

ARTS BASED RESEARCH

**FROM
HAUNTED
TO
HEALED**

2026

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From Haunted to Healed

by
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Glossary of Terms

Theoretical Frameworks

- **Afro-Futurism:** The synthesis of African cultural history and ritual with technology and science fiction. The Borderspace created through ZAR creates its own universe of meaning and frameworks for interpreting the world that can integrate old and new ways of being.
- **Al-Khalaa:** Traditionally the "unmapped" desert or void outside a village/town in Sudan, (characterized by sparse plant life, trash e.c.t) In this thesis, it is theorized as a psychic generative space and site of transformation and transgression. The term is appropriated to describe local terrains originating from the Islamic concept of Al-Khala found in the Quran, which describes spiritual or metaphysical voids.
- **Borderspace (as Ritual & Artistic Site):** In this research, the Borderspace is a theorized threshold environment where the Zar ceremony is situated. It exists as a third space in my practice between the enclosed feminine interior and Al-Khalaa. If the Zar is a site where "otherness" is permitted and inhabited and where traditional standards of femininity are both confronted and discarded through performance, then the Borderspace acts as the primary laboratory for identity transformation.
- **Body empathy:** John Blacking's theory which proposes the human body's ability to think in movement as a form of communication through communal rhythms.
- **Body resonance:** The concept that musical and rhythmic structures are "rooted in the human body." Blacking explored how the physical morphology of the body and the instrument (or material) interact to make meaning.
- **The interior:** A construct emerging as a delineation within the theory of relative enclosure as described by Anthropologist Janice Boddy, which can be described as a metaphysical and spatial encapsulation of the "womb-space" and feminine domain (domestic sphere).
- **Neural Entrainment:** Theory proposed by John Blacking and Barbera Bickel that stipulates that the oscillation and movement of brainwaves can be synced to external stimuli through music.
- **Rhythmic Stabilization:** A neurobiological concept popularized by psychiatrist **Dr. Bruce Perry** as part of his **Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics (NMT)**. Refers to the use of "bottom-up" sensory activities characterized as rhythmic to regulate a person's nervous system.
- **Syncretism:** Merging contradictory spiritual belief systems or materials into a new, hybrid practice. In this work, it refers to the integration of images found in Sudanese ritual Borderspaces with those informing traditional Islamic practice in the region.
- **Theory of Relative Enclosure:** Introduced by Canadian anthropologist Janice Boddy in her research on Northern Sudanese women participants of the ZAR-Bori cult in Hofriyat, Sudan. It describes a socio-cultural idiom where the body, home, and community are understood as concentric, permeable rings. It prioritizes a "protected interior" (fertile, sacred) against the "exterior" (the world of strangers).
- **Virtual time:** Coined by John Blacking and Susanne Langer, this concept describes a state where music (or rhythmic art) creates a "world of virtual time" that suspends the

subject's awareness of linear, chronological periods of time in favor of resonating with the surrounding rhythmic frequencies.

- **Transcendental Painting Group:** Founded in New Mexico in 1938 by artists including Raymond Jonson and Emil Bisttram, this group sought to move beyond the physical world through abstract art. Influenced by Theosophy and Zen Buddhism.

Trauma and Recovery

- **Constriction:** Refers to the paralyzing effect that the intrusion of the traumatic experience can have on the victim, causing a psychic dissociation that defensively shields the psyche from harm.
- **Hyperarousal:** Refers to a heightened sensitivity to any stimuli that, through associations conscious and unconscious, may trigger the reoccurrence of the body's physiological response to the original traumatic experience.
- **Intrusion:** Refers to the tendency of the traumatic experience to replay itself in the form of flashbacks and nightmares, which can thrust themselves upon the sufferer's consciousness as a vivid and terrifyingly present repetition of the experience.
- **Intrusivity:** The state of being breached by an external force (a spirit, a stranger, or a memory). In the context of Borderspace and ZAR, it is the productive friction where the interior is breached.
- **Trauma Integration:** Moving beyond the storage of traumatic memory which Judith Herman describes as "frozen and wordless" into a state where the trauma is metabolized and reconciled through action.

The Zar

- **Daluka:** A traditional Sudanese drum usually made with stretched goat or cow hide over a clay pot; it is known for its feminine association as an instrument mainly used by women singers and performers.
- **Possession:** Within the context of ZAR in Northern Sudan, this usually refers to physical manifestations or symptoms of ailment, referring to either literal signs of sickness or stress emerging from fracture within the idiom of relative enclosure governing the community.
- **Sheika:** In the context of ZAR-Bori, a Sheika is a hereditary leader and master of ceremonies of a Zar group. The Sheika acts as a spiritual intermediary, diagnostician, and negotiator between the human host and the Zayran possessing them.
- **Trance:** In the context of ZAR, the physiological state of "Body Resonance" and "Neural Entrainment" triggered by repetitive rhythms where the host's identity shifts to reveal and enter negotiation with the Zeyran spirits.

- **Zar Ceremony:** A transnational religious movement involving activating trance states for the sake of negotiating with cohabiting spirits. The movement has several factions in African countries including North Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Egypt.
- **Zar-Bori:** The Northern Sudanese branch of the ZAR cult adopted among Islamized and Arabized populations, mainly targeting married women of child-rearing age. ZAR represents a family of spirits known as Zeyran/Zairan that are contextualized in the Northern Sudanese universe of meaning. These spirits attack women, making them afflicted (possessed), consequently requiring trance and ceremony to bring about remedy.

Materiality and Symbolology

- **Artography:** An artistic practice and creative approach coined by Rita Irwin that suggests that the processes of art-making allow for learning, teaching, and making to take place within the singular process of art-making.
- **Artworking:** A term theorized by artist-researcher **Barbara Bickel** (often in the context of "matrixial" theory) to describe art-making as a process of "aesthetic midwifing." In this framework, **artworking** is not about the production of a final object, but rather a "work of mourning," "care," or "ritual" that allows for the emergence of meaning through process.
- **Colour (Teal, Pink, Gold/Silver):** In Zar, colors have literal cooling or spirit-appeasing functions. In this practice, Teal represents purity, healing, generation, and Nile water; Pink represents the blood and fracture. I opt for these alternate representative colors almost as a deviation from the rigidity of their associations. For me, these are the colors that emerged from the Borderspace as parallel to red and blue. As for Gold and Silver, the association lies mainly with its importance among married Northern Sudanese women as it relates to dowry and other celebratory and cultural ceremonies, many of whom keep gold as financial security when access to income is limited.
- **Iterative or Generative Mark-Making:** A research method where the hand's movement serves as a direct transcription of psychological digging. It is the "scaffolding" of the research left visible on the final surface.
- **Non-finito:** A making-as-inquiry term referring to an intentionally "unfinished" state. It marks the work as an active excavation and a "living inquiry," preventing it from becoming a static ethnographic object. Within the context of my work, it speaks to the self-concept of many of the women engaging in possession ceremonies as unsophisticated in relation to concepts and constructs outside of their domain.
- **Pattern, Music, & Drumming:** The structural pulse of the work. These are converted into visual patterns (coins, medallions) to trigger a visceral response in the viewer's nervous system.
- **Personal vs. Received Symbols:**
 - **Received Symbols:** Cultural objects with established semiotic meanings (e.g., the Daluka drum, the ostrich egg/skull).
 - **Personal Symbols:** Subjective objects transformed by the artist (e.g., specific tassels or nail-heads) to represent transformation of meaning.

ABSTRACT

Through this work I investigate processes of trauma healing and gender affirmation at the core of the psycho-spiritual release experienced by women participants of possession ceremonies known as ZAR-Bori¹ in Northern Sudan. ZAR² (a.k.a Zahar or Saar) is the name of an ancient possession cult and family of spirits historically active in Central/North and East Africa and parts of the Arab peninsula. Practice involves the ceremonial placation of possessing spirits through performance in conjunction with other ceremonial acts. Through a body of collages, clay-works and paintings, engrained in Zar concepts of interiority and perfection, I will engage in a transcendental and Afro-futurist exploration and unveiling of concepts and symbols outlining gender performance as referenced in the works of anthropological researcher Janice Boddy.³ To further highlight the functionality of ZAR as a borderspace and site for communal healing, I will interpret and evaluate possession as a parallel process to trauma integration as detailed in Judith Herman's *Dialectic of Trauma*⁴. Herman divides trauma integration into 3 distinct processes: Hyperarousal (Trigger) Intrusion (Flashback/Mental image) and Constriction (paralysis/physical response).

Drawing upon interdisciplinary praxis that engages Art and Culture, Visual Art, Anthropology theory and Socio-Cultural and Psycho-spiritual philosophy, my primary research, exploring abstract multidisciplinary artworks, serves to distort and subvert the intention of the ideals which inspired them and convey the feelings of horror and desolation experienced by women implicated in varying interpersonal and communal dramas, fueling the demand for possession ceremony (fertility, FGM related issues, issues relating to beauty and gender performance and all those problems generally stemming from implication in the nuclear family). When referring to "Ideals" in this context, I am referring to those images and symbols both relevant to my own life and upbringing in Northern Sudan including domesticated items symbolising enclosure such as jars, thickly skinned fruits such as oranges and canned and encased foods.

The significance of these objects and images lies in their proximity to concepts grounding ideals of womanhood such as purity and cleanliness. The middle point between the personification of these ideals and the need for ZAR lies in their inherent un-inhabitability and subsequent failure at the social and interpersonal level. Thus, ZAR operates for these women in particular, as a remedy to a variety of domestic, interpersonal and communal hardships and shortcomings emerging from their status as both married and having children. In this research I am looking to both present and distort these natural, cultural and metaphysical symbols of feminine perfection by creatively drawing out artistic frameworks for transgression inspired by ZAR ceremony and the narratives situating it in the cultural context of North Sudan. If ZAR is a space where otherness is permitted and inhabited, where standards for femininity are both confronted and discarded in performance, then we can aptly label ZAR as a functional Borderspace. Not only do I hope to uncover the visual narrative informing the Borderspace and how it facilitates healing, I will also explore if the framework of Borderspace used to heal the possessed can be replicated in artistic practice to subvert images and symbols informing gender and identity in post-colonial North Sudan.

¹ Northern Sudanese branch of ZAR cult adopted among Islamized and Arabized populations, mainly targeting women who are of child rearing age that are married. ZAR represents a family of spirits known as Zeyran/Zairan that are contextualized in the Northern Sudanese universe of meaning. These spirits attack women making them afflicted (possessed) consequently requiring trance and ceremony to bring about remedy.

² ZAR is a transnational religious movement involving activating trance states for the sake of negotiating with cohabiting spirits. The movement has several factions in African countries including North Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Egypt.

³ Boddy, Janice. *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan*.

⁴ Herman, Judith. 2015. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

1. Introduction:

This study proposes an arts based investigation into the effectiveness and relevance of semiotics in informing identity and spiritual practice among women participants of ZAR ceremonies, posing the two-fold question;

The visual narrative surrounding ZAR and more specifically Trance affirms a process of trauma healing taking place.

1. *How does the visual narrative of the Borderspace as the site where ZAR ceremonies take place, highlight or affirm trauma healing as an outcome of trance?*
2. *How can this concept of Borderspace be creatively adopted as an artistic approach to subverting cultural semiotics and images representing ideals in relation to femininity?*

To address these inquiries I will examine how symbols, images and spatial arrangements, and embodied performance operate as meaning-making systems within possession rituals. By exploring how the semiotic context of the Borderspace housing ZAR informs the experiential impact of possession for participants of ceremony: as both a reconciliatory mechanism and a site of trauma healing, the study aims to illuminate the dialogical relationship between interior psychic fractures and exterior cultural codes. It further interrogates how feminine codifications of space, image and narrative pre-establish cultural contradictions and mental schisms that call forth the performance of ZAR, and how broader social and cultural conditions contribute to the occurrence of possession states. Through this lens, this research positions ZAR not only as a ritual practice, but as a complex semiotic and embodied response to gendered structures of meaning, conflict and repair.

What is Zar?

In simple terms, ZAR is the name of a transnational possession cult and family of spirits originating in The Horn of Africa and practiced in The Horn of Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, most commonly found today in Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia among others, ZAR-Bori is the particular variation of ZAR covered in my breadth of research which is practiced among Northern Sudanese women. Very close parallel practices exist in other countries like the Bori cult of Nigeria⁵ (Not to be confused with Northern Sudan's ZAR-Bori though there are shared linguistic roots) and the Masabe of Zambia⁶. The word ZAR is said to have originated in the Horn of Africa from Amharic language. In the region where the research informing my work is taking place (North Sudan/Hofriyat Township), the term is also closely associated with Arabic words "Zeyran/Zairan" and "Ziara". Zeyran means guests and Ziara means the act of visiting or of being guests. It's easy to see how these terms are integrated into the realms of spirits and possession. Based on the research of anthropologist Janice Body into ZAR practice in Northern Sudan, she outlines the practice of ZAR as being highly informed by the age and marital status of the woman participants who are usually afflicted with a physical and most commonly fertility related ailment or a social issue relating to marital or economic status. Thus, the engendered nature of ZAR informs the logistics of the ceremony, which most commonly takes place in the home of either the afflicted, a close associate of the afflicted or the home of the Sheika (ceremony leader). Once the afflicted and neighbors and community members are gathered, the Sheika will begin her drum, lightly tapping a rhythm on the Daluka (traditional Sudanese hide drum) signalling the start of events as the spirits are invited to inhabit the afflicted and other participants.

⁵ behrend, heike. "Spirit Possession: Modernity and Power in Africa: Spirit Possession: Modernity and Power in Africa." *American Ethnologist*, 2001. doi:10.1525/AE.2001.28.3.722. **Bori cult: A traditional Hausa spirit possession religion in Northern Nigeria, centered on healing and interacting with spirits.**

⁶ Mianji F, Semnani Y. Zār Spirit Possession in Iran and African Countries: Group Distress, Culture-Bound Syndrome or Cultural Concept of Distress? *Iran J Psychiatry*. 2015 **Masabe cult: Primarily practiced among the BaTonga people of Zambia (particularly in the Mazabuka area), is a musical healing ritual and spirit possession phenomenon. It is a "cult of affliction" used to treat illness believed to be caused by invading alien spirits, often referred to as Masabe or mashave (in Shona).**

To understand the practical healing function of ZAR as expressed in ceremony it is necessary to outline the cultural, historical and interpersonal context coloring the lives of women participants and particularly, the trauma's associated with performing roles as homemaker, wife, and perfectly domesticated woman. Yet, while these roles do not necessarily diminish in relevance or importance as one ages and while our capacity to engage in them changes, the window where women are most affected by these issues is in their youth, a likely consequence of the general cultural trend towards early marriage and in some unfortunate cases, child marriage. The impact of Turko-egyptian rule, lasting about 65 years, and centuries of slavery of southern Sudanese, Ethiopian and Tigray peoples have deeply shaped the history and culture in the Sahil region. For example, the Funj Sultanate self-sustained through slave raids and trafficking Sudanese from the Southern and Western regions through to Egypt from 1504 to the early 1800's. Prior to the subjection of Funj sultanate to islamization and rise to monarchy, Southern Sudan ruled via the Christian kingdom of Alodia.

The subjugation of the Southern and Western regions to ethnic cleansing and religious persecution remained an issue and was deeply exacerbated and exploited by colonial presences from the late 19th to the late 20th century. These histories of oppression and marginalization contribute to the trauma and social tensions that underlie the need for ZAR, which exists in many variations across Sudan depending on the culture or region of practice.

ZAR Tumbura for example, practiced among indigenous African Sudanese people, has roots among populations that were enslaved and subjugated by Arab Northerners in the 19th century slave trade, serving as therapeutic release and communal healing, incorporating Nigerian Bori and Ethiopian practices and music. This is different from the Islamized ZAR Bori tradition in Northern Sudan which is highly gendered, domesticated and originating among elite self identified Arab Northerners, ZAR Tumbura invites both women and men to participate in trance and shared healing, though both of these practices occur concurrently in epicenters like Khartoum. The origins of these practices predate the rise of islam in the region, but with its spread ZAR incorporated islamic

symbols, motifs and ideals, adapting them to existing local, spiritual and cultural frameworks.

Why pursue this topic for research?

I was compelled to undertake this study as a means of critically interrogating and ultimately inverting the norms and symbolic structures that shaped the ceremonial traditions of my childhood. By revisiting these inherited forms I seek to uncover the repressive realities and intergenerational trauma's contextualizing these spaces and how they are subsequently engaged with and expelled to bring about healing. This project thus functions not only as a documentation but as an analytical excavation of ritual as both cultural expression and psychic residue. Although I have not directly participated in ZAR ceremonies, my understanding of ZAR emerges through its residual presence in my familial environment, particularly through the practices of elder relatives, most notably my grandmother would respond to many unexplainable disturbances throughout the home including knockings, footsteps or other ambiguous incidents by placing small slips of inscribed paper in the dusty corners of the house. When questioned on the origin of these jottings, she would recount a tale of a ZAR shaman who shared an incantation or the like during the ceremony, which she would carefully record for future use.

