Grab/ Hold

By Matthias Khoury-Whalen

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for

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Abstract:

This thesis project, and its accompanying exhibition *Grab/ Hold,* examine how SWANA diasporic artists create work from experiences of dislocation, fragmented memory, and becoming. Informed by Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology, it explores orientation as a critical framework for understanding how bodies negotiate space and orient themselves within conditions of instability. Drawing on Jalal Toufic's theory of "immaterial withdrawal" and Walid Sadek's "excessive matter", the project situates contemporary diasporic art practices within Lebanon and its ongoing political violence. Through a curatorial model that frames gathering as a form of care, resistance, and community-building, the exhibition brings together works by Batoul Faour, Christina Hajjar, Dana Qaddah, Muriel Ahmarani Jaouich, and Nour Bishouty. *Grab/ Hold* foregrounds queer Arab perspectives and understands artistic practice as a means of grounding and reorientation within diasporic experience.

Acknowledgment:

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my father, whose unconditional love and support have guided me not only through this academic journey but also through life's broader journey.

Preface:

I decided to include my mother's maiden name in my thesis writing as a way of honouring my grandparents and their experiences of immigration and homemaking. While I have been wanting to formally incorporate it into my name for some time, I hesitated to include it in the promotional material attached to the show, as I have not yet gone through the bureaucratic process attached to this change. I noticed a sense of urgency in making this change in time for the exhibition, but given the significance I have attributed to this decision, I do not feel there is a sense of immediate urgency. Including it in my writing feels like the right place to begin honouring my ancestral roots on my mother's side, and a first step in an ongoing remembering.

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> Moments of disorientation are vital. They are bodily experiences that throw the world up… Such a feeling of shattering, or of being shattered, might persist and become a crisis. Or the feeling itself might pass as the ground returns or as we return to the ground. The body might be reoriented if the hand that reaches out finds something to steady an action. Or the hand might reach out and find nothing, and might grasp instead the indeterminacy of air.
>
> Sara Ahmed,
>
> *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others, 2006.*

Grab/ Hold is a curatorial project developed in fulfillment of the requirements for OCAD University's Master of Fine Arts degree in Criticism and Curatorial Practices that investigates the ways Lebanese artists from the broader South West Asian and North African (SWANA) region create and produce work out of a place of dislocation and becoming. The exhibition features works from diasporic artists who converse with themes of belonging, resilience, and home-making in their practice. Grounded in autotheory as a methodology, as championed by queer and critical feminist theorists, this thesis and exhibition emerge from a personal place, shaped by intergenerational memory and a desire to further understand collective identity through the gesture of gathering, assembling, listening, and observing. It is a continuation of research I produced in my undergraduate degree, where I looked specifically at sartorial dress practices; how what we wear and the way we choose to adorn ourselves, culturally or aesthetically, shape our experience in a space and in the world.

My identity and Lebanese heritage have formed and inspired my curatorial practice. My grandfather was a metallurgist who was always drawn to the aesthetic aspects of his craft. My

grandmother was a seamstress, tailoring clothes for herself and her children before later establishing a practice of her own. My uncle Michael Khoury is an oil painter, and my aunt and godmother, Nadia Khoury, managed his career for a number of years before eventually opening a commercial gallery in downtown Fredericton, New Brunswick. For as long as I can remember, art has been around me, and I have not only had an interest in it, but in the processes behind creating works and the experiences of artists themselves.

Grab/ Hold comes together as not only an exhibition, but also a warm and inviting meeting place, and an opportunity to gather. Within this space, members of the diaspora and the broader public will come together over food, drink, stories, and artworks. In imagining this, I am drawn to the collective model: how art collectives offer refuge, kinship, and a refusal to be isolated by displacement. At the heart of my inquiry lies the tension between the need to create community from within a fractured, often traumatized, diaspora. Diasporic artist communities share with queer artists a need to create spaces of belonging and safety. Like queer artists, diasporic artists may often find themselves a-kilter or at odds with the spaces that they inhabit. They may also be expected to create or perform within the narrow confines of an assumed or imposed identity. *Grab/ Hold,* as an exhibition, and this thesis, ask how, within a diaspora that has experienced collective grief and withdrawal, do queer SWANA[1] artists produce work out of a place of disorientation. How can a queer lens on diasporic artists' journeys help sustain art practices in ways which affirm and celebrate the artist's craft, without colonial, heteronormative, homonormative, or hegemonic influence?

[1] Maira and Shirazi (2023) explain the increasing use of the term South west asian and north african SWANA in preference to MENA (Middle East and North Africa) studies as a means of decolonizing cultural discourse of the region from western hegemonic perceptions of the region and its relations to the west. This essay will use the term SWANA artists to capture broadly all artist of the geographic region. However, when discussing the history of queer phenomenology in the region, the use of the term queer Arab may be used either in relation to artists or queer persons. Exceptionally,, any reference to art or culture of the Levant references only SWANA artists from Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine.

As captured in the introductory quote set out above, Sara Ahmed makes the point in *Orientations, Bodies, Objects* that Queerness brings on a sense of disorientation between the body and the space around it[2]. She explains that many queer bodies attempt to ground themselves within a space by orienting themselves against a person or an object, real or imagined. I apply this lens to SWANA artists and their creative process. What forms of creative expression emerge from the disoriented Arab body? What anchors sustain diasporic art practices shaped by displacement and memory? More particularly, how do queer Arab bodies orient themselves within spaces not built with them in mind, and in what ways might they reconfigure such spaces through artistic practice? In the years following the civil war, Lebanon saw a reemergence of artistic production, tourism, and cultural life, even as the aftermath of violence continued to shape everyday realities. Today, more than five years after the 2020 Beirut explosion, and in the midst of ongoing occupation and political tensions largely conducted by the genocidal war waged by the State of Israel and the USA, there is an urgent need for a contemporary analysis of the ongoing conflict and its specific impact on artists and creative communities, both in Lebanon and across its diaspora. There is also a need to adopt a queer lens and consider the broader impact these traumas have on queer Arab bodies. The weight of global affairs has had me ask broader questions about the significance of curation as a practice: What is the role of art in times like these? What can curation do in the face of collective grief? These questions have led me toward artists and projects that engage with trauma and recovery, not only as themes, but as conditions of living.

[2] Sara Ahmed, "Disorientation and Queer Objects," in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 157–180.

Amal Traboulsi was the founder of "Épreuve d'Artiste"[3], a grassroots gallery project that emerged after the outbreak of the civil war and moved around Beirut throughout it. The gallery foregrounded community and showcased work by contemporary artists. The work of Walid Raad and his fictional archive, *The Atlas Group*[4], also continues to shape how I think about narrative and truth. He operated under this imagined foundation until 2004, developing projects aimed at researching, archiving, and producing audio, visual, and literary materials that explore Lebanon's contemporary history, with particular focus on the wars from 1975 to 1990.

The following paper is divided into three chapters. The first chapter seeks to situate the reader in relation to the 1975-90 Civil War in Lebanon and the response of artists to this collective trauma, and how this experience has informed diasporic art practices. I will introduce Jalal Toufic and Walid Sadek's concepts of withdrawal and excess, two artistic means of unpacking the detritus of war-born trauma, before returning to these in Chapter Three. The Chapter also begins with my own narrative as a queer person raised within the Christian Lebanese diaspora of the east coast of Canada, where I was born, drawing inspiration from Dr. Andrew Gayed's recent work "*Queer World Making: Contemporary Middle Eastern Diasporic Art.*"[5], and his own practice of autotheory. My research is rooted in the broad themes of home, belonging, and diaspora. Within the Lebanese context, these themes unfold in relation to trauma, resistance, art, the effects of displacement, war, and fractured memory. To frame this, I draw on Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*, which offers disorientation as a critical methodology. By looking through this lens, I seek to examine how diasporic bodies, both queer and non-queer, negotiate the conditions of longing and return. Art becomes a way of tracing the orientations of

[3] Kristine Khouri, "La Galerie qui Bouge: Beirut 1979," *Bidoun*, no. 16 (2009), https://www.bidoun.org/articles/la-galerie-qui-bouge.

[4] The Atlas Group. *The Atlas Group* (1989). https://www.theatlasgroup1989.org/.

[5] Andrew Gayed. *Queer World Making: Contemporary Middle Eastern Diasporic Ar*t, 1st ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1515/9780295752303.

identity, memory, and place. My approach considers how Lebanese and diasporic artists articulate these tensions through their practices.

A second chapter will present the queer theoretical lens proposed by Ahmed in her work as a means of understanding the disorientation that queer people may sense in a relentlessly heteronormative world. This chapter will provide an opportunity to raise questions about the experience of queerness in forging an artist's journey, the relevance of this perspective in understanding other migrations from trauma or the loss of community experienced within diasporas, and the need to create spaces of belonging and identity that are accepting without becoming structuring or normative. As Ahmed points out, the artists' challenge often lies in defending and making space for queer perspectives without those perspectives being neutralized or straightened in the process[6]. Through this understanding of Ahmed's phenomenology, I will look at the works of diasporic artists through a queer lens. In its second part, chapter two moves from a discussion of queer phenomenology to a brief history of queerness in Lebanon and the Middle East. Drawing from Gayed's work, the chapter questions the dominant Western dogma of gay liberation as a gift to the world, when other communities, including SWANA ones, may have had to erase more traditional ways of co-existence between straight and queer community perspectives. By pairing these historical shifts with the lived experiences of contemporary queer Middle Eastern artists this chapter will explore how colonial legacies continue to shape both the possibilities and constraints of queer belonging in the region and its diasporas.

From these perspectives the third chapter will present a curatorial essay. It will include a further look at my curatorial methodology and the exhibition as a whole. Drawing inspiration from Toufic and Sadek's concepts of "immaterial withdrawal" and "excessive matter" introduced above the essay will help to understand processes of collective memory, withdrawal, grief,

[6] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

trauma, and vicarious trauma as it moves through diasporas, as well as art's role in this reconciliation. The chapter will frame the exhibition within these analytical contexts. I will describe the manner in which the exhibition and its curatorial practices will create space for dialogue, exchange and community building within the local diaspora and the broader community.

Chapter three also introduces the major works and artists of the exhibition. The first artist whose work I am including is Christina Hajjar[7], a Lebanese Canadian writer, visual artist, and cultural worker. Based in Treaty 1 territory in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Hajjar's work considers intergenerational memory, inheritance, and place within a diasporic context. She is a queer-femme photographer, filmmaker, and installation artist. I am drawn to Hajjar's photography and video work, notably " تقبرني (Ta'burni) ", translating to "bury me", the ultimate expression of love. It communicates to someone that you wish to die before them, that you could not bear to live without them. The next artist I am looking towards is Nour Bishouty, a multidisciplinary artist, working with video, on paper, and with sculptural installations[8]. She is represented by Cooper Cole in Toronto and has participated in multiple international artistic residency programs. Her work is concerned with memory gaps within archives, knowledge production, and the generative potentials of misunderstanding. Batoul Faour is a filmmaker and architect whose work explores the intersections of materiality, memory, and urban trauma. She graduated from the Master of Architecture program at UofT's Daniels Faculty of Design in 2021. Her thesis project included both the award-winning essay and a film, *Shafāfiyyāh* ("Transparency"), which was featured as part of the group show *Beirut: Eternal Recurrence* at

[7] Christina Hajjar, تقبرني *(Ta'burni)*, 2020, photograph/collage, 24×36 inches, https://christinahajjar.com/art/taburni/.mpcas.ca

[8] Nour Bishouty, *Official Website*, https://www.nourbishouty.com/.

Ottawa's SAW Art Centre. Faour is also a sessional instructor at the Daniels Faculty. Dana Qaddah is an interdisciplinary artist whose work centers around environmental deterioration and colonial legacies. Based on unceded Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh, and Squamish territory, Qaddah practices in between Vancouver, Toronto, and New York, where they are currently completing their MFA at Bard College. Qaddah builds relationships with archives of personal and itinerant cultural knowledge, working across installation, sculpture, photography and video works, while reflecting on generational displacement and feelings of disconnection from one's sense of self and place. Muriel Ahmarani Jaouich is Canadian artist of Armenian, Egyptian, and Lebanese descent, whose paintings focus on historical violence, intergenerational trauma and genealogy. Through painting, she transforms personal and collective histories into intimate visual narratives. Her work approaches grief as a living process, rooted in care and intergenerational healing. She is represented by Patel Brown in Montreal and Toronto; her work is in many private and corporate collections across Montreal, New York, Los-Angeles, Milan, Barcelona, as well as a recent acquisition by the CIBC collection.

