



A body

finding  
freedom

within  
itself

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Cover image: *Calling back the dead  
and dismembered aspects of the  
self*, 2022. Graphite on paper.

لأم العيون.

To the one with the eyes.

Abstract.

When a dislocation of any type occurs, whether geographical, emotional, or spiritual, the disorder pushes the self to retreat to safety. For me, that safety is in my body. It is in this place of retreat where I locate my original home.

In this space of translocation, I forage for materials from my surroundings and places that I belong to. Moving between Dubai, Damascus, Beirut, and Providence, I shape a reality dependent on what is available. I then transform these materials, searching for the forms and relationships that emerge while meditating on home and the body as a moving vessel and container for attachments.

My work involves various modes of reflection through making. Drawings help with understanding experiences, while foraging and

assemblage are the physical structures that embody narratives, histories, realities, and memory. Recorded sounds register localities and spaces. I am interested in documenting the shifts, transitions, challenges, and resolutions as they occur, whether in the work or in myself.

I am centering beauty as a form of hope, rather than the pervasive violence and pain that follows the bodies of people from the Levant diaspora. Hope exists in the new generation that escaped the holds of the greatest burden, carrying the legacy and memory of our parents and ancestors through time and place.

Two questions emerge: How do we locate ourselves? How is memory of the homeland imprinted on the body?

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# Introduction.

I considered my thesis as a space where I could reflect, in real time, between the ideas I was interested in and the process of making in the studio. The sections in this book express that connectivity and evolution of thought, as well as the work, developed over the course of the last six months.

My thesis began online on December 30, 2022, in a blog that involved a lot more diaristic and detailed research and reflections.

For those who are compelled, you can visit the blog titled *Thesis and Life*. *Thesis is Life* at: [idamsadlam.wordpress.com](https://idamsadlam.wordpress.com)

“Home is my mother, and individuals who rooted me, planted the placement. Arabic is home.”

Home is shelter, safety, privacy, family, mother, womb.

The tribe, land, smells, and food.

The return to the womb, the land, the home. We return to ourselves.

“If I think of Lebanon as وطن (nation), I don’t think of nationalism or loyalty. I think about the kindness of people... There’s a story I heard as a child about a well-known author who decided to return to Lebanon, to the village, to be a farmer. Now I understand why.”

# Mother Tongue.

I am a Syrian national who migrated to and lived my whole life in the UAE. My ideas and connections to home, homeland, and nation have never followed a clear path. My sense of belonging due to this relocation has always felt temporary and unstable.

In Arabic, looking for a translation for “home” turns into an exercise in etymology and history. In English, sentimental notions of belonging and safety occur in statements like “feeling at home,” “returning home,” or “home is where the heart is.” Different words in Arabic express belonging, house, shelter, safety, and so on; and since the language is split into formal, and spoken, words from the spoken one change depending on the city they originate from. But the overarching notion of “home” in Arabic most often leads to “homeland” or “nation.”

The distinction between “homeland” and “nation” is subtle. In Arabic, وطن (watan), which alludes to both translations, is derived from the same root word, وَطَنَ (watana), meaning “to reside,”

“to instate oneself,” “to familiarize.” “Homeland” is the original sentiment, the natural way that people have felt attachment to the land they and their ancestors lived in, while “nation” is the modern, political concept that groups people into ethnicities, territories, and governments.

Language is important here. I must recognize and acknowledge that although I am a native Arabic speaker, my primary mode of communication, as well as thought, is in English. I am always negotiating and translating; a back-and-forth that happens between the mother tongue—the origin, the homeland, and the learned one—the new land.

There is a quote by Egyptian poet Iman Mersal that comes to mind about language:

*Speaking a second language with an accent is a way for the mother tongue to be present—to be immortal—to the point of “sabotaging” that second language in some way.*

So, is home a place, a memory, a house, a land, a nation?

To dig deeper into my own interiority, experience, and position, I reached out to my community of family, friends, and asylum seekers in Providence with a focus on those from the Levant diaspora (Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan). Through electronic channels—phone, email, and Zoom—I collected their stories

and first-hand accounts concerning their migration, whether physical or spiritual, to learn how these bodies reflected on their own movement and sense of belonging. Their thoughts answering my questions (below) can be read throughout this book.

1. What is home for you?
2. Can it change? If so, what factors change home?
3. Are you not at home by choice or by force?
4. Is there more than one home? Or one true home? What’s the difference?
5. Is it a feeling, a memory, a position, or something else?
6. What are the first images that appear when you think of home?
7. What are the first objects that you think of that connect you to home?
8. What is the music that takes you home?
9. What are the sensations that arise when you think of home?
10. Where do you feel the sensation of home in your body?
11. If you had the choice to be home, and if you are not there, would you choose to be/go there?
12. Is home movable or static? What makes it either?
13. In Arabic, “home” is “وطن”. How does that affect your understanding of home?
14. Do you feel at home where you are? What affects this feeling?
15. Do you think we make a big deal about home? Please elaborate.
16. Philosophically, how would you describe your body?
17. Can a body be the home?

I took this photograph (right) on a recent trip visiting my father, who I hadn’t seen since 2019. Beirut became home to my grandparents and my dad after the start of the civil war in Syria. The hanging cables reminded me of hysterical lines that could not

be tamed nor controlled. They reflected the growing pains in this beautiful country. The unruly cables represented both the disorder and the sense of familiarity that I grew up with.



Beirut, Lebanon, January 2023.

## Ocean, the Carrier.

Since moving into sculptural work, one of my main processes has involved foraging for material around me, whether on the street, in the desert, at the beach, or in dumpsters. The objects I find are either used in the base structure of the work, to define the work with its materiality, or as documentation and preservation. Material and form became more important to me than image; maybe they always were, but my time at RISD helped clarify that for me. And only after some reflection did I recall that both my grandmother and mother have always been makers, attracted by tactility and the use of their hands in making things.

I started thinking about material that I could find around me in the surroundings I occupied, beginning with Mirdif, the neighborhood in Dubai where I have lived since 2004. Mirdif is situated deeper

into the desert, beyond the three main highways that split the city east and west. Although it has been in constant development over the last 20 years, a lot of the environment that surrounds Mirdif is still off-white sand mixed with gravel, islands or small pathways with bushes, and a good number of trees still fighting for their right to co-exist. I have always been interested in the idea of the leftover, or the discarded—things that were left behind to slowly deteriorate and lose their functionality, like drying bean shells dropped from trees, or gravel mixed with cement that look like rocks. I am also looking at the flora that people have implanted in the area, like the Bougainvillea tree and other plants I can't name.