It is common for participation in ZAR to remain a focal point in the lives of women stripped of much of their autonomy. Similarly to ZAR, materiality in the life of Northern Sudanese women during the period, is intrinsic to self in a context that undermines contributions by women as "biological" or "innate". The significance of things like Gold, Silver, Imported Preservable goods and so forth cannot be understated in relation to self-actualization in a society that imbues them with more tangible and transferable value than the labor of the women who own them. This research seeks to highlight the constellation of meanings including; images, symbols and ideals within which the practice of ZAR is situated, a framework herein referred to as the interior. Subsequently, the study endeavors to invert these prevailing representations to critically engage with

the underlying layers of transgression, failure and defilement that arise from the systemic production of trauma. This trauma is perpetuated through parallel cultural processes such female genital mutilation (FGM), child marriage and other processes.

Transcendental painting and metaphysical abstraction⁷ were my initial points of interest in my arts based research journey as I delved deeper into the methods and works of artists like Agnes Pelton, Theodora Allen and Karla Knight. My fascination with this approach was in the ability to forge new symbolic universes from pre-established disciplines and frameworks. These approaches captivated me as an African woman and member of the diaspora primarily as a framework for exploring diverse socio-cultural dimensions including scientific, anthropological, and cultural perspectives. Metaphysical abstraction is regularly adopted as a means of uncovering metaphysical principles and frameworks governing everyday life.⁸ Transcendental artmaking among women has often functioned latently as interpretive of their everyday lives and existence in conjunction with major life events, as well as redefining concepts using a gendered lens and reclaiming exclusionary spaces.

Nathan K. Rees in his doctoral work⁹ exploring race, religion and culture in the Transcendental Painting Group describes a phenomenon I have long observed as someone fascinated with esoteric knowledge as a concept; Theosophy and its promotions of syncretism. In his work he describes Theosophy as a religious movement founded in the US by Russian Esoteric theorist Helena Blavatsky. The theory essentially proposed an integration of eastern and western esoteric knowledge systems to facilitate mutual understanding. Rees points out the potential ills of this approach being the appropriation of indigenous knowledge into new faiths while losing sight of the source material, highlighting how critics almost never questioned the integrity or traditional/religious source of the spiritual practices or observations depicted. Ultimately,

⁷ Zheng, Hao, "Spirituality and Abstract Art" (2023). *MA Theses*. 143. https://digitalcommons.sia.edu/stu_theses/143

⁸Ibid.

⁹ Rees, Nathan K. "Synthesizing Transcendental Painting: Race, Religion, and Aesthetics in the Art of Emil Bisttram, Raymond Jonson, and Agnes Pelton." PhD diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 2010.

there is a monopolizing tendency that peeks through and potentially undermines the message behind the work.

In spite of a missing of cultural integrity grounding some of the pursuits of artists who engaged transcendental approaches, it was in engaging these artists and their practices that I began to think about how the images and symbols informing my background and upbringing in Sudan could be re-imagined within my works. Though Reeves speaks of this tendency towards syncretism critically in the context of the Transcendental Painting Group, I consider its function as a potential deviation from the images associated with high degrees of religious repression experienced by Northern Sudanese women. If we adopt this tendency towards integration, suddenly we can draw from multiple fields of knowledge. This concept as it relates to the creation of UFO mythologies and subsequent Afrofuturist aesthetics and narratives was the beginning of my curiosity about how I could begin to create imagery challenging feminine ideals within Northern Sudanese cultural identity beyond Arab culture and Islam.

When we consider the implications of ZAR as a ceremony largely informed by varying socio-cultural schisms, in taking up a transcendental artmaking approach, which involves imbuing metaphysical semiotics and images, ancestorizing work and engaging my own recall in relation to my homeland which is now at war, I am looking to create works that embody the horrors of existence or the impression of existence, outside of that space known as "The interior". I am borrowing from images that have informed ideals of femininity in the Northern Sudanese context, allowing them to guide my interpretation and creation, as informed by centuries of religious occupation, ethnic cleansing and displacement. Rooted in a diasporic experience, my identity stretches across multiple places and times-some tangible, others remembered or imagined. Through my artwork including painting, sculpture and installation, I seek a transcendental artspace where memory, longing and presence intersect, inviting viewers to inhabit the layered Borderspace of experience and self.

The chapters that follow begin by articulating the concepts of ZAR that ground and shape my methodology. This is followed by a critical engagement with theoretical frameworks outlined in Janice Body's wombs and alien spirits, Heiki Bernard on spirit possession, modernity and power in Africa, Judith Herman On trauma and recovery, Susan M. Kenyon on Sudanese women and Rebecca Sager on transcendence through aesthetic experience. Together, these engagements establish the conceptual terrain through which my studio practice operates, identifying both inherited narratives and critical conceptual pathways that the work seeks to interrogate and reconfigure. The following sections provide a critical analysis of artistic precedents that have informed my projects approaches, material exploration and conceptual development. In the subsequent section I introduce studio processes, detailing how thinking unfolds through research methods, iterative processes, material experimentation, challenges and strategies. This is followed by an analytical and descriptive discussion of the artwork produced. This thesis concludes with a critical reflection on the project experience, highlighting key insights, obstacles and outcomes, and culminating in a synthesis of the overarching thesis argument.

This thesis positions studio practice as a form of research, where making is both a method of inquiry and a means of knowledge production. Arts Based Researcher Rita Irwin's theory of Artography¹⁰ best encapsulates this approach, which posits that art-making is a conjunctive process integrating learning, making and knowing in the process of creating. Through iterative making, material experimentation and reflective engagement, the studio becomes a site of investigation, learning and teaching where ideas are tested, reshaped and realized in visual form. The work generated here is not only experimental but also analytical, producing insights into the cultural, social and embodied dimensions of femininity, migration and identity.

¹⁰ Leggo, Carl, Anita E. Sinner, Rita L. Irwin, Kathy Pantaleo, Peter Gouzouasis, and Kit Grauer. "Lingering in Liminal Spaces: A/r/tography as Living Inquiry in a Language Arts Class." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 24, no. 2 (2011)

2. Conceptual and theoretical framework:

2.1 Zar concepts

Interiority has often been employed as a cultural metaphor for womanhood, suggesting enclosure, purity, protection and separation from the public sphere. These ideas are reinforced through material and social structures, such as male dominance in public space, gender segregated homes and division of labor based on gender. As these spatial and social boundaries are internalized, interiority becomes a physical condition and way of shaping identity. The constraints produced by this containment may then find expression through spiritual or metaphysical systems that offer alternative ways of negotiating or responding to these limitations.

The word ZAR in itself is shorthand for the Arabic word for house guests “Zayran”. Thus, even in the sociocultural sense, ZAR is conceptually coded in a framework of foreignness to facilitate its functionality in the society. Zayran¹¹ is also the word used to describe the characters inhabiting the universe of ZAR by Janice Body. In saying the ideas presented during ZAR are “*implanted*”, we are touching the heart of a concept which transcends the workings of these systems in conjunction with one another, that concept being foreignness. Foreignness is functional because it de-centers Interiority/Exteriority as all encompassing delineations. Foreignness also justifies its own subversions while enacting them. The foreign cannot be held to the standards of the location which it exists within as a relational outsider. In a world where Interiority forms the ideological and material scaffolding of womanhood, it becomes very easy to understand how ZAR becomes predominantly engendered as a woman’s cult and movement.

¹¹ Wombs and Alien Spirits: Example of use of the term “In Hofriyati thought, humans and **zayran** occupy different elements or zones of the universe, and entry of a spirit into the human realm, however common, violates the boundary between them.”

As Janice Boddy argues in her *theory of relative enclosure*¹²interiority can be understood as a relational concept structured by degrees of proximity. Social relationships are organized according to varying levels of closeness, forming expanding concentric circles. At the center is the immediate family - particularly siblings - followed by progressively more distant relatives, members of the local community, and finally, non-kin muslims situated at the outer edges of social intimacy.¹³

My interests in relation to ZAR-Bori are twofold. I first hope to uncover images and languages speaking to cultural semiotics among participants in Northern Sudan and mysticisms specific to desert living. I also intend on subverting the images and symbols relating to womanhood and gender as informed by interiority in ways that highlight the dysfunctionality attached with their exaltation. Voids are a common concept in both Islamic art and cosmology.¹⁴ (الخلاء - al-khalā') is a term in Islam used to describe the emptiness of lack of faith or the desolation of the dispirited. Cosmologically the term is conceptually similar to the concept of a black hole, a vacuum from which all divine truth once emerged and a common ideal among Sufi philosophers. In his study titled "The Metaphysics of Nothingness." Fauzi Naeim reflects on islamic conceptualizations of voids through the writings of the Sufi philosopher Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi. He notes that at times Ibni Arabi employs the term Al-kala, which carries connotations of both emptiness and void.¹⁵

This concept attaches itself to the desert landscape in a unique way, overlaying a spiritual reality which comes to inform place as much as any existing structures. Al-khalaa in Northern Sudan is locally re-defined as a section of the city or township that is desolate and flat with mostly garbage and sparse small plant life. The associations with these spaces locally are mostly negative and made to invoke some level of fear or paranoia but mostly play out as jokes among friends and spreading urban myths.

¹² Introduced by Canadian anthropologist Janice Boddy in her research on Northern Sudanese women participants of the ZAR-Bori cult in Hofriyat, Sudan. It describes a socio-cultural idiom where the body, home, and community are understood as concentric, permeable rings. It prioritizes a "protected interior" (fertile, sacred) against the "exterior" (the world of strangers).

¹³ Boddy, Janice. *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1989. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj36105910>.

¹⁴ <https://www.almirajsuficentre.org.au/qamus/app/single/754>

¹⁵ Mohamed, Fauzi Naeim. "Metaphysics of Nothingness: Heidegger, Ibn 'Arabi and Nagarjuna." KATHA-The Official Journal of the Centre for Civilisational Dialogue 15 (2019): 89–115.

However, as much as the qualification criteria of a space being Khalaa is highly volatile within the society (people will often argue about whether certain places are in “al-khalaa” when talking about those living at the edges of towns or cities) it is accepted as a real space. This is a highly transient belief within Sudanese society, in that, Al Khalaa is not only coded as distinctly dispirited, it's also another space, much like the world of Zayran, which exists outside the limits of the exterior/interior.

Symbols which come to define interiority and by extension womanhood in this context often inadvertently become defined by traits considered antithetical to objects and images found in these spaces. Examples include thickly skinned fruits, ostrich eggs, canned foods and other objects which imply enclosure and provide shelter from dirt, dryness and sun. Janice Boddy speaks to these ideals in her research, highlighting the dichotomy between spaces coded in the interior vs exterior. Clean spaces like the home are marked safe from disturbance by malevolent spirits while inhabiting the exterior involves susceptibility to all types of spirits, often found in desolate open areas like the desert, abandoned homes and trash heaps.¹⁶

Failure to meet social and gender expectations can create deep social and psychological anxiety for both women and the wider community. When I was a child my grandfather often told stories about visions he saw on the desert highway while driving home from work. One story stands out: a woman appearing alone on the roadside, then suddenly in front of his car. My uncles shared similar stories with concern, though at the time, I didn't understand what had caused them such alarm. When viewed in relation to how womanhood is defined in the region - as connected to home - family and social roles, the image of a woman alone in the desert becomes significant. Removed from domestic space or kinship structures, she exists outside accepted norms. Her presence disrupts expectations about where and how women should exist, which may explain why she is perceived as frightening. This idea can also be extended past the northern Sudanese context where women outside prescribed spaces provoke unease.

¹⁶ Boddy, Janice. *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1989. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj36105910>.

The predominance of women apparitions in media and fiction has long been speculated about, I think that the truth of it partly lies in the theory of relative enclosure and interiority. It is not so much about the image of the woman being terrifying or strange, it is more so the intrinsic knowledge that the spatial domains occupied by women have historically been highly regulated and associated with roles as caregivers in some form or fashion. Thus, it is women's evasion of the interior that forms the crux of this horror, made worse by the fact that the interior is dynamic and everchanging, cultivating paranoid that can shift your positionality within a society. What happens to a woman who cannot have children? Does ZAR offer a way to cope with the shame and pressure imposed by rigid societal expectations?

2.2 Possession:

Janice Boddy describes the state of co-oppancy with spirit as an effectively permanent affliction requiring negotiation, compulsion and submission as part of remedy. She distinguished between entrancement and possession, highlighting the permanence of possession in contrast with the temporality of trance as a state that is intentionally provoked. The ceremony thus serves as a safe space for the negotiation of needs, communicated through trance.¹⁷

It can be deduced from reflecting on the common nature of issues said to cause possession noted in Boddy's writings that the implications of possession are not as literal as they seem. To be possessed in the case of the Zar participants is to be afflicted. Trance becomes surgical, as a means of extracting knowledge or insight from spirit. With such a theory in place, the potential for possession is broadened from people experiencing symptoms of trance or altered states to a myriad of common socio-cultural and interpersonal issues for which there is no immediate remedy. The centering of fertility and marriage in many of the narratives that enable ZAR is

¹⁷ Boddy, Janice. *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1989. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj36105910>.

intentional and rooted in the centrality of reproduction to the perceived value of women in the society as a whole.

In the context of ZAR, to be possessed is adjusted to fit the standards of civility and culture of its place of practice. Since ZAR is known to afflict mainly women of childbearing and homecaring age, these standards of civility are informed by a combination of localized and imported ideals premised on purity, enclosure, domesticity and natalism. Thus, the issues which give rise to possession by Zeyran often take the form of common cultural differences and grievances found in the community such as fertility issues, inheritance issues, illness, marital issues and complications from Female Genital Mutilation, all manifesting as a result of the of cultural and social ideals in one way or another. In the context I am studying, possession is a state with varying symptoms and is in some ways indistinguishable from concepts of a basic curse in that, to be possessed does not necessarily imply a total loss of autonomy. Rather it can be understood as a form of co-occupancy, made visible through trance. Here, within the Borderspace, the individual negotiates the terms of the encounter. The Borderspace functions as this negotiating space, where women seek guidance, liberation, healing and counsel. Part of my work will explore whether the ways in which the images and narratives distinguishing the Borderspace and its performances can be appropriated as a framework for arts-based research.

To further highlight that the visual narrative laid out in ZAR represent trauma integration and healing I will work to interpret and evaluate the state of possession as a parallel process to trauma integration as detailed in Judith Herman's *Dialectic of Trauma*¹⁸. Herman divides trauma integration into 3 distinct processes: *Hyperarousal (Trigger) Intrusion (Flashback/Mental image) and Constriction (paralysis/physical response)*. - *Trauma and Recovery (1992) (p.35-42)* Herman highlights the way trauma can shake or even shatter the foundations of relationships. She explains how it can be impossible to effectively construct a solid version of self in relation to others and strip the human experience of inherent meaning while undermining any former belief in divine order,

¹⁸ Herman, Judith. 2015. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

protection or laws of nature.¹⁹ This theory becomes relevant when we consider the idiom of relative inclosure as one which centers communal connection and proximity to familial dynamics as central to one's ability to survive. It is not an accident that ZAR becomes a source of remedy in a society that inflates the importance and personal impact of communal bonds. The trauma that emerges from fracture is so significant that it is regularly symbolically referenced within nature and culture in our region of research.

Herman elaborates further on the ways in which trauma can impact innate beliefs and ideals surrounding ourselves and the world around us. In this sense, trauma also operates as a kind of piercing of the interior, disrupting our relationship with our own ideals surrounding womanhood while potentially harming you in ways that could facilitate your marginalization from it. ZAR as a trauma remedy is also pre-established through the framework of possession. As discussed earlier in the section, possession is a state that pre-dates trance in the afflicted, trance can be evoked from possession but possession is not simply trance. This framework creates a pathway for trauma to manifest as a state of possession via its psychological impact on the person seeking ZAR. This framework creates a point of accessibility for remedy. Rather than have the particular and highly alarming state of trance be the symptom of possession, the broadening of the concept allows for the interpretation of trauma as a type of possession.

Sources of Trauma:

For Northern Sudanese women, trauma emerges from several sources. First there is the self imposed dogmas of keeping up with the color caste system and maintaining their proximity to idealized skin tones as well as behavioral and cultural concepts of Arabness and their extending regimens and upkeep. Then there is their positionality within households which can range from relatively free to extremely repressed depending largely on class and ethnic background. These issues are exacerbated in the

¹⁹ Herman, Judith. 2015. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

context of religious extremism as waged by former dictator Omer Al Bashir before he was ousted, though this tendency precedes his rise to power. As recently as 2022 women had been put to death by stoning for adultery. Arab or even Northern women are not the only targets of this violence which is heightened when dealing with women of marginalized identity such as women from Nuba mountains, Darfur or South Sudan. There are also the limitations imposed by islamic laws which grant husbands disproportionate power over their wives' movement and existence under islamic morality policing. Here the idioms of relative enclosure is most aptly personified as not only is the husband relegated to the exterior, he can also police it with authority in relation to his women family members movements.