This project contributes new understandings of how queer/SWANA artists negotiate dislocation, trauma, and belonging in their practices. It foregrounds queer diasporic perspectives often absent from contemporary art discourse from the region and Western queer art criticism. The exhibition and thesis together seek to create a model for curating as a practice of gathering and care, offering both diasporic and broader audiences a space for dialogue.

CHAPTER I

Introduction: Remnants of Remembrance

I remember sitting in my maternal grandparents' cool, shaded garage on a hot summer's day, smelling their citronella plants and admiring the reach of their fig tree. My grandfather had crafted the wooden chair I sat on; my grandmother had hand-sewn the cushion atop it. That garage, filled with gardening tools and terracotta pots, was a shelter built from memory and labour, a pocket of safety carved from displacement in their new home. After leaving Lebanon and their loved ones behind to start anew in 1959, my grandparents had succeeded in creating a new kind of refuge. I am reminded of memories like these as I write about art and war.

I grew up with a mother born into a Lebanese household in Canada, to Arabic-speaking parents and three siblings who had immigrated with them. By the time my mother was born, her family had begun to settle into their adopted home in New Brunswick, the traditional homeland of the Wabanaki Confederacy ("People of the First Light"), representing the ancestral territory of five Algonquin-speaking nations: Mi'kmaq, Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet), Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, and Abenaki. My father's family is French Canadian, with Acadian and Irish roots, and in my experience growing up, these worlds collided with ease. Both sides of my family had loud rooms filled with song, dance, storytelling, and an emphasis on gathering. Though culturally distinct, these worlds felt deeply aligned in their insistence on togetherness.

At my mother's parents' home, I remember often sitting quietly in rooms full of people laughing, sharing stories in a language I did not understand. The language moved around me as sound, expression, and tone that I began to derive meaning from. Unable to follow the words, I

learned instead to read faces, expressions, and pauses. I became acutely aware of my surroundings at an early age, developing a sensitivity to the atmosphere around me and an ability to sense what was being communicated beyond language. This attentiveness became increasingly necessary as I grew older and more aware of how different I was from most boys my age; at school, in extracurricular spaces, and within my family. I understood, often instinctively, what was expected of me, how masculinity was meant to be performed and inhabited. Yet I could not fully assimilate into those expectations. Nor was I able, or perhaps willing, to disappear into them. Part of this research has shown me that this early training in reading space, bodies, and affect shapes how I move through the world, how I understand and experience moments of disorientation, and how I have come to recognize queerness not only as a facet of identity but as a way of navigating environments we inhabit.

The trauma of queer embodiment in a constrainingly heteronormative culture cannot compare to the blunt trauma of car-bombs, rockets, or air-raids, but is perhaps more relatable to the vicarious trauma experienced by diaspora communities afraid for loved ones back home, which manifests as a constant gnawing feeling not often acknowledged, and if acknowledged, not ever fully explained. As a child, I was frightened to hear of my aunt's harrowing escape from Beirut, dropping her rosary in an untimely way, after two days in hiding, as she tried to cross the green line to safety across the city's religious divide. Regardless of the source of our trauma, their potency and impact, *Grab/ Hold* invites an exploration of otherness, a willingness to see the world from a different angle, from a different experience of it.

In the aftermath of the Lebanese Civil War (1975 to 1990), artists, like my grandparents in their own way, were forced to reckon with what had been lost and what might still be salvaged. The Civil War was a conflict that fractured the nation along religious, sectarian,

ideological, and regional lines. For fifteen years, Lebanon became a battleground for domestic militias and foreign powers alike, including Syria and Israel. The war devastated Beirut, displaced hundreds of thousands, and left an estimated 144,000 dead, 5 percent of the population[9]. Yet despite its immense toll, Lebanon never underwent a formal process of transitional justice. In the war's aftermath, a general amnesty law was passed in 1991[10], effectively silencing public reckoning and allowing political actors to resume power without accountability. Without a national truth commission or a process of collective mourning, postwar Lebanon became a site of fragmented memory and state-sanctioned amnesia. While the war left permanent scars on Lebanon's landscape and its people, it also offered a fertile ground for artists to intervene. Without an official acknowledgment, contemporary artists and curators continued to operate and produce work that began to build an unofficial archive, reclaim public space, and resist erasures enforced by state interests. This chapter will examine how artists working during this period engaged with resistance movements, helped citizens address the trauma of war, and shaped collective thought. Specifically, I will introduce the concepts of excessive matter and immaterial withdrawal, illustrating these concepts briefly through the work of Walid Raad's *The Atlas Group* (1989-2004) and Amal Traboulsi's Gallery: Épreuve d'Artiste (1979-2006). Before turning to the artists of the *Grab/ Hold* exhibition, this review will situate how an earlier generation of Lebanese artists, prior to the most recent diaspora, used their artistic and curatorial practices to challenge state-controlled narratives, counter political amnesia, and reconstruct memory in postwar Lebanon.

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[9] Samir Makdisi and Richard Sadaka, "The Lebanese Civil War, 1975–90," in *Understanding Civil War: Evidence and Analysis*, ed. Paul Collier and Nicholas Sambanis (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2005), p.69, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep02484.7.

[10] Ryan Saadeh, "On Justice Denied: Interrogating Amnesty and Amnesia in Post-Conflict Lebanon," *Yale Journal of International Affairs,* https://www.yalejournal.org/publications/on-justice-denied-interrogating-amnesty-and-amnesia-in-post-conflict-lebanon.

Laughter, Excess and Withdrawal

In an article published in *Bidoun*, Edwin Nasr[11] reflects on the paradox of living in an environment where death is unavoidably present. Nasr recounts the stories of postwar generations raised by "cheerful militants," exposing how violence was often filtered through humour, bravado, and myth. He asks ruefully: "Was inappropriate laughter our inheritance?" To outsiders, this may seem perverse or unseemly, but for those living amid the ruins, reframing the unfathomable as something survivable becomes a way of coping. And yet, these romanticized narratives can slip dangerously into denial, echoing the state's own target of erasure. Can art and artists offer a more honest reckoning? Can they create spaces where trauma is neither glamorized nor buried, but felt in its excess?

Lebanese artist and theorist Walid Sadek has described the aftermath of civil war as a time when one encounters what he calls "excessive matter"; the physical and emotional remains of violence that resist rationalization or representation. These are not simply ruins or remnants; they are presences that overwhelm and rupture the link between what we see and what we understand. A bombed neighbourhood, a missing relative who does not return, or a lost childhood home are all examples of excessive materiality. It is within this tension between recognition and estrangement that we find excessive matter.

Another leading theorist and contemporary of Sadek's is Jalal Toufic. He has explained the artist's response to such excessive trauma as a process of "immaterial withdrawal", a loss of culture and tradition after war and tragedy. Toufic explains that even if the physical remnants,

[11] Nasr, Edwin. "Laughter Was Our Inheritance A Beirut Diary." *Bidoun*, no. 29 (2021). https://bidoun.org/articles/edwin-nasr.

artifacts, or objects remain, the rupture of war and trauma force a relational withdrawal from these items or histories that can not be retrieved. It becomes the artists' job to then recontextualize these histories, without nostalgia or longing for the past, but with new and energized vitality.

Walid Sadek's "Excessive Matter"

Sadek discusses a collective response to the aftermath of war not as something that can be fully represented, but as an "excess of materiality." This excess names a mode of understanding shaped by violent interruptions to daily life, events that cannot be fully interpreted but are deeply felt[12]. The experience carries an emotional charge that manifests as a persistent presence, one that is often too difficult to fully relate to, confront or turn toward. What defines this condition is the estrangement of the familiar: the closer the figure, the home, or the everyday space, the deeper the bodily response. It is through this proximity that the familiar turns excessive, appearing as a presence that resists comprehension. Fares Chalabi, in his essay "Art as Resistance in post War Lebanon," insists that Sadek's experience of excessive matter is always grounded in family and familiarity, indeed that it must be so grounded in order to experience "the rupture between presentation and representation". He illustrates the concept with Sadek's own account of his return to Beirut after the 2006 Israeli air raids and being torn by his visit to once familiar neighborhoods, holding in one hand the names of these places and in the other their locations, but now unable from the rubble to reconcile the two. In Sadek's words: "One may say that Beirut is twofold: A receptacle of abandoned names and an excess of tangibility. It is the

[12] Walid Sadek, "Place at Last," *Art Journal* 66, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 39.

names afloat over neighborhoods and apartment buildings constructed out of rubble, a mix of fragments." As we will see in the curatorial essay in Chapter Three, and in the *Grab/ Hold* exhibition, the more recent experience of Beirut's destruction by the port explosion and the ongoing Israeli occupational aggressions has led new artists to search for meaning no longer in the concrete rubble, but in the shards of glass from a city shattered anew. Even as I write, Beirut is destroyed once again by Israeli bombs. Just this morning, I read an article informing me that less than a week ago, on March 18th, an Israeli airstrike killed Ali Sbeity, a local painter and visual artist from the southern Lebanese village of Kafra[13]. His work was known for highlighting the beauty of the land, of Lebanon and its people, and the animals he came to know in nearby villages. While Sadek's own art practice gave meaning to this concept of excessive matter, it is perhaps even more powerfully illustrated in the work of Walid Raad.

Walid Raad's *The Atlas Group* was created by the artist in 1989. He produced work under this imagined foundation until 2004. The project's purpose was to research, archive, and produce audio, visual and literary materials that examine Lebanon's contemporary history, with an emphasis on the wars between 1975 and 1990. Blurring the line between fact and fabrication, Raad's work challenges conventional notions of historical truths. *The Atlas Group* dismantles linear narratives by playing with the authority typically assigned to galleries and cultural institutions, asking us to question who dictates what is understood as truth.

Confronted with the excess matter of the war's detritus, Raad's *The Atlas Group* operates on the register of a detailed examination of absence. One of the most intriguing aspects of *The Atlas Group* is this constant blurring between reality and fiction. Although the work is largely

[13] Isa Farfan, "Lebanese Artist Ali Sbeity Reportedly Killed in Israeli Strike," Hyperallergic, March 25, 2026, https://hyperallergic.com/lebanese-artist-ali-sbeity-reportedly-killed-in-israeli-strike/.

framed as fiction, the themes and images relate to daily contemporary life in Lebanon. His work includes real images and archives, but is amalgamated in a way that emphasizes subjectivity. Can framing facts in this way bring us closer to his experience of life through conflict? Raad calls institutions into question by presenting much of his work in the traditional authoritative format we've come to accept as unquestionable truth: archived documents, meticulously labelled. His work prompts us to interrogate who holds the power to control these narratives and the truths they purport to convey.

Take, for instance, *My neck is thinner than a hair* (2000–2003), a work attributed to *The Atlas Group* that researches the 3,641 car bombs[14] detonated during the Lebanese Civil War. The Monthly Magazine[15] documents only 241 such explosions between 1975 and 2005, complete with dates, locations, perpetrators, and casualties. Raad's inflated figures are not merely fabrications, but reflect how, in the collective memory, such violence felt omnipresent, so routine it surpassed numerical logic. His hyperbole becomes a method of indexing emotional truth rather than empirical accuracy. Sourced from the archives of the An-Nahar Research Center and the Arab Documentation Center in Beirut, the series consists of 100 inkjet prints, each presenting the front and back of a photographic "document." On one side, we are confronted with stark black-and-white images of car engines, burnt and dismembered, lying on asphalt streets. On the other side, we find handwritten notes, smudged official stamps, and scribbled dates, purporting to authenticate each moment of violence. Raad intentionally frames his works in this way, challenging us to question who dictates what is understood as truth. There is a forensic element to the works, as the engines are an emblem of the stubborn physicality of war's remains. These

[14] Walid Raad, *My neck is thinner than a hair*, The Atlas Group, 2001, https://www.theatlasgroup1989.org/neck.

[15] *The Monthly Magazine,* "History of Car Bombs in Lebanon: 1975-2013," https://monthlymagazine.com/en/article/1073/history-of-car-bombs-in-lebanon--1975-2013-241-vehicles-16-tons-of-explosives-1820-dead-and-7196-injured.

heavy objects, rendered strange by their displacement and isolation, suggest the enduring presence of trauma in material form. They refuse to vanish just like the memories they call forward. In many images, the engine hunches awkwardly like a creature out of place, made grotesque by its survival. In others, it sits beside a traffic cone or in the shadow of the city's architecture. Through this series, Raad employs Sadek's "excessive matter": the kind of surplus left behind by conflicts, what cannot be processed. The engines serve as a metaphor for the remnants of trauma that resist full comprehension.