I think about how we are constantly bringing things with us and changing our surroundings wherever we go.

Mirdif, Dubai, UAE, April 2020.

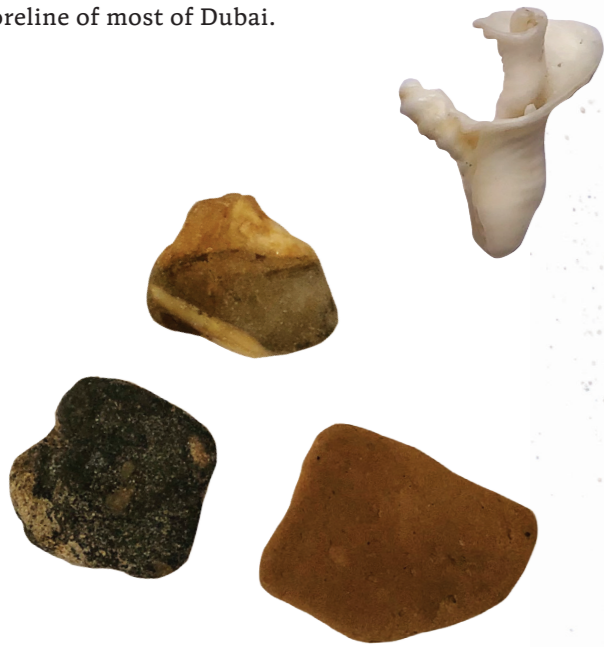


“Home is where you don’t have to explain anything.”

Pieces of things that in their totality reflect the area.

Collection of earth from Mirdif, December 2022. This piece of rock (above) found in Mirdif could actually be asphalt, or basalt rock. I learned that Tarmac is a British materials company, and when I think about the history of the UAE and its allyship with Britain, even the earth beneath my feet feels like it is mixed, imported.

I then visited the beach in Jumeirah, an upper-class neighborhood along the shoreline of most of Dubai.



Collection from Jumeirah beach, Dubai, UAE, December 2022.



Seashells are formed by mollusks—the slimy creatures inside shells and some other fish. Mollusks absorb saltwater and, once excreted, turn it into calcium carbonate that hardens into a shell. When mollusks die, their shells are discarded and float in the sea where currents, tides, and waves transport them until they end up on our shores.

I think about the distances these shells travel and where they end up, on the shore, eventually turning into sand.

Our universe contains at least 70 septillion stars (7 + 23 zeros). Earth contains 7.5 Sextillion sand grains (75 + 17 zeros). Sand is not only made from rocks and shells. It’s also composed of silicon dust which are found in sun-like stars in the universe.

A reminder of the totality of it all.



There is a history in these Jumeirah shores, involving the Gulf trade route, fisheries, and pearl diving. But for me, a different history follows me here. I wrote in my diary:

31 December 2022

*I return to this beach. I return to that girl at the beach. The constant solo beach girl of my life.*

Since 2009, I found myself going to this same beach, alone. The visits became more frequent and normal. I made the trip, a 40-minute drive each way, almost weekly. I spent hours watching people, thinking my thoughts, writing down my dreams or anxieties, reading my books, and swimming. This beach always reminds me of that girl in her 20’s, confused about life, falling in and out of relationships and fantasies, listening to motivational speeches on a life’s purpose and

passion, resisting her “going with the flow-ness” that seemed like it got her nowhere, eventually making and finding her own way.

These trips were important. A pull to the sea that I needed without understanding what it provided—an intuitive feeling of being there, the sacred time of solitude, the space for recuperation, reconnection, but within the safety of being surrounded by others when my mind took its twists and turns into pits of hell. Later, the pit became a widening valley, a river, a struggle that persisted into my 30’s.

The sea has many personal associations for me. It started in my dreams where I constantly dreamed of large, dark blue waves rising or crashing on the shore, like a Tsunami, it was always a Tsunami. Online articles about dream meanings connect water with a person’s

“I don’t want my memories to change.”

“Images of my childhood bedroom. The child, baby boy, that is home. That baby boy is my healer, it all comes down back to him.”

emotional state. The water dreams then turned into recurring dreams of me saving my mother from drowning in different bodies of water. The dreams were later revealed in the waking world with a climactic event that caused deep pain.

Spending time by myself has been constant throughout my life, ever since I was a child. Lost in my own thoughts and emotions, talking to myself, observing the world, in my body, in my head. Returning to the beach after being away for months is always momentous. In a spiritual way, it occurs to me that I somehow align my child self with the woman I am in the present. I go back in time, to move forward. The beach is the constant place where I am one with all the Maldas that have passed through me and still live within me.

Moving towards shorelines...

“Home is yellow sun, it’s warm  
enough. Blue sea and sounds of waves  
crashing gently. Smells of fish, salt.  
Smiles, calm inside.”



Collecting sand at Matunuck Beach, RI, USA, March 2023.



Barrington Beach, RI, USA, February 2023.



Formation of shells stuck to each other.



*Najwa/Talking to God*, 2023. Steel pipe, copper wire, interfacing fabric, Aghabani fabric.

“Home is comfort and love. A space to block out the world from, even if it’s a room.”

