

*Mishmash Maghreb-Québec*

## خليط مغرب - كيبك

*“While borders are thought of as partitionary lines which include something and exclude the rest, the threshold is imagined as a liminal space in which anything is possible. While borders create clear divisions, thresholds mark a space of possibilities, empowerment, and metamorphosis.”<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetic* (2008). Page 205.

في حين يُنظر إلى الحدود على أنها خطوط تقسيم تتضمن شيئاً وتستبعد الباقي، يتم تخيل العتبة كمساحة محدودة يكون فيها أي شيء ممكناً. في حين أن الحدود تخلق انقسامات واضحة، فإن العتبات تمثل مساحة من الاحتمالات والتمكين والتحول

<sup>1</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetic* (2008). Page 205.



*Text by  
Didier Morelli*

*Translation in Arabic by  
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*Reflection around the web art installation Monabamaqueb (2022)  
by Laila Mestari.*

[www.galeriegaleriesweb.com/webtheque/monabamaqueb/](http://www.galeriegaleriesweb.com/webtheque/monabamaqueb/)

*Galerie Galerie*

2022



## Loading...

My ten-year old laptop struggles to load the graphics, sounds, and GIFs that constitute the vertical frieze Monabamaqueb (2022). So, I wait, contemplating using my iPhone and its 5G network instead.

In my ageing computer’s slow descent into web surfing obsolescence over the past decade, I have become accustomed to my browser’s warning that my “connection is not private: Attackers might be trying to steal your information...” Routinely bypassing this nuisance by manually proceeding beyond the security check, I am surprisingly casual about the constant threats of intercepted connections, passwords, messages or credit cards. This liminal space that is the internet, of which I now only vaguely remember the physicality of when dial-up access used to jam up the landline, is so fluid that I barely perceive its edges, boundaries, or limits. Where does it begin and end, and where do I, [insert memoji], fit into this matrix?

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In the outer reaches of Laïla Mestari’s *Monabamaqueb* is an interstellar space that garners our attention because of its distant, vast, and infinite echoes of noisy, cross-cultural worldly realities. Above the fray, floating like its own constellation, the artist appears on technological screens from various epochs: flat screen, computer monitor, tube television, telephone, smart-pad, and camcorder viewfinder. These short, looping glimpses of performances for the camera offer various portals into a biographical virtual installation. Taken together, these sometimes-playful snippets seek to resolve a complicated equation:

<Montrealer+NorthAfrican+Berber+Arab+NorthAfrican+Quebecer=?>

In this instance specifically, the answer to the code is Mestari, captured repeatedly performing the outlines of her self-described hybrid identity. The work is a mishmash, in both form and content, aesthetic and concept, structure and meaning. Diaspora, immigration, and fragmentation are embodied through depictions of water flowing in its various states (liquid, solid, gas), through the flight of birds of feather or birds of steel, and the presence of patterns, dresses, textiles, and other visual codes that have travelled from one circumscribed geographic region to the other. This uncoded territory, a liminal space within the artist’s mind, runs freely to the intergenerational sounds and sights of Mestari’s cultural métissage and its many contradictions, intricacies, and beauties.

## Loading...

## ...جار التحميل...



يعاني حاسوبي المحمول، البالغ من العمر عشر سنوات، لتحميل الرسومات والأصوات وصور GIF التي تشكل الإفريز العمودي لـ”مُناباماقب” (Monabamaqueb (2022). أنتظر، مفكراً في استخدام iPhone وشبكة 5G بدلاً من الحاسوب.

بينما كان حاسوبي القديم يهترئ شيئاً فشيئاً على مدى العقد الماضي، أصبحت معتاداً على تحذير المتصفح من أن "الإتصال ليس سرياً: قد يحاول المهاجمون سرقة معلوماتك ...". أتجاوز هذا الإزعاج يدوياً وبشكل روتيني عن طريق النقر للمتابعة، غير مبالٍ كلياً بالتهديدات المستمرة للاتصالات أو كلمات المرور أو الرسائل أو بطاقات الائتمان التي يتم اعتراضها. هذه المساحة المحدودة التي هي الإنترنت، والتي لا أشعر بماديتها إلا عندما أتذكر تشويش هاتف الخط الأرضي كما كان الأمر في السابق، هي مرنة لدرجة أنني بالكاد أدرك حوافها أو حدودها. أين تبدأ وتنتهي، وكيف لي أنا أن أتناسب مع هذه المصفوفة؟