Figure 1: *My neck is thinner than a hair_Engines.* 1996/2001, pigmented inkjet prints, 24 x 34 cm each.

Jalal Toufic's "Immaterial Withdrawal"

This relationship to trauma can be further understood through what Jalal Toufic describes as "immaterial withdrawal", a loss of culture and tradition after war and tragedy. Toufic explains that even if the physical remnants, artifacts, or objects remain, there is a relational withdrawal from these items or histories that can not be retrieved. It becomes the artists' job to then recontextualize these histories, without nostalgia or longing for the past, but with new, energized vitality. In his seminal work *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*, Toufic references the classic tale within a tale of the Arabian nights to reference how in Lebanon's case Surpassing Disasters have been cyclical and intergenerational, happening in the present, in the childhoods of many and are viscerally held in everpresent futures, grinding away at the potency of tradition. For Toufic, many will naturally want to resurrect or defend tradition in the face of a surpassing disaster, forgetting that the tradition has already been erased.

> *All returns to tradition in the aftermath of a surpassing disaster have to be fought because tradition has been objectively withdrawn, and hence the "return" would be to a counterfeit tradition, one characterized by reduction to the exoteric and lack of subtlety.*

Walid Raad was also influenced by Toufic and experimented with withdrawal in his art practice. In another of his works, *Secrets In The Open Sea* (1994), the image withdraws entirely. A series of 29 chromogenic prints appears at first glance to be nothing more than uniform blue surfaces, different shades; some almost turquoise, others a deep navy or a royal blue. According to Raad's fictional narrative, these prints were discovered beneath the debris during the 1993 demolition of Beirut's war-damaged commercial center[16]. He claims that six of the prints were sent to

[16] Walid Raad, *Secrets in the Open Sea*, The Atlas Group, https://www.theatlasgroup1989.org/sos.

laboratories in France for further examination and analysis. Only under specific lighting conditions were the laboratories able to uncover faint black and white portraits; faces of individuals whom Raad claims drowned during the Lebanese Civil War.

When looking closely at the portraits, near the bottom of the prints, they appear ghostly and imprecise, present enough only to allow viewers to see their shadows. There is no accompanying biographical information, historical context, or confirmation of their existence. *Secrets in the Open Sea* materializes Toufic's concept of "immaterial withdrawal," wherein the forms of tradition or meaning may survive a catastrophe, while their lived experience, their humanity, becomes inaccessible. The subjects of the images are visually present, yet withdrawn from recognition or historical accountability. As with much of Raad's work, the piece mimics that of archival logic; laboratories, forensic tests, and factual framing. The viewer is asked to confront the impossibility of memory itself. Raad acknowledged the state's failure to produce a readily available record of those lost to the war and offers instead a trace of loss made perceptible only when there's a willingness to look and to confront what official history leaves unspoken.

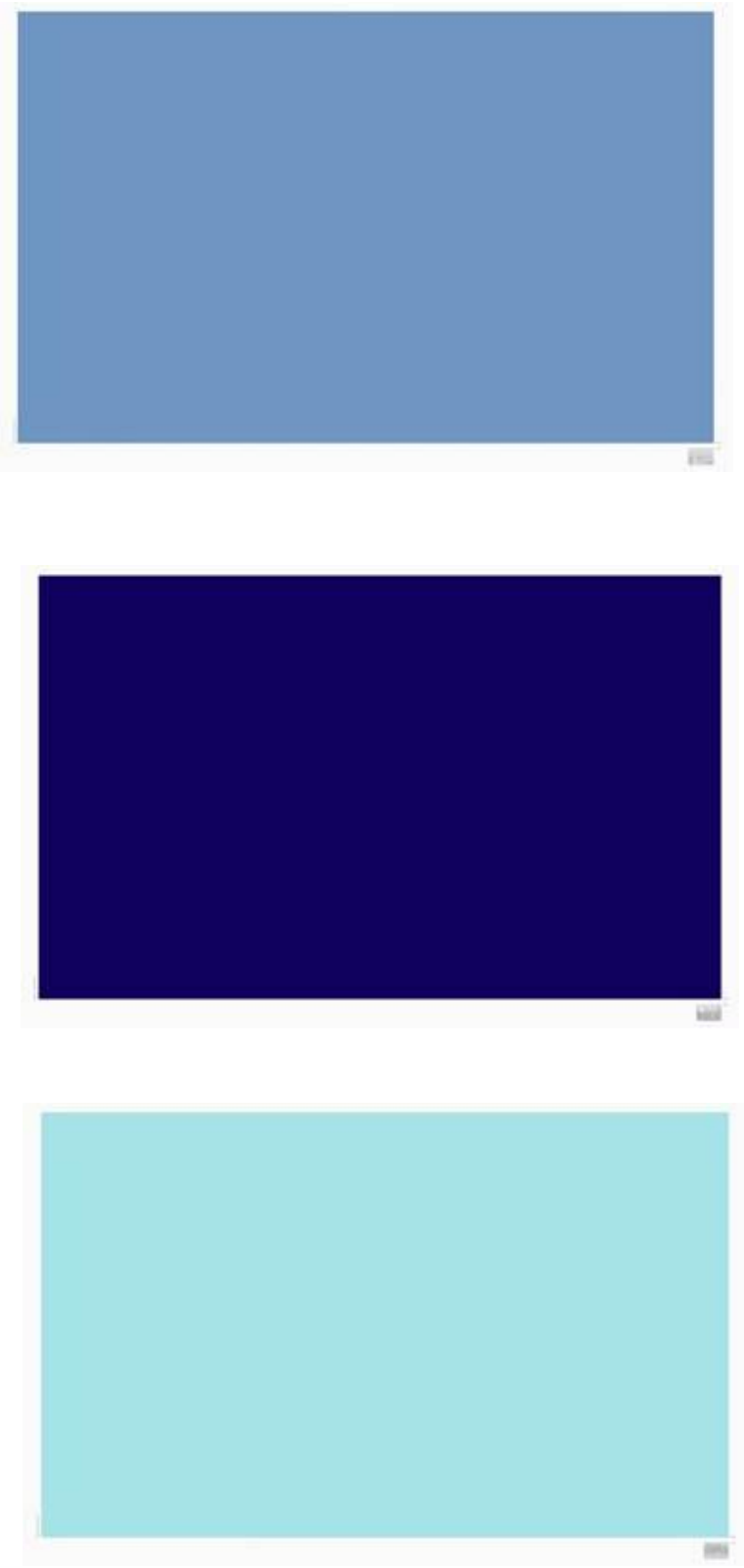

Figure 2: *Secrets in the open sea*. 1994/2004, 6 pigmented inkjet prints, 111 x 173 cm each

Both Sadek and Toufic's work are important in situating the work of Lebanese artists in helping communities and survivors address and confront their war trauma. Their work has been inspirational to Lebanese artists both at home and across the diaspora and will help understand the practice of artists exhibiting in *Grab/ Hold*. Equally inspirational, however, is the work of Amal Traboulsi, a curator who took another path, confronting material excess and immaterial withdrawal instead of rationalizing it.

Amal Traboulsi and Her Gallery: An Antidote to Material Excess and Withdrawal

Amal Traboulsi's Épreuve d'Artistes was founded just a few years after the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War, born from her long-held dream of opening a gallery. Amid a chaotic cultural landscape, Traboulsi envisioned the space as a site of solace and reflection. Opening in the Tajer building in the Clemenceau neighbourhood of West Beirut[17], the gallery emerged at a time when the tension between modernity and tradition could be felt in Lebanon[18]. Traboulsi recalls that in the gallery's early years, there was a widespread desire to explore Lebanese identity and a general craving for community. Her curatorial work responded to this moment by fostering a space in which artists could come together to reimagine belonging and preserve cultural memory. Épreuves d'Artistes (1979), functioned not only as an exhibition space but as an act of public resistance. Amid displacement and infrastructural collapse, Traboulsi maintained a curatorial vision grounded in community, identity, and care. In an interview with Taymour Grahne, she recalls moving the gallery five times to avoid shelling, refusing to close entirely despite the danger: "We had an urgency to live," she said. Traboulsi understood that there was a

[17] Kristine Khouri, "La Galerie qui Bouge: Beirut 1979," *Bidoun*, no. 16 (2009), https://www.bidoun.org/articles/la-galerie-qui-bouge.

[18] Fares Chalabi, "Art as Resistance in Postwar Lebanon," *ARTMargins 9*, no. 1 (2020): 30, https://doi.org/10.1162/artm_a_00253.

role for art outside of wartime trauma[19], "art was a real need for some just to feel like being alive". The gallery, due to its fluid nature was nicknamed "La Galerie Qui Bouge" (the gallery that moves), and it became a space that affirmed artists and their communities by resisting the logic of erasure imposed by the war and the dominant Western narratives that had begun to heavily influence contemporary Middle Eastern art approaches before the war[20]. Traboulsi noted a perceived shift in the culture during this era, stating, "...what was done in the West did not interest the Lebanese at that time. They felt a big gap between their emotions and the rigid concept of contemporary Western art. We slowly started to show more contemporary art, including installations." While Épreuve d'Artistes was a foray by Traboulsi and her mentor, German Art Historian Martin Giesen, seeking "to specialize in the techniques of printmaking such as etching, lithography, woodcut, linocut, and silkscreen", it quickly became apparent that as attracted as she and Martin were to these fields, Lebanese audiences were experiencing a collective trauma that made impossible a deep dive into western artistic traditions of this nature at that time. It became clear to Traboulsi that Lebanese artists had to shed the vestiges of colonialism in which previous generations of artists had been schooled and draw from their own traditions and lived experience in order to engage audiences where they were. In this way Épreuve d'Artistes, "la gallerie qui bouge" became not only an exercise of defiance towards the war around it, but also offered an important breaking point with colonial art legacies that would allow a new generation of Lebanese artists to embrace their arabicity and address their current lived reality, not only in relation to present horrors, but also in relation to an imagined and more hopeful future. The ethos of the Gallery was to keep engaging with artistic exploration, including

[19] Amal Traboulsi, interview by Taymour Grahne, Art of the Middle East, September 8, 2011, https://artofthemideastdotcom.wordpress.com/2011/09/08/amal-traboulsi-interview/.

[20] Chalabi, "Art as Resistance in Postwar Lebanon".

the cultivation of an authentic Lebanese aesthetic as an act of defiance towards the war raging all around. Épreuve d'Artiste Gallery was one of the first galleries in Lebanon to exhibit installations. This inclination towards new media and installation works was indicative of a desire to reframe the collective understanding of the world around her. Toufic explains that it is precisely in the aftermath of a "surpassing disaster" that our ties to tradition are ruptured and that material traditions and objects become unrecognizable. Traditions may continue to exist in form but become inaccessible in meaning or force[21]. Traboulsi's curatorial practice actively opposed this sense of "immaterial withdrawal" by showing local artists and cultivating a Lebanese audience when many other galleries were closing their doors. She made space for tradition to be experienced, not merely referenced or remembered. Through hospitality and intimacy, Traboulsi created a space where the excessive materiality of wartorn Lebanon could be processed. Her commitment to art persisted even as the war intensified. In this way, she embodied what Toufic considered the artist's role or calling in the face of such surpassing disaster.

She navigated immense daily challenges to keep Épreuve d'Artistes operational, crossing from East to West Beirut amid road closures, active shelling, and military checkpoints. In 1982, during the opening of an exhibition by Jordanian sculptor Mona Saudi, Israeli tanks entered Beirut. Traboulsi recalls overhearing soldiers remark on the improbability of an art gallery continuing to function in such conditions. But each time the gallery opened its doors, it was an act of quiet defiance. As tensions escalated, the gallery was forced to close and reopen multiple times. During these periods, Traboulsi hosted exhibitions out of her own home in Achrafieh, keeping her practice and the gallery alive. She encouraged artists like Maya Eid, Amin Boulous,

[21] Jalal Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*, 2nd ed. (Forthcoming Books, 2009), 15.

and Jean-Marc Nahas to keep working despite the scarcity of resources[22]. Despite worsening political conditions, openings were always full. Épreuve d'Artistes functioned not only as a gallery but as a space for excessive materiality to be processed; trauma was met with gestures of care and a love for creation and hospitality.