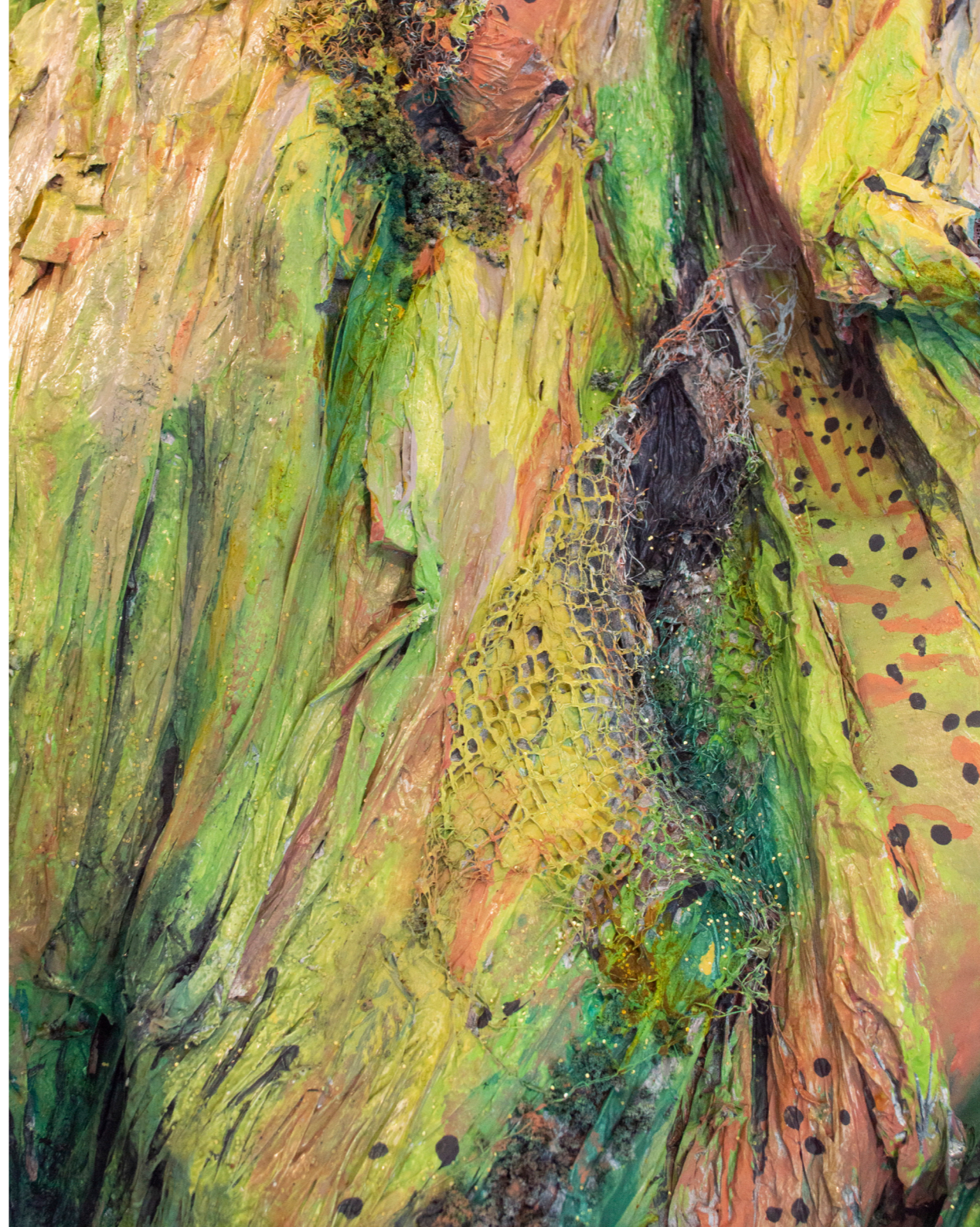
*Najwa/Talking to God* (2023) is really special to me. I put it together thinking about my grandmother, Najwa. Her name means “talking to God.” Thinking about sounds that locate me, I compiled the voice notes sent over Whatsapp from family members as expressions of care and affection. I chose the voice of my maternal grandmother whose own story of movement reflects the reality of our time. My grandfather, her husband, left Syria in the late 70’s to pursue his education in the United Kingdom and stayed there. After many years, my grandmother followed where they would both live out their retirement in London.

In the last couple of years, her health began to deteriorate, and the dilemma of distance, of being far away from her family, children, and her home, created a sense of discomfort and longing within me. The UK offered comfort in assistance, yet it was far from her sense of belonging and family care. Her voice messages are bittersweet. The foreign land offers hope, while the homeland is where love is located. The piece is meant to be contemplative. You can lie down underneath it and listen to her speak to you kindly, affectionately, locating yourself in love and home.



## Post-Human Body.

Concerns with human consumption persist for me; I am conscious of what and how I consume, purchase, and discard. In my art practice, a lot of the materials and surfaces I use are repurposed. I save and collect different types of material scrap for future reuse. I have always wanted to stuff plastic waste into canvas backings or inside sculptures to rid the natural environment of our trash. For example, the folds of *Hustéra* are created using layers of 25 collected plastic bags.



*Hustéra*, 2022. Plastic bags, acrylic and spray paint, steel wool, architectural bushes, latex, mop rope, scrap. 35 x 47 in (top piece) + 129 in (mop rope).

*Hustéra* led me to fantasize about the post-human body that would exist in the Anthropocene epoch, and the objects and materials that get attached to each other as they evolve to survive in the future.

I began making drawings that illustrated bodies in motion in protective shells made up of earth,

What will these bodies keep and hang on to? What will they adopt? What will they discard?

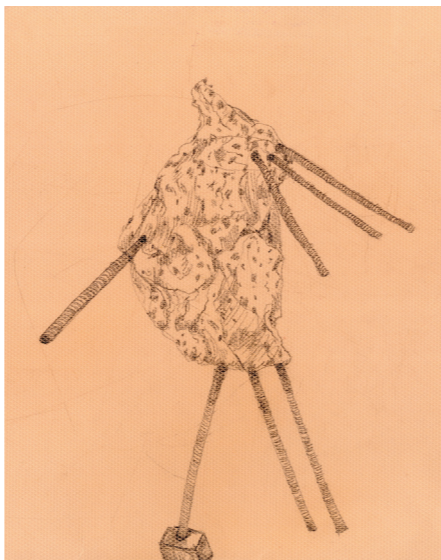
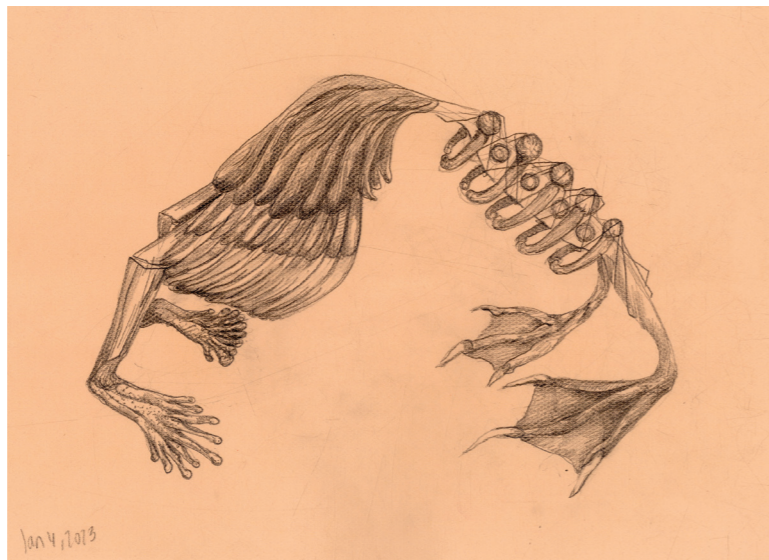