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في الروافد الخارجية لـ”مُناباماقب” ليلي مستاري، هناك مساحة بين النجوم تجذب انتباهنا بسبب أصداءها البعيدة، الشاسعة واللامتناهية للواقع الدنيوي الصاخب العابر للثقافات. بعيداً عن تلك المعركة، تطفو الفنانة كأنها كوكبتها الخاصة، وتظهر على شاشات تكنولوجية من مختلف العصور: شاشة مسطحة، شاشة كمبيوتر، تلفزيون كاثودي، هاتف، لوحة ذكية، وعدسة الكاميرا. توفر هذه العروض القصيرة والمتكررة للكاميرا بوابات مختلفة لتجهيز افتراضي لسيرة الذاتية. مجتمعة، تسعى هذه المقتطفات المرحلة أحياناً إلى حل معادلة معقدة:

<Montrealer+NorthAfrican+Berber+Arab+NorthAfrican+Quebecer=?>

في هذه الحالة على وجه التحديد، الجواب على الرمز هو مستاري نفسها، التي تم التقاطها بشكل متكرر وهي تؤدي الخطوط العريضة لهويتها الهجينة، كما تصفها. العمل عبارة عن خيط، من حيث الشكل والمحتوى، والجمالية والمفهوم، والبنية والمعنى. الشتات، الهجرة، والتجزئة، كل ذلك يتجسد من خلال تصوير المياه المتدفقة في حالاتها المختلفة (سائل، صلب، غاز)، من خلال تحليق طيور الريش أو الطيور الفولاذية، ووجود النماذج والفساتين والمنسوجات، والرموز المرئية التي سافرت من منطقة جغرافية إلى أخرى. هذه المنطقة الغير متنازل عنها، وهي مساحة محدودة في ذهن الفنانة، تسير بحرية على وقع الأصوات والمشاهد بين الأجيال المتعددة التي تعيد ميستاري تجميعها ثقافياً، كما تناقضاتها وتعقيداتها وجمالياتها.



«*OK, OK, come on, bye-bye.*»

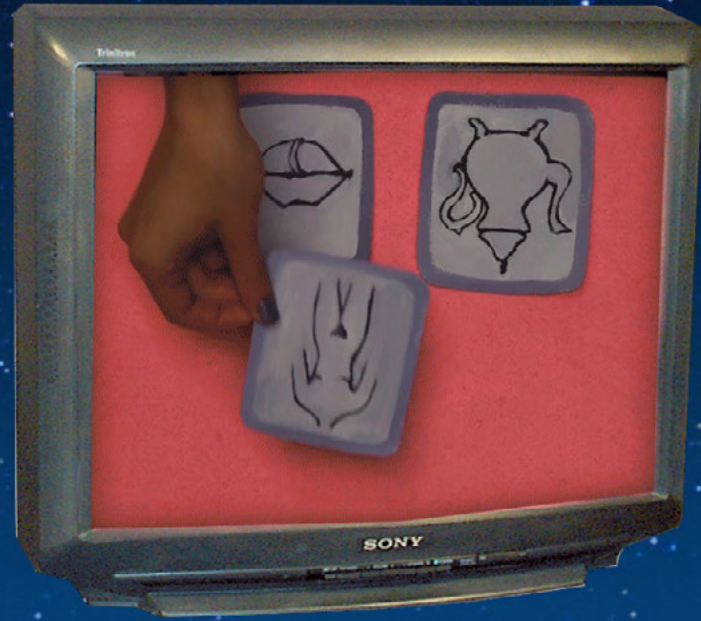
In an essay entitled “Performing Postcoloniality in the Moroccan Scene: Emerging Sites of Hybridity” (2010), the scholar Khalid Amine writes about empowerment, indoctrination, and postcolonial intersubjectivity within Morocco’s 20th century theatrical tradition. Speaking about “performing liminality” in Morocco specifically, he states: “My argument is that contemporary Moroccan theatre finds itself construed within a liminal space, on the borderlines between different tropes. It cannot exist otherwise, for it juxtaposes heterogeneous entities to emerge as a hybrid field that is spaced between East and West. It is fusion of Western theatrical traditions and local Arabic performance practices.” (193) His conclusion, that hybridity is “not simply a fusion of two pure moments, but the persistent emergence of liminal third spaces that transform, renew, and recreate different kinds of writing out of previous models” (204), rejoins Mestari’s inter-medial remixing.