The concepts articulated by Jalal Toufic and Walid Sadek offer important tools for approaching the work of Arab diasporic artists, particularly in relation to loss, withdrawal, and the conditions under which meaning becomes inaccessible or fragmented. These ideas have shaped how I encounter artworks emerging from diasporic contexts. At the same time, my understanding of these ideas has been informed not only by theory, but by curatorial models rooted in lived practice. Amal Traboulsi's work at Épreuve d'Artiste demonstrates how a sustained commitment can function as a form of resistance, creating space for art to be experienced and opportunity for community to emerge around its programming. This approach resonates deeply with my own experiences and work at my godmother's gallery. Gallery on Queen in Fredericton operates as a commercial space, but it functions also as a centre for diversity; platforming emerging artists, queer artists, Black and brown art, indigenous art from the Wabanaki community and more. As one of the first art spaces in New Brunswick, and in some respects, on the East Coast to bring this level of care to these communities, it has been foundational to the development of my own exhibition-making practice. Together, these influences inform my curatorial thinking.

[22] Khouri, "La Galerie qui Bouge: Beirut 1979," *Bidoun.*

Art as Resistance to Erasure

Today, the artists that Traboulsi's gallery supported continue to produce either in Lebanon or in exile - for instance, Jean-Marc Nahas, now part of the Lebanese diaspora in Montreal. What is clear from a brief survey of her work as a curator and that of Walid Raad as an artist, is that both figures were part of a broader artistic response to fourteen years of Civil War and to the State's obstinate refusal to look at its impact and to carry on as if nothing were. As if nothing had been. The French sociologist Jacques Ellul, commenting on the Algerian war and fight for national liberation, expressed powerfully the artist's or author's role in reclaiming truth when powerful state interests mean for us to look away[23]: "A lover with their loved one has no time for poetry. Poetry is the fruit of absence and the longing that comes from being torn away." War tears us away from what is most dear to us. War's frantic, pitiless pace and its aftermath has no time for collective remembrance. Populations displaced, uprooted, erased and traumatized from war will often follow suit, but the collective amnesia will be forced to break. It is the role of artists and curators in society to force this reckoning.

Traboulsi and Raad's work shows the process of this reckoning as a movement from excessive materiality to immaterial withdrawal. Artists and curators first had to help audiences process the war's material detritus before approaching the more persistent but undeniably present emotional response of withdrawal. The works of Amal Traboulsi and Walid Raad represent two radically different, but equally urgent approaches to resisting erasures of Lebanon's postwar silence. Where Traboulsi curated spaces of community care, collective memory formation and continuity, Raad constructs fictive archives of absence and aesthetic withdrawal. One works

[23] Jacques Ellul, *L'illusion politique* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1965), https://monoskop.org/images/7/70/ELLUL_Jacques_-_1965_-_L'illusion_politique.pdf

through presence, the other through absence. Both confront a state that refused accountability, and both resist the impulse to package war and memory into coherent, state-sanctioned narratives. Their work invites us not to resolve trauma, but to consider its excess.

When I return to my grandparents' garage, now emptied of their warmth, of the scents and fragrance from my childhood, I am left to reflect upon my role as a third-generation immigrant. My position is not one of experience; I am not a witness or survivor, but have been shaped by inherited stories, objects withdrawn, and cultural memory. Artists such as Traboulsi and Raad are not only anchors for the many local audiences and collectivities of which they form a part, as they help them journey from erasure to renewal. Their works also help others, removed from the trauma, by shaping a collective diasporic community and inviting us into acts of remembrance, into relation, into imagining. In a West that often consumes trauma without understanding, in a state built on forgetting, in a world that would rather look away, they insist we stay and look closer.

In chapter 2, I will turn to queer phenomenology as an additional lens in analyzing and understanding the absurdity of excessive matter and the physical and emotional impacts of the detritus of war. In *Grab/ Hold,* it is hoped that queer perspectives can also help process trauma in ways that look past the hurt, from angles that restore familiarity, connectivity and the shared humanity in trauma.

CHAPTER 2

Introduction

This chapter situates queer not as a fixed identity, but as a way of inhabiting and navigating space, drawing primarily on Sara Ahmed's work on queer phenomenology as well as drawing from Dr. Andrew Gayed's critique of the colonizing modernity agenda of Western Gay Liberation politics. Through these understandings, I will explore how a queer lens may have more universal reach in unpacking the experience of alterity common to queer people, racial minorities, migrants and countless "others".

I define "queer" as something that inherently lacks a stable identity category. Following Judith Butler, queer is understood as open to continual reworking, operating less as a fixed descriptor than as a way of forming affiliations without resolving difference[24]. Whereas Butler emphasizes queer's existence in the present, José Esteban Muñoz proposes queer as something "not quite here," something that has yet to arrive, full of potential[25]. For Sara Ahmed, it can be described as feeling misaligned relative to heteronormative directions; it concerns how a body or object inhabits or navigates space. Taking into consideration all of these perspectives, I frame queer not as a fixed identity, but as a generative concept that shapes how bodies, desires, and habitats are understood. Queer resists normalization, since attempts to define it as a stable category risk undermining the openness that makes it queer.

[24] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 230.

[25] José Esteban Muñoz, "Queerness as Horizon: Utopian Hermeneutics in the Face of Gay Pragmatism," in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

Sara Ahmed's Queer Phenomology

Ahmed examines how orientations shape the way bodies inhabit and perceive space. I am particularly drawn to her discussion of orientation within the context of sexuality. Ahmed describes how queer bodies may experience a kind of disorientation, a visceral unease or misalignment, even a sense of nausea when entering spaces organized around heteronormative assumptions. The presence of a queer body can interrupt the "straightening" lines that structure such environments. For many queer individuals, orientation thus becomes a process of seeking an anchor, whether physical or relational, within a space in order to navigate it. Orientation is, in this sense, a turning toward something that allows one to find or sustain one's bearings.

As I work through Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology in relation to my own project and exhibition, I find myself in negotiation with "the object" and where it resides. Is it the artwork, the artist's body, or both? This tension becomes especially clear in a reading for a Contemporary Art and Design course in which I was a Teaching Assistant, during my first term at OCAD. *Working Girl: On Selling Art and Selling Sex*, Sophia Giovannitti's chapter, resonated with me and following a conversation about it with a friend, I received the short novel as a gift. She recounts her experience working within the sex industry while completing her MFA in New York City[26]. She draws striking parallels between these two worlds, describing how the intimacy desired by wealthy clients mirrors the attention she receives at post-opening dinners with curators and collectors, all vying for a piece of her. By drawing a line between her body's labour and her art practice, she speaks to the commodification of both. If an art practice is arguably an extension of self, is an artwork an object? The body and the artworks fall in and out of public perception. Giovannitti's narrative sits in this tension, revealing how artists are both makers of

[26] Sophia Giovannitti, *Working Girl: On Selling Art and Selling Sex* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023).

objects and objects in circulation. For Ahmed, orientation requires an act of facing[27]. If an object is a thing to which I am facing, do I look toward the artist or their art? Drawing from Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception,* she posits that perceptions of obliqueness or queerness entail a retreat, the facing towards an object that slips away. It is this function of queer phenomenology that *Grab/ Hold* seeks to explore through the exhibition of diasporic SWANA artists.

> Queer gatherings are lines that gather—on the face, or as bodies around the table—to form new patterns and new ways of making sense. The question then becomes not so much what is a queer orientation, but how we are orientated toward queer moments when objects slip. Do we retain our hold of these objects by bringing them back ''in line''? Or do we let them go, allowing them to acquire new shapes and directions? A queer phenomenology might involve an orientation toward what slips, which allows what slips to pass through, in the unknowable length of its duration. In other words, a queer phenomenology would function as a disorientation device; it would not overcome the ''disalignment'' of the horizontal and vertical axes, allowing the oblique to open up another angle on the world. (Ahmed. p.171)

The gathering which *Grab/ Hold* proposes will help understand the diasporic artists' sense of disembodiment, whether queer or non-queer, as their works and artistic journeys help them process experiences of loss, remembrance and the rending away which occurs when human beings are forced to flee a homeland, or are raised entirely within new "Borderlands" (to borrow Gloria Anzaldua's terminology) while still experiencing an othering process, consistent with queer phenomenology. The exhibition will provide room for reflection on the tension between the normalizing aspects of queer politics and the ontological claim of queer phenomenology to

[27] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

resist all normalization in order to remain queer. It will also seek to embrace "disalignment" and raise questions about whether queer theory should be more broadly understood than as the expression of a sexual minority perspective, or might in fact help explain the disorientation felt by many others.

Criticism of Gay Liberation and Colonial Impacts of Modernity on SWANA Same Sex Experience

I will return to this topic, and to Anzaldua's treatment of the subject and that of other theorists, such as Steven Nelson, below. Before doing so, however, it is helpful to explore the second theoretical lens of this thesis, which is Andrew Gayed's critique of classical Western sexual history, as outlined by Foucault, in defence of a well-documented history of pre-modern Islamicate same-sex desire and practice. This discussion is helpful in situating the dominant contemporary understanding of homosexual desire in a Western and colonial context, as a normalizing identity, as distinct from an often erased pre-modern Arab experience of same-sex desire as a commonly accepted, but often silenced or unacknowledged practice, still devoid of any specific identity, nomenclature or lexicon. This reinterpretation of gay history is helpful in understanding queer phenomenology and the choices with which it confronts us.

Queerness in Arab and SWANA communities is often haunted by the persistent Western fantasy that it does not, and did not, exist in the so-called "Arab world" before its alleged arrival through liberal Westernized modernity. This assumption erases precolonial and non-Western sexual formations and also rids queer subjects of their autonomy. The recurring claim that queerness does not exist in the Arab world is not merely an act of cultural ignorance but the residue of a much deeper colonial legacy. As articulated by Gayed in *Queer World Making: Contemporary Middle Eastern Diasporic Art*, sexuality as a stable identity category and

particularly the homosexual as a fixed type, did not exist in premodern Islamicate societies. Rather than being organized through identity, same-sex desire existed through relations and social roles that were neither named nor understood as "homosexuality." Gayed turns to Khaled El-Rouayheb's study: *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800,* to further situate these ideas within a historical framework[28]. While El-Rouayheb's study focuses on premodern Arab-Islamicate societies broadly, his findings illuminate the historical erasure that continues to shape contemporary Lebanese understandings of queerness. Instead of naming or categorizing people as "homosexual," cultural sources depict same-sex desire as part of ordinary social life, frequently appearing in poetry, literature, and everyday relations. European travellers in the Ottoman period later reacted with shock to the openness of these practices, projecting their own moral frameworks onto the region. It would be misleading to interpret this as evidence of an uncomplicated acceptance of same-sex intimacy, as sexual intercourse between men was prohibited by Islamic law. At the same time, El-Rouayheb points to the abundance of biographical notices, literary collections, and poetic works that openly depict forms of same-sex attachment. In line with Gayed's observation that premodern Islamicate societies organized same-sex desire through roles, acts, and aesthetic conventions rather than fixed identities, El-Rouayheb cautions against retroactively imposing modern sexual categories onto Arab society but instead looks at these materials within the specific social conventions of their milieu.

Gayed takes this historical lens one step further in his discussion of diaspora consciousness and homocolonialism in the closing passages of the fourth chapter of his text. He argues that past histories, including colonial histories imposed upon the Orient by an ascendant, dominant and Victorian West, "can be embedded within diasporic imaginings of self, desire, and

[28] Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World*, 1500–1800 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

being."[29] In this context, it is important to consider critically whether diaspora narratives too often romanticize a half-forgotten past, clinging to glancing shadows of remembrance, or fail to consider the colonial legacies upon which collective or individual memories are built. Gayed reminds us that in the context of queer history, at issue in this colonial act of historical erasure is the ability to experience homoerotic pleasures in a non-identifying frame, without labels or overweening stigma. These questions remain extremely valid today and are instructive not only for the alterity that is commonly referred to today as Queer, but for all other "others", including the increasingly ubiquitous migrants of countless diasporas in a shrinking and globalized world.

Queer Phenomenology and Decolonized Sexual History as Analytical Lenses for Diaspora Art from Contemporary Lebanon

Armed with the theoretical lenses of queer phenomenology and critical sexual history outlined above, it is possible to approach the context of Lebanese diasporic artists practicing in 2025. Keeping in mind the impacts of the Lebanese Civil War outlined in Chapter 1, the unavoidable truth is that decades of war, political instability, and economic collapse in Lebanon have produced enduring trauma and ongoing mass departure. According to the Lebanese Research Centre, between 2018 and 2021, 196,433 Lebanese reportedly emigrated[30]. It is said that the 2020 Beirut port explosion, a disaster tied to decades of political corruption and neglect, left nearly 300, 000 Beirutis displaced[31]. For those who remained, the city gradually hardened

[29] Andrew Gayed, "An Alternative History of Sexuality: Diaspora Consciousness and the Queer Diasporic Lens," in *Queer World Making: Contemporary Middle Eastern Diasporic Art* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2024), 103–127.
[30] Andrew Daou, "*The Lebanese Diaspora: From Emigration to Return*", LERC Research Intern Paper Series, No. 8. Lebanese Emigration Research Center, Notre Dame University–Louaizé, 2024/2025.

