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Jihad of Bitter Petals: Queering Identity and Material through Unraveling and Struggle

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine
Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Yasmine Kasem Kasem

Committee in charge:

Professor Anya Gallaccio, Chair
Professor Amy Adler
Professor Edwin Cruz
Professor Fatima El-Tayeb

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The Thesis of Yasmine Kasem Kasem as it is listed on UC San Diego Academic Records is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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University of California San Diego

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Jihad of Bitter Petals: Queering Identity and Material through Unraveling and Struggle

by

Yasmine Kasem Kasem

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego 2019

Professor Anya Gallaccio, Chair

I will be discussing systems different identities create and how paradigms of opposition to one another form through mainstream agendas of each identity. I will then talk about opposing forces and the result of their unity, navigating instances where contrasting dynamisms are dependent on one another in accomplishing a goal or completing a new unique force from their collision. Finally, I will speak of material metaphors and breaking points, dissecting a material's limit to force of exterior aspects and of itself. Additionally, the queering of material through unraveling and transformation.

INTRODUCTION

My identity exists as a tension and friction. I have accepted my Arab characteristics, name, Islamic religion, and refuse to relinquish them. Yet, with the time it took for me to feel comfortable with those aspects in a post 9/11 America, another identity unfolding into the mix has shaken up my understanding of how I am to navigate being a Muslim woman in America. This newer identity to me, that of which is non-heteronormative, would create a tight, stinging tension within. Even in the more moderate version of Islam I grew up with, heteronormativity -- or an existence of the nuclear family and “normal” gender roles, was still expected and the notion of queerness was met with either disgust or denial. My experience uniting these identities within a single body is one that manifests as a continued struggle. An existence that resists surrendering to the pressures of mainstream generalizations within the separate communities of Islam and the LGBT+, by renouncing one identity for the other; that of a “self” caught in the complexities of submission and struggle.

The delicacies of balancing said personal identities demands a material and process that reflects the tension and fragility that occurs within this lived experience. For this, I have selected the compressed cotton fluff that makes up Cotton Piping. The fluff interacts with itself in two ways: lightly layered over itself in a loose pattern or a matted form gripping tightly to its fibrous body. Both systems are connected to one another in a single abstracted 3-dimensional form. These are then suspended in space, introduced to its own weight. The sculpture performs its own struggle against gravity and the pressure to break

away from itself. This installation is performing the fragile balance I experience in the task of balancing the identities within me, that are set up in perpetuated opposition to one another. Sculptures that both submit to their situational make up yet struggle in its resistance to collapse.

SECTION I: IDENTITY

Its Ramadan, and we will have Iftar¹ at the Mosque in the park, or the one in the school cafeteria. Most of time, we celebrate at the Mosque in the Catholic church's rec building downtown. The women in the back of the room with the organ, and the men in the front with the garage door with a felted grey cubical wall to keep us out of each other's sight. This was my least favorite Mosque, it was ugly and scary; brown veneer walls and grayish-blue low pile carpet were sickened by the yellowish fluorescent lights above. When it was time to pray Magarib² or Aisha³, an even uglier composite rug was dragged out from the garage door and rolled out for us to pack onto. Before we would leave, we would replace the idol of a bleeding, tortured man back onto the wall.

However, the Mosque will be at Uncle Iqbal's house today, and he has graciously put up pastel colored bedsheets to create a curtain, so that we can pray without the distraction of our opposite genders. I am a young child and these boundaries are powerless to infringe upon my will of transgressing its divide; batting against its flimsy presence. Though, when I am satisfied in viewing the separate domain that existed on the other side of the soft barricade, I long for the presence of the world I left behind the pink pastel 1,000-thread-count barrier.

My experience as a Muslim in the American Midwest is already a loaded and formulated identity to grapple with in a post 9/11 era. I was consciously aware of the

¹ "Iftar" is the meal to break the day long fast during the month of Ramadan.

² "Magarib" is the prayer that occurs at sun set.