3. Critical Discourse Review

Janice Boddy

Wombs and Alien Spirits:

Canadian anthropologist and practicing researcher and professor Janice Body examines ZAR-Bori in great detail in her 1989 work *Wombs and Alien spirits*. In this work, the Zar family of spirits and ceremony is meticulously studied. Spirits are individuated and their significance is analyzed in relation to local social hierarchies and caste systems. Furthermore, society itself is interpreted through the framework of exteriority vs interiority, highlighting the spatial and relational dimensions that shape gender, power and spiritual practice. Within the context of Body's insights the interior is a spatial metaphor that refers to several concepts within the theory of relative enclosure, from the interior of the Womb space, to the interior of the home. In general, and for the purposes of this research the interior refers to the realm of feminine existence where women reside. Examples of these spaces, such as my grandmother and great aunts homes will become sites for excavating images and symbols of feminine ideals to be interrogated in the borderspace of my practice.

“Villagers acknowledge a plethora of consanguineal and affinal links to all other Hofriyati. Social space as expressed through kinship and marriage thus replicates the social organization of physical space; both are based upon the idea of relative enclosure within a circumscribed area, a principle I call “interiority.” (p.71)

Body goes on to specify the varying complexities of intercommunal relations In the Northern Sudanese township called “Hofriyat” located in Jezira state where she resided for two years of her field research. She diligently documented all aspects of communal life from the interpersonal to the familial. In her work she describes the community like a series of concentric rings getting wider. This "interiority" is associated with fertility, purity, and femininity, and which theoretically and physically opposes the "exterior" which can

be described as the unmapped desert, the heat, and the "world of strangers." The womb, as the ultimate interior, is not just a biological site but a cultural symbol of social continuity that must be guarded against external chaos. Boddy argues that possession occurs when these enclosures are breached by "alien" spirits—the *Zayran*. These spirits are explicitly "others": they represent foreign ethnicities, colonial figures, or external cultural forces that have "intruded" upon the host. Rather than viewing this as a pathology to be cured through exorcism, Boddy frames the Zar ceremony as a negotiation with systems of power. In my own research I will further propose that it is not only a negotiation but a rebellion against long standing regimes of political and cultural repression.

This leads me to the central limitation of the material which is that because Boddy's fieldwork was conducted in the late 1970s and 1980s within the specific village of Hofriyat, the research cannot fully account for the radical shifts caused by decades of subsequent civil war, mass displacement, and the rise of more stringent Islamist movements in Sudan. Though it is still useful in describing the general mechanics and traditions informing ceremonies which are of course historical and passed down generationally.

Heike Behrend: Spirit possession, modernity and power in Africa ***As described by Susan Kenyon***

German social anthropologist Heike Behrend and Professor and researcher Ute Luig compiled articles and reflections from their observations of a myriad of possession cults and movements across Africa aimed at uncovering the dynamics of power, autonomy and patriarchy informing their practice. Examples of movements mentioned include the Nya cult of Mali²⁰ and the Bori cult²¹ in Kano Nigeria. The articles go beyond closed cults movements in relation to possession practices to provide a regional roadmap of the relevance of the possession concept across the continent, from its relevance in contexts of war via the manifestation of revolutionary spirits as is reflected on in relation to the resistance to LRA²² insurgency in Northern Uganda, or exploring the implications of possession on colonial rule in Madagascar. In this framework, possession is not limited to cult practice. Instead, it serves as a tool for understanding a society's moral universe, social order and cultural imagination.

The article of importance among these reflections is authored by anthropologist Susan M, Kenyon and titled "**The case of the Butcher's wife: Illness, possession and power in Central Sudan.**" in her field research, much like Boddy Susan observes a woman named Amna as she prepares for ceremony. The woman is said to be unwell. She believes she suffers from excess blessings and has been cursed with evil eye. Upon meeting with a Faki²³, she decides to hold the ceremony as soon as possible. The emphasis in Kenyon's writings are empowerment and rights of passage. ZAR is

²⁰ behrend, heike. "Spirit Possession: Modernity and Power in Africa: Spirit Possession: Modernity and Power in Africa." *American Ethnologist*, 2001. doi:10.1525/AE.2001.28.3.722. **Nya Cult: Nya cult in Mali is an esoteric male-dominated cult where initiated members practice spirit possession to channel a localized, powerful deity (Nya).**

²¹ behrend, heike. "Spirit Possession: Modernity and Power in Africa: Spirit Possession: Modernity and Power in Africa." *American Ethnologist*, 2001. doi:10.1525/AE.2001.28.3.722. **Bori cult: A traditional Hausa spirit possession religion in Northern Nigeria, centered on healing and interacting with spirits.**

²² Dunn, Kevin C. "Uganda: The Lord's Resistance Army." *Review of African Political Economy* 31, no. 99 (2004): 139–42. **LRA (Lords resistance Army) is a religious fundamentalist militia group led by Joseph Kony that was active in destabilising northern Uganda from 1987 to early 2000's.**

²³ Kenyon, Susan M. "Zar as modernization in contemporary Sudan." *Anthropological Quarterly* (1995): 107-120. **Faki: denotes someone well-versed in Islamic jurisprudence and religious knowledge. As a name, Elfaki signifies a lineage connected to religious learning, wisdom, and leadership within the community.**

conceptualized as a kind of concurrent event to things like Female Genital Mutilation and or Marriage, occurring in a woman's life in conjunction with her maturity and entrance into the domestic realm. Kenyon goes into detail describing the 4 day festivities ending in a rejuvenating rainfall, galvanizing the effects of recently practiced possession magic.

Kenyon refers to women's empowerment and knowledge making as core incentives for performing these ceremonies and even states that the practice "symbolizes the domain of women". Which is consistent with concepts shared by other cited researchers such as Janice Boddy. Kenyon further argues that these ceremonies operate as cures for knowledge via the cultivation of "creative energy". Furthermore, Kenyon pays great attention to the factors contributing to the rise of possession in Amna, from her recent surgery, to the rumours of her infertility and declining weight. Kenyon's observations support the hypothesis that ZAR in the Northern Sudanese context is emblematic of the repressive state of womanhood in its region of practice. While Kenyon does not specifically refer to trauma as a root cause or even that there is any trauma healing process at play, she does allude to a process of re-interpreting rigid societal norms via expression in ceremony.

Kenyon suggests that the butcher's wife and her family are able to survive through the strength of their community, which also pushed Amna to pursue ZAR to solve her ailment. However, there are certain dimensions of Amna's story that could have led to a trauma healing narrative had they potentially been further explored such as the fact that she may have had over 10 children and was still being burdened with fertility concerns at an age where she is also being told she has aged out of rearing. While Kenyon effectively highlights many details illustrating the challenges that Amna faces in her daily life, it would have been more valuable to move past this somewhat positivist reading of her circumstances - though this limitation is not necessarily a fault of Kenyon. My research requires more than the practical success of these ceremonies, such as described with Amna. The trauma leading women to turn to traditional practices as a means of concealing shame or reconciling with failed cultural ideals is important to

highlight for my work, as someone delving into ZAR as a Borderspace for reinterpreting the world in relation to self.

Judith Herman:

Trauma and Recovery

Judith Herman, M.D. is a Harvard psychiatrist who revolutionized trauma studies with her 1992 book "Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of violence" through her research. Herman delves deep into the intricacies of trauma experience, memory and integration. She carefully breaks down the processes of trauma recovery and storage during and following incidents of trauma and how the ways in which we process pain are intricately connected to our survival and the ways we experience reality. The primary achievement of Herman's work is her historical contextualization of trauma, where she argues that the study of psychological distress is inextricably linked to political movements. By tracing the lineage of trauma through the study of hysteria in the late 19th century, "shell shock" in combat veterans, and the emergence of the feminist movement in the 1970s, Herman demonstrates that society's willingness to recognize trauma fluctuates based on the visibility and power of the victimized group.

A core theoretical contribution of the text is the definition of the "dialectic of trauma," a psychological conflict between the survivor's urge to deny the event and the intrusive need to proclaim it. Herman identifies three primary symptoms that characterize this state:

Hyperarousal refers to a heightened sensitivity to any stimuli that, through associations conscious and unconscious, may trigger the reoccurrence of the body's physiological response to the original traumatic experience.

Intrusion refers to the tendency of the traumatic experience to replay itself in the form of flashbacks and nightmares, which can thrust themselves upon the sufferer's consciousness as a vivid and terrifyingly present repetition of the experience.

Constriction refers to the paralyzing effect that the intrusion of the traumatic experience can have on the victim, causing a psychic dissociation that defensively shields the psyche from harm.

Building upon this, Herman introduced the revolutionary concept of Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD). She posited that existing diagnostic criteria, which focused on "simple" PTSD from isolated incidents like accidents or natural disasters, failed to account for the profound personality changes seen in victims of prolonged habitual trauma. In these cases, the trauma is not merely an event but a sustained environment that erodes the victim's sense of self.²⁴

Lastly, Herman's work is esteemed for its prescriptive clarity regarding the recovery process. She outlines a three-stage model of healing that prioritizes the survivor's agency above all else. The first stage focuses on the establishment of safety, both physical and psychological; the second involves remembrance and mourning, where the survivor transforms the traumatic memory into a coherent narrative; and the third stage focuses on reconnection, allowing the survivor to forge new relationships and a renewed sense of future. This model shifted the focus of therapy from the mere suppression of symptoms to the total restoration of the person's social and political existence.

The main concepts I will be engaging with in relation to my research are the three stages of trauma integration outlined above as hyperarousal, intrusion and constriction. The process of trauma integration as broken down into these parts can be paralleled against the process of possession; from affliction to possession to trance. Furthermore, the conditions and shattered sense of self described by Herman mirrors the state of frustration and marginality experienced by women claiming possession, in that in both cases, some incident or issue which is inconsistent with the victim's moral universe arises, facilitating a dissociated or "possessed" state.

²⁴ Herman, Judith. 2015. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Susan M. Kenyon

The Sudanese Woman,

Researcher and Professor of Anthropology Susan M. Kenyon compiled a series of articles highlighting findings into the personal and public lives of Sudanese women. There is an article by Sudanese writer Samia al Nagar where she describes first and second hand accounts of ZAR ceremonies taking place in Omdourman, Khartoum. Samia begins by describing her acquaintance with local ceremonies since she was child. She outlines her methods of research compilation which include surveys, phone interviews and communication with priestesses or “Sheikhas”. She begins by briefly describing the inception of the group in Omdourman as well as the history of the practice in other regions and how it evolved into its current form in Northern Sudan. What distinguished Samia’s reflections from those of foreign anthropologists and researchers is the way that her insight and proximity allows her to interpret and gather knowledge. While samia was able to vaguely describe the origins of ZAR in the region, she went on to the speak to the ways in which Sheiks and Sheikas can exploit the ZAR inception narratives to their own benefit, such as by falsely claiming to hail from a family that introduced ZAR to Sudan.

“These different stories of ZAR leaders represent attempts of the different Sheikha’s to validate their own ritual status. Each tries to show her own proximity to the introduction of ZAR to Sudan in order to enhance her status in the cult.”

Next Samia provides a demographic breakdown of the women participants of ZAR. She lists several factors including age, marital status e.c.t. What is interesting about Samia's approach to interpreting this information is that, unlike other anthropologists who might have simply focused on the demographics of the majority who qualify for participation in ritual, she still looks at the roles played by marginal groups such as elderly women, widows and divorcees. This gives us valuable insight into a seemingly hierarchical system which consists of elder priestesses and helpers who exist in these spaces to facilitate the processes of possession and ensure the integrity of the space. Samia also goes on to list and describe common situations arising in women's lives leading to states of distress, necessitating ZAR.

She then moves on to breaking down her case studies. Each patient is described with the same detail and cadence as a medical chart. Samia lists the reason for ailment, whether or not ZAR has been formerly sought, and the reason for pursuing ZAR. These details are noted for all 10 patients she is studying. Samia's ability to add additional context and detail orientated documentation helps make her research feel more authentic and easier to decipher. She also breaks down the relevance of marriage and child rearing within Sudanese society. This helps contextualize the nature of ZAR related possession ailments as being consistently associated with familial issues linking back to the family or nuclear home. In shedding light on these norms, it becomes possible to recognize patterns among participants and even common struggles uniting them. The significance of Samia's account in relation to my own research is in her holistic interpretations of women's participation in ZAR. The second hand accounts I have received about the ceremonies from relatives have mostly been relayed by older women. Unlike with other researchers like Boddy, Samia's account is not hyperfocused on young married child rearing women as the sole participants of ZAR, supporting my own depictions of the ceremony as being centered more on healing and facilitating integration and remedy than adhering to social norms.

Samia's accounts shed light on the kind of social and cultural norms that root ZAR ceremonies in material reality, it becomes very clear how this practice situates itself within a culture that is still adapting to the rigidity of gendered expectations placed upon populations. In my works this kind of anxiety is reflected in the marks and lines depicted on the artboards. In these works I am aiming to speak to the tension between the positionality of women participants relative to their own culture as well as to the greater global community.

Rebecca Sager

Transcendence through Aesthetic Experience

Professor Rebecca Sager is a researcher and teacher who specializes in exploring visual culture in relation to religion, politics and social dynamics. In her research Rebecca Sager reflects on the ways visual cultures facilitate both access to and the production of collective knowledge within diasporic communities. She proposes a framework that centers the cognitive and psycho-spiritual dimensions of aesthetic communication, emphasizing how visual and sensory forms of expression shape the transmission, retention and circulation of knowledge across diasporic contexts. Sager elaborates on her proposed continuum of understanding which seeks to integrate common values, meanings, processes and images across cultures, genres and modes of expression. Her goal is to organize and synthesize this information in a way that sheds light on universal principles that can bring about understanding in relation to the ways aesthetics operate to transform and enhance our experience as humans.

Sager centers transcendence in her ethnomusicological approach to arts based research, inspired by John Blacking's ideas surrounding transcendence and music theory. She argues that there is a self and another self that is susceptible to transcendence on varying levels, ultimately culminating in the highest level of reaction being total possession or trance. Sager also brings up the importance of "non-referential meaning" as an axis of knowledge that is under explored in favor of studying the impact of symbols. This framework is particularly useful when considering how meaning

develops in relation to trauma. Although ZAR operates within a rich semiotic universe of symbols and ritual expression, the lived experiences of the women involved are often complex, nuanced and at times, shame inducing. These experiences do not always conform to socially recognizable narratives, which in part, necessitates a ritual system such as ZAR - one that is communal and inclusive, yet sufficiently open-ended to preserve the dignity and privacy of those afflicted.

Sagar engages with several compelling concepts drawn from Blacking's work, including "virtual time" which describes the experience of lived time as moving at a different pace from its formal recording or documentation. She also discusses ideas such as "body resonance" and "body empathy", which refer to the fluid communication that occurs between bodies engaged in shared movement, highlighting how knowledge and affect can be transmitted through embodied interaction. These concepts are highly interesting to consider when reflecting on the relevance of ZAR as a potential site of knowledge sharing among participants, who are not performing for one another but communicating with each other, responding to cues, and behaving in ways that are organized yet spontaneous. Part of Sager's essay is devoted to reassessing:

"Some of my own ethnographic research in northern Haiti and Austin, Texas, in an effort to see what, if any, shared values, processes or meanings might be revealed as a result of directing analytical focus upon transcendence phenomena."

I find myself resonating with this approach as someone who is often working to decipher indigenous spiritual knowledge systems from traditional religious practices and theories. This leaning into non-referential knowledge allows for many re-conciliatory pathways that allow for healing and understanding to form while also undermining the rigidity of established religious structures in the region. Subsequently, engagement with traditional music, dance and performance are validated within the communal and resonance based framework of non-referential knowledge.

Barbara A. Bickel

Art, Ritual, and Trance Inquiry: A-rational Learning in an Irrational World

Barbara Bickel's reflections resonated deeply with me during my research as she was able to aptly articulate my desire to pursue transcendental work as an African woman and member of the diaspora by bringing attention to the ways in which transcendental work manifests not only as a method of practice but as a cogent framework for interpreting and engaging with the world. She illuminates A-rational knowledge as repressed under the weight and influence of rational knowledge, an imbalance she argues is informed by our systems of patriarchy and capitalism, informing her adherence to spiritual feminism. She interprets Trance and Ritual as "inquiry processes" with the capacity to reclaim and regenerate a-rational knowledge and abilities lost in the fog of the rigid inflexible norms governing our material reality. She reflects on Brata Ettinger's "Matrixial Theory" which calls for the abandonment of a polarized You Vs Me approach to learning in favor of finding ways to tap into shared knowledge systems and widen our receptivity to each other and the natural world around us. She introduced an eco-feminist approach to transcendental work emphasising the natural world, our connections to the environment and the de-centering of technical/material knowledge in artistic practice, believing that artists had the ability to tap into "Earth Voice". Bickel's relationship to trance begins in the late 80's as a collaborative artist among other spiritualists using their practice to facilitate healing. In the late 90's she was inducted into a Wiccan order where she experienced trance. Since then she has continued to use trance and ritual as a means of grappling with trauma, conflict and the esoteric.