[31] Batoul Faour, "Glass Politics: On Broken Windows in Beirut," *The Avery Review*, no. 52 (April 2021), https://averyreview.com/issues/52/glass-politics.

and restructured daily movement, restricted access, and narrowed the spaces in which ordinary life could unfold. Today, the unfolding occupation of South Lebanon by Israel has displaced over one million people.

Within Lebanon's cultural context, sexual identity often does not operate as a stable or publicly legible category, but instead emerges through lived practices and expressions of self. Even before the recent Beirut port explosion, the reconstruction efforts in Lebanon following the Civil War had revitalized the Beirut core, but still left communities displaced and shunted away from the new city rising. Beirut's "queer habitus", such as it was in the 1990s and turn of the millennium, was impacted in such ways. Sofian Merabet from the University of Austin, Texas, describes the concept of a "queer habitus" to explore how queer subjectivities in Beirut are formed through bodily performance, spatial navigation, and everyday practices, rather than through fixed identities or visible political movements. Queerness is not anchored in stable neighbourhoods or institutionalized LGBT spaces, but unfolds across temporary, fragile, and shifting topographies shaped by postwar reconstruction and development.

Merabet tells the story of his evolving friendship with Ramzi, a young Lebanese man he describes as wildly intelligent and charismatic. Marabet explains that after the war, the city's reconstruction had turned much of Beirut into a concrete jungle. The two friends would meet and walk through the city, a simple act that, depending on the route, could become quite an ordeal. Most people drove, so navigating the urban landscape on foot became, in a sense, a queer act in itself. Ramzi, who had left Lebanon after the war to complete his schooling, returned to find himself struggling to come to terms with both his identity and his place within the city. He developed an affinity for performance and eventually for drag, finding a sense of freedom of expression within an underground drag scene. Pockets of safety were carved out and actively

sought. While his performances gained some local notoriety as entertainment, he was often never fully accepted beyond the stage. As his public visibility grew, Ramzi faced multiple hate crimes and attacks, and friends within the community were forced to relocate for their own safety. Ramzi's experience gives expression to the shifting balance of power, the acceptance or non-acceptance of same-sex relations within Lebanon in the late 1990s versus pre-modern times. While a Western gay liberation subculture found footing in Beirut, its unorthodoxy has not been fully accepted and has been met with brutal repression.

More recently, the Beirut port explosion gave rise to another destruction and rebuilding phase in Lebanon's metropolis. The successive destructions of Beirut have left an imprint of trauma on its inhabitants, but the trauma is shared throughout its diaspora. Researching Lebanon's colonial past has offered me an opportunity to reconsider my own grandfather's oft-referenced elegy of Beirut as the "Paris of the Middle-East" as an emblematic expression of France's colonial imprint, and also to consider what spaces he felt compelled to share this perspective in, and which spaces allowed such nostalgia to circulate unquestioned. And Beirut's claim to its past grandeur endures; the rebuilding continues, ever more grand, ever more exclusive.

According to Batoul Faour, an architecture graduate from the University of Toronto and an artist in the exhibition, Beirut's most recent postwar reconstruction, led mostly by luxury developer Solidere, rendered the city center largely inaccessible, with its luxury towers erasing historical legacy and prewar vibrancy. Designed for the wealthy and advancing a neoliberal agenda of economic segregation[32], the overbearing legacy of the war left corrupt, powerful elites in positions to strategically take over the city's reconstruction and position themselves at the

[32] Faour. *The Avery Review.*

forefront of its attempt at economic growth[33]. Once vibrant traditional markets and souks have been bulldozed to make place for designer labels and brand stores that residents cannot afford. Many of the city's own inhabitants were forced into economic exile. This latest exodus has enlarged a vast global diaspora, within which questions of memory and belonging are ongoing. Within it, queerness emerges as a parallel form of displacement, another way of living out of alignment with dominant spatial, cultural, and temporal norms. What is particularly striking in Batoul's work is her discussion of glass as a material in the city's reconstruction following the 2020 explosion. She describes glass towers, rising buildings, and increasing unaffordability, a cycle that mirrors past patterns of urban erasure and gentrification. The juxtaposition of these two accounts of urban transformation underscores how Beirut's landscape repeatedly reshapes both physical and social life, often at the expense of those most vulnerable.

An important touchstone in approaching the concept of otherness that diaspora communities experience, both in their countries of origin and in their destination or communities of transit, is Gloria Anzaldua's often-cited work *Borderlands*[34]. Anzaldua's influence as a Chicana author, queer feminist and activist in defining the "new mestiza" as a transnational identity most at home within an uncertain borderland, not fully accepted in any place, is intriguingly similar to Sara Ahmed's theory of queer phenomenology. The inhabitant of this Borderland, Anzaldua's new mestiza, is a master of adaptation, code-switching on a dime to blend in with their past or their present, driven by fear of what their future may hold – a quintessentially queer experience. Anzaldua's work predates Ahmed's by about twenty years, but her concept of "nepantilism", an Aztec word meaning being torn between two places[35], opens

[33] Sofian Merabet, "Queer Habitus: Bodily Performance and Queer Ethnography in Lebanon," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 21, no. 5 (2014)Aztec.

[34] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

[35] Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 78.

up interesting places for convergence between Ahmed's work and Anzaldua's. Artists of extensive and intergenerational diasporas, like Lebanon's or Italy's, may experience a disorientating nausea when asked about their lived experience of their homeland or their knowledge of the native language, and yet diaspora identities are authentic, and the experiences of discrimination or othering by host communities are often even more deeply felt. Queer phenomenology offers a touchstone for analyzing and understanding this experience and perhaps other similar experiences as well.

For instance, the African diaspora in America is at once extremely diverse and also indissociably embedded intergenerationally in the American experience. All the same, Black American diaspora theorists also frame their experience with reference to the unease, disorientation, and even insecurity that comes from being othered in their own homeland or communities. This is particularly true of the artist's experience. Nelson frames diasporas as "centers for hybridity". Nelson, an influential Black art historian and scholar, recognizes that 'diasporic' is a qualifier or identity that one can accept, adopt, or have imposed upon oneself[36]. Inescapably, even when diaspora artists are embraced in supporting ways by art establishments, they are always othered, and therefore paradoxically remain queer or at odds with the mainstream that claims to embrace them.

> If "diaspora" or "diasporic" is a name we give to ourselves, it is also an avenue of reception and as such, it is also a name others give to us (and whether the work of artists of color is diasporic or not is not entirely up to the artist, but rather determined as well by the critic, scholar or curator…) Whether in a neo-colonial, conservative environment that dilutes the creative energies of diasporic artists or in a dialogue that ties art practices

[36] Steven Nelson, "Diaspora: Multiple Practices, Multiple World Views," in *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 296–316.

> solely to the alterity of the artist the critical apparatus generally manages to keep the work of the diasporic artist at arm's length. Hence the paradox: diasporas are everywhere but they are always over there.

Nelson's account of diaspora experience as those among us who are not ours is like Anzaldua's borderland experience, another queer experience. Just as Queer phenomenology may speak of being at odds or a-kilter with the upright vertical of a straight world, Arab artists have in common their experience of the white gaze. Whether Arab artists seek to escape the moniker of being diasporic or embrace it, they will almost invariably be othered. It is a borderland existence with which Queer artists are also all too familiar. The hope lies in the realization that these experiences and perspectives, while different, still might share a common trajectory towards greater inclusiveness and tolerance; what Ahmed would celebrate as embracing "the possibility for another way of dwelling in the world."

In conclusion, the lenses of queer phenomenology and decolonized sexual history illuminate how SWANA diasporic artists navigate disorientation, othering, and the legacies of colonial power and remembrance. This chapter has demonstrated how queerness and diaspora are inseparable; as Ahmed emphasizes, orientation is never neutral; it is an active negotiation, a turning toward and with objects, people, and spaces that may themselves often slip or resist. Gayed's readings remind us that non-Western histories of same-sex desire challenge the universality of Western gay liberation narratives, situating contemporary experiences within a longer, more complex chronology. Taking both of these lenses and applying them more broadly to a more generalized diasporic reality, we find that queer phenomenology is an apt lens for describing a more universal diasporic experience. As we will see in the final chapter and in the

exhibit itself, a decolonizing approach to queer artistic expression, inspired by Gayed's work, may offer a frame to better conceptualize queer art-making as a non-identifying, less hegemonic and more fluid concept helpful in understanding a broad range of human experience. Finally, Steven Nelson's framing of diaspora as a site of both belonging and othering, along with Anzaldúa's code switching, underscores the generative possibilities of inhabiting borderlands. Building on these theoretical frameworks, the following and final chapter will present a close reading of selected artworks, alongside a curatorial essay for the exhibition *Grab/ Hold*. The chapter will explore how diasporic artists materialize the tensions and dislocations discussed here. I will return to Walid Sadek's theory of "excessive matter" and Jalal Toufic's "immaterial withdrawal". Linking these theories with these feelings of disorientation and othering will help the upcoming chapter's analysis foreground how artistic practice itself becomes a mode of dwelling, resisting, and reorienting ourselves against a world with multiple overlapping forms of constraint.

CHAPTER 3

Exhibition Text:

> *As a mestiza, I have no country; my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian, I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.)*
>
> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza,* 1987, p. 80

The exhibition features artists from Lebanon and the broader Southwest Asia and North African (SWANA) diaspora whose practices engage themes of fragmentation, erasure, and distortion. Its title, *Grab/ Hold*, is informed by Sara Ahmed's work in Queer Phenomenology, particularly her exploration of orientation. Ahmed description of disorientation explored above, and its accompanying nausea is described further by the author as a desire to "grab" or "hold" onto something to orient oneself within space, as an anchor and way of orienting oneself within an environment. *Grab/ Hold* understands this feeling and traces a through-line between queer disorientation and the lived experience of the diasporic Arab artist. The Queerness of the exhibition offers a lens through which audiences can understand this disembodiment, the sense of being a-kilter, that one might feel as a stranger in a new place. These same feelings of disorientation might also manifest in displaced diasporic artists, or as a victim of war, revisiting a devastated but once familiar place.

While the exhibition was planned and brought together over months of preparation as a vehicle to explore intergenerational trauma from the civil war to the Beirut port explosion and the role of diaspora and artists in processing that trauma, this exhibition work takes on an unfortunate new salience with renewed bombings and indiscriminate violence perpetrated in

Beirut and across Lebanon, since March 2, 2026[37]. The final preparations for the exhibition have required adjustments as conversations with artists have been interrupted by evacuation orders and a new campaign of terror, backed by the U.S. and Israel.

As an emerging curator navigating such challenges, I find both solace and inspiration in organizers who have had to pivot in such times, notably Amal Traboulsi's commitment to sustaining her practice through Épreuves d'Artiste "la galerie qui bouge" during the many years of Lebanon's civil war. Her work offers a powerful example of what it means to continue making space for art under conditions of instability, and how organizing can become a form of endurance. For some, art-making in times of conflict, or worse yet, talking about these practices, may seem inconsiderate or misplaced, given the manifold unfolding human tragedies. However, artists working through war and displacement often understand, with particular urgency, the importance of holding beauty, meaning, and relation in times of unrest.

I return to Jalal Toufic's immaterial withdrawal and Walid Sadek's excessive matter in the exhibition. *Grab/ Hold* understands immaterial withdrawal as a disconnect between past and present, a longing to preserve, but an inability to access. Sadek's excess is a material overload, an influx of trauma the brain and body can not comprehend, and is not meant to. The works in the exhibition are intended to become grounding presences, a navigation of these experiences. The exhibition brings together a wide range of mediums, from oil painting and video installation to screenprint, collage, and sculpture. Each work is essential to the exhibition's overall structure while also offering its own distinct encounter. Together, the works and the artists behind them form a network of support between one another, and with those who come to witness them. Regrettably, therefore, I have found myself torn between an almost despondent fascination with

[37] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Situation in Lebanon* (March 2026), https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2026/03/situation-lebanon.

every last reported news of new destruction in Lebanon and a renewed urgency in working with the generous support of the artists in the exhibition in pulling the show together with new meaning.