³ "Aisha" is the prayer that occurs after the sun has fully gone away, at night.

differences that made me an “Other” in certain aspects to my small, conservative Midwestern town. Additionally, the DIY Mosque’s my small Muslim community had to adapt to is, itself, another layer to peel back and evaluate when I am in more traditional Islamic spaces. I feel like an alien and more awkward in a regular Mosque than I do in a makeshift-Masjid⁴. Though that’s just an example of the variance that exists within the identity of the American Muslim experience. I was born into a Sunni Islamic family, a long Patra-lineage of practice and devout worship on my fathers’ side, hailing from Egypt. Alternatively, my mother grew up in long line of German Lutherans, domestic to the northern Midwest. She later converted to Islam well before she met my father. Sunni Islam is the largest sect of Islam and positioned itself as the mainstream authority. In the Sunni tradition, heteronormativity is a must. One should marry the opposite gender if they are able to, and have children to increase our Umma, or community of Muslims globally. Non-heteronormative lifestyles are widely regarded as unacceptable or “Haram” in the Sunni Islamic tradition with the citation of the Sura Al- Araf, 81 in the Quran or the Islamic story of Sodom and Gomorrah and the mainstream interpretation of the verse.⁵ My confrontation of non-heteronormativity, or to be frank, Queerness in Islam was a question that arose much later. I was more closely fascinated on gender dynamics and women’s discourse in Arab culture and Islamic practice.

⁴ “Masjid” means “mosque” in Arabic.

⁵ Sura Al- Araf, 81 refers to the story of prophet Lut (or “Lot”) and his people. It is commonly interpreted to be the reason for the condemnation of homosexuality in Mainstream Islam.

It should be acknowledged that while Sunni Islam is the largest sect, there are several other sects of Islam. I associate myself with non-denominational progressive Muslims. A liberal group that openly accepts the LGBTQIA+ community and does not consider it “Haram”. However, identifying as such Muslim can be controversial because of their unorthodox practice and break from tradition. To identify as a progressive Muslim, can be met with scrutiny and disgust as well.

As it shows, even within a larger “minority” identity like “American Muslim”, are variants that challenge the monolithic projection of this minority group that is scooped up and served to outsiders in a simple, “Stereotype-Sunday”. This holds true for both identities I am discussing. I traverse another colorful minority community, the LGBTQIA+ or Queer community. However, I can only speak to a mostly white, American experience within these spaces. I was fortunate to eventually meet peers of similar backgrounds and predicaments to myself who had opened the dialogue of their ongoing struggle in reconciling a queer identity within Islam and Arab culture. Being immigrants held another weight and their discourse was often one that projected an understanding their current lifestyle was only temporary. That the ideal life for them, Male Muslims, would be one that was heteronormative with a wife and biological children. In our conversations, it was common to hear a supportive rebuttal of “Don’t even worry, you’re in America, you’re free!” from our white, non-Muslim American born friends. Even I was guilty of spouting similar phrases, perpetuating the idea of western culture and location as the cure to the melancholy that lived in the hearts of any non-western oppressed queer individual. Though

in my experience, that was the rhetoric that was spewed about in the queer spaces I interacted with. Composed of mainly white, gay, non-religious men who were American or from Western European countries.

It did not become clear to me that these spaces did not harbor healthy conversations on religion and nonwestern cultural practices; specifically, Southwest Asia and North African cultures, and more specifically Islamic issues until I had befriended other queer Arabs. Until then, the two identities, appeared as oil and water. In an ideal setting, the two if functioning properly will not mix into one new solution. However, if such opposites do happen to mix, something must be wrong. A dysfunctional merger of oil and water. If the oil and water mix, they are suspect of being improper oil, or improper water or different substances in disguise. Through this metaphor, I am demonstrating the mainstream conversations that are had about being a queer Muslim. Both within the Islamic communities and outside of it. Straddling what seems like opposing forces creates an idea that one cannot properly adapt to mainstream attitudes in these major identities. To be, or at least appear as a proper version of one identity, one becomes an improper version of the other. Caught in a struggle against submitting to the “properness” of one identity.