Drawings of post-human creatures, 2023. Pencil on paper. 8 x 11 in.

scrap metal, cement, plastic. Bodies need to keep moving to survive and continue to exist. These drawings looked at bodies as composite entities in transition and their future potential to become, as though they are a genus of a new species—a potential decentering of the human species once it has achieved global destruction of Earth.



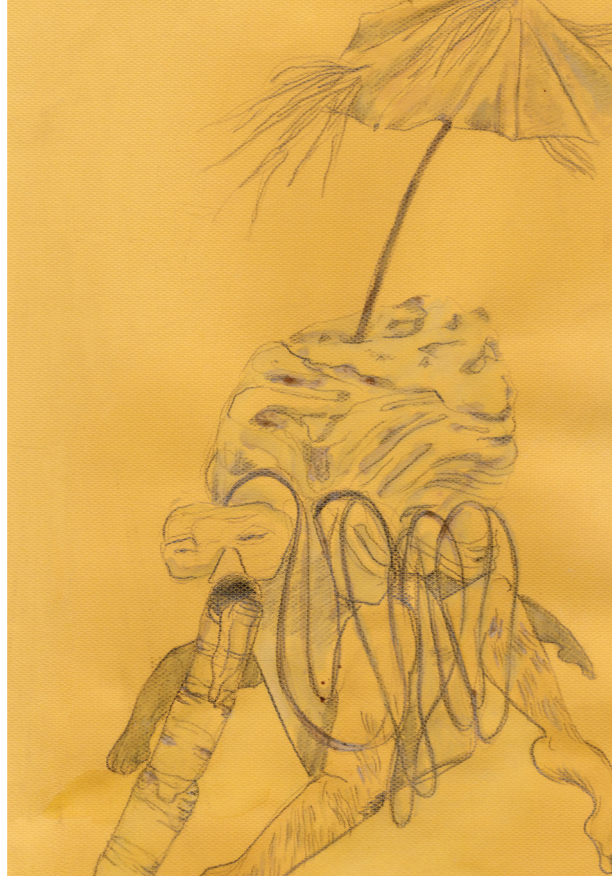
Below: Line drawings of a body in different gestures of movement.



“The body is an intricately designed living biological machine that houses my consciousness and mind.”



*Shell*, 2023. Clay, twigs, paint. 2.5 x 7 in.



Drawings of post-human bodies, 2023.  
Pencil and watercolor on paper. 8 x 11 in.



Figure 1. Rockite, burlap, copper wire.



Figure 2. Clay, earth, gold thread, hair, acrylic paint.



Figure 3. Clay, leaves from bamboo plant, silicon, acrylic paint.

There's tremendous pleasure in transforming drawings into 3D sculptures (Fig. 1-3). In these iterations I used clay, rockite, and collected earth from Dubai to shape them. They became small-scale creatures that exist as if alive, crawling and flying through our world.

Meanwhile, I experimented with the foot as the basis for movement. In these studies (Fig. 4 & 5), I was looking for the right form and process for their making. The studies looked more like archaeological finds and human remains.

Figure 4 (left). Rockite, sponge, earth.  
Figure 5 (right). Rockite, wood stain.



Drawing of numerous feet attached to an abdomen inside a sprocket wheel.



# Cycles and Revolutions.

People and animals have been migrating since creation, bringing with them tools, objects, and pieces of earth to newer territories.

So, what is a migrating body?

If everything is in a state of flux, then we are constantly in a place of transition. There is always movement, and this movement parallels the natural world.

Vibrations and energies.  
Currents.  
Bodies of water and rain.  
Oppositional forces pushing against each other, in rocks and in our teeth.

Blood pumping up and down inside the body.  
Rotations of planets.  
Flesh to bones to dirt to seed to plant to dirt, to plant.  
Digestion.  
Cells reproducing.  
Menstrual cycle.

My practice has paralleled this state of movement and transition with constant experimentations and research to achieve a non-fixed state of being.

“The original home is also of course temporary, ephemeral which brings us full circle back to the beginning.”

“If I no longer derive comfort and peace from that place, that could change my perception of home. Sometimes it’s necessary to go through discomfort in order to achieve a certain goal. A transitional period until you are able to find home.”

*An Impossible Revolution* was a study of a performance in the desert in the UAE. I incorporated the jump rope from a previous performance using rope I found at the desert, to move horizontally across the soft, sand dunes—an impossible task that exhausted me, going nowhere but in circles. Although cycles and revolutions end in the same place they begin, yet the actions performed still change landscapes.

# Migrating Spirits.

When I Google bodies in migration, only images of migrant bodies in death appear.

Where does the migrating soul go to?

The body that is left behind in the water, under the earth. Is the spirit the original home? And the body just the physical ship? Like a spaceship, an Earthship on Earth, commanded by the invisible spirit of this human species.

What is a lifeless body? A body that has no life?

In a scene in the documentary *Century of the Self*, Nazis load a truck full of dead bodies. They “packed” these bodies with consideration to space, stacking them, one body head up, the other body head down. To make room for more bodies.

What of the terror that migrants face during perilous journeys through the seas and through borders? Some who perish in the waters, others who are caught and taken away, some who are operated on, some violated, and some who lose their family on the way.

“My relationship with home is based on my entitlement to human rights.”