As you walk into the gallery space, the first pieces you will encounter are a series of *Headresses* (2022) by Beirut-born artist Dana Qaddah[38]. Qaddah practices currently between New York, Toronto and Vancouver, but developed as an interdisciplinary artist and organizer on Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh territories. Their artistic practice is grounded in themes of building from and through colonial legacies and the abstraction of one's own sense of self and place. The two series of works presented in *Grab/ Hold* explore the embodiment of the bounties of the sea and harvests from a memorialized Palestine. Qaddah's work connects with the exhibition's desire to create a space that, while serving as a testimony to the difficult journeys from trauma of SWANA artists, remains celebratory and creates an inviting, hospitable space, evoking warm, fragmented memories of belonging and familial and familiar gatherings to which we can cling when the ground shifts. *Headdresses* (all 2022) are made in reference to the structure of Palestinian dowries and other traditional wear, speaking to particular movements, figures, embodiments of the sea & agriculture found in geographical areas significant to Qaddah's lineages. Installed directly into the floor, these floating figures in the front gallery seem almost to take on lives of their own. They prompt us to imagine who might wear them, where they have come from, and what they have witnessed. As viewers enter the gallery, they are immediately met by these figures and the realities, and possibilities, they hold. The front space, with its wooden floors and beamed ceilings, carries the atmosphere of a ship's interior, grounding *Headdresses* in echoed themes of passage, migration, and displacement.

[38] *See Appendices.*

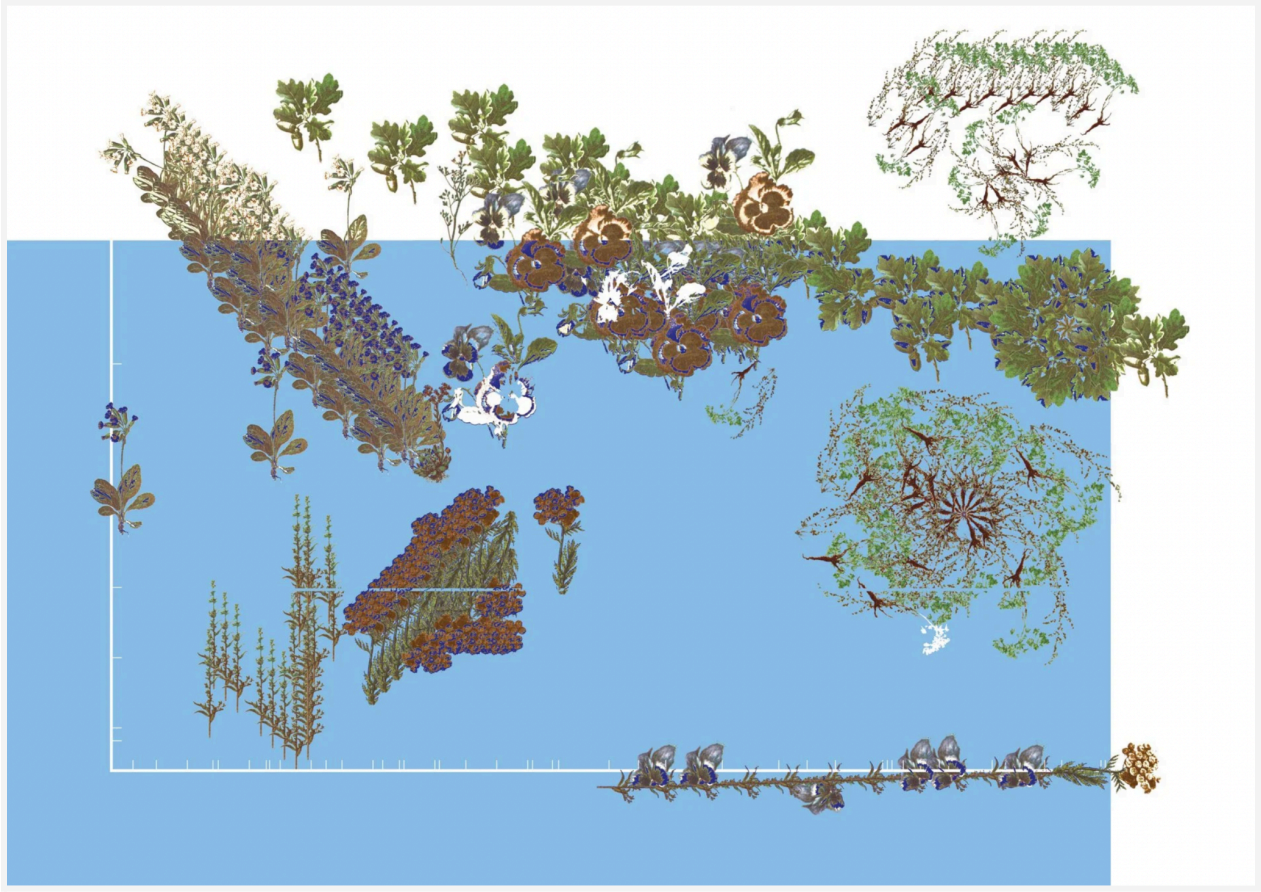

Figure 3: Nour Bishouty. Untitled. *Visible Regions* series. 2022 Edition of 6, Size: 26" x 37"

Entering the back gallery space, on the far left corner, we meet a work by Nour Bishouty, a multi-disciplinary artist with significant international exhibition work, currently represented by Cooper Cole in Toronto. Bishouty is interested in the gaps in archival memory and the Western production of knowledge and fantasy. In her work, she explores the generative possibilities of misunderstanding. The work chosen for this exhibition is an Untitled Print from her *Visible Regions* series. It is a 5-colour screen print from 2022. In describing her work, Bishouty explains that during her 2022 residency in Toronto, she was working through questions in her practice

about landscape “not as a neutral backdrop, but as a system of representation shaped by power, erasure, and distortion”. Using illustrations of plants native to the Levant[39], she builds out compositions produced in the visual language of cartography, but that defy the rules of orientation or scale. In her words: "the resulting forms resemble maps but remain distorted and unstable. By working in printmaking, a medium historically tied to the circulation of knowledge, I treat these “maps” as gestures that deliberately undermine their own authority.” What we have with this piece is therefore something of an artist’s manifesto, a refusal to accept as authoritative the lies which the deep state, and particularly the agencies of a State at war, will issue as part of a given war effort, or any absolutionist post-conflict narrative. The process is very much consistent with Walid Raad’s work explored above. In the case of Lebanon, authoritative histories are invariably the most suspect.

But when artists themselves engage with the distortion, who wins? Must artists be truth seekers? Queer phenomenology resists the normalizing impulse behind that question, asking instead, must there be one truth? Surely, it depends upon one’s angle, or perspective? Bishouty’s map invites us then to an inquiry that goes to the very heart of the *Grab/ Hold* exhibition, but one which is brought evermore to the fore by the events of March 2026[40]. The higher the stakes in a given conflict or crisis, the higher the value on truth, or upon the need to control the narrative. Perhaps the value in art in such times lies in part in its ability to call into question authoritative narratives, without claiming any particular authority for itself. Perhaps distortion needs to be made explicit, so that it can be exposed everywhere. Or perhaps we all need to become a bit more comfortable with distortion or instability.

[39] Maira and Shirazi, “Thinking SWANA in Asian American Studies,” 123.

[40] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Situation in Lebanon.*

Turning from pieces that foreground Toufic and Walid Raad's influences, to one's closer perhaps to Amal Traboulsi's perspective, *Grab/ Hold* next offers two artists whose works affirm the enduring strength and spirit of remembrance in the face of conflict, rather than focusing on its devastating impacts. Christina Hajjar and Muriel Ahmarani Jaouich are both interested in working from fragments of memory, storytelling and inherited objects.

Christina Hajjar's piece is titled "Ta'burni", تقبرني , Arabic for "bury me". The artist relates that this is an expression that she learned as a child from her mother, as an expression of love or endearment. Literally, it conveys the sense that you hope you will die before your loved one, because you cannot bear the thought of life without them. In this piece, the artist shares the phrase and food rituals, learned from mother to daughter, with her paramour and partner, using roses, cinnamon and parsley as the touchstones of memories deeply felt and pleasurable. The piece is at once alluring and disturbing, suggesting, as does its title, a claim upon another that is at once violently imposing and yet so deeply felt as to be personally undeniable. Roses, cinnamon, and parsley come together in a fluid arrangement that evokes diaspora, pleasure, and cultural transmission. The piece and its provocative title demand an attention that is disembodying, while couched as the ultimate expression of love. In this way, it is a quintessentially queer piece. It sets the stage for the rest of the journey in *Grab/ Hold.* Language here is being passed down through lineage, and this expression of love becomes all the more palpable amidst the ongoing occupation and violence in the region.

Figure 4: Muriel Ahmarani Jaouich, *Breath Between Worlds*, 2025. oil on canvas. 35 cm x 45 cm

Muriel Ahmarani Jaouich is a Canadian artist of Armenian, Egyptian and Lebanese descent currently working in the unceded territory of the Kanien'kehà:ka Peoples (Montreal). Her work explores themes of intergenerational trauma and historical violence and is deeply rooted in her family's experience of diaspora and genocide, drawing from photographic archives and inherited objects. Her work, *Breath Between Worlds*, while grounded in her Egyptian and Armenian history, reflects Lebanon's experience of survival, both in the SWANA region and across its diaspora. In her description of this work, the artist insists upon its earthiness, despite its otherworldly spiritual overtones. The work reflects on the passage between life and death,

drawing together imagery from Egyptian funerary traditions and medieval Armenian manuscripts. In the background, a reclining figure evokes the shape of a sarcophagus, suggesting a body in transition. A procession of faces emerges across the surface, recalling saints, ancestors, or illuminated figures of remembrance. Above them, a curved human form floats close to the scene, yet somehow removed from it. Through its soft palette and rhythmic composition, the painting creates a quiet, intimate moment within the exhibition. Though relatively small in scale, it holds a powerful sense of stillness, inviting reflection on transformation, continuity, and the persistence of spirit across time and space.

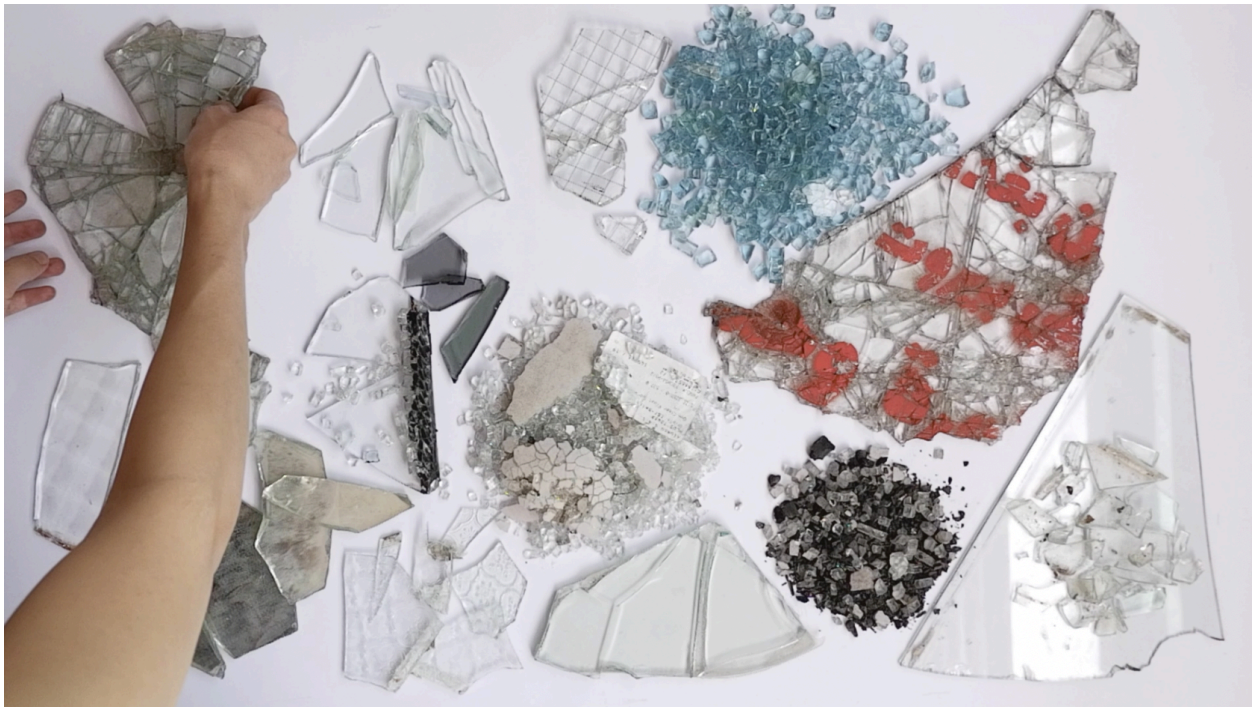

Figure 5: Hand organizing pieces of glass: Still from *Shafāfiyyāh,* a film by Batoul Faour 2023.