Thus, queer Muslims, if such an identity can be envisioned at all, occupy a place close to that assigned to Muslimas, i.e. they are perceived as being too oppressed and alienated from their own needs to speak up as long as they still identify with Islam. It is only when they can make the step into western modernity – a step that necessarily requires the break with, the coming out of the Muslim community – that they can claim an individualized identity as feminist or queer, usually by expressing gratitude for being saved by their ‘host society’.¹

Fatima El-Tayeb, professor of Literature, Ethnic and Critical Gender studies at the University of California San Diego, argues this issue in her essay “Gays who cannot properly be gay’: Queer Muslims in the neoliberal European city” is an exchange I have experienced first-hand. Further explaining the thought process against these two minority groups that increases the tension within a queer Muslim in the reconciliation of their two identities. To be a proper Muslim, one must follow Islam as sincerely and perfectly as possible. This is illustrated in the actual word “Islam”, which translates to “Submission to the will of Allah” or “Surrender”. Still, submission is not easily obtained. In accordance to mainstream Islam, submission is achieved through practice and belief formed by traditional interpretations of the Quran and Hadith⁶. Additionally, one would be challenged with temptations or situations that champions internal and spiritual perseverance through an act of “Jihad”, which translates as an “inner struggle” with temptations to do what is righteous. In terms of the reconciliation of a queer existence in a mainstream, Sunni Islamic construct -- It is favorable that such a Muslim have a Jihad with their Queer identity. They would resist their non-heterosexual “desires” to practice Islam and live a heteronormative, or straight lifestyle. Alternatively, various LGBTQIA+ identities have been actively attaining tolerance and acceptance in mainstream America. Through law and popular culture, has begun to normalize different queer folk, but it has been an ongoing

⁶ The Hadith is the post mortem compilation of sayings and practices reported to be from Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

and uphill battle. To be a queer individual has historically been associated with shame and intimidated into hiding, lending the term *closeted* or *in the closet* as a term for individuals hiding their identity. In the inverse, “coming out” is par amount by the harrowing experience of no longer hiding that controversial identity and announcing queerness in a public way. LGBTQIA+ pride is a public movement effecting all areas of social interaction in western cultures. Albeit still controversial in some respects, to be “out” is increasingly more the norm.

The alternating pressures of subscribing to these different minority identities can create tension. The ripping of the self apart, especially in the face of wanting to preserve the mainstream protocols of these minority identities and be a part of a group, feeling a sense of belonging. This creates a larger issue in the west, where being one type minority is enough to tackle. Being a part of two minority groups who are told, by themselves and outsiders, that they cannot get along. As contradictory as oil and water. Being a queer Muslim is a constant state of maintenance between the tensions that would otherwise seek to separate. It is both surrender and submission.

SECTION II: 3rd Experience

Opposing forces have an eventual meeting point at which their forces collide creating a third experience between them, one that is equally both. This 3rd experience should not be recognized “as a resistance to X” but one that is unique and deserves recognition as its own valid existence. To circle back to the unique relationship of the meaning of “Islam” and “Jihad”; they are synonymous and necessary for one another to accomplish the goal of being a “Proper Muslim”. It’s fascinating that when translated, the words create a conflicting message when isolated outside of a religious context; that of “submission” and “struggle”. I see that both a queer and Muslim identity is the embodiment of that relationship of friction and struggle with both identities. Dr. Samar Habib discusses this in the lecture ” *States of Being: Narratives of Queer Muslim Diasporas in Contemporary Scholarship.*” Paraphrasing Dr. Habib; To push an agenda promoting and normalizing Homosexual/ Queer identities contradicts traditional/mainstream Islamic teachings and culture which can be considered as Islamophobic. Alternatively: To promote the unquestioned tolerance of “traditional/ mainstream” Islamic values can be considered Homophobic.² One encapsulating both identities are an existence of friction and struggle to balance these forces, resisting the urge and pressure to surrender to the ease of choosing one. However strong that urge is, there must be a 3rd option that does not result in picking a side. I consider D.W. Winnicott’s argument in *Metapsychological and Clinical Aspects of Regression Within the Psycho-Analytical Set-Up* Who states “Throughout this paper I imply that there is, however deeply

buried or frozen, a longing for something in the environment to make possible the surrender, in the sense of yielding, of false self." ³ Which, in my case, this manifestation of the "false-self" would be the act of picking one identity over the other, always leaving a yearning for the one left behind. In this sense, that "something" to make possible the surrender is the visibility and validity of the Queer Muslim experience as a unique unification of the oppositional forces; to submit the experience of struggle and balance as such. Friction doesn't have to be bad, or exist as a result of opposition, in this, it is a state of becoming.