The history of performance art is also that of the evolution of media. The term intermedia, coined in the mid-1960s by Fluxus artist Dick Higgins, describes various interdisciplinary art activities situated between genres. Monabamaqueb continues in this lineage, introducing important identitarian anchor points that were often evacuated from the white, male-dominated and overly conceptually concerned experimental 1960s practices. The realisation of a body politic within Mestari’s work is intrinsically linked to both its hybrid structure—betwixt mediums—and content—betwixt cultures.

<sup>2</sup> Khalid Amine, “Performing Postcoloniality in the Moroccan Scene: Emerging Sites of Hybridity.” *Contesting Performance: Global Sites of Research*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2010. pages 191-206.







« *OK, OK, come on, bye-bye.* »

في مقال بعنوان "أداء ما بعد الاستعمار في المشهد المغربي: مواقع هجينة ناشئة" (2010)، يكتب الباحث خالد أمين عن التمكين والتلقين ومفهوم التذوات في ما بعد الاستعمار ضمن التقاليد المسرحية في المغرب في القرن العشرين. عن "أداء الحدود" في المغرب على وجه التحديد، يقول: "حجتي هي أن المسرح المغربي المعاصر يجد نفسه مفهوماً في مساحة محدودة، على الحدود بين المناطق المختلفة. لا يمكن أن يوجد خلاف ذلك، لأنه يجمع بين الكيانات المتنوعة حتى يظهر كمجال هجين واقع بين الشرق والغرب. إنه مزيج من التقاليد المسرحية الغربية وممارسات الأداء العربية المحلية."<sup>2</sup> (193) استنتاجه، أن الهجين ليس مجرد مزيج من لحظتين نقيتين، ولكن الظهور المستمر للمساحة الثالثة التي تتحول وتجدد وتعيد إنشاء أنواع مختلفة من الكتابة من النماذج السابقة" (204)، هذا الإستنتاج ينضم إلى إعادة المزج بين الوسائط الخاصة بميستاري.



تاريخ فن الأداء هو أيضاً تاريخ تطور الوسائط. يصف مصطلح "انترميديا" الذي صاغه فنانون الفلوكسوس ديك هيجنز في منتصف الستينيات، العديد من الأنشطة الفنية متعددة التخصصات الواقعة بين الأنواع. يستمر "منابماقب" في هذا النهج، حيث يقدم نقاط ربط هامة لطالما تم إخلؤها في الممارسات التجريبية المفاهيمية التي هيمن عليها الذكر الأبيض في الستينيات. يرتبط تحقيق الجسم السياسي في عمل ميستاري ارتباطاً وثيقاً بكل من هيكلها الهجين - ما بين الوسائط - والمحتوى - ما بين الثقافات.