Finally, as a capstone to this journey through Lebanon's diasporic art and its tension between the defiance of the absurdity of wartime atrocities, and the remembrance of the community and spirit that is Lebanon, audiences are invited to the lower level of the gallery for a video treatment of Beirut, through some of its darkest days. Batoul Faour's *Shafāfiyyāh* offers viewers an opportunity to engage directly with the political tension in the exhibition. Faour is a visual artist and architect practicing between Lebanon and Toronto, creating works that explore the politics of space. Her documentary film *Shafāfiyyāh* is in itself a master class in the politics of materiality, excess and disembodiment that *Grab/ Hold* seeks to bring to the fore. The film explores Beirut in the post-blast destruction of the 2020 port explosion. Entire blocks of newly rebuilt spiralling glass towers were blown apart during that apocalyptic event. Families, like generations before them, sheltered in place, in bathrooms and places away from the walled view, away from the windows onto a world to be admired but kept out. Faour sifts through the broken shards of glass in a process of art-making, which is very intentionally about trying to make sense of a repeated history of exploitation, of victimhood. The artist/narrator in her film describes Beirut with a detachment that speaks to her own disembodiment: "On the streets, the anticipation of disaster has become natural. In a city whose political economy and built landscape are structured by countless cycles of institutionalized crime, notions of political transparency are as brittle and breakable as the material that lends the metaphor."... "If glass can tell us anything, it is that, at a time when the unthinkable continues to happen, quick fixes and cover-ups are increasingly visible."

Beirut is constantly being destroyed and rebuilt. Many are numb to chaos because they have survived it too many times before. Batoul's piece emphasizes, however, that resilience and enduring is not enough, and should not be traded as 'a marketing strategy to the world'. The

focus should instead be upon naming perpetrators and obtaining justice. By ending the exhibition in the lower gallery with Batoul's thought-provoking film, *Grab/ Hold,* is also seeking to challenge the complacency of the Lebanese, its diaspora, and the West in general with the repeated denials of justice Lebanon has endured and is enduring.

Conclusion: Art In Times Like These

The curatorial model informing the *Grab/ Hold* exhibition is an exploration of the strength of artists' collectives. Artists of the Lebanese diaspora in Canada form a small but powerful collective and community. This sense of community is no doubt inherited from traditions across the Arab world. But it is also nurtured by the artists themselves. I felt this immediately as I reached out to each artist in turn, and they connected me with others as the show was coming together. It is summarized beautifully in a social media post where I learned with great gratitude that Dana Qaddah, who travelled from Vancouver for the show, was looking forward to it as an opportunity "to connect with all my cousins". The gathering space that I envision was informed by this experience of collective community and the village experience that queer artists have written about and portrayed in their art and curation practices. It was informed, in a more rooted fashion, in the successful exhibition shows that my godmother has curated at the Gallery on Queen in Fredericton, including "*Wabanaki*" and "*Queens on Queen*", creating inclusive spaces of gathering, dialogue and artistic exploration while supporting both emerging artists and established makers across divers backgrounds. At a deeper level still, my commitment to open, inclusive community processes of collaboration and co-curation comes from the nurturing hospitality of my maternal grandparents' home and the values they instilled in succeeding generations. This also shapes the overall approach of *Grab/ Hold* and what it aims to

accomplish. The vision is also to celebrate the diversity of perspective among the artists of Lebanon's diaspora, to celebrate the beauty of all that is Lebanon, while understanding the diaspora experience better through a queer lens, and to remain resolutely queer in doing so. Queer lenses also inform the conviviality of safe gathering spaces, the disquiet of being othered even when one seeks to share a universal human experience, and other themes that underpin *Grab/ Hold* and the Lebanese diasporic art journey. Canada has reacquainted the world in recent months with an old-world word: Hegemons. Queer folk are well acquainted with the impact of hegemonies, be they military, economic or political. When such hegemonies coalesce as they have today in the United States and in Israel, in the hands of a powerful few, the brutal power of patriarchy is destructively unleashed, and the world's uncertain march towards a more just, more tolerant and diverse future is easily unravelled. These are trying times in which to be queer, where safe harbors may be needed. Yet the queer experience of navigating distortion and imbalance can be helpful. It is not surprising but fitting, therefore, that with its call to action in favour of more peaceful, tolerant, but sustained calls for justice, it is the voices of women and queer artists from Lebanon and its diaspora that *Grab/ Hold* has the honour of showcasing.

The spring of 2026 will be remembered as another turning point in Beirut and Lebanon's ongoing experience of violence, destruction, and reconstruction. The human scale of displacement and destruction in Southern Lebanon by Israeli state aggression in March and April 2026 is unprecedented in scale and method. Reminiscent of the brutal destruction of civilian life and infrastructure in Gaza in recent months, Lebanon appears now as the northern front of Israeli expansionism. Artist and curators will continue to process and unpack these experiences in months and years ahead, but in the here and now *Grab/ Hold* hopes to offer a space for solace,

for reflection, for dialogue in the hope of achieving, a lasting peace, that keeps the bulldozing might of hegemons at bay through principled reminders of our diversity and the “possibility of another way of dwelling in the world”. My hope with this exhibition and any future variations of it is that audiences are able not only to reflect and process shared journeys and remembrances, even traumatic ones, but, with time, to also indulge and enjoy.

Appendices:

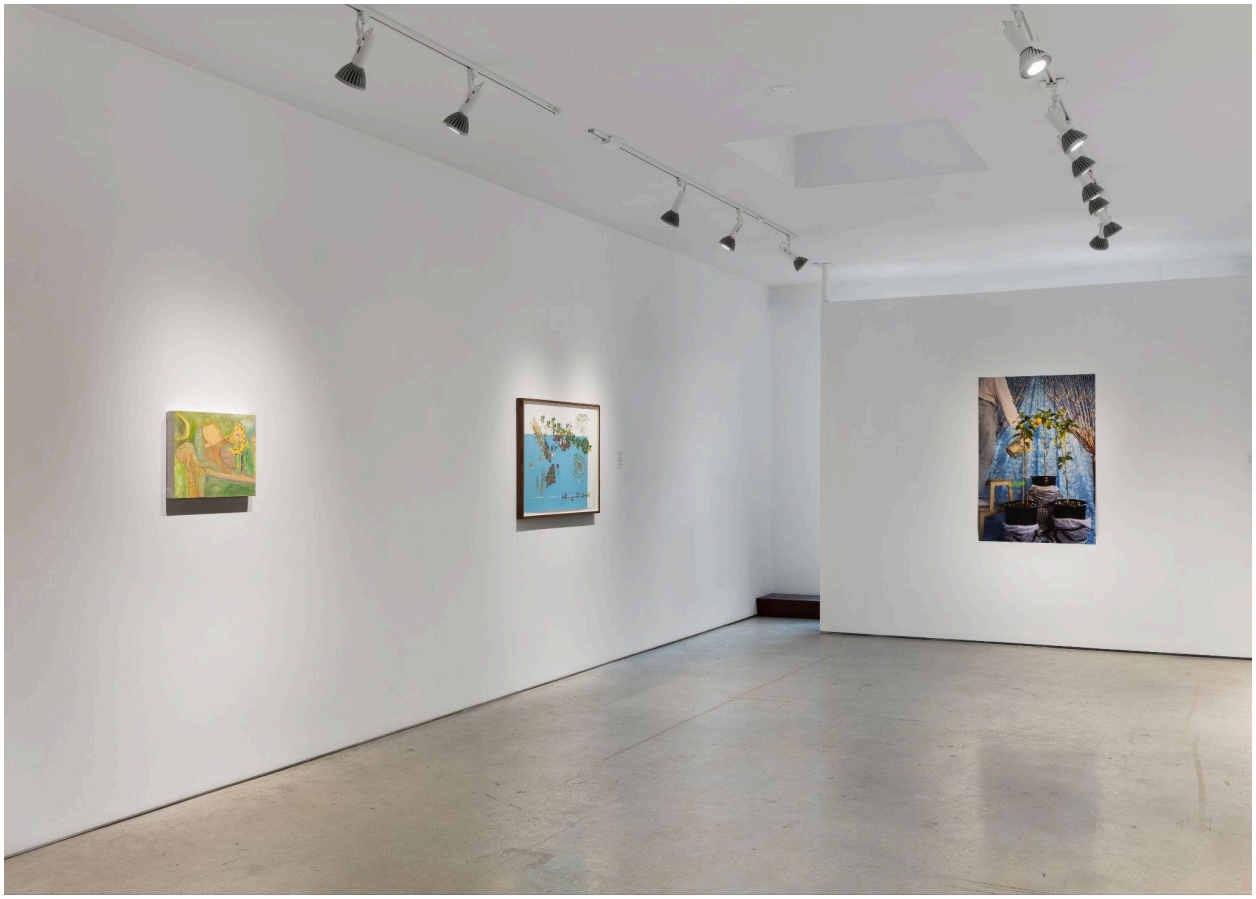

***Figure 1A**: grab/ hold. Installation image.*

Documentation: Laura Findlay (@lfdocumentation)

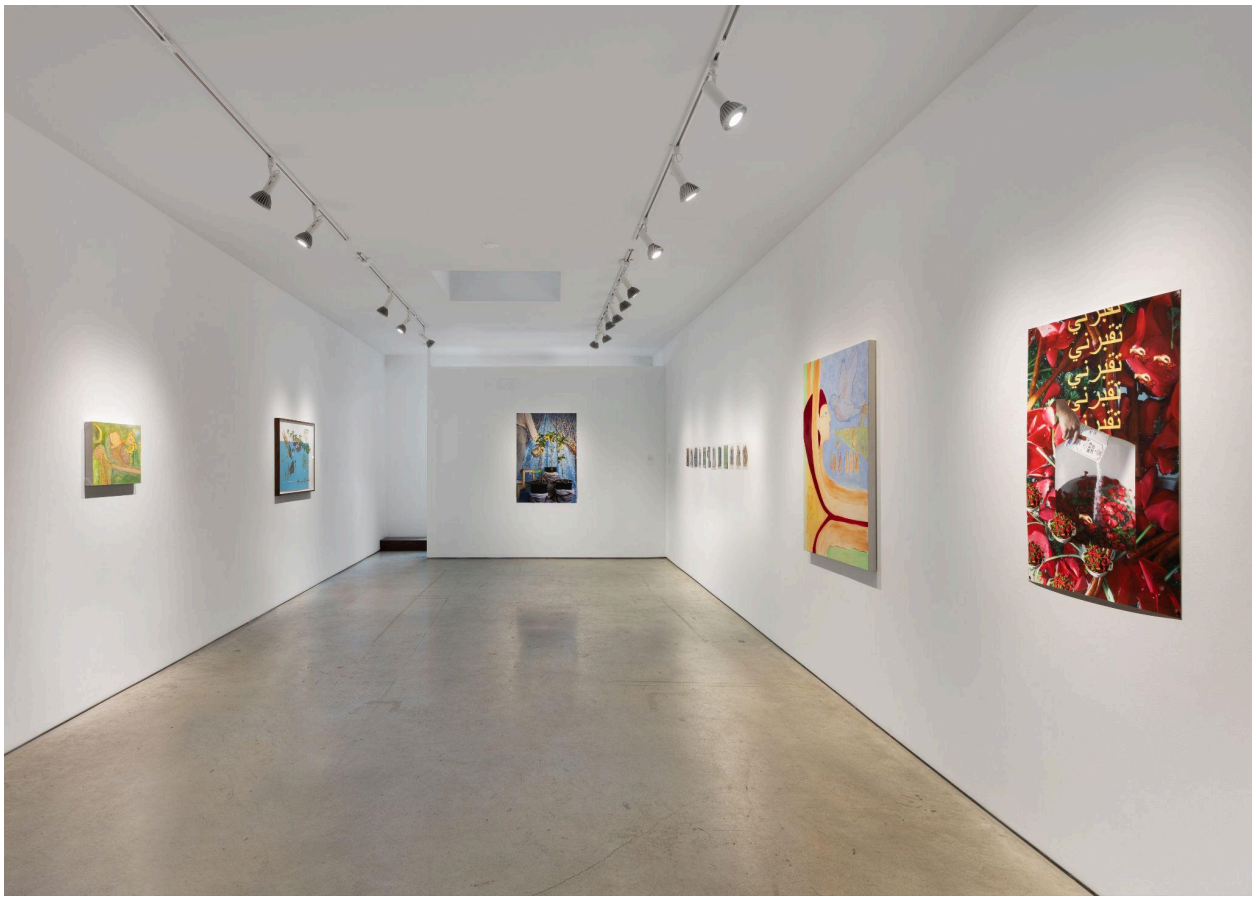

***Figure 1B**: grab/ hold. Installation image.*

Documentation: Laura Findlay (@lfdocumentation)