Bickel goes on to speak to the ways in which art-making in the context of transcendental work is a highly emotional and psycho-spiritually stimulating process. She reflects on her process and adopts Brata Ettinger's concept of "Artworking" which describes transcendental work as processes involving constant emotional breakage and healing facilitated by automative processes of art making, during which truths or revelations emerge. I relate deeply to this theory, as throughout my process, I have consistently found myself emotionally withered, exhausted, wondering what the use is, then

occasionally flashes of memories from homelands. Through this process of recollecting and creating, I was strangely able to reconcile emotional baggage I had believed was insurmountable. One of my pieces features several round emotive clay faces arranged on canvas. Each time I molded a face I was always surprised by the expression that emerged. Some appeared angry, some anxious, some sad, some indifferent. Looking at the collage of expressions, I felt lighter, as if observing cursed objects excavated from my form.

For me, this process of emotional excavation, relief and heartache achieved during “Artworking” can additionally represent the movement of repressed feelings, emotions and memories from the interior, outwards. Furthermore, Bickel argues that art can bring about trauma healing not only for the maker but additionally for the receiver of the work which manifests as mutual compassion. When reflecting on the significance of ZAR in our region of study, I think about how the process also requires mutual compassion in order to bring about the necessary healing. When the women in ceremony are dancing and performing and being exaggerative and boisterous, their expression is facilitated by the compassion in their room, for their struggle and for their need to release. For Beckel, art should ultimately prove an encounter with life that is transcendent not only spiritual but emotionally, breaking down both metaphysical and psychological barriers erected by trauma and fear. I was additionally inspired by Beckler’s conceptual and practical engagement with ritual within her practice. Beckler argues that the practicality, discipline and rigidity involved in artmaking can function to undermine the potential for an ecstatic or transcendental experience; she mitigates this by adopting ritual practice.

“Apart from ordinary life, ritual travels within liminal spaces, in the margins and spaces between what we know as ‘the real world.’ It is within the sacred space of ritual that spirit is invoked and encountered. Artworking can thus unfold with a compassionate cosmic consciousness”

Upon reading this I couldn't help but think of my own research in relation to Interiority and Janice Body’s theory of relative enclosure. I think this space that Beckler is

describing is similarly invoked by Boddy in her descriptions of ZAR ritual. Within ZAR boundaries between exterior and interior are obscured. This perspective allows me to envision ZAR not only as a spiritual process but additionally as a creative one. The women participating in the ceremony are not only channeling, they are effectively creating new knowledge systems and remedies. Furthermore, similarly to how Beckler describes ritual as the gateway to the in-between, ZAR has a similar function as a meeting or in-between point for reconciliation between the exterior and the interior. She borrows Brata Ettinger's term "The borderspace" to describe this midpoint. Upon reflecting on the borderspace, I couldn't help but think of a similar concept I had been reflecting on called "Al-Khalaa". As defined in earlier sections, Al-Khalaa describes empty and deserted spaces characterized by sparse plant life, trash and vastness. Borrowing from an Islamic concept referring to spiritual voids, in the Sudanese context, the word is physicalized to describe liminal space in the community, thought to be imbued with dark or negative energy. Similarly to how Beckler has been working with the borderspace as a semiotic codex of meaning and imagery, Al-khalaa has operated for me as a source of aesthetic inspiration, offering antithetical concepts to feminine ideals that allow for the imagining of new means of feminine expression and being.

4. Artistic Precedents, Work and Analysis:

4.1 Summary of final works

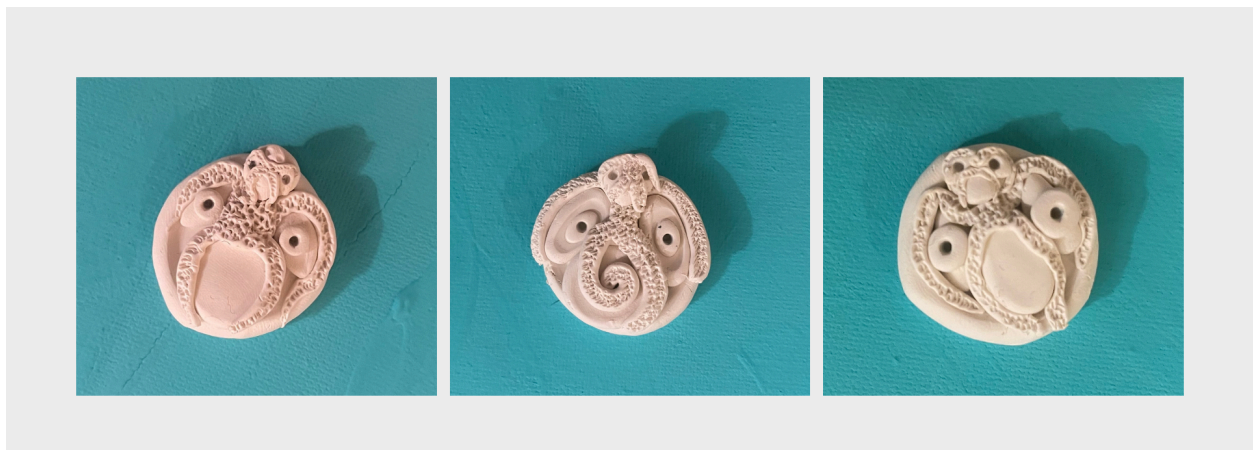
The material outcomes of my engagement in a transcendental art practice are informed by the realities of the women inspiring their creation. Through an interdisciplinary approach, I have come up with around 10 experimental works that hopefully speak to my creative process as well as the truths held in my body that required the adoption of a transcendental approach. Of the works offered, 3 are canvas works speaking to the desire for integration between external and internal self at the heart of so many women's engagement with ZAR.

One of the images is of a woman in lingerie with her neck bent back and her arms up in the sky, emboldened and empowered by trance (**see fig.2**). In the corner there is smoke signifying the spirits entering the environment of ceremony. In this image I wanted to both speak to the process of ZAR as being highly liberating due to its implication as inherently foreign as well as to highlight the importance of nature as an empowering source of inspiration and self-embodiment. The leopard and tiger prints represent these connections with the natural world, as well as the blue background, highlighting the significance of the Nile and water in the act of healing. The Bakhour or smoke depicted in the top left corner of the work is meant to depict the beginning of trance, as the Sheika in ZAR initiates ceremony by lighting and waiving the Bhakoor over participants.

The next two works speak to the spirits or "Zeyran" present during the ceremony. (**see fig.3.1 and 3.2**) To depict this I chose to expand on a face design I had developed for a previous project. For each piece I created a collage using the small clay faces I molded. One canvas is painted a bright neon pink and the other is turquoise. These shades being offshoots of essential colors in relation to Northern Sudanese spirituality (blue for water, red for blood), I think instead of the colors the Zeyran might opt for. The neon tones are callous and bright, almost like the sun is shining on them, similar to those objects abandoned in the desert. Furthermore the colors allude to childlike wonder,

fascination and curiosity, traits considered antithetical to the serious work of homemaking done by Sudanese women. Similarly, Abstract Artists like Mark Rothko and James Turrell use color to facilitate transcendence and promote meditative states. By utilizing expansive, immersive hues such as Teal and Magenta my intent is to similarly bridge the gap between the material world and a state of aesthetic transformation or resonance. The vibration of the pink and turquoise serves as a subtle disruption of the space, acting as a visual shorthand for the alien spirit that graces ZAR. Neon or fluorescent colors were also intentionally chosen for their ability to absorb light, paralleling the ways ZAR operates through absorbing the power of the community's presence, fueling its processes as it generates new knowledge.

The process of creating the individual faces was tedious but rewarding. Every time I finished a new face the expression would stare back with so much life that only ever revealed itself once the face was complete. It really felt like I was imbuing these little objects with my essence. Sometimes I would be anxious or sad or nervous and I could see it in the final expression looking back at me.



Additionally, the arrangement of the medallions in a grid is emblematic of the anthropological rootings of my research, intentionally spaced to resemble an ecological or archeological grid used for collecting field samples. There is a level of continuity between the markings on the art boards, the neon panels and the clay objects. A

concept of documentation, field work and artifact is underscored as a means of highlighting multiple concepts. First it depicts the limitations of the source material as dated and situated in an era of research still impacted by frontierism. Furthermore, in presenting these biomorphic clay faces as if they were unearthed field samples, I am highlighting the friction between the pure and guarded interior and the rigid, scientific frameworks that attempt to categorize it. This arrangement mirrors the methodology of *archaeology*, in that during my process of claymaking I am inadvertently reproducing the frameworks of the knowledge I absorbed and regurgitating it in a different setting for investigation. Lastly, it highlights the limitations of women participants whose own struggles to reconcile narrative with reality, as is a common struggle for field workers and researchers, is ultimately the same struggle that leads them to participate in ZAR.

The arrangement of the medallions on the canvas is also reflective of the kind of rhythmic beat that is played by the sheika or ceremony leader on a traditional drum (Daluka) as a means of provoking spirit into revelation. Going back to John Blacking's concepts of body resonance which almost allude to a sensual knowledge-scape that is intuitively activated, these two works are both representative of the ceremony of possession as well as designed to activate the Borderspace. Whether through the bright colors or the texture or shadows of the faces, the works loudly demand an immediate impression before one is able to look more closely at the distortions and expressions on the canvas. The spacing between the gold pieces on the canvas also creates a natural syncopation where the viewer doesn't immediately pick up on distinctions and faults between parts. This type of homogeneity is reflected within the ZAR ceremony where participants come together to be made equal in the presence of higher forms, while remaining guided by the uniqueness and quirks of possession spirits. The arrangement is also reminiscent of dots or notes on a music sheet, like an ancient rhythmic code or language. Expanding on John Blacking's research, the concept of "virtual time" also becomes relevant thematically via my engagement with source material that has seemingly remained unamended for quite a while. Virtual time refers to the disparity between true time and experienced time when experiencing transcendence. In the context of human sciences, we can observe how the anthropological and historical

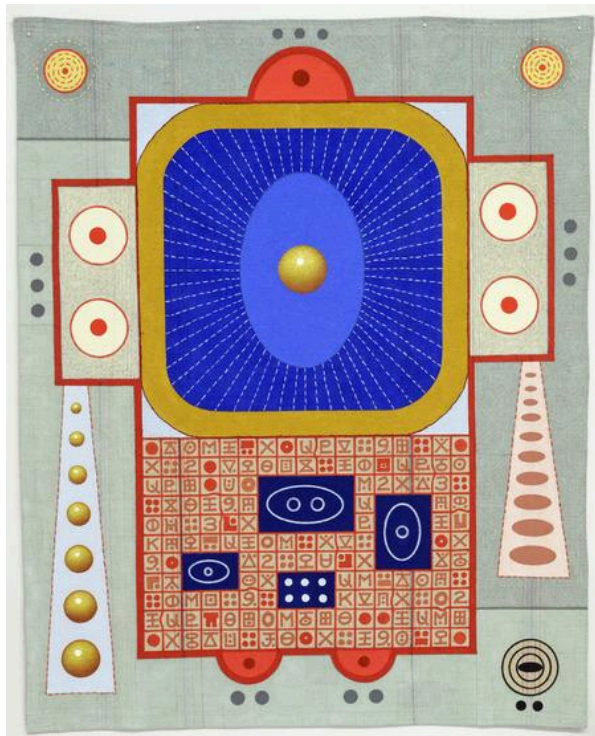
source material reveals a disparity between the documentation and research into African cultures and their period of existence. With traditions and cultures seemingly frozen in time at their time of study.

In reflecting on the ways I could have gone about depicting a possession circle, I considered a literal illustrative approach in similar non-finito or abstract style featuring embodied forms, drums and clear arrangement within a space. I chose to adopt a more abstracted style for depicting ceremony and participants for a few reasons. Firstly, there are already many images of ZAR ceremony depicted in traditional illustrative ways communicating movement and altered states. Secondly, I wanted to incorporate disembodied forms not only for the sake of continuity with the other works, but also as means of de-centering silhouettes as obvious markers for gender and identity. I was reflecting on Hilma Af Kint's reassessment of relationships with gender via scientific frameworks, and her borrowing of the images and language of microbiology, cell biology and botanical sciences to reconceptualize gender relations, as well as Wangetchi Mutu's explorations of re-imagined Hybrid corporeal forms in her works collage and sculptural works. Inspired by Mutu's approach to investigating the borderspace between the physical body and the natural world, I can affirm my own engagement with the borderspace and Al-Khala has enabled me to generate and identify Hybrid motifs, images and symbols. The power line collage, the generative mark drawings and the clayworks come together to represent the innate Hybridity of the Borderspace.

Via my engagement with the source material I was finding in reference to ZAR and its surrounding cultures, I found anthropological studies, archeological artifacts, and historiographical accounts from between the late 70's and late 90's had their own semiotic universe and image based language that I wanted to experiment with. In the post-colonial period, researchers are adamant about distinguishing regions and peoples as unique to the nations they belong to. For me this framework which re-centers the foreign researcher as the arbiter of identity, complete with allusions to artifact, ancient technology and sensationalized interpretations of cultures is very similar to the kind of sensationalist framework UFO cultists often assume. Karla Knight is an

artist whose works I reflected on early in the term, her works are retro-futuristic and feature a written language she cultivated as a part of her practice. In the works this language gives the impression of interplanetary instructional artifacts, activating some buried alien technology.

One of my desires in undertaking this research was to appropriate these mechanisms of cultural synthesis which were historically adopted by dominant groups to degrade or undermine the impacts of marginalized cultures, to instead support intercommunal healing. How can the stories and narratives that divide cultures and people be reconciled and integrated? Thus, the nature of the Borderspace within my practice describes not only the spiritual realm but a space where boundaries between cultures, peoples and places all converge into one plane. Here we can begin to imagine the tassel, which is made relevant in Sudan mainly through Islam and the Arab Peninsula re-imagined as solid and adapted to the terrain, or where the objectification of women in the society combined with the importance of gold in measuring one's value could contribute to their spirits manifesting as squidfaced gold medallions with varying expressions.



Karla Knight, *Navigator series: Little Universal Remote 6*, 2023
Flashe, acrylic marker, pencil, and embroidery on cotton
36 x 29 inches

The medallions on my neon panel works can also be read as buttons or knobs, the kind that might unlock a trap or a treasure or switch on a hidden space craft. The idea of informational synthesis is a common thread in both human sciences research and transcendentalist arts based research and UFOlogy. The concept of pulling from different sources, periods and groups to complete a narrative that is relational to dominating powers is common among researchers and Syncretism²⁵ followers alike.

The images for these two pieces emerged to me very early on and their assembly was relatively simple. Each medallion is hand crafted from oven clay mostly with my hands with some wood carving tools. I definitely made more than I ended up needing, though I do plan on creating one or two additional neon panels to go with the first two pieces. The smaller coin-like circles on the canvas in between the possessed medallion faces are made by impressing the backs of nails into clay. The natural variation in design achieved by using different nails was uniquely charming and almost regal. The use of nails further entrenches the ideal of gender reconciliation grounding ZAR ceremony, as Nails are both associated with masculine work and the exterior, as well as the structural integrity of the home. In Janice Boddy's writings she describes how in preparation for a home birth an elderly woman places a glove of Garlic and iron nail at the pregnant mother's bedside as a means of warding off evil eye.²⁶ (p.16) Iron Nails are considered Relics of the exterior and are thus imbued with intrinsic metaphysical power. This further embeds the concept of gender reconciliation in the work via being situated in the Borderspace between exterior and interior.

This concept of ornament as identity is consistent throughout the works, as by choosing to literally have these possessed almost disfigured faces take the place of participants, I am speaking to the ways women are objectified in the context of marriage, inheritance and general culture. Being "Worth your weight in gold" becomes more than a

²⁵ **Syncretism:** Merging contradictory spiritual belief systems or materials into a new, hybrid practice. In this work, it refers to the integration of images found in Sudanese ritual Borderspaces with those informing traditional islamic practice in the region.