It is difficult to contend with the pervasive violence, struggle, and pain that follows bodies of migrants. A pressing issue that floats in the peripheries of our day-to-day lives as “secure” citizens of a place. For me, my position is marked by distance and the occupation of being an artist. I’m grappling with these realities in a way that feels productive to me. I want to face them, deconstruct them, question them, and transform them.



## Grounding, Halting.

*A World Not Ours* is a documentary by the Palestinian-Danish film director Mahdi Fleifel about the Ain El Helweh refugee camp in Lebanon. The film stayed with me for days. These films are so difficult to watch, a reminder of the realities of humans, of Arabs, Palestinians and the “conflict” we grew up hearing about on the news and from friends. An occupation that has lasted 75 years.

The feeling of being stuck. You can see from the faces of the people in the camp, from their eyes, that there is no hope and there is no getting away from. There is no amount of self-help or self-care or striving that can get you out. A monotonous existence with no rights and no fulfilling aspiration. There must be a point in a person’s life when everything fails and the

soul is broken down. It makes no effort to try anymore.

Towards the end of the film, the main character, Abu Eyad, attempts the illegal trip to Greece through Syria and Turkey. The dangerous and expensive journey finally gets him to the Serbian border, where he is caught and sent back to Greece. He spends a whole year living on the streets with other refugees, with no papers, no resolution, only to be told he would be sent back to the camp.

That final shot, catching the look on his face, the dread. Fleifel knew there was nothing more to be said.

It got me thinking about the opposite of movement and migration. The state of non-movement, halting, grounding, imprisonment.



We are containers of our own thoughts, feelings, and experiences, and just like containers, we can be full or filled, empty or emptied. What is a container if it can’t function as a container to its full potential? If it leaks, is stuck to the ground, worn out?

*Abu Eyad*, 2023. Plaster, burlap, rope, wire, clay, rocks, foam, wood stain. 42 x 28 in.

“I was sold the idea that as a Syrian, I should be supportive of Syria and its people. After I grew up and after the civil war, I realized whatever I was feeling towards Syria was purely humanitarian. The feeling of belonging was from a humanitarian basis. I don’t feel any انتماء (belonging) to Syria... When I expressed my opinion or input with other Syrians, people jumped to state that I was not Syrian because I was born and raised outside of the country. And now in the UAE, where I’ve been living all my life, it should feel like home. But I see how they look at me, that I don’t deserve the position I have because I am not local.”

“These countries are not for us. If we were able to own a house, it would make living in the US feel like home. Even citizenship doesn’t matter if we can’t own our house.”

## As If Borrowing.

It’s ironic that the same western lands many dream of escaping to have taken away homes and broken down every sense of stability, agency, and identity. Others who grow up in stolen lands with a daily threat to existence, and the despair of witnessing being forgotten—existence is expressed in a consistent dose of resistance and fighting, or in hiding. Fear.

Migration and running away are tied to survival. Leaving with literally the clothes on your back. Leaving behind people, things, souvenirs, walls, and invisible scenes that fill empty rooms from the house(s) you grew up in.

British-Somali poet Warsan Shire, solidifies this emotional friction of running from home in her poem, *Home*.

*No one leaves home unless  
home is the mouth of a shark  
you only run for the border  
when you see the whole city running as well*

The UAE was a safe haven for many Arabs from the Levant, but as a system of governance, did not offer citizenship to its long-term residents—ones who resided there for 30+ years—only short-term, working permits or visas.

As one of the people who lived there for 30 years, the connection was as lasting as the expiry date on every new visa I got with every new job. I think about my parents who moved there in the 80’s, started a business, spent money on schooling, housing, and living.

Renting space in perpetuity.

Once you are not fit for work, or you run out of money, you leave. And with our countries in the Levant enduring one crisis after the other, where does that body go?

“Who taught Arabic to generations in this small country? Who put حمص (hummus) in their kitchen? Brought the ارغيلة (hookah) to their cafes, and stocked the books in their shops?

I felt detached from the home-land, realizing the meaning of my temporary status in a place I lived all my life, always thinking outside of, towards the future that would provide me with permanent status, to the western lands.

Relocating from a young age looks like a constant borrowing from cultural traditions of different countries, yet without being so intrinsically involved in what constitutes the specifics of society, whether Syrian, or Emirati (UAE), or western.

I am foreigner wherever I go.

A foreigner is a person not belonging to a particular place or group; a stranger or outsider.

# Mending.

*Our Women on the Ground: Essays by Arab Women Reporting on the Arab World* is a beautiful collection of personal accounts written by 18 journalists from the Arab region who have covered conflict in the Arab world. Edited by journalist Zahra Hankir, many of the essays concern conversations and interviews with women about their realities in respect to war. These voices are seldom heard. Questions arose: What was their reality? When the men were occupied in arms, or taken by armies and murdered, what became of these women?

Of the many stories that inspired me from the book, I keep thinking back to the essay written by Amira Al-Sharif, a Yemeni photographer. She introduces us to Saadiya, a woman who lives on the island

of Socotra in Yemen. Saadiya, a mother of seven, has been fighting to keep her land on her own. “She loves her trees—which she planted herself—and her birds as much as she loves her children,” Al-Sharif wrote. “Saadiya built her two homes with palm trees... She collects seashells, and dislikes anything that taints the beauty of her surroundings.” (page 155) Later, Saadiya says, “Whatever happens, I am not leaving my land. The land belongs to those who were born and live on it. I fear nobody.” (page 156)

The part that truly sparked something in me was Al-Sharif’s intention and objective, which she describes as photographing the beauty she finds around her: in women, children, and daily life.

She chose to focus on hope. For people from countries within the Arab region, we are followed by the shadows of corruption, war, death, and displacement. Our existence is deeply political.

These are some of the phrases I highlighted from the book that vividly captures images and experiences of people from the Middle East:

- Emigration is a loss of dignity and a form of humiliation, while staying here is hell.*
- Where should we go?*
- Outspoken woman is improper.*
- Middle Eastern by ancestry, with strong ties to the West due to displacement.*
- Dead, missing, exiled.*
- Emasculate the men.*
- Tragic and resilient.*
- The women kept the compound in order, cooking, cleaning, and helping care for the wounded men.*
- Mangled bodies.*
- Every time Iraq began to unravel, it was women who worked the hardest to stitch it back together.*
- Crouching in a makeshift shelter.*
- Mountain of sandbags.*
- Palmyra—the site of death.*
- A desert (hell) vs a green place (heaven).*
- Bouncing between negotiation, compromise, and resistance.*

“Home is within me. I’ve been living alone far for a long time. I found home in myself.”