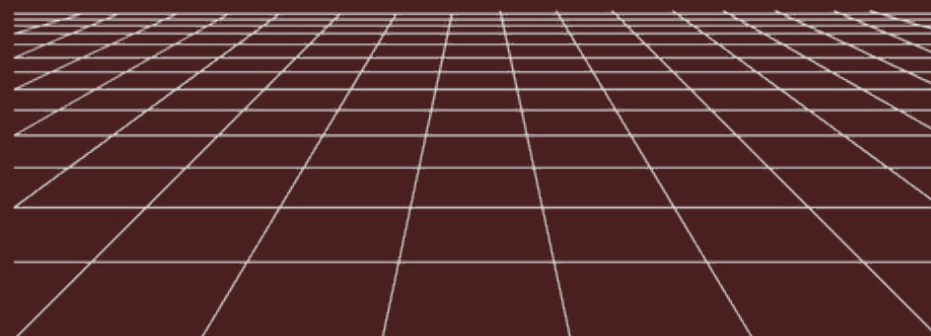
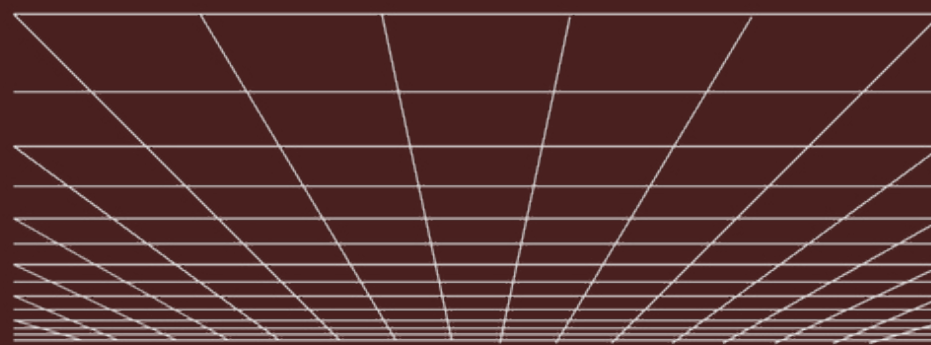
<sup>2</sup> Khalid Amine, "Performing Postcoloniality in the Moroccan Scene: Emerging Sites of Hybridity." *Contesting Performance: Global Sites of Research*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2010. pages 191-206.



## (SS) Simultaneous&Syncopated

Towards the bottom of its frieze, *Monabamaqueb* lands in a three-dimensional room of tiled images, a series of video stills and drawings where the artist seeks to uncover her own resemblance with members of her family. Trying to “figure out what my face is, where it comes from, what it does,” Mestari’s intervention calls upon seminal art historical feminist self-portrait aesthetics like those of Suzy Lake (Miss Chatelaine, 1973), Ana Mendieta (Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints), 1972), and Mona Hatoum (So Much I Want To Say, 1983). Below this room, at the bottom of a staircase, is yet another ring of existence.

This downward motion continuously guides our journey, towards a final image of Mestari wearing a jellaba in a bridge pose on a North African textile carpet. This corporeal bridge, repeated numerous times throughout the frieze, is an important metaphor. It gestures to the underlying connectivity of *Monabamaqueb* different elements, to a flight over borders and boundaries in order to generate newfound identities. As a third, liminal space, a heterogenous assemblage, Mestari escapes the strictures of contemporary discourse to create her own expressive architecture of a Maghrebian-Québécois.



## (SS) Simultaneous&Syncopated

في الجزء السفلي من إفريزها، تهبط "مناباماقب" في غرفة ثلاثية الأبعاد المليئة بالصور، وسلسلة من اللقطات والرسومات حيث تسعى الفنانة للكشف عن تشابهها مع أفراد عائلتها. في محاولة لـ "معرفه ما هو وجهي، من أين يأتي وماذا يفعل"، يستشهد تدخل ميستاري بجماليات أعمال فنية أساسية من تاريخ النسوية للصور الذاتية مثل أعمال سوزي لايك (ملكة جمال شاتلين 1973) و أنا منديتا (بلا عنوان (زجاج على بصمات الجسم) 1972) ومنى حاطوم (أريد أن أقول الكثير، 1983). أسفل هذه الغرفة، في أسفل الدرج، هناك عالم آخر من الوجود.

توجه هذه الحركة الهابطة رحلتنا باستمرار، نحو صورة نهائية لميستاري ترتدي فيها الجلابية وهي في وضعية الجسر على سجادة من نسيج شمال أفريقية. هذا الجسر الجسدي، الذي يتكرر عدة مرات في أنحاء الإفريز، هو استعارة مهمة. إنه يشير إلى الاتصال الأساسي لعناصر "مناباماقب" المختلفة، إلى رحلة عبر الحدود والفواصل من أجل توليد هويات جديدة. كأنها مساحة ثالثة، تركيب غير متجانس، تهرب ميستاري من قيود الخطاب المعاصر لخلق هندستها التعبيرية الخاصة لكيبك-مغربي.