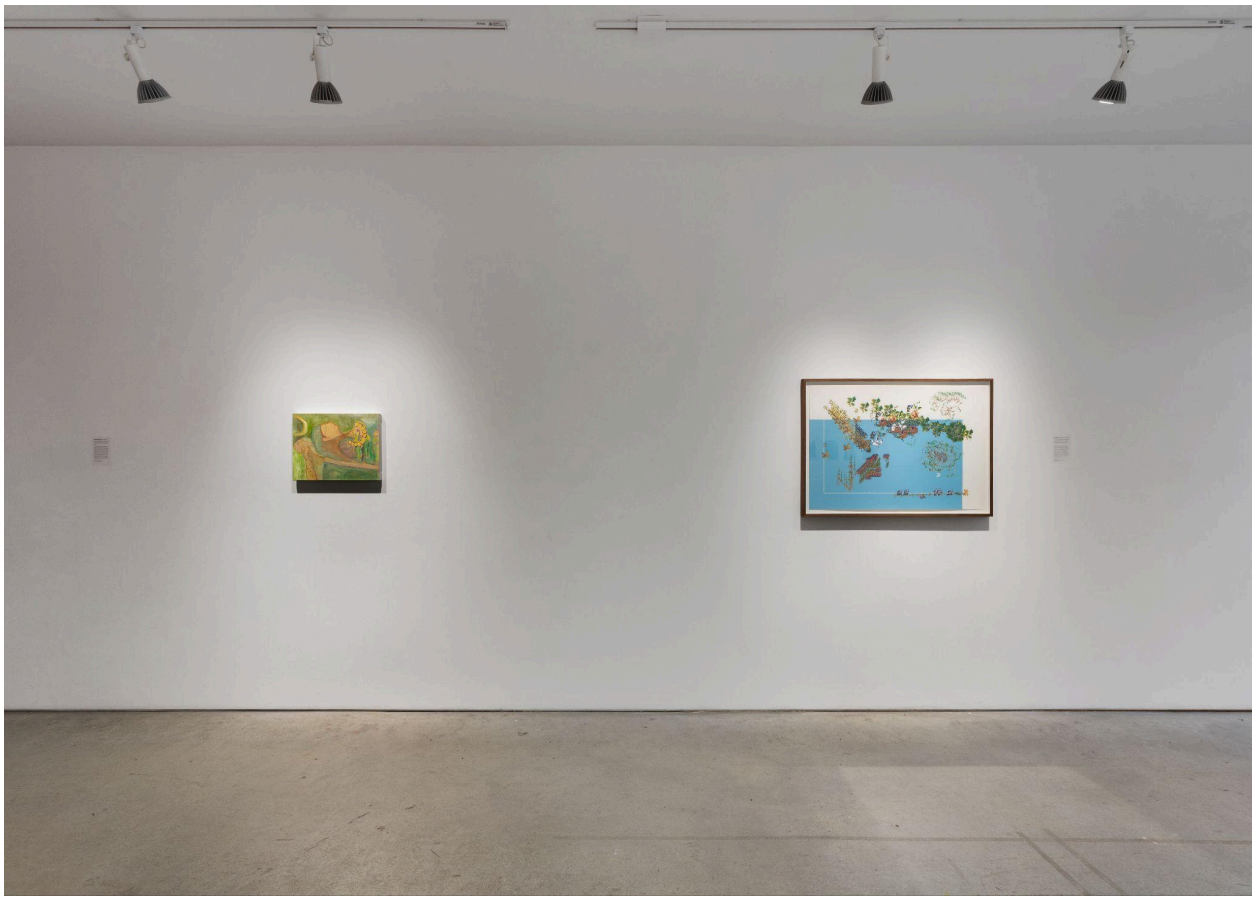

***Figure 1C**: grab/ hold. Installation image.*

Documentation: Laura Findlay (@lfdocumentation)

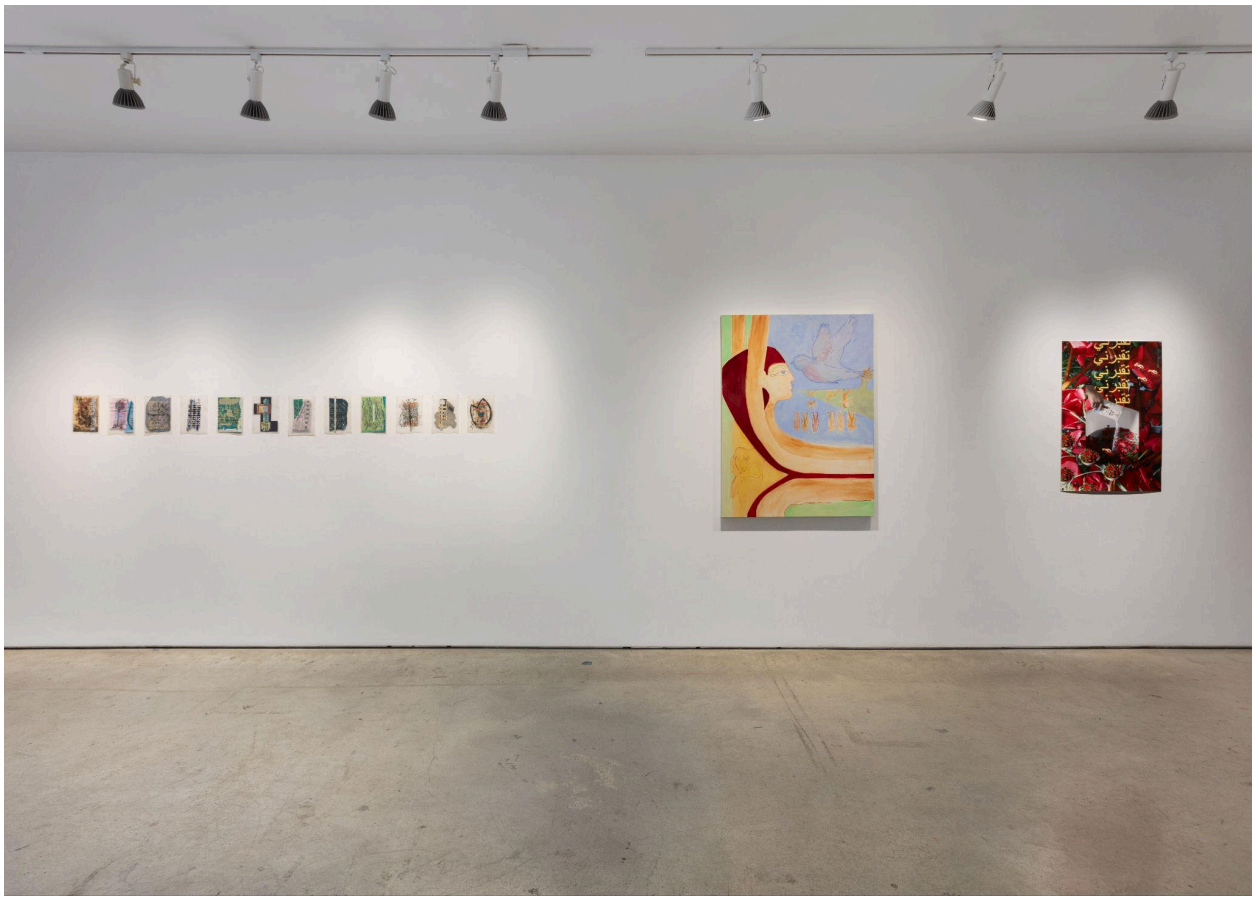

***Figure 1D**: grab/ hold. Installation image.*

Documentation: Laura Findlay (@lfdocumentation)

***Figure 1E**: Dana Qaddah. Itinerant Sentiments Series (ongoing)*

Documentation: Laura Findlay (@lfdocumentation)

Figure 1F: *Dana Qaddah. Headresses (2022). Protection (2022), Mediterranean Sea (2022). Documentation: Laura Findlay (@lfdocumentation)*

Figure 1G: *Installation image. Dana Qaddah. Protection (2022)*

Documentation: Laura Findlay (@lfdocumentation)

Figure 1H: *Dana Qaddah. Headresses (2022).*

Documentation: Laura Findlay (@lfdocumentation)

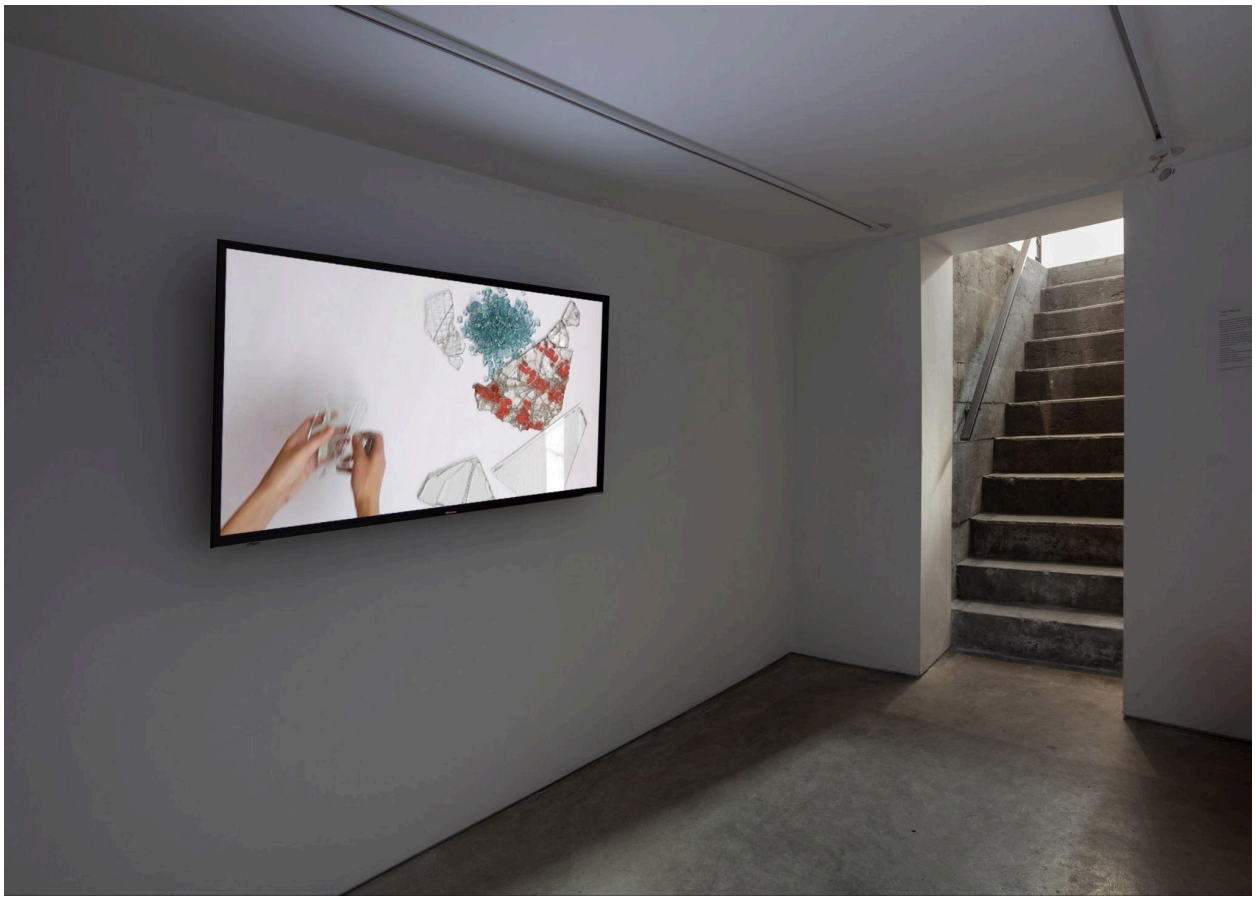

Figure 1I: *Batoul Faour. Shafāfiyyāh. 2023. Documentation: Laura Findlay (@lfdocumentation)*

Figure 1J: *Hanna Shorthouse. Original poster design for the exhibition, grab/ hold. Created from stills of included artwork. Digital design. 2024.*

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