In example of the unity of oppositional forces, I consider the Martial art of Aikido. Formed in the 20th century japan, Aikido is about balancing opposing forces. Instead of resistance to an attack by pushing back or striking the opposing force with similar or greater strength, an Aikidoka, or one who practices aikido, will accept the attacker's momentum like a gift, blend the opposing energy with their own and reflect it back to the attacker like a mirror. For this result to happen, the defender is dependent on the attacker's energy. Through the motions they go together, resulting in a neutralization of the opposing attackers' energy and body with minimal resisting force, yet not surrendering to the attacker either. However, there is still friction in the overall activity of Aikido, when the intention is to defend one's self from a physical force. This unique relationship that the attacker and defender have are dependent on one another for the technique to work. I consider this unique relationship as one that is queer in that it is not the conventional

response to being attacked. It is the act of accepting an attack instead of resisting; an alternative response to the natural response of blocking, and striking back. It is one that must be learned and trained for.

Similarly, the accommodations and adaptations my Muslim community experienced in creating a “Mosque” in a space that is not intended to act as such, I would also define as a queer experience. Our pop up, odd-mosques would exist in a church, creating an un-church and not-mosque but a place that is both of, and not traditionally either. The act of taking oppositional identities, momentums or places and mixing them together into a unique union is a queer act that is the 3rd experience.

The 3rd experience are the instances of unusual practices and adaptations. A queering of conventional responses or practices that are necessary when the conventional response, like striking back or surrendering one identity for another, or making a place of worship out of a space unintended for that use, is either not available, or more damaging. Friction is inevitable, but it is far less suffering than choosing one force over the other.

SECTION III: QUEERING MATERIAL BODIES

To be completely honest, I am a very impatient artist. Immediacy within process is what I seek to experience. However, my previous practice, one that was more formal, was primary in making with more classical or traditional art materials such as bronze, stone and steel. It was a practice of painful, painful patience. Shaping, welding, melting and chiseling piece by piece- bit by bit-- until at the very last moment, all the components would come together and create the envisioned piece desired. All the factors were clearly defined, as the materials would have to present themselves as didactically as possible. Not presenting or performing as anything but bronze, stone and steel. I have come to interpret this practice as a desire for myself to be understood, at least through physical makeup of the art, as the question “What are you?” was often asked to me about my race. It was imperative that material ambiguity would be absent within my artistic experience. As a sculptor, materials are important to me and I must see parts of myself in the precise material to satisfy its use in my process.

Indeed, some materials are easier to work with than others, but easier ones don't always offer the same internalized connection or reflection of the “self” that I desire to transform through my own hand. For each piece is a remaking, or reconstitution of my body into a material that holds the language of a current and felt emotional state. Elizebeth Grosz, feminist theorist and philosopher, deliberates the 20th century theorists Deleuze's understanding of “becoming” through the process and make up of art. Grosz States “The materials of perception—the bodily relations between states of things and subjects—

become the resources of the unlivable precept; the materials of affection—our sufferings, joys, horrors, our becomings, the events we undertake—become the expressions of our possibilities for inhuman transformation.”⁴ In the undertaking of the task to transform my body into a new expression, the desire for a true reflection had been overwhelming, and a change was needed. With art as the “inhuman” presentation of my human flesh, I had manipulated the material in an idealized light. Presenting bronze as bronze, steel as steel, and stone as stone to put up a front of a false material body; they offered the security I desired but did not actually possess. For me, these materials were devoid of the sufferings and horrors, and had only presented a venerated understanding of the self, of my body and condition: strong, stoic and indefinite. For if a material only presents the affectionate qualities without its complications in that affection, its image becomes a false reflection of the “becoming” I stride for in my process. Acknowledging the complications that exist within me, specifically the balancing and maintenance of being Queer and Muslim, resulted in the call for a material that presented similar reflections of complications within its own material body. For I am reconstructing my body-- reconstituting it and becoming new through the material. There is a definite need for the material to shine within the complex and delicate process of becoming.