### *Monabamaqueb* (2022)

*Monabamaqueb* is a URL work inhabited by the question of the hybridity of Maghrebian-Quebec identity. Composed in the manner of a vertical frieze, the project gathers photographs, GIFs, drawings and soundtracks from a visual and performative research on auto-ethnography, the inhabitation of territory and the digestion of knowledge. The surrealist architecture of the work and its ambiguous intergalactic location momentarily suspend discourses on identity in order to deterritorialize its possibilities. The title is a contraction of Montrealer + North African + Berber + Arab + North African + Quebecer, and calls for an artistic practice of fragmentation and reconfiguration.



Conseil des arts  
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*Monabamaqueb* is a work by Laïla Mestari, co-produced by Galerie Galerie with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts.

[www.galeriegaleriesweb.com](http://www.galeriegaleriesweb.com)



# Petal by Petal:



Laila Mestari, *Chanson pour Amina*, 2020, video still



# Feminine Desire as a Conduit for Home

“As long as you were here  
your hands smelled of Red Roses

Now that you are gone  
Red Roses smell of your hands”

— Ziba Maleki, 2022<sup>1</sup>

From a young age, my mom taught me that her name in Arabic means “morning dew on a rose.” Later in life, she took me out for my first rose tea at a Chinese cafe and told me everything about taking care of yourself using roses and rose water, explaining how she’d make tea from her hedges every morning growing up in Beqaa Valley. When I asked my mom if we should buy rose tea so she could make it at home, she said that Earl Grey was her favourite now. She had lost the ritual because it was connected to a place no longer accessible to her. In diaspora, her relationship with rose water carried on, becoming a stand-in for the plant that was once tethered to the ground.

“When you say ‘rose,’ I think of elegance,” my mom told me. “When you say ‘Lebanon,’ all I see are painful memories of war, sadness, and grief. Therefore, Lebanon is not home for me.” My mom, sister, and I promised we would get rose tattoos for each other. I had a three-stem rose tattooed on my leg that mimics the design on a plastic tablecloth roll I got from a Middle Eastern grocery store. My new short film *The Landmarks of Memory* (2023) includes this tattoo performance ritual, as well as archival footage<sup>2</sup> of a pre-war flower shop bearing the name “Lebanon’s Rose وردة لبنان.” My window exhibition of the same name commemorates my mother’s parents who were killed in the Lebanese Civil War.

There is an abundance of collective love for roses in Southwest Asian/Middle Eastern and North African (SWANA) cultures. They are revered as a transcultural plant, symbol, and medicine used in cuisine, health, wellness, art, and politics. Across the SWANA region, roses are indigenous to the land and also grown commercially. Damask rose (named after the capital of Syria, where it was first cultivated) is the most popular variety, known for its rose water, oil, and perfume distillation. Morocco, Oman, Iran, Armenia, Saudi Arabia, and other countries celebrate rose festivals annually, and even more places, including Lebanon, celebrate rose season through collaborative harvesting, rose water processing, hikes, and workshops. Iran produces 90 percent of the world’s rose water, which is enjoyed in drinks and desserts, as well as for skincare, therapeutic, and religious purposes.

“Roses are my companions for everything,” Lebanese American Layla Feghali writes in her co-edited herbal and healing guidebook *Li Beirut*.<sup>3</sup> “I especially love to drink them with sage. They soften my ancestral wounds and longing, mend my deepest heartache and betrayal, and help me find connection. [...] They feel like the love of all my Tetas across the ages, holding me in protection and prayer.” In Feghali’s forthcoming book *The Land in Our Bones*, she asks how we find our way home amid displacement: “What does it mean to be of a place, when extraction and empire destroy its geographies? [...] What do we rediscover when we look beyond what’s been lost and tend to what remains?”<sup>4</sup>

Fostering a sense of home can look like forming more intentional relationships with ancestral plants while incorporating them into the everyday. Beyond personal consumption, roses are used by artists and activists to express feminine desire through remembrance,



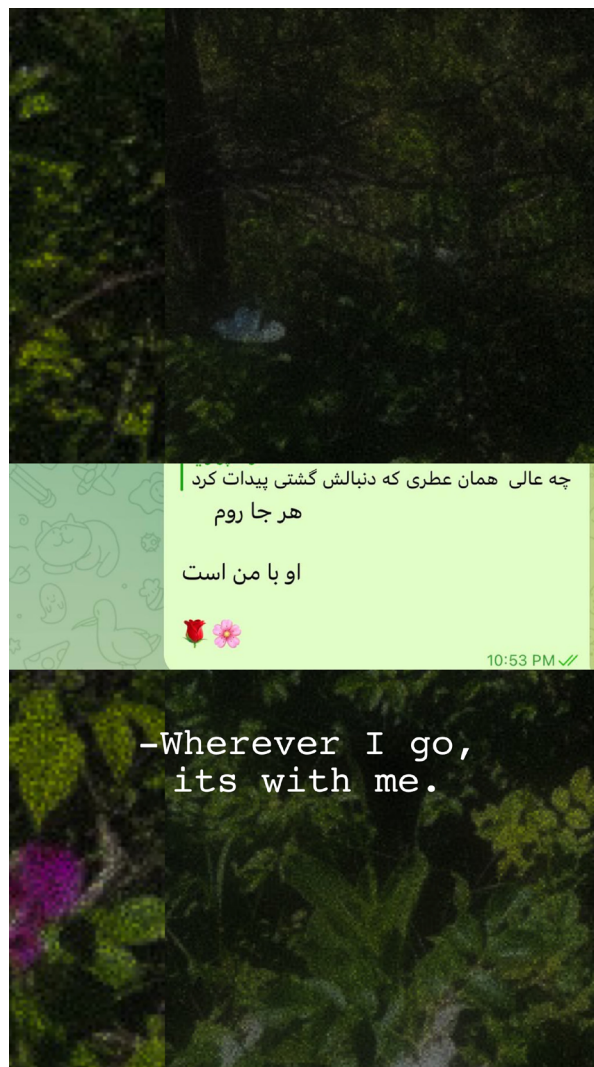






Both: Ziba Maleki with assistance from Shirin Fahimi and translation by Khashayar Mohammadi, from the series *phullo, phallo, phirse* (grow, flower and feast again), 2022  
COURTESY OF ZIBA MALEKI





Ziba Maleki with assistance from Shirin Fahimi and translation by Khashayar Mohammadi, from the series *phullo, phallo, phirse* (*grow, flower and feast again*), 2022  
COURTESY OF ZIBA MALEKI

unrest, and intergenerational connection. It is no wonder that many SWANA artists reference roses and grandmothers together.

*phullo, phallo, phirse* (*grow, flower and feast again*) (2022)—an Instagram storytelling project by the South Asian Visual Arts Centre (SAVAC), Toronto, in partnership with Waard Ward collective’s community rose garden—featured four diasporic women sharing the ways in which they “tend to their beloved rose bushes and how roses tint their way of seeing the world.”<sup>5</sup> Kurdish/Turkish Canadian Ziba Maleki<sup>6</sup> shared an audio and archival photo series that tells the story of how her grandmother, at nine years old, sat in a room of courters before being taken away to her new husband’s house. Maleki remembers how her grandmother picked roses from the neighbour’s garden and used them for food or tea. Now that she is gone, “every Red Rose conjures her memory in our minds.”<sup>7</sup>

Maleki’s grandmother used to recite from a poem: “The Red Roses are plucked and put on a cloth to dry / I hope each girl is married to a person who she loves.” In the project, Maleki’s sister and cousin each sing their version of this from memory. The protectiveness and

resilience conveyed in the words underscore the nuances of traditional women’s labour: their duty to the home, their lack of agency in love, and their guidance of girls in the family. Here, roses accompany the incantation for safety and sexual liberation, becoming a matriarchal symbol invoked through Maleki’s project of remembrance.

Gesture, or embodied response, is an important way SWANA artists work with roses to address nostalgia for home and landscape. Based in Montreal, artist Laïla Mestari of the North African diaspora was on a residency in Trois-Pistoles, QC, when she noticed wild roses growing by a creek and felt called to create a performance with the land. Her three-minute short film *Chanson pour Amina* (Song for Amina) (2020) opens with a landscape photograph floating on the surface of the water, with rose petals scattered across the image.<sup>8</sup> The photograph appears to be a spread torn from what could have been a tourism or photo book. Mestari’s hands enter the frame as she proceeds to push the ripped papers into the water with a stick and smother the images with seaweed-covered rocks to “put it back in the land.” When the scene becomes activated by Mestari’s intervention, the rose petals begin to dance and flow.



This performance is dedicated to her maternal grandmother, Amina. Rose petals connect Mestari to all of her grandmothers and to Moroccan rituals of care, including roses used in food, medicine, and tea. For her, roses, and especially their smell, are connected to matrilineal memories, Moroccan culture, and the feminine body.

As symbols tied to loss, love, and desire, I also think of the power that roses embody in women's resistances, queer resistances, and grief rituals. For example, the death of 22-year-old Kurdish Iranian Jina (Mahsa) Amini in September 2022 at the hands of the morality police sparked an unprecedented dissent in Iran and a global movement under the slogan "Women, Life, Freedom." Demonstrations included posters of Amini placed on the ground and covered in roses in vigil. The online dissemination of these images fostered a sense of collective mourning and conviction toward the cause. On Amini's gravestone, the handwritten Kurdish message translates to "Jina dear, you won't die. Your name will become a code." Here, roses signal to grief and injustice—a proclamation of care and action.

Roses have appeared in several other movements, including the Syrian revolution as part of the wider Arab Spring. In poet-scholar Banah Ghadbian's PhD dissertation "Ululating from the Underground: Syrian Women's Protests, Performances, and Pedagogies under Siege," zhe explains how Syrian women and youth took to the streets at the onset of the Syrian Revolution in 2011 with roses, olive branches, and water bottles in hand. Described as a woman-led civil disobedience movement, Ghadbian writes about how these objects "became imprinted in Syrian cultural memory as peaceful, creative symbols of the Syrian Revolution."<sup>9</sup>

Activated through protesting bodies, the objects of resistance become icons in their own right—a symbol imbued with collective rage and vitality, a reminder that the work continues. "This image of roses and water stood in sharp contrast to regime police gunning protestors down in cold blood," Ghadbian writes. "The art of the Syrian Revolution becomes a living world imprinted into our collective cultural memories when reality has 'died' in Syria. Art is an affirmation of subjectivity, a creative truth that exists for itself. It also aesthetically embodies what Jose Muñoz calls a methodology of hope, a futurism, a form of queer utopia which takes the form of everyday aesthetic and performative practices."<sup>10</sup>

Art in the everyday is an essential part of my own queer praxis—and roses are there, in their bountiful velvet and delicate strength, reminding me of freedom, desire, and the pursuit of pleasure. Roses remind us of the inherent love and wisdom of generations of women that paved the way for us to live. They are a remnant of home—a difficult word for many of us whose lives and families have been impacted by violence, war, colonization, occupation, and forced displacement. Roses will follow us everywhere as medicine, offering comfort, beauty, and healing. They will nourish our every yearning so that we might embrace wholeness and quench our hearts with the passion and softness needed each day.

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#### ENDNOTES

- 1 South Asian Visual Arts Centre (@savac\_), Instagram, August 17, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/ChXfumSlqf->
- 2 *Beirut, Never Again*, directed by Jocelyne Saab (Lebanon, 1976).
- 3 SWANA Ancestral Hub, *Li Beirut*, accessed June 19, 2023, 33, [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53682deae4b03a1661ad89a9/t/6419593c164e1e2eadacca64/1679382860987/li+beirut+bilingual+%5Bcompressed+for+web%5D\\_compressed.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53682deae4b03a1661ad89a9/t/6419593c164e1e2eadacca64/1679382860987/li+beirut+bilingual+%5Bcompressed+for+web%5D_compressed.pdf)
- 4 Feghali, *The Land in Our Bones* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2024), <https://www.kobo.com/gb/en/ebook/the-land-in-our-bones>.
- 5 "Ishtar's International Network of Feral Gardens," SAVAC, Toronto, April–October 2022, <https://savac.net/ishtar-2022>
- 6 South Asian Visual Arts Centre (@savac\_), Instagram, August 15, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/ChSTTQILSjJ>
- 7 South Asian Visual Arts Centre (@savac\_), August 17, 2022.
- 8 *Chanson pour Amina*, written and directed by Laila Mestari (2020), <https://vimeo.com/447916560>
- 9 Banah Ghadbian, "Ululating from the Underground: Syrian Women's Protests, Performances, and Pedagogies under Siege" (PhD dissertation, University of California San Diego, 2021), 221, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6j07n7j1>
- 10 Ibid.