²⁶ Boddy, Janice. *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.

compliment in a society where women's access to cash is limited or facilitated through engagement with men. The final element of the pieces is the small coral-like vein attached to the corner of the work, then covered in resin. Blood is a relevant symbol within Hofriyat feminine ideals, particularly its containment and health in flow. This subtle vein extension thus represents an aestheticized concept of biological contamination, presented in a way to undermine its disruptive function in these processes, instead incorporated in harmony with opposing ideals. **(see fig.4)**

My next 4 pieces are works speaking to internal states in conflict with outer realities. One of the works features a similar face design to the one used for the clay faces. Partially inspired by Fulani and Nubian spiritual cultures where masks were worn to represent and connect with ancestral spirits and gods. The design is also inspired by graffiti art and indigenous polynesian art common within tiki culture. The pieces have a consistent theme of metallic paint used, which is meant to speak to the relevance of gold as a socio-economic lifeline when times are desperate. The non-finito style continues and references a concept of field notes or documentation, rooting the metaphysical reality. The symbols on the panels: Gold and silver, morning doves, Nile water, nudity, exposure and evasion of the interior. This feeling of evasion is both literal in the evasion of aesthetic norms by discarding clothing and clean lines and boundaries, as well as evasion of ideals and civilities.

The first panel features a disembodied floating abstract face **(See fig.6)** donning a devious smile, gold background and erratic magenta strokes along the bottom of the board. The face almost appears conjured by the flame-like strokes below, a malevolent spirit or a woman evading the interior? It is difficult to tell considering the horror they similarly inspire within context. Here we also see the functionality of non-finito style as a further expression of the capacity for chaos emerging from the characters being depicted in the work. **(see fig.5)**

My final pieces are a collection of tassels and artifact pieces speaking to the latent sexuality of Sudanese women as individuals navigating sexual and cultural repression

under dogmatic regimes **(see fig.7.1 & 7.2)** . In the process of crafting the tassels I also made something resembling veins using leftover air dry clay, which ended up getting added to the neon panel piece. Witnessing the tassels near the object is a stark reminder of the real materiality of biological functions over ideals of perfection and femininity and how these realities are often in conflict with one another. My final pieces are collage works created in dedication to my great aunt who practiced mixed media collage using the materials at her disposal, including wood vinyl, loose cloth, bark and banana leaf. In my own works I chose to opt for vinyl collage as a way of adapting her concepts through a modern lens. **(see fig.8)**

The processes of making and reflecting engaged while producing these works allowed me to personally inhabit and re-imagine the images and symbols coloring my childhood in Northern Sudan. The borderspace as a framework facilitating ZAR and conceptual third space inspiring my works, provides a methodology for subverting these images in a way that is both culturally consistent and visually interesting. In engaging creative inquiry and Art-ography the act of making becomes a site of active excavation. In molding the clay faces I am also uncovering their expression, in looking through my photo reserves I am also searching through archives of images from journeys that I can no longer fully recall. Similarly to how Art-ography stipulates learning and relaying information through the process of making, through my process I was not only able to produce works, I also engaged certain processes for the first time such as vinyl collage. As for the teaching aspect, I think it is interesting to consider the gallery as Borderspace with an imbued pedagogical agency, where the viewer is not a passive observer but a temporary "host" to the work's frequency. By staging a material Collision between the biomorphic clay and industrial vinyl, the gallery ceases to be a sterile container and becomes a site of Neural Entrainment. The intention is for "teaching" to happen through Body Resonance rather than text.

4.2 Experimentations:

Cuban painter and print maker Belkis Ayon is another artist who adopted transcendental art making as a means of transporting herself between worlds, infiltrating the famous Cuban Abakua²⁷ Fraternal society through her works, as a way of speaking to the hegemony of patriarchy. In her works the woman figure is represented only using stark white, seemingly haunting the space, yet still fearful and unnerved.



Belkis Ayón, La Cena (The Supper), 1991. Six-panel collograph on paper, 138 x 300 cm. Painting depicting the spirit of Princess Sikane infiltrating the masculine space of the male dominated Abakua cult as a bright haunted entity.

Similarly to Ayon, The images and symbols prevalent throughout my works operate to hint at the repression at the root of the psychic horror plaguing the women participants of these ceremonies. Red, for blood, symbolically relevant in relation to fertility, purity and the womb. Spilt blood or “Nazeef” is considered symptomatic of possession. Then there are precious metals, mainly gold, silver and bronze, all retaining spiritual

²⁷ Ishemo, Shubi L. "From Africa to Cuba: an historical analysis of the sociedad secreta Abakuá (Ñañiguismo)." *Review of African Political Economy* 29, no. 92 (2002): 253-272.

implications among northern Sudanese as containing protective properties, multiplying wealth and keeping evil eyes at bay. Red and Gold are also the common Bridal colors for both bride and groom among North Sudanese and the colors worn for Jirtig²⁸ celebrations. I had made a small artwork early on in the program with a wooden hand dubbed “Zombie Bride” inspired by my Grandmother's life and struggle as a child bride, her resilience, but also her lost youth. It was a bridal hand with henna, gold bridal jewelry and nails, coming out of a picture frame with dirt, rose petals, coins among other adornments.



²⁸ ***Al-Jertiq*** is a ritual for protection, fertility and abundance that is held during significant life events such as marriage, childbirth and circumcision, or to mourn the death of a young, unmarried man. -

<https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/al-jertiq-practices-rituals-and-expressions-for-preservation-protection-abundance-and-fertility-in-sudan-02275>

“Restoration of the breach between the traumatized person and the community depends, first, upon public acknowledgment of the traumatic event and, second, upon some form of community action.”¹⁶

In some ways ZAR can help support this process of restoration for women in the community, though, there are limitations. Janice Boddy suggested that ZAR partially operates to supplement the limitations and rigidity of life in Islamic society. I see how this could be feasible particularly in a place like Sudan that has mostly only known repressive political rule from its inception. Yet, religiosity in practice is not a guiding principle for participation in ZAR, nor is the concept rooting ZAR distinct to Islamic nations. Historical influences on ZAR practices in the region are highly diverse, symbologies and local imaginaries play a big part, largely rooted in Meroetic religions and practices originating on the land.

“Her susceptibility is less if she wears the gold ring made from an Egyptian coin (referred to as an “official seal”. But if wearing gold defends her from spirit attack, neglecting to wear it may increase her vulnerability should she then see it worn by another.”²⁹ (p.103)

4.3 Symbolic objects and materials:

Another symbol I have honed in on is the tassel. Tassels and lace were consistent motifs in my grandmother's home growing up. Whether they were hanging from a Sibha, or Jirtig ornament or lavishly dangling off an oversized piece of furniture. The tassels as a visual metaphor within the context of my final works represent multiple concepts at once. First there are the manifold representative functions of the tassel as religious object, sex symbol, implied luxury item, foreignness/Arabness and femininity among others. In my approach to representing this complex cultural symbol I wanted to somehow subvert its function as a way of introducing a concept of gender reconciliation

²⁹ Boddy, Janice. *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1989. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj36105910>.

displayed within the borderspace of ZAR. I engaged the borderspace to create this work in several ways. First in constructing the tassels from oven clay, subverting their nature and function from mobile and dynamic to rigid and durable. The application of heat in this process of calcification mirroring that of carcasses baking in the Desert. An object once coding the interior, and which was designed for its context, in delicate silk threads, now inhabiting the Borderspace; Both colorful and decorative as well as hard and capable of maintaining its form outside of the boundaries of the interior.

Then there are morning doves, pigeons, ostriches, eggs and feathers, Nile water and certain saplings which are placed under the beds of ill and pregnant women. Outside of the natural world, objects denoting enclosure and preservation are sought after and cherished, even more so if they also carry an association of being foreign. Imported foods like jarred olives and fruits, canned fish like tuna and sardine and thickly skinned fruits like oranges and grapefruits were all coveted for the pantry. Much like these items, the Sudanese woman, burdened by docility, takes up durability. It should be noted that in spite of the impact of islam on the region, assimilation is still conditional and highly reliant on the region of practice. I also found myself naturally drawn to boudoir photography aesthetics and styles popularized during the Art Nouveau era. The emphasis on glamour, nudity, natural forms and sensuality are both stigmatized and emphasised within the social and personal doctrines of the Sudanese woman of that time. I am additionally inspired by the images emerging from the desert landscape, dubbed “al-khalaa” or the void for the sake of this research. Common images in these spaces include thorn bushes, small poisonous plants, donkeys, snakes, marron sands and a variety of landbirds and lizards.

I am very interested in the way these images exist as a natural antithesis to feminine ideals in the region. In one of my earlier experiments on these themes I chewed on pieces of clay, spit them out and left the molds to dry, then I made some teeth and bones out of clay.. **(see fig.9)**

These earlier experiments were more premised on conjoining the interior with the exterior in material harmony, however, i was also able to channel some of the ideals informing spaces like al-khalaa (the desert/void) such as the bones which are inspired by animal carcasses I would often see growing up and a sand welcome matt speaking to the dryness which is thought to undermine fertility in the domestic space. In one of my works which features a gun with a 3d printed frame and clay over it modeled after a reproductive system. Inspired by the flesh gun in the Cronenberg film “existenz” my main goal with this piece was to de-essentialize the system by inverting its intrinsic meaning. **(see fig.10)** When first considering the implications of “Interiority” as a visual metaphor my mind immediately traveled back in time to my grandmother's home in Khartoum. My great aunt's art hung up on the walls, the oversized furniture and ironic abundance of hyper-feminine objects fringing on being sexual in implication like the bodacious oversized tassels that hung from curtains and oversized furniture sets imported from Egypt, lace doilies and table cloths, and dust! So much dust.



My first project was a welcome matt made of sand, denoting the complexity of literal demarcations of interior and exterior within Sudanese homes. When we visit relatives in Madani there is always a lingering dissonance when I step onto hard concrete floors, no one would believe people used to have sand floors! My great aunt’s living room probably got a cement floor in the mid 2000’s then she finally upgraded from an outdoor toilette in 2019. This is where the toilet comes in! **(see fig.11)**

When I first showed this piece in first year the response was mixed but interesting!

Some were interested in it, others were surprised they were interested, but for me it was more about honoring a kind of attitude that was held by the woman whose legacy I was latently honoring by engaging collage as an artform. My great aunt Fatma was an artist and craftswoman who worked with a variety of materials found in the home such as different fabrics, wood panels, vinyls, e.c.t While i ultimately did have to give in and hit the art store a few times in the early stages, my initial explorations into these themes of interiority and femininity were greatly guided by her impact as someone who was working with somewhat limited means. I pushed myself to scavenge for materials in my home and around my area. This process added another layer to my research attempting to map the aesthetic world of “the interior” as a dynamic and bendable boundary that can be manipulated and enlarged by empowered stakeholders. By taking objects into my home I began to consider the implications of interiority as both a type of spatiality and a process of building familiarity. The toilette exists in conjunction with another collage work titled Anghareb which is emblematic of a pattern found on outdoor mattresses in Sudan. **(see fig.11)** Another experiment I did with some of my personal photography early in the program involved painting over a few photos as a way of illustrating the metaphysical terrain of Al-Khalaa that overlays the geography in Northern Sudan.



These collages and images are representations of both literal transgressions of spatial norms in relation to domesticity as well as speaking to unspoken spiritual realities and truths in the regions that ZAR is practiced. For the toilet, there are the obvious implications of impurity, which are explicit in Sudan as it is considered highly un-hygienic not only not to wash your hands but to enter the bathroom without specific slippers only to be used for entering the toilette. As children we would share myths and quran verses meant to protect before entering. The general tendency towards obsessive surveillance of women in relation to hygiene is very common in culture. I think much of my early research was dedicated to maligning these semiotic tendencies. Film is a constant source of inspiration for my art and research. I became enamoured by a prop piece used in the movie “existenZe” depicting a gun made of flesh. Unlike other body horror props I had seen which usually depict skin, I was fascinated by the apparent internal anatomy of the piece, covered in veins, teeth and other apparent biomatter. This

curiosity led me to experiment marginally with interiority as a biological or physical state but rather than explore the pre-established metaphors relating to things like fertility, the womb and virginity, which I find rather redundant, instead I focused on the reproductive system as a site for desecration.

The initial concept involved making a gun entirely out of clay in the form of a woman's reproductive system. Before I started claymaking I was already sketching and conceptualizing how I wanted to approach the image of the reproductive system. Historically, much of medical research on the topic has coded the womb as both a conceptual and biological landscape of the inception of humanity as well as a political battleground. This rather grave implication functions paradoxically to reduce the significance of women's health and bodies in favor of a model which favors the womb as ancient bio-spiritual technology and not a part of the body. There is very little room for something as simple as innocuity within this intense axis of meaning, lending itself to an invasive bioessentialist culture. Here is a sketch i did titled perfect beach day, before i had started thinking about making the gun where an outline of a reproductive system hangs on a clothes line with a bikini:



I never ended up finishing these projects, ultimately I think because I had never been fascinated by a biological dimension to interiority and some limitations in conceiving of how to impactfully construct the project. However, what these early experimentations did provide me with was a new symbolic language involving internal biomatter I knew I wanted to integrate into future works as an inversion of the feminine ideals governing women participants of Zar.

Upon further reflection of feminine ideals relating to purity, I recalled my aunt Fatma was fixated on cleanliness and might have been the cleanest older person I knew, always smelling of perfumes and oils and always freshly bathed in a new garb. Yet, in spirit my grandma was ironically transgressive outside of feminine norms. She never married or had children and was for the most part in love with her hobbies. Her works reflect a quiet gratitude for the countryside, with its working folk and natural scenes. In all of this research into ZAR my main criticism may be the overestimation of Islam as a producer of meaning and semiotic knowledge among Zar participants in the region; religion is culturally invasive by default in regions with longstanding and successive colonial regimes such as Sudan. Yet I would argue that nature remains the essential producer of meaning in relation to feminine ideals and values among all Sudanese women.

The natural world is the most often referenced and revered universe of meaning among Sudanese women in relation to their gender identity. When completing my research several cogent symbolic metaphors kept coming up over and over in association with femininity and womanhood. Pigeons, called “hammam” and morning dove “ghomrea” are some of several birds mentioned as symbolic of feminine ideals. I remember being a child and asking my grandmother why “Hammam” (Pigeons in Arabic) had the same name as “bathroom” in Arabic, before following her outside to watch a pigeon splash around in a puddle. Birds that bathe are considered inherently superior to birds who are not regularly seen bathing, birds that inhabit the Nile are also seen as especially pure and feminine in association.

Earlier I mentioned the relevance of my grandmother's home as a site for extracting

symbols encapsulating the interior. Though I had access to toys as a child, I often found myself playing with the many decorative trinkets housed in our living room. From an ostrich egg encased in velvet to a life size mona lisa copy above the couch and varying cultural statues and relics I couldn't really appreciate at the time, but i knew i liked touching them and playing with them, i remember picking up and shaking the gara as a child.

“One knows that a gara is ready to be decorated and hung in a room if, when shaken, its seeds can be heard to rattle inside. Although the dryness of the gourd (or for that matter, the ostrich eggshell) appears to contradict its association with fertility as predicated on moisture, what it symbolizes, I think, is generative potential.”³⁰ (p.66)

I want to expand on Boddy's hypothesis to state that her proposed idiom of relative enclosure does not only apply to maintain moisture. Enclosure on its own accord, as maintained by a closed gourd and encased ostrich egg develops its own relevance for older women who are no longer entrenched in the realities of domestic life. Enclosure for an older woman shifts from preservation of attributes associated with youthful fertility such as purity and moisture to things like endurance, self maintenance and stability. The dried gourd is stronger than the fresh and it is only once the ostrich egg is emptied does it become worthy of resignation to velvet encasement. My grandmother maintained a Sudanese cultural tradition of women prematurely aging themselves almost as a consequence of her own humility. Adulthood breeds traumatized psyche's for child brides who are assigned a very narrow life path from the moment they are able to digest the world around them. I say this to highlight that, there are different ideals that older women must learn to identify with that incentivize keeping and engaging with these kinds of objects as some recognition of the sacrifice but also to showcase that they have transitioned in life. This also makes me reflect on Rebecca Soger's concept of "non-referential knowledge". While it may not be formally stated that the relevance of these objects also significantly lies with them being kept by older women, the ways in which they may identify with these objects is almost innate as if they inherited them. I

³⁰ Boddy, Janice. *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan*.

believe that trauma associated with their time as active homemakers is also at the root of this resonance.

The events leading women to Zar are often traumatic with lifelong implications for the afflicted, whether its marriage or children or health, their issues are often grave and it can feel impossible to regain control, and so, the interior is not only fertile, generative or necessarily active, it can also represent silence or freedom from disturbance from stimulation. When your will is constantly overrun, dormance can become the ultimate expression of it. Judith herman breaks down hyperarousal as a state which keeps the victim in constant alert following trauma:

“HYPERAROUSAL: After a traumatic experience, the human system of self-preservation seems to go onto permanent alert, as if the danger might return at any moment. Physiological arousal continues unabated. In this state of hyperarousal, which is the first cardinal symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder, the traumatized person startles easily, reacts irritably to small provocations, and sleeps poorly.”³¹ (p.35)

In her field research Janice Boddy interviews many women in the community on their life and daily activities. She observes that many of the women describe life with great mundanity outside of rights of passage such as marriage and pregnancy, at one point one of the women states “we are just cattle”.