There is something alluring about queer materials; the ambiguous textures that are familiar, but not quite familiar enough to speak broadly of their truth through a quick glance. In this section, the “queer” characteristics added to the material are qualities synonymous to what it’s like to live as a Muslim who is also part of the LGBT+

community; however, these experiences are not exclusive to Muslims. In my defining of “queer materials”, it is a substance that evades the confidence of proper identification without either prior knowledge, experience or more thorough examination from the viewer. One that offers ambiguity in its origin and function. As an abstruse preset for making, the queer material is best to capture the essence of an entity balancing opposing forces. Functioning as the perfect material to illustrate the “3rd experience”, or as I have mentioned in section II, an experience that exist between the binary of opposing forces through a state of transformation and becoming. In this process, I have selected a material that can perform a struggle with its own body, but also a material that that can be manipulated with different processes to show various results. In this event, cotton piping is the best embodiment of the queer material I sought out.

Cotton piping has several qualities I found appealing. It’s a material I have found internal relations to through the presentation of its “body” in queer occasions. For example, I happened upon this material on accident, mistaking it for rope in a quick glance. It looked like a thickly woven cord that could carry weight and tension with ease. However, I was mistaken upon enacting the action of tying it off to the corner of a large fabric piece to use as leverage in stretching the fabric to a breaking point. Nonetheless, it was the “rope” that failed and tore instead of the fabric. In this event of its ripping upon acute tension, it reveled not only its fragility, but possibilities of its expansion and transformation becoming even more obscure. This event had introduced another layer of practice within my artistic process -- the breaking of assumptions, reveling deeper truths. The queering of material

manifests a moment of reveal, although in my practice it happens through a tense and forced circumstance. Again, I frame this understanding through Elizabeth Grosz “Art is where intensity is most at home, where matter is most attenuated without being nullified: perhaps we can understand matter as it most closely approximates mind, diastole or proliferation...”⁵ My inaugural meeting with the cotton piping, lead to a mistaken identity, an assumption of its function. However, within the moment of intensity, the snapping of the cotton piping’s presented body, was the proliferation and expansion of understanding this material could yield in process; a knowing of, perhaps not its entire truth, but a better sense of it. The cotton fluff within had been tightly compacted and squeezed into a thin casing of cotton thread like a sausage yet peeled away from itself like string cheese. I later discovered cotton piping is a material used to create borders and finishing edges primarily inside of quilts and upholstery. Its purpose of being an interior element in making lends to the ambiguity in its complete form due to its role of being hidden within the folds of fabric. Additionally, in its job of being hidden, I considered concealed bodies, obscured selves, and related that to the act of being closeted.

In contemplation of a material that I had felt queer connections to, specifically the inherent expectation and primary purpose of being hidden, there was something fundamentally satisfying in the process of expanding the piping material from its compression after its breaking point. Allowing the thin, fibrous strips to tear away from and then grasp back to its cotton body in new presentations. In its expansion, it becomes more and more mysterious, yet reveals its softness with intensity through the introduction

of gravity. For within my process, it freely latches to itself without the aid of a bonding agent like adhesives, resins or stitching, but is holding to itself with only the original components of its previous presented “rope” like body. Grasping to itself in precarious tension when suspended and subjected to its own weight. In this it becomes like a body performing its own struggle because of its situational makeup, which in this instance, the situational make up is the material qualities itself. Materials like the piping are also subject to the action of “Queering” which I define as an act of obscuring the martial from its original form into a more ambiguous state, function or meaning. This action is rooted in the theme of transformation and rendering a material into a different representation that highlights the materials lesser known qualities or function.

Harmony Hammonds, contemporary sculptor and pioneer in the feminist/ lesbian art movement in the late 60’s -70’s address Queer material and process in *Floor Pieces* through the braiding of factory fabric cut off/ remnants and coiling the braids into rugs. Her process of queering is one that combines the pieces of many into one whole. Her process of braiding initiates a queering of space through braiding, nit just material into rugs but sexuality and gender with art.⁶ I have also considered rugs and their making through my series *Every Fragment; a Prayer* which sought to address the issue of space, or the lack thereof for Queer Muslims. In this series, I made five prayer rugs out of thin strands of the cotton piping and through a dying process, covered them with colorful symbols representing physical spaces I would worship in as a child/ teen. This was a queering as well, but more so in the instance of space. Growing up, my home town did not have a

mosque and my small Muslim community often had to rent our prayer spaces from back rooms of churches, park buildings or each other's houses. A strange form of practice in of itself, but not totally uncommon. Italian photographer Nicolo Degiorgis documented a series of photographs showing alternative Islamic spaces in north east Italy in his photo book "Hidden Islam", presenting as gymnasiums, store fronts and factories, but internally functioning as mosques. Due to issues with right wing politics and being denied the permission to build mosques, The "make shift mosques" Degiorgis documents in his book are temporary solutions to a deeper issue.