راحة البال (tranquility), طمأنينة (peace of mind), استقرار (stability)”

- Power can be invisible, it can be fantastic, and dull and routine.*
- A body finding freedom within itself.*
- Syria: never the country I called home, but certainly my homeland.*
- Home was a place we created for ourselves over and over in places that never felt as though they were indisputably our own.*
- Never living in Syria, a means to live abroad.*
- Packing up a home.*
- تشرDNA , ripped apart, made dispossessed.*
- تعتير (misfortune, loss of dignity).*
- Hide and protect bodies.*
- Western photographs are drawn to the carnage, but I continue to seek other parts full of life, love, and hope.*
- What fighting spirits are.*
- Syrians locked in fear since the Hama massacre.*
- Rebuild a home.*
- What’s a home without neighbors, a town without people, is it still a home?*
- Picking up lives and rebuilding.*

Assuming my perspective of a woman, tending to, caring for, mending, I recalled *Swelling* an older piece I made in 2022 which emerged from actions of repair, using discarded fabrics from my mother and my collection.



*Swelling*, 2022. Sponge foam, fabric, latex, scrap, turmeric, black dye, iron oxide and oil paint. 25 x 16 in.

“The opposite of home is الغربة (foreignness). Like for example, بدّي ارجع على بلدي (I want to go back to my country.) Home is much more fluid in English and it’s more of a feeling. To me الغربة (foreignness) is a feeling because you can still feel غريبة ببلدك (a foreigner in your home country.)”

قال محمد الماغوط .

من الغباء أن أدافع عن وطن لا أملك فيه بيتاً.  
من الغباء أن أضحي بنفسي ليعيش أطفال من بعدي مشردين ..  
من الغباء أن تتكل أمي بفقدي وهي لا تعلم لماذا مت ...  
من العار أن أترك زوجتي فريسة للكلاب من بعدي ..  
الوطن حيث تتوفر لي مقومات الحياة، لا مسببات الموت ..  
والإنتماء كذبة اخترعها الساسة وأصحاب السلطة وللصوص لموت من أجلهم ..  
لا أؤمن بالموت من أجل الوطن ..  
الوطن لا يخسر أبداً ، نحن الخاسرون ..  
عندما يتلى الوطن بالحرب ينادون الفقراء ليدافعوا عنه ..  
وعندما تنتهي الحرب ينادون الأغنياء ليتقاسموا الغنائم ..  
عليك أن تفهم أن في وطني تمتليء صدور الأبطال بالرصاص وتمتليء بطون الخونة بالأموال ..  
ويموت من لا يستحق الموت على يد من لا يستحق الحياة ..



Screenshot of the post from Facebook.

# That Complicated Feeling.

Baba sent me a short poem he found on Facebook by the Syrian poet Mohammad Al-Maghut. His poem is a satire on the love of nation. Al-Maghut once wrote:

*Policemen, Interpol men everywhere; you search for the perfect crime... there is only one perfect crime; to be born an Arab.*

Is love of homeland and nation an exercise in conditioning? Or is it tied to a spiritual sense of ancestry, roots, and belonging? The pain and bitterness of feeling a sense of detachment, especially when it is secondhand—sentiments expressed by our parents or newly displaced people. There is that constant nagging that something is amiss, and unstable. The spiritual attachment of an ancestral land is now in conflict with the political realities of that same land, and it creates an incongruence which takes many forms. For some, it’s nostalgia, for others resentment, or repulsion, or anger. It is a constant negotiation with where to place, or uproot, our hearts.



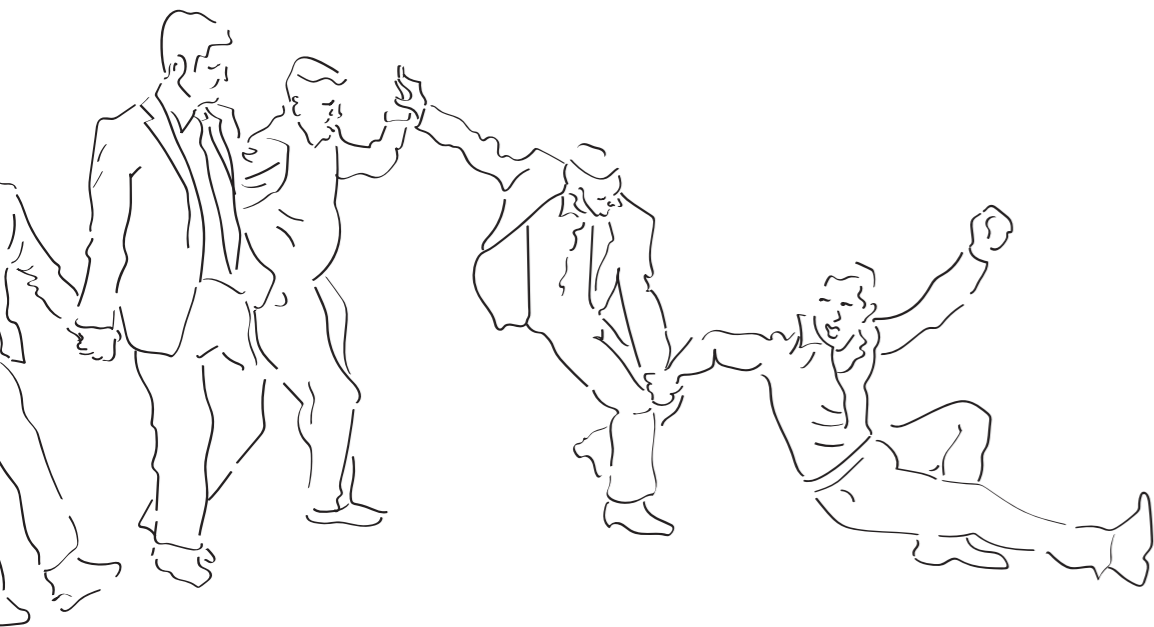
Baba, 2023. Graphite on paper. 20 x 14 in.