“And if they are, in some respects, guardians and symbols of the salient value in Hofriyat — of interiority — they are highly susceptible to its violation. The ideas of closeness, consuming, and binding convene to illuminate the metaphor by which women most often describe themselves and express the ambivalence of their position. **“Nihna bahaim^ they say, “We are cattle.”**³² Not only is this symptomatic of the lack of autonomy in many of these women's lives but also speaks to a greater tendency of self-neglect that can contribute to failure to adequately interpret and identify harm. In

³¹ Herman, Judith. 2015. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

³² Boddy, Janice. *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan*.

much of my explorations surrounding enclosure specifically as it related to eggs and ostrich eggs in particular, I find that the image and symbol of fracture is just as impactful and relevant in relation to feminine ideals as the implication of spillage which Boddy explores at length particularly in relation to blood. Even when children are born and you are performing your assigned functions, fracture is possible via outsiders, evil eye, e.c.t

Tassels and lace were also found around the home in different capacities, there was a time where my grandmother kept floor to ceiling white lace curtains covering a window that took up half the walls. Tassels were all over the place, on dresses, on bracelets, on furniture. What I find interesting about Boddy's study and reflections upon interacting with Hofriyat women is a seeming lack of acknowledgment of sexuality as it relates to femininity in the region of study. I have always been interested in boudoir photography, mainly because the settings are often reflective of this kind of domesticated feminine sensibility. In delving into the works of women transcendental artists like Naudline Pierre and Rosaleen Norton, I find comfort in their adoption of the nude body as a transcendent form, representing evasion of socio-cultural restrictions of civility and normality. However, this is not the case to be made for the nudity in my own works, which more so speaks to a hidden self, projected in the sexuality of the foreign spirit or character which is being referenced.

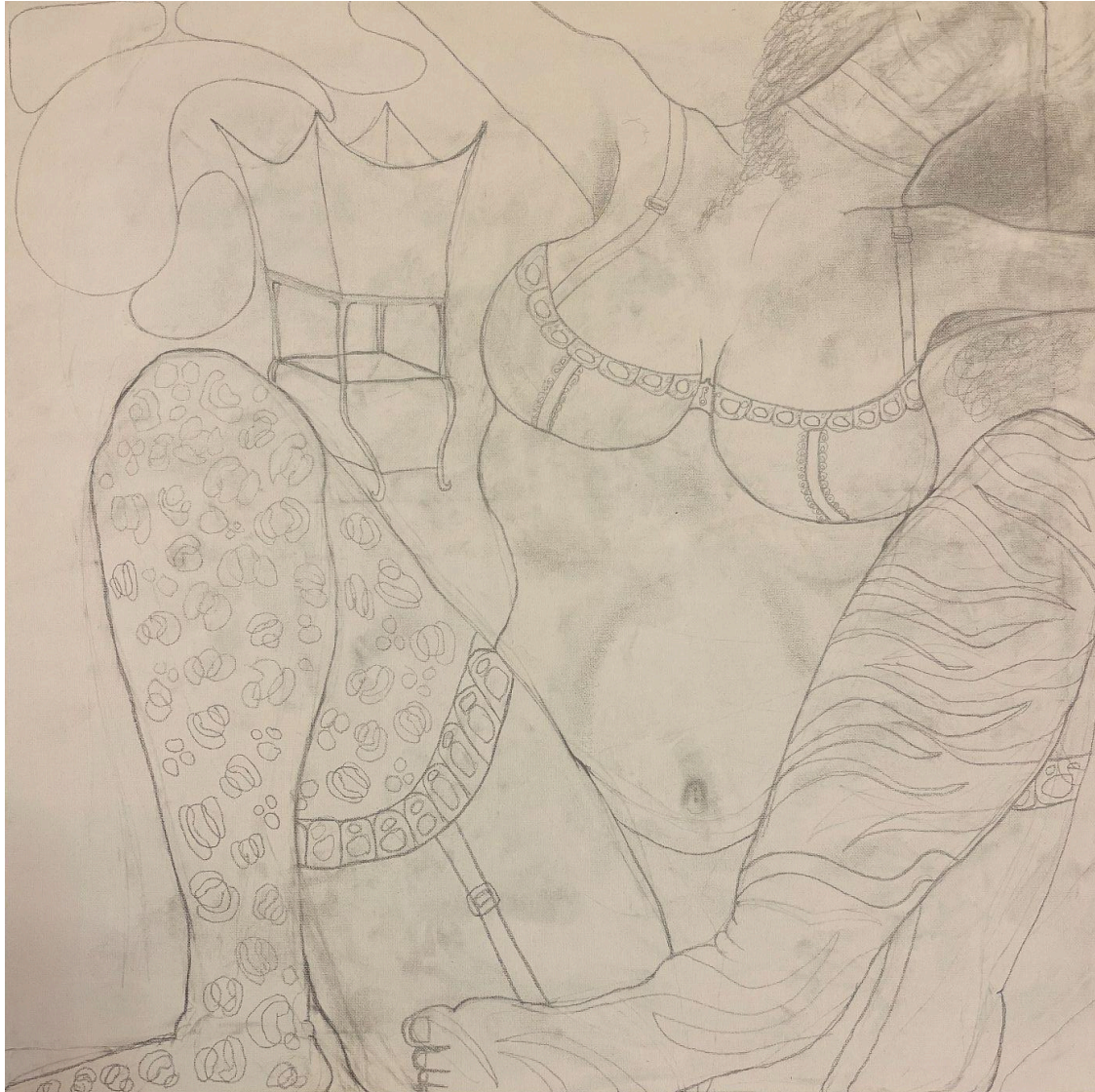
When reflecting on the relational manifestation of ZAR processes with the dialectic of trauma as outlined by Judith Herman, we can begin to observe where and how parallels might be drawn. Earlier I interpreted Janice Boddy's reflections on the emotional states of Hofriyat women to state that they are likely unknowingly suffering from what Herman might describe as "Hyperarousal" accounting for their tendency towards reclusion and inability to map out meaning in a collage of life events outside of our control. This state of hyperarousal may be the state of depression or ill-feeling that sends these women to Zar practitioners in the first place or it may be their default state over years of resilience, what matters is that it be addressed via ceremony.

Drums are commonly used as a means of invoking trance and encouraging

enmeshment with spirit. Going back to Judith Herman's dialectic, when the playing of the drums and the chanting of priestesses are working in tandem, and spirit is adequately placated, the performances begin. Herman describes "intrusion" as the state following hyperarousal where the concept, memory or image at the core of the trauma is brought to the forefront of consciousness. The revelatory functions of Zar are significant, when reflecting on the initiation of the ceremony with music and drumming as a means of satisfying spirit, I am reminded of John Blacking's concept of "Body resonance" which stipulates that we tap into a shared knowing when reacting to and moving along with music. Much of my interest and research into transcendental artmaking is informed by this desire to engage my own library of symbols and meanings in order to tap into something that is shared. It is epistemologically consistent that the music and embellishing elements which decorate the ceremony are necessary for communication with possessing spirits. In my own work I have attempted to integrate this concept of aesthetic transcendentalism by working with particular colors and motifs to signify or even trigger certain states.

Teal and Turquoise in the context of my works represent vitality, pink and gold represent the antithesis of feminine ideals within the Sudanese context. What I find consistently puzzling about the ways in which our culture navigates feminine expression is that while you are occasionally encouraged to pursue extravagance, it must come with some implication of foreign temporality. A woman might say to another woman wearing a shorter skirt or off the shoulder, "wow who are you today?" even minor changes in physical appearance must come with an implication of being ill-fitted or mismatched. This is not to say beauty enhancement is not encouraged, but the centering of nature as the most cogent ideal for femininity frames a lot of enhancement as a disruption or reductive. Much of my work up to this point kind of aims to combat these norms as well as to work towards a construct for feminine identity outside of roles delineated by hetero-patriarchy. The "Interior" as the designated place for the sequestering of all things relating to womanhood and femininity, is the perfect place to locate what I can describe as a latent sexuality informing women's lives. This theory I am proposing of

latent sexuality manifests via a semiotic language as well as in Zar and certain wedding contexts, which are the only times it is considered socially acceptable for women to be glamorous without being considered unholy.



The policing of women's movements and behaviors is a recurring source of anxiety for members of northern Sudanese society and the shifting implications of interiority from protection to potential imprisonment and containment. Much of my resonance with Al-khalaa as a universe of meaning is rooted in this overbearing containment. Al-khalaa is not simply the outdoors or referring to the natural world, it is conversely the absence

of life and spirit. It's the difference between being in nature and being in the wild. One of my first explorations into these themes was a laser cut project where I designed and cut a tarot card based on one of my sketches. I named the card "Malikat Al Khalaa" (**fig .12**) or Queen of the Khalaa as a means of metaphorically reclaiming these domains. The inspiration behind this experiment were the stories I would hear from my grandfather on his way home from work on the desert highway. There was one tale he would repeat about a woman apparition. He claimed to have been driving down the dark road when suddenly a woman appeared at the side of the road, he stopped and told her to move away from the street and she did not respond, he continued driving and claims she spontaneously re-appeared in front of the car running him off the road in panic.

What is interesting about this story is the horror initially contained in what is seemingly mundane. A woman spotted on the side of the road is hardly horrifying, but in a region where women rarely walk alone during the day let alone at night, it becomes a source of psycho-spiritual horror. The reason for this lies in the same socio-cultural delineations that assign women as guardians of the interior. When women evade the interior, they become unmanageable and by extension horrifying. This phenomenon is not unique to the Sudanese context. The myth and legend of the woman apparition is consistent across cultures. It is quite likely that the idiom of relative enclosure and by extension the boundaries of the interior may be the source of these narrativizations of women as evasive and terrifying in spirit.



In most of my works I am engaging with metallic colors, paints and materials. This is not accidental. There are several layers to the inclusion of silver and gold in particular. Firstly and most obviously, gold in Sudan is considered sacred, it offers protection from negative spirit as well as a very real lifeline for many women who otherwise have no significant assets to claim. Furthermore, I am engaging in a subtle subversion of these ideals by incorporating designs found among non-precious/industrial metal objects such as screws and nails and painting over them in gold. An example of this is the following work, which consists of several small coins made from clay and painted over with gold. The process involved impressing several little balls of clay with the back of different nails. **(fig.13)**

Red and pink are also consistently seen throughout my works, occasionally mixed together. I wanted to shift the innate implications of the color within the culture and engage with it instead as glamorous and sensual as opposed to biological, fertility related or womb related. In addition to exploring and subverting the relevance of commonly used colors in Zar, I also sought out to experiment with the concept of tassel and lace as symbols of interiority. My first experiment was an attempt at making clay

lace, which ended up looking more like a mesh but was a good start nonetheless.

(fig.14)

Then I decided to make some tassels. I wanted to make one larger tassel and two smaller ones accompanying it. The symbolic relevance of the tassel is manifold, first there is the obvious association with islamic cultures and garbs. Second, there is the shape of the tassel which often mimics a feminine form and represents the kind of excessive embellishment Sudanese covet due to its associations with foreignness. When I started working on the projects I found it quite tedious but as time went on I was able to watch the tassels form. I dipped one of them in water paint and it stained it a lovely purple color at the bottom. Another symbolic dimension of the tassel is its potential allusion to the sema or Dervishes who engage in Sufi prayer practices and the movements of their garbs during worship ceremonies.

Another conceptual framework providing much of the symbolism I refer to in my research is the desert landscape, which for the sake of this research is labeled "Al-khalaa". Aside from referring to my photography of the landscape, I also integrate different plants such as thornbush and animals including donkeys and bats. The significance of these symbols lies in their transgression of feminine ideals. One of my favorite desert scenes is watching the bats fly out from under the palm trees at sunset or sunrise. Transgression is the core technology facilitating healing within Zar ceremonies, though not all would refer to it as such. While some scholars agree that Zar is a process of provocation of spirit, others have framed it more so as a placation. In my work I try to make space for both of these possibilities, highlighting the erratic and occasionally violent nature of possession as well as the pleasant controlled elements seemingly enjoyed by participants.

Furthermore, as an ethnographic component to my research I decided I wanted to create some works in memory of my great aunt's artistic practice in college making. The two works created are inspired by this concept of Al-khalaa and desert mysticisms. The snake symbolizes Jebel Berkal, a Holy Mountain located in Meroe in North Sudan. The

snake head is said to be an ancient god protecting the nearby burial grounds of the past kushite kings and queens. The works are made using holographic vinyl print on two wood boards. **(fig.8)** In looking back on the ways in which I have paralleled the processes of Zar with the dialectic of trauma, highlighting how possession states can mirror hyperarousal while drumming and singing can trigger intrusion of trauma memories, I can't help but think about the thoughts and images that must be racing through the minds of participants. These two vinyl works are a reflection of that hidden interiority felt by the possessed. If I were to imagine where they went then I might say they were in Al Khalaa or some other alternate dimension of wonder and enlightenment.

5. Final reflections and Gallery experience:

Upon entering the space the first pieces guests are confronted with are the sketch panels. **(fig.5)** A latent theme running through the course of the exhibit is artifact, documentation and anthropological study as an ode to the source material. The *non-finito* style is also an emblem of a saying reiterated throughout Janice Body's research as a part of the self concept of women living in Hofriyat. The women would state; "Nihna Bahaim" "We are cattle" as a symbol of their sense of relative primitiveness or lack of worldliness in relation to both their Men counterparts and the colonial empires that entrap their identities. Furthermore, Psychologist Dr. Bruce Perry argues that sketching and drawing can constitute a kind of rhythmic processing towards healing³³. When considering the impact of the non-finito style adopted in many of the works, I am attempting to draw attention to this process of stabilization and spontaneous generation that happens in these pre-refined stages of making. Showing the generative marks feels more intimate in that the boundaries between my expression

³³ Perry, B. D. (2006). The Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics: Applying principles of neurodevelopment to clinical work with traumatized and maltreated children. *Children's Voice*, 15(3), 32–38.

and creation are eroded, humanizing the process while also contributing to the visual narrative of the gallery as a laboratory or private work-space/Borderspace, more so containing fragments and samples of concepts and ideas. By choosing this approach I choose to prioritize the process of regulation over that of completion. Thus, trauma healing becomes a hallmark of my practice within the borderspace.

Metallic paint and abstract swirls are present on all the panels. Gold and silver in this context represent the material value placed on and abdicated to women via the transfer of regional luxuries such as gold, which are materially entangled with customs around marriage, courtship and familial inheritance. The rushed urgency in the pencil markings and sketch work for me also speaks to this anthropological tendency towards synthesization in that, the small window of time afforded for engagement with local populations and cultures is burdened with the task of accounting for the histories of entire peoples. There is also, on my part, a bit of difficulty around gold as a commodity and regional symbol because of the havoc it continues to wreak on not only North Sudan but Ethiopia and South Sudan in the same vein. The starkness of the metallic paint in these boards, highlighting the weight of these goods when measured up against the humanity of their keepers.

As you move further into the gallery the next works in the sequence include a small vinyl collage and an acrylic and pencil work on canvas. The work which features a headless torso with prayer beads around the waist (Sibha), animal print lingerie, Bakhour³⁴ and distorted faces is a continuation of the non-finito style with an added vibrancy and liveliness. Possession as a healing mechanism largely involves cultivating a space for free expression as a condition for revelation. Within the concept of ZAR this idea is both literal in the sense of costume and props, and metaphorical in relation to freedom from localized cultural rigidities. In this piece the body of a woman is depicted with her arms and legs open, symbolizing freedom and security within the space.

³⁴ **Traditional Arab incense culture** crafted using a blend of aromatic elements like agarwood, oud, resin, spices, flowers and essential oils. - <https://medium.com/@jaquasiasplatforms/what-is-bakhoor-the-pursuit-of-perfumed-pleasure-348ae2e44281>

Furthermore, she is unclothed to highlight her ability to be vulnerable as a condition for her expression, her head is hidden to represent the temporary vacancy that makes way for the ideals of penetrating spirits, represented in the distorted faces emerging from the bakhoor. For me this piece emerges as an expression of the state of healing as freedom from internalized dogmas. The vibrant blue background placing the subject is in the sky, elevated above restriction.

The next series of pieces guests are confronted with are the two neon panels and the clay objects which include a tassel head, two tassels, and 7 medallions which are the same as those featured on the panels. **(Fig 3.1&3.2)** There is a cohesion in this part of the space between these works that further entrenches this theme of field work and documentation. The arrangement of the clay objects on the clear table has the appearance of treasures uncovered, particularly against the contemporary nature and feel of the clear tables they are presented on. **(Fig.15)** On either side of this object display is one of the neon panels. The brightness of the works makes them almost vibrate in the space. Although I do regret not adding a third neon panel which I still plan on completing, I do appreciate the negative space between the two works which almost works as a buffer zone representing gaps filled by emanating vibrations or energies spilling out from the works.