Image 1: Nicolo Degiorgis, *Warehouses VR37133*, from "Hidden Islam" 2009-2013 ⁷

In my work, I address this practice of pop-up mosques, as a practice of queering space through the strange and unique situation my Muslim community was in. We had to make

temporary spaces for ourselves out of places unintended for us to use. It was an act of cyclical transformation: entering a church, un-churching it through the removal of idols, setting up appropriate gender separations and laying the carpets or rag rugs in the proper direction. At the end of our Iftar dinner and after Aishia prayer, we would revert the room back to its original state, removing any traces of our worship there.

There few and far between mosques that are openly supportive of the LGBTQ+ community, much less Muslims who identify as such. Because of this lack of accepting religious space I that experience, the prayer rug became a solution in making small, spiritual and solitary spaces I can make in any location. Through the making of 5 rugs, I created 5 religious spaces that I can enter without judgement of being Queer in an Islamic space. However, these rugs do differ in their imagery, style and durability than traditional prayer rugs. Prayer rugs and typical rugs are intended for floor use all the same but are treated vastly different. Whereas it may be acceptable to sometimes walk on a rug with your shoes, or even have a rug for wiping your shoes off before entering a space, the prayer rug *is* the space. Traditionally, prayer rug initiates a highly spiritual space for Muslims, treated with respect and cleanliness making it more special than an ordinary rug for utility or decoration purposes. My rugs are made of the fragile thin strips of piping that display their fragility and precariousness as well. In this effect giving a different pretext of handling and interaction from the viewer.

Through *Floor Pieces*, Hammonds is addressing not only physical space in the making of rugs, but social relationships, history and identity through the transformation of

material.⁸ My practice of material transformation functions similarly, but in the opposite direction of unraveling. I see cotton piping as a whole. A complete body mass of interconnecting fibers compressed. Existing in the “in-between” of conventional interactions with cotton; a unique state between raw cotton and woven fabric. Similarly, to Hammonds fabric scraps, the piping is made of what’s called “shoddy” the remnants of lightly processes cotton left over from various cotton processing. I am queering the piping through its unraveling in an act to expand and discover. Hammonds speaks of hand manipulation of material in the act of the erotic, touching and manipulating the material as a metaphor of “touching ones self” or embracing her same-sex desires.⁹ I can relate to Hammonds process of material manipulation in similar aspects, however, as an Asexual Pan-Romantic woman, the manifestation of desire is the act of embracing and maintaining one’s self in a state of constant struggle. I rip and tear, and card the cotton piping by hand as an act to know myself. Not in such a violent manner like sharks ripping flesh in a frenzy to identify what it is, but a ripping as a way that is undoing a disguise and transforming into truth.

This transformation Brings the aspect of “truth” I seek, which in the case of the cotton is fragility. But fragility is not to be understood as a weakness in my work. It presents the state of precariousness even after the conditioning of violent processes to transform the piping into a different form. Unraveling the piping and reconfiguring it into a sheet of patterns is only the first step in the process. Additionally, I card the piping with a wire brush, matting it into a tangled fluff that’s layered over differing spots on the cotton

sheet. Felting acts as a conditioning agent through the act of pouring boiling soapy water over the patches of tangled fluff where it is then aggressively massaged together through a screen. Felting doesn't remedy the state of fragility the sheet is in, but adds a thicker layer. Solidifying the flesh of the cotton, like callouses or scars as a reaction to the brutal process that is inflected on its soft body.