Leaving Home, 2023. Hair dye and graphite on paper. 20 x 14 in.

Top right: *Baba*, 2023. Black tights, polyfill, acrylic paint, wig hair. 23 x 24 in.  
Bottom right: *Untitled*, 2023. Loofa net, acrylic paint, latex, copper rod, rope. 65 x 45 in.





## Light-heart.

To center hope and beauty is to recall moments of joy and love. For me, these are expressed in care, celebration, and contemplation.

One of the paths considered in my initial research involved the integration or intersection of music and dance and its relationship to the body. Two main performative motifs come to mind. The first is the Dabke, the traditional Levantine dance, and the other is the meditative dance of the whirling dervishes from Sufism. While in the studio, I attempted to find connection by re-listening to old Arabic pop songs from the 90's, folkloric music, and classical music. I was interested in how the body fixates on beats and rhythms that transcends the sense of space and time, in a way elevating the spirit to another plane for a few



moments or hours. The body's function becomes the medium between here and there, wherever those two places are.

But on a simpler and more light-hearted note, it brings me joy watching Arab men, who are traditionally hyper-masculine, become so entranced in the beats of dabke, attempting high jumps, low hops, a lot of leg work, in semi-cohesion. Dabke is usually performed at weddings and I wonder how hardened men relate to music and their bodies in this way.

My friend once told me that the only thing the Israelis can never steal from the Arabs is the dabke. It's so inherently Levant Arab. The word "dabke" comes from the root word دَبَكَ (dabaka) which means "stamping the feet."

For the whirling dervish, their movement is meditation. Circling around oneself, centering the self and the spirit, getting closer with the oneness of God. Their white skirts float around in unison and calculated footsteps, the motion hypnotizing even the viewer. Dervishes can spin for an hour

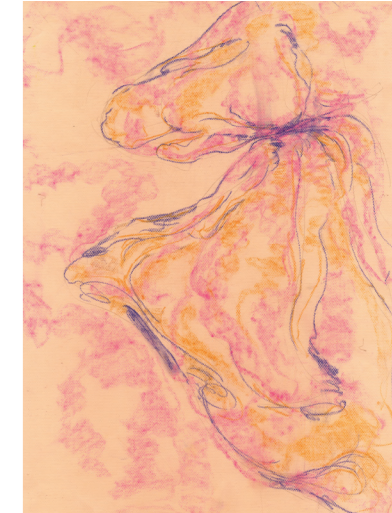
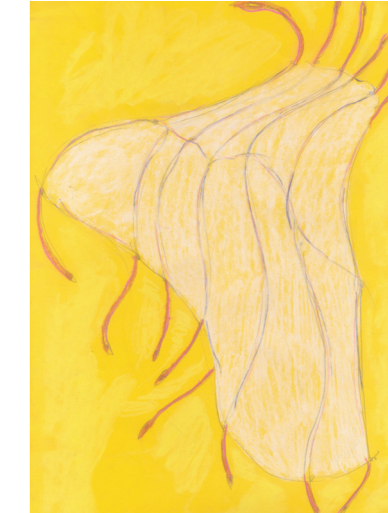
In the studio, I thought about forms that were delicate and ephemeral. The drawings and subsequent sculpture reflect the abstraction in form and color, with an attention to weightless material and composition, or simply an exercise in complicating a thing.



Drawings of whirling dervishes. 2023. Pastel on paper. 20 x 14 in.

without experiencing vertigo. In my attempt at spinning, the joy was in locating the focus within the body, while allowing the mind to float.

Right: *Darwish*. 2023. Clay, yarn, fabric, wax, wire. 15 in long.



"My body is a way for me to be connected to home. It's a guide, or way to tell me "you're okay, you're not okay. You need to do this or that." It's a compass towards home. If I take care of my body, I can feel home."

“Especially for a child of diaspora. You’re too foreign for here, and too foreign there. You just constantly feel like a foreigner, until you remember that it’s all yours to begin with. There is no foreigner, or local, no belonging and nonbelonging.”

# Here and There.

I arrive at the in-between space—where the body is located in one place, while the heart, memories, family, homeland, and friends are located elsewhere. In this transitional space, suspended, going from one point to the other, the body is always in a state of becoming.

With no emotional affiliation to nation, political identity, philosophy or religion, it feels as though I’m a free-range being. These objects

that I make evoke and reflect the same senses of non-categorization, non-belonging. They act as containers to attachments, to people and memories, to their stories, fears and aspirations. As a medium to belong.

When land, possessions, and family are lost, what remains is the container for the self. The body.



Aleppo soap, laurel soap, or Ghar soap, is a handmade national product associated with the city of Aleppo, Syria, and is made with laurel oil, olive oil and lye. Bringing it to the US in limited quantities made me think about how with each bar shrinking, I inch closer to the separation between myself and a home, or an attachment. The separation between object and place. I cast the bars in clay and created a time-based performance



video which involved lathering the clay bar until it crumbled completely, slowly muddying the water. In this video iteration, I reversed the sequence so it appears that I am slowly bringing this artifact back to life.

The original cast and clay bars remain with me and now act as memories and artifacts of a placement.



Top: Aleppo soap bars and unfired clay casts.  
Bottom: *Lather and Crumble*, 2023. Stills from video performance. 6 mins.



“This body that my soul sits in is a vessel or shell, or container. It changes and it’s فان (mortal), it goes away. The soul is lasting. We have to keep caring for this vessel until the soul finishes from it. الله يعطينا عمر على قد الصحة (May God give us life as long as we have good health.)”



*Zeitoun*, 2023. Clay, suede, rope, olive oil. 17 x 8 in.

Zeitoun is Arabic for “olive,” and this piece is based on one of the conversations I had with an asylum seeker in Providence who told me she missed the olive trees that were abundant in her village in Syria. Here I’m thinking about the relationship between migrant bodies and resisting bodies, and their environment. Found in the Mediterranean, the olive tree is



*Zeitoun* (detail).

one of the most significant plants for the culture of the Levant—its oil precious for people from the Middle East. It is referenced in religion and has also become one of many symbols of resistance. For instance, in occupied Palestine, Israeli settlers continuously uproot and destroy thousands of olive trees on Palestinian lands, which makes their replanting a form of upholding, restating, or reclaiming of the land. This piece follows the notion of how a fruit can have significant

sentimental and political associations in our existence and memory.