The final aspect of the show are 3 collage works composed of my own photography taken at the Sudan Ethiopia border. The first image is a photo of power lines with a vinyl cutout of a power line from another personal photo, layered over the first photo in holographic vinyl. In normal light the superimposed powerline appears black/greyish with a dim rainbow reflection, almost like an oil spill. When a flash photo is taken, a vibrant rainbow is reflected in the captured image. **(Fig 16.1&16.2)** The other 2 pieces are collages on wood boards. This is the last section of the show with the pieces placed almost in the corner of the room, dimming the area around it. In retrospect, one of my regrets is not incorporating a sand welcome mat like I did in other shows in front of this section as an induction into the exterior but I think the shift is communicated subtly through the space. The other pieces naturally demand more attention through their

placement, though there is a sense of sparseness throughout, somewhat reflecting the desolation of the saharan landscape inspiring the work. **(Fig.17)**

When considering the metaphysical spatialities I am engaging through this experimentation, this section is a subtle allusion to “Al-khalaa”, which can be interpreted as a parallel concept to “the exterior”, characterized by dryness, dust, distinct lack of life and sparse vegetation. Though the exterior describes a cultural delineation as opposed to a geographical one, both concepts emerge from the same cultural consciousness that overlays terrains with metaphysical mappings, gendering the landscape. Al-khalaa is also where many men are made to work, mining gold, farming land and shepherding animals. The power lines are a stark contrast to this sentiment though. Oddly enough, these pieces bring me back to the statements reiterated by the women participants of ZAR “Nihna Bahaim” “We are cattle”.

Though they are meant to represent a masculinized exterior, in the colonial context, modernity can marginalize when instituted without local consideration. There is also the silent price of increasing FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) in Africa, the idea of infrastructure being rooted in your land for foreign extraction is unfortunately a common concept. In the first panel with the enlarged power line, there is almost an impression of alien technology, interdimensionality as well as the kind of desert mysticism reminiscent of the synthetic faiths and beliefs found in western esoteric communities like the UFO movement, largely predicated on the semiotic synthesis of pre-established cultural imaginaries from the global south. These pieces are also somewhat shoddy, textured and faded in color, almost like having been baked in the sun for a prolonged period, making them appear more like ornaments of the exterior. Overall, the show ended up operating more as a laboratory for the development of a symbolic visual language that will operate as a jumping off point for further arts based research. From this Junkyard of images I am able to outline a clear and more refined sense of direction and further work to do inspired by each of the projects presented in this show.

6. Results:

Upon taking up this research one of my main aims was to engage the Borderspace in order to subvert the ideals which I believed existed at the root of the traumas that marginalize women and necessitate the need for Zar-Bori in North Sudan. Having engaged in this process of arts based research I find that these concepts of feminine perfection, while being highly idealized and ontologically exalted, are not necessarily emphasised within the boundaries of the ceremony itself. While women who are struggling with mental or physical health issues often consult with Zeyran with the aim of fixing their ailments, the entire point of the ceremony is in that it provides solutions in what may otherwise be regarded as a vacuum of knowledge in relation to a particular issue. However, upon taking up this research my aims included investigating potential limitations as it pertains to the recreation of norms ceremonies like Zar claim to evade. On one hand Zar provides a clear framework operating along an axis of foreignness which allows for illustrative and hybridized modes of expression. On the other hand, the process of possession is one which begins outside the context of ceremonial trance and is often exacerbated by cultural realities. Upon reflecting on my first research question which seeks to uncover the visual and aesthetic culture rooting ideals incentivizing partaking in Zar, I can ultimately conclude that the impact of visual cues and semiotics on zar cannot be understated. Firstly, in engaging in historiographical research and combing through my own childhood, two clear axis of meaning emerge, one which is more greatly oriented in islam and another which is indigenous and grounded in pre-colonial meaning. Zar offers the Borderspace as an area where these two universes can exist in conversation with one another in a society where they are otherwise often in conflict.

In my approach to this research I made an effort not to engage Arabic writing or many transnational symbols relating to islam such as the crescent moon or other symbols. My main justification for this was that Islam is such an all encompassing and robust culture, it can become easy to mix up boundaryless symbols with those implicating regional knowledge systems. Here I find that the metaphors and ideals defining femininity were

actually quite simple and rudimentary, almost by design. The idiom of relative enclosure as described by Janice Boddy perfectly encapsulates the nature of objects constituting the imaginary of the interior. From eggs to jars to canned food to white cloths, what these images intend to highlight is not subtle or incommunicable but intended to be simple enough to allow for transferability of meaning in ways that are immediate and explicit. The prevalence of metallic paints particularly in Gold and Silver almost operate in favor of the same function. One thing I have learned from my research is the spiritual transferability of visual stimuli. I also employ bright neon poster paint in many of the works both as a means of attracting the eye and emphasising the dullness of the pencil marks.

Upon completing some of my works I found the stark contrast between the unpainted generative drawings and the painted works interesting.. For me, the value of keeping pencil lines on the works in this case highlights the paradox of the seemingly humble and rural self identification of ZAR-Bori participants, and the highly sophisticated foreign world that informs them. There is a process of projection that takes place with the objects decorating the ZAR universe. Gold and other objects symbolising purity, enclosure and status become directly synonymous with womanhood. This brings me to my second question which reflects on the ways, if any, in which Borderspace operates as a creative and artistic framework and site of generative making. The social function of Zar is twofold, there is the aspect which is healing in nature and the side that is purely celebrational, casual and done for enjoyment and entertainment. I believe that this complex role Zar plays in the society can also be attributed to a general need and desire from women participants for some degree of freedom and joy in a culture that conceals and naturalizes all of their achievements within the interior and demands constant humility..

Furthermore, upon researching the various stages of Zar ceremony, starting with possession and culminating to trance, the concepts grounding Judith Herman's dialectic each manifest in concurrence but for different reasons. If we consider the state of early

possession to be similar to that of hyperarousal and the symptoms of hyperarousal to resemble many of those symbolising agitation with spirit such as sleeplessness, Zar becomes necessary if we are honoring the sequence of events outlined in the dialectic. In essence, the dialectic presupposes the states leading up to trance. If hyperarousal is first with possession, then Zar would come next to symbolize intrusion, which is the process of traumatic recall or flashbacks. Zar is an inversion of the dialectic if we consider trance as a moment of intrusion. Rather than being naturally triggered by spontaneous stimuli and retreating, Zar intercepts this process and instead forcefully induces trance, inducting the worshipper into a new world of meaning in relation to themselves and forcing the activation of healing processes.

7. Conclusion:

The ways in which the idiom of relative enclosure and extended landscape of “interiority” shape the self concepts of women participants of Zar-Bori ceremonies are numerous. First, there is the impact of those objects and images which are thought to possess the essence of feminine perfection, such as Gold, water, blood and the gourd. The functionality of these ideals lies in the ease with which they allow for transferability of meaning and responsibilities. The unidimensional nature of meaning and ideals communicated through many of these objects considered to occupy feminine perfection cannot on their own create meaning or effectively placate the need for individuation. It is these limitations that request a subsidiary technology such as Zar and the Borderspace be employed.

Thus, not only are the ideals and images surrounding femininity not compatible with the lived realities of many women who occupy these communities, they are not designed to

be. The role these objects play is for the projection of unmet or met benchmarks of feminine performance as well as for the purpose of constructing a semiotic language that is shared and easily communicated. On the other hand, an argument can also be made that the simple and rudimentary nature of these objects also functions as community builders. Constructing an entire world of meaning that women can organize and support each other in relation to. Foreignness is another central axis of knowledge upon which ZAR operates. If possession gives rise to the circumstances that call for Zar, then foreignness is the language that mitigates your engagement with it. Trance must take place in context so as to maintain ideological boundaries between possessed and possessor, instilling the need for foreignness to facilitate this process. The Borderspace invites and presupposes this engagement with foreignness as symbolic of the crossing of an implied boundary between space and time, constructing unique visual narratives within the space through body resonance and non-referential knowledge.

1. The visual narrative surrounding ZAR and more specifically Trance affirms a process of trauma healing taking place.

All in all, upon exploring the manifestations of the visual narrative of ZAR within the Borderspace, we can deduce that a process of trauma healing is clearly taking place as participants can be seen being triggered into parallel states as those outlined in the dialectic of trauma which is summarized by Herman as 3 core concepts: **hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction.**

When considering the ways in which forms of non-referential knowledge such as body resonance operating via drum beat or color might be working to support these processes, it is made even more obvious that trauma healing is taking place as the body resonance experienced with the Daluka drum beats, or neon panels reflected in the final works, not only exemplifies Blacking's theory, but illustrates the process of intrusion as potential parallel to that of Trance. If intrusion according to Herman can be understood as the state of re-remembering or retriggering, symptomatic of failed trauma

integration, rather than have intrusion as an organic negative symptom of trauma, trance inverts the mechanics from a self-determinist perspective. With resonance and community the Borderspace opens to provoke the possessed (hyperaroused) state into trance (intrusion) as a means of reclaiming narrative and healing fracture.

Another concept which further validates the idea that the visual narrative within trance is reflecting trauma healing processes is Psychologist Dr. Bruce Perry's theory of Rhythmic Stabilization³⁵ which posits that trauma healing requires moving a memory from a frozen state into a rhythmic, integrated one, and that rhythmic activities contain inherent trauma healing functions due to mirroring life-sustaining processes like heartbeats. Body resonance triggered by the *Daluka* or neon panels in the gallery space forces the nervous system to move and shake the trauma off by providing an external frequency for the body to latch onto.

2. The Borderspace can be adopted as an approach to artistic practice as a means of generating subversive imagery and Hybrid forms; producing art that reflects the interaction of dominant narratives and ways of being and thinking with the exterior and its principles.

I feel this was clearly validated not only in the diversity of concepts produced; from clay tassels to distorted forms in medallions and collage works inspired by Al-khalaa. On one hand the Borderspace represents the endless potential of synthesising processes and how cross-examining our own narratives against totally different universes of meaning is necessary for growth. The Borderspace should not be confused with the exterior, while it contains its essence, it is more so a meeting place where concepts and symbols come together for the particular purpose of convergence and generation. When considering the implication of altered states as a potential manifestation of fragmentation of self, the Borderspace offers a natural solution; a space where ideals that necessarily repel one another can come together for the sake of producing knowledge. It is in the context of

³⁵ Frew, Julie. "Rhythm, regulation, and relationship." In *Unleashing the Power of Musical Play*, pp. 43-57. Routledge, 2025.

the Borderspace that vibrant colors are bleached and faded under sunlight, or indoor objects like toilettes and beds are made to be outdoors. It is where objects, materials and people go to temporarily defy narratives and governing principles that have failed to bring them healing or comfort. Fragmentation is a common psychological reaction to trauma. If possession is understood as a process of internal fragmentation of values and concepts of self, then Zar and the Borderspace become logical sites for re-integration and expression.

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Figure 5: Collection of Artboards, Pencil and acrylic. 2026.



Figure 6: Sheika: Acrylic on artboard
2026

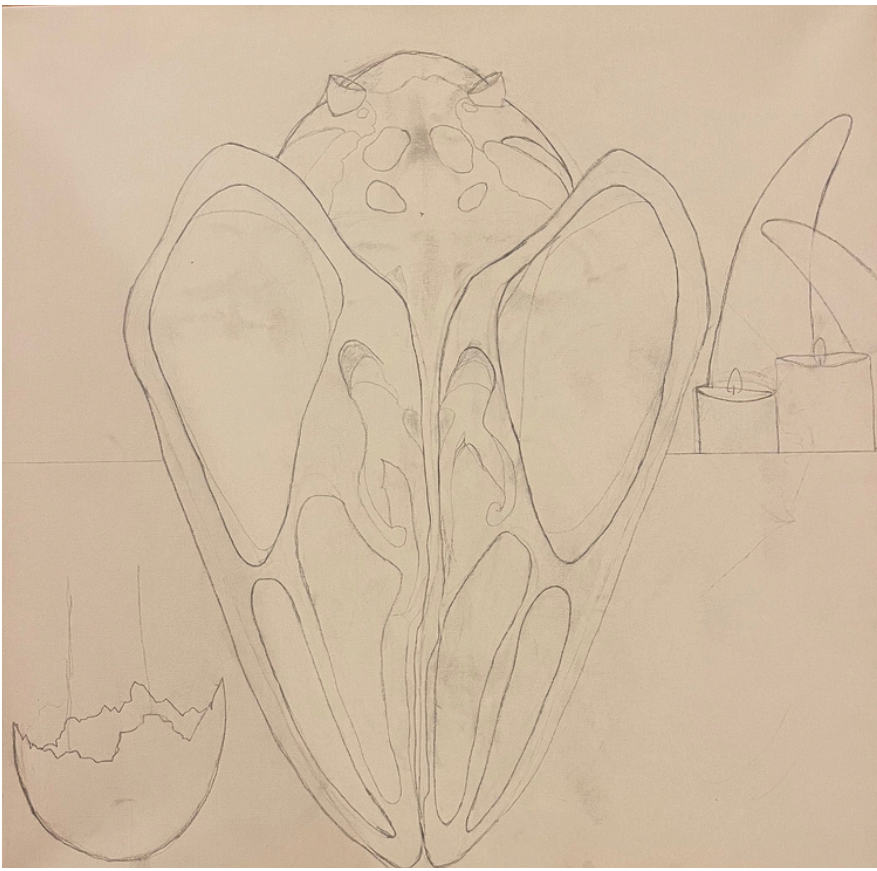


Figure 1

Ostritch head
experimental sketch
piece.



Figure 2

Entranced:
Acrylic, water
color and
pencil on
canvas
2026



Possession circle 1:
Clayworks on painted canvas

Figure 3.1



Possession circle 2:
Clayworks on painted canvas

Figure 3.2



Claywork faces:
part of neon panel peice

Figure 4

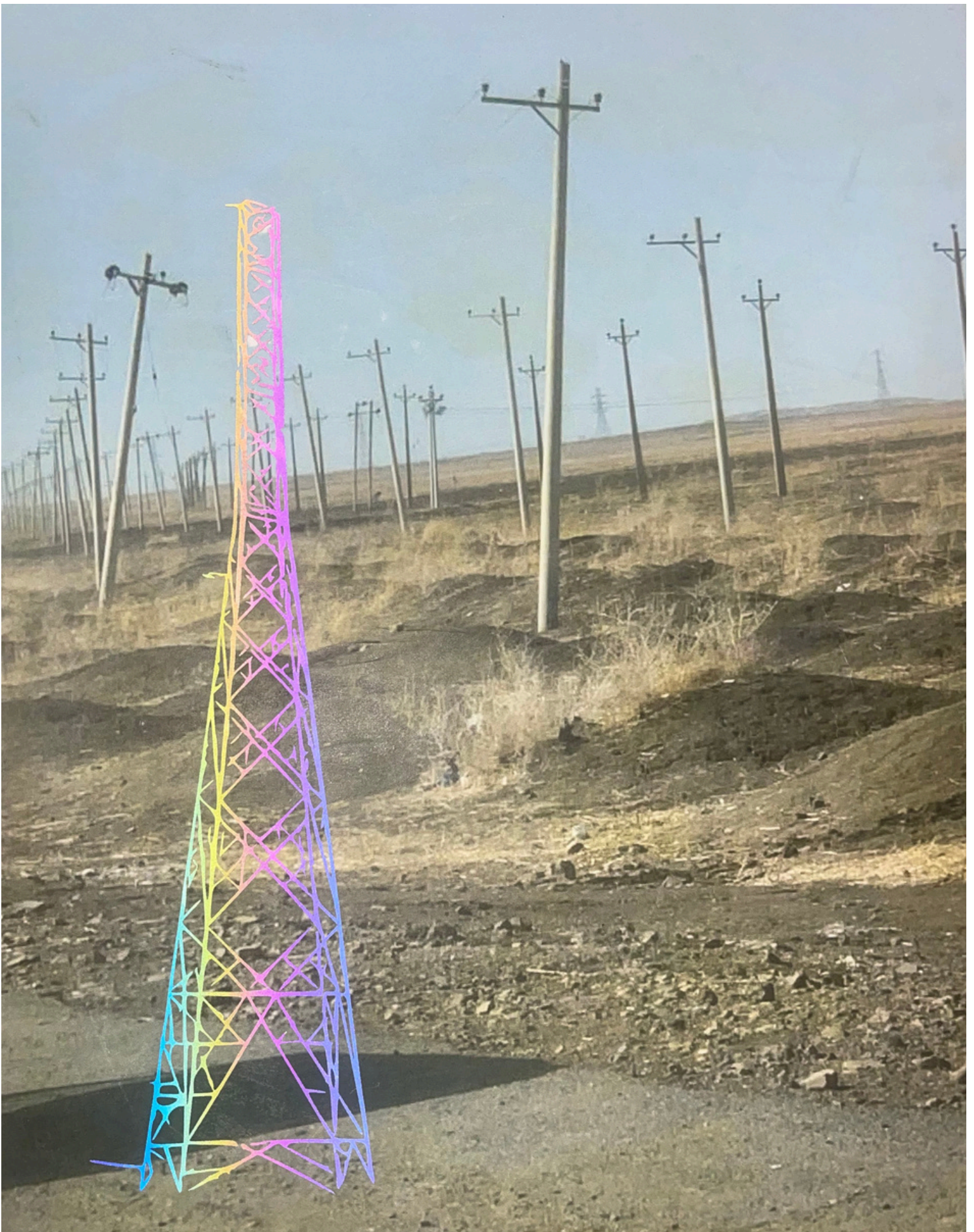


Figure 16.1 Vinyl Collage 2026



Figure 16.2 Vinyl collage 2026



Figure 7.1 Claywork tassel head, 2026

Figure 7.2

Claywork
Tassels
2026



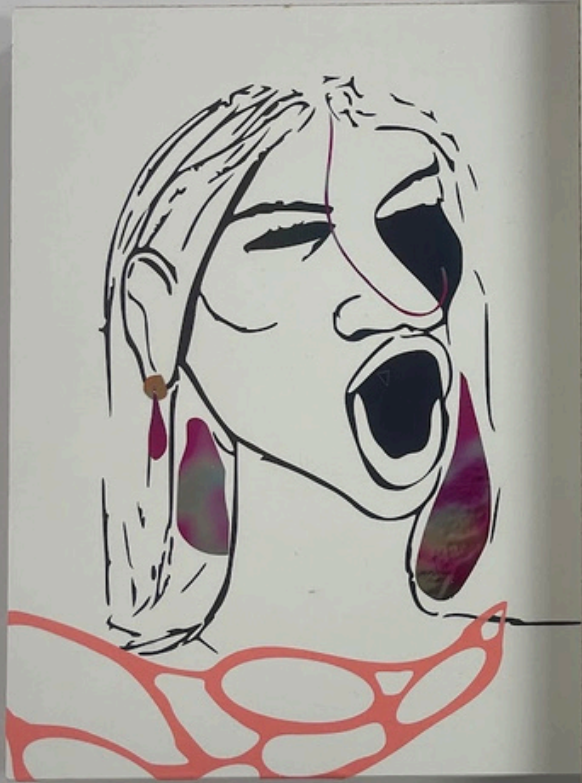


Figure 8:
Vinyl collages
on woodboard
2026



Figure 9

Experimentations with
interiority/exteriority:
Chewed up clay peices,
sand welcome matt.



Figure 10

More fabrication experiments:



3D print design of women reproductive system and clay peices meant to fit over for gun design. -->>



Figure 11:

Personal
photography
collage on
woodboard.

2026

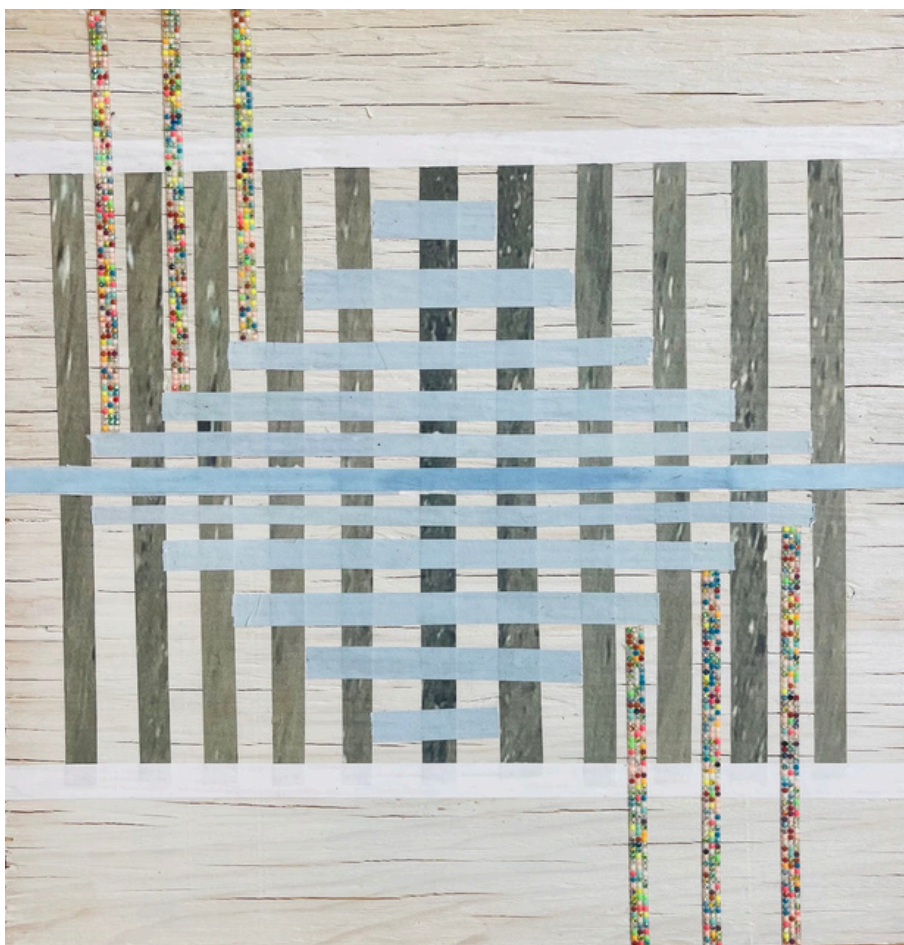




Figure 12

Fabrication
experimentation
with laser printing
Al-khalaa inspired
tarot card.

2025

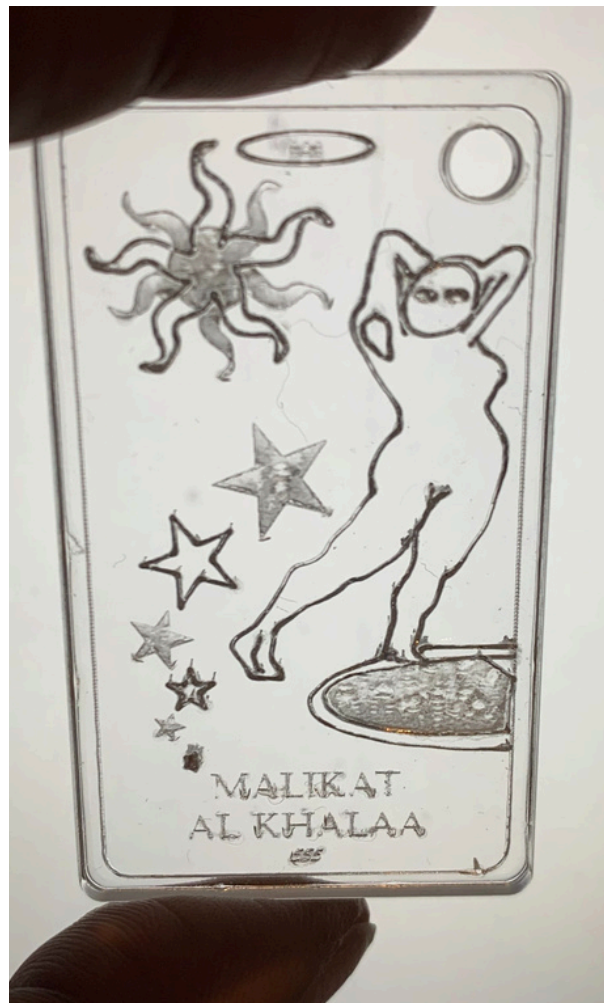




Figure 13

Early experimentation with neon panel possession circle concepts.

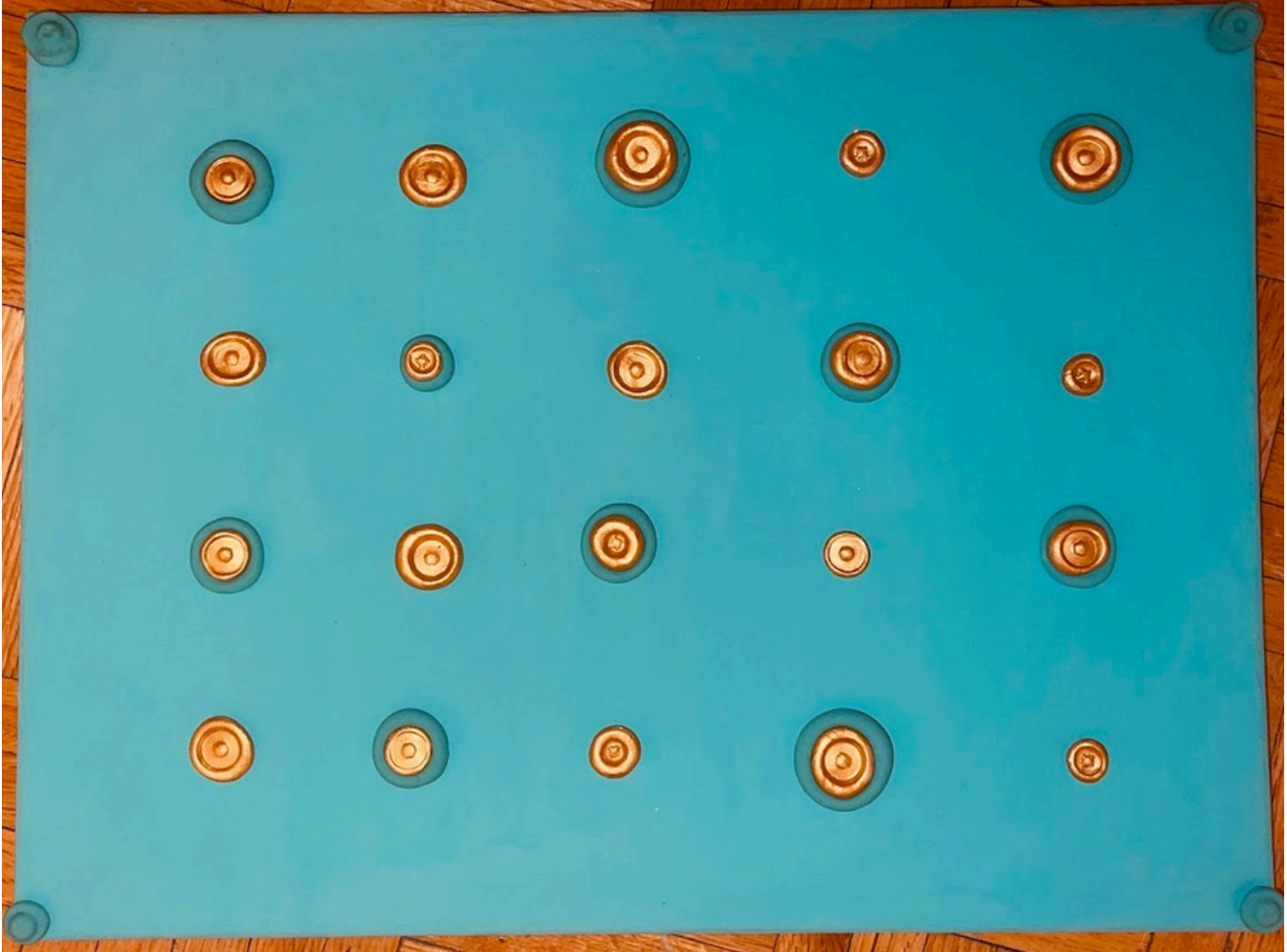




Figure 17
Gallery space

Figure 15
gallery space

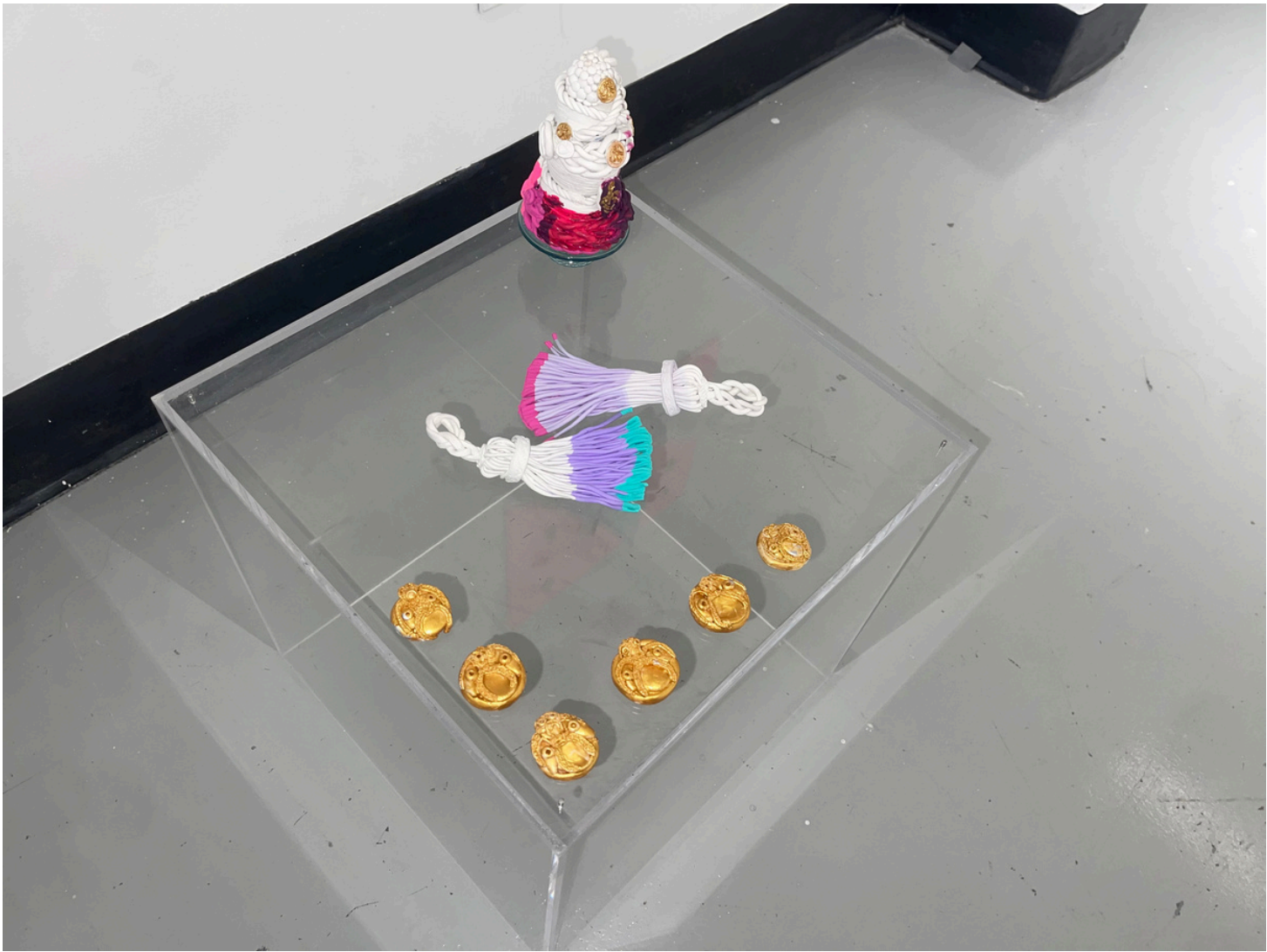
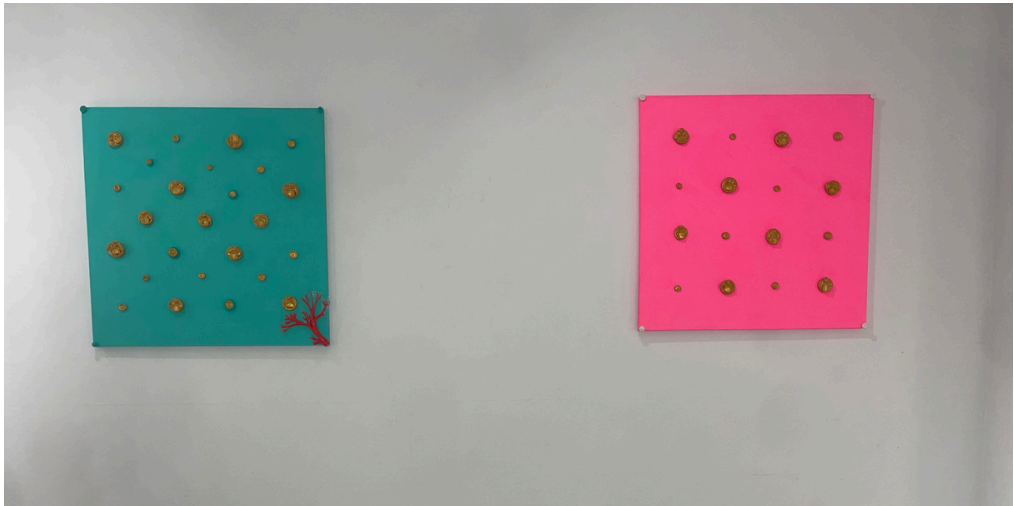


Figure 14

Attempt at Claywork lace