Image 2: Harmony Hammond, *Floor Piece V*, 1973 ¹⁰

Like Hammonds interweaving of history into her *Floor Pieces*, the Sculptures in my installation have historical links to their tinting. The sculptures are tinted and stained in the process of felting with a specific dye made of various plants. I wanted the plants used in the making of this dye to be intentional and link them as well to queer materials. I had spent some time in researching histories of queer Islam, or queerness in Arab cultures. As

there are several instances of male same-sex relationships through the writings of popular poets like Rumi, same sex female relationships require digging much deeper into obscurity. Lesbianism was medicalized in 9th century medieval Arab societies. Medieval Muslim Philosopher Al-Kindi believed that lesbianism was a condition of heat that caused a woman's labia to itch and could only be treated with the sexual contact and orgasm with another woman, due to the belief that female ejaculation was cool in temperature.¹¹ Additionally, the cause of Lesbianism was believed to be sourced to a specific concoction. 9th century physician, Yahanna Ibn Masawayh though the source of lesbianism to be linked to foods in connecting the event of a mother transferring lesbianism through her breast to her nursing baby if she ate a combination of celery, arugula, the leaves of clover and the bitter orange blossoms.¹² This information became an important element in my process as I could take a recipe of queerness from the Medieval Islamic era and incorporate it into my work. I created a dye made of the ingredients motioned, creating a golden or honey like dye to be used in the felting process. Occasionally adding bits of the bitter petals and leaves to create more direct impressions on the cotton.

The pieces presented in my thesis exhibition "Jihad of Bitter Petals" is the material performance of the internal struggle of maintaining oppositional identity politics that is being a Queer Muslim through the act of unraveling and re-composition. This initiates the visual amalgamation of the "3rd experience" mentioned in section II. In her book "The Mushroom at the Edge of the World" Anna Tsing, researcher and Professor of Anthropology at UC Santa Cruz discusses the Matsutake mushroom as an instance of

“Third Nature”, or an occurrence of nature that exists despite the destruction of nature that industrial and postindustrial capitalism has brought to the world.¹³ The “third nature” is discussed through the understanding that precious fungi, the Matsutake, a mushroom that only grows in forests contaminated by human industrial intervention, creates entire and unique systems of business, law, and social relationships across race and class. That the Matsutake mushroom, is an organism that thrives in environments where other foliage die due to aggressive human industrial interventions. The mushroom only exists in habitats of industrial determination in nature, demonstrating the precariousness of its existence. That the mushroom needs both a natural and fabricated environment to survive and grow. Cotton functions as a material translation of not just the precariousness of being a queer Muslim, but that the physical material itself displayed its fragility and instability.

In my earliest attempts of making works with the piping, “Hold (Me)” 2018 was composed of only cotton piping layered over itself into a big sheet, it was then tied off with another piece of cotton piping in its original form, and hoisted up into the air, suspending one end of the delicate sheet. The piece presented the question: Can the cotton hold its own weight? Much of the sheet quickly tore away from its rising self, but managed to hold onto one, small part of itself, answering “yes”. This piece exhibited the materials ability to perform through visual tension. There is where the work exists in the 3rd experience, on the edge of total collapse but not fully doing so. Additionally, its physical make up exhibits moments of fluff and callouses, imitating a woven sheet, but lacking the strength and durability to be one.



Image 3: Yasmine Kasem, *Hold (Me)* 2018. Cotton Piping. Dimensions variable.¹⁴

Consider collectivities and the movements they create: LGBTQIA+, feminist, Muslim etc. Collectivities exist and are essential in creating spaces for various identities to thrive and flourish, depending on the generative work and discourse from the individuals involved. However, in the instances of the cotton sculptures, there is a lack of collectivity beyond the cotton itself. This soft fiber is not acting as a collectivity as can only rely on itself. While one could argue that cotton is the product of countless tiny strands of plant matter entangled together into a mass, but it is all the same source, the same body. My sculptures threads delicately grasp to itself or through the forced matting and clustering. Regardless of these conditioning processes, its fragile and vulnerable to collapse under its own weight. Here is when gravity plays a key role in allowing the sculpture to perform the

elements of resisting the force of collapse. I navigate these visual questions and presentations through abstraction, using ambiguous emotional fields and intensities through external forces like gravity.

To bring up my practice with material and obscurity within situations, I find solace within the contemporary sculptor Lynda