUSICIAN

print media
2019

The Islamic Revolution of 1979, which gave power to the religious regime, is the key reason for the creation and formation of the Iranian diaspora in Iran's modern history. It is accountable for daily harassment, purges, persecution, imprisonment, torture and mass executions of many Iranians. It formed a victim narrative for the Iranians who were forced to join their diaspora. As a result, some Iranian diasporic subjects possess hatred and aggression towards Islam, while some have mixed feelings about it. This juxtaposition can even be seen in the music of diaspora, like the works of Shahin Najafi, a musician living in exile. In the philosophy of colours, purple is considered a rare and unique color since it is less common in nature and difficult to produce biologically. Najafi, the musician in the photo, is also considered a phenomenon in Iran's contemporary music and culture. Most of his music is a protest against Iran's current regime and about sensitive issues regarding Iran such as Islam, alcohol, feminism, gender, etc. The moving musician with an electric guitar in a concert, singing about the benefits of being drunk while alcohol is banned and against the Islamic law in Iran can represent the constant contradiction and juxtaposition in which Iranian diasporic subjects live. Maybe as Najafi sings a poem by Yaghma Golroei in "Purple Musician", the solution is some wine, otherwise "with sobriety, you won't be able to solve your problem".



PERMANENT TATOOS

print media

2020

The flight PS752 was shot down by the Iranian regime's military branch with 176 passengers on board, including 138 Iranians en route to Canada. Many were in their 20s and 30s, and several young children were also on board. Almost all Iranian Canadians lost someone they knew on that flight, but the grief was bigger than a loss. For Iranians that immigrated, these flights are very familiar; all of us have been on at least one. We all experienced homesickness, sadness, distress, and emotional turbulence on our way to soon be in our new home. Simply, this incident could happen to any of us because our lives are not that different from those of many killed in the plane crash. Just for this reason, we, Iranians living outside of our homeland died on that plane, or at least a part of us. That is why these losses have put permanent scars on our minds and bodies. The work "Permanent Tattoos" is about these scars on Iranians, especially those who live outside of Iran. The typographic design includes names of those who died in the crash. It is cut out of a photo of a surface covered with my actual blood. The use of my blood is essential to this work because it represents my relation to this work as not only an Iranian Canadian but also a diasporic individual who lost friends in this crash. The design was projected on an Iranian diasporic subject's body, presenting the scars and pains that these losses left us with.

**METALLIC SCULPTURE**installation
2020

Since the traditional Persian and Arabic calligraphy is the artistic practice of handwriting of valuable and religious text such as the holy Quran and poetry, it is considered an opulent form of art for transferring knowledge and meaning. Visually presenting Persian and Arabic calligraphy while separating it from its mission to carry information contradicts not only its origin but also its purpose. Although, I believe even this visual form of presentation conveys some sort of meaning. Perhaps it aesthetically communicates a need and urgency for communication. It seems that we are used to writing and reading so much that we forget there is a significant aesthetic dimension to them. We can focus more on typography and calligraphy as an ancient form of art when separating communication from it. We should remember that each letter and word is a shape and form and by repurposing the letters and words, visual artists can create almost purely visual artworks. The idea behind the Metal Sculpture is to stimulate a situation for an audience who can read Persian but are not able to read this specific calligraphy design just like audiences who are not able read Persian as a reminder that this project is created in a third space where new cultural meanings are constantly constructed. This piece was supposed to be created using the CNC machine at OCAD University, however, due to the COVID-19 lockdown and university closure, only a mock-up version is shown in this thesis.



RUMI STAPLE

print media
2020

This work is my personal journey as a new member of the Iranian diasporic community in Toronto with its enthusiasm, affection, hardship, sadness, depression, and homesickness. When I moved to this new to-be-home, I felt a gap, which has been becoming lesser by time. I was a stranger in the land of strange. I did not know a place or a person and I was deeply situated in-betweenness of migration. As a result, I had plenty of time on my hands. I started walking in the city, reading poetry, and metaphorically building bridges in my host country. In one of those times, I read a poem from Rumi that said, "what you seek is seeking you" and it gifted me a long-awaited peace. That is where this artwork comes from, a stamp that works as a reminder for me of tough times. With the help of some ink, this stamp can be in every piece of life as a token of self-appreciation and self-empowerment. It is worth mentioning that Farsi is read right to left, however, when audiences use the stamp, the Farsi typography on their bodies is backward. Instead of fixing the stamp to be backward and the resulted typography be right, I ironically kept it that way as a reminder to myself that even when "what you seek is seeking you" is just right in front of you, it is hard to see and understand it. Just like the real life.