The olive seed is covered with suede fabric found at an old textiles mill in Providence, along with the rope. By placing it barely hanging from the rope suspended in space, I think about transience and instability, reflecting on migratory bodies that are also in a state of transition, unstable, carrying with them memories about the homeland and ideas of belonging. I filled the seed with olive oil that slowly drips out onto the floor, playing with ideas of time, movement, scarcity, loss, and preciousness.

*Al Watan*, Arabic for “nation”, is another iteration where I used olive oil, with found bamboo sticks from Barrington Beach (RI).



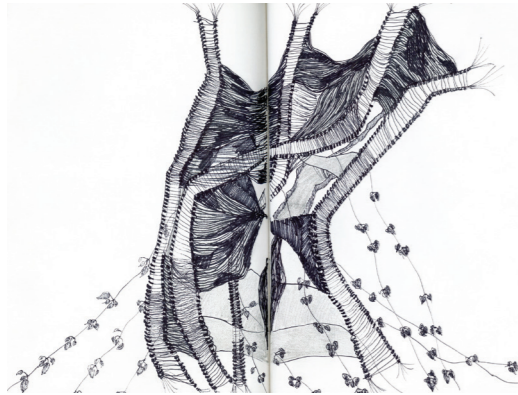
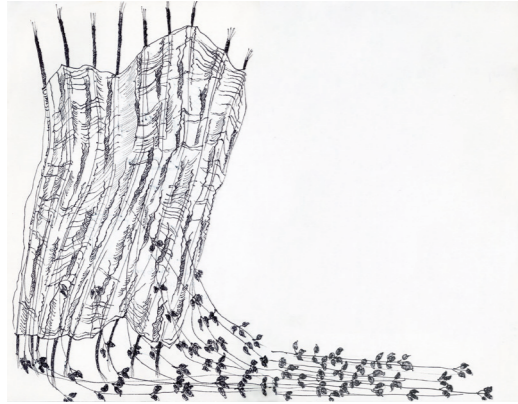
*Al Watan*, 2023. Bamboo, glass bottle, olive oil, copper wire, cable. 72 x 14 in.



*Queen Zanoobia*, 2023. Shoe, artificial plants, foam, tree branch, fabric, Aleppo soap, wire, weeds. Dimensions variable.

Queen Zanoobia, the third century Palmyrian queen is rooted in Syrian mythology and storytelling—a pride of our history too. During the recent civil war, ISIS occupied Palmyra while looting and destroying artifacts, and murdering people.

The violence that was performed there still rests in the area, and contributed to the displacement of people, their land, and their history.



Various sketches for *Currents*.

## In Transit.

Everything comes full circle.

That image in Beirut with the fallen electric cables stuck with me. The unruly, electrifying, dilapidated, decaying, faulty lines. I mused over those lines for months, eventually deciding to construct a new sculpture for my final thesis show. It was important for me to work with the space itself, and after some constraints I developed a piece that would mimic a cascade of some sort involving the cables and folds in figurative gestures, connected through threads that delicately held each other up. The final installation seemed to also encapsulate the ocean, and my own interiority, again.

These bodies reach, extend, bend.

Humans are somehow both drawn to and repulsed by decay.

*Currents*, 2023. Wire, electric cables, plastic bags, enamel, oil and acrylic paint, thread, yarn, fabric, lights, tree branches. Dimensions variable.





Plastic bags are really easy to manipulate and can cover large ground; they are also cheap since they are mass produced. It takes plastic bags between 300-1000 years to photodegrade—become microplastics that are eventually ingested in tiny particles by animals, and us. In the art world, plastic bags have low value as a material due to their long term conservation challenges, and are basically considered a bad choice as an investment by collectors. How can a material be both things, degradable and nondegradable, have value in one market, yet none in another? Our associations and

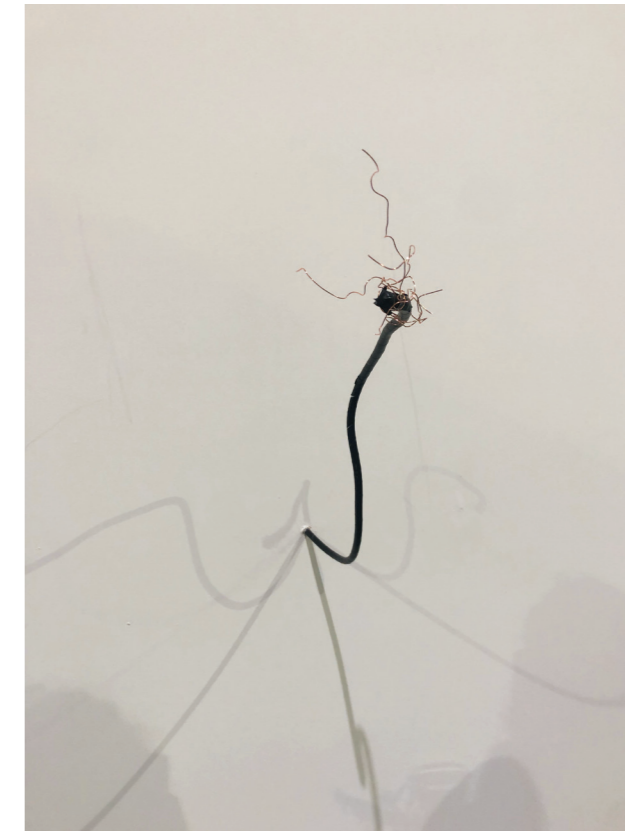
relationship to it depends on its context of its use. I was interested in this dichotomy, and how much or little of the material's transformation can alter the perception of its value. I also considered the connection to migrant bodies, and to women, but really to each of us living in this capitalist system. Who has value, and who decides whose value is greater or lesser?

When choosing the material for this piece, I thought of the quote from Zahra Hankir's book:

*Flimsy plastic bags crammed with clothes, dangled off shoulders.*



Detail shots.



Black as a site of gravity and pull.  
Black is the ocean at night.  
A site of both fear and safety.

# Acknowledgments.

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My family, the root to my growth, for holding the fort so I could have a home to return to.

And finally, to the Salama Foundation, who helped make this dream a reality.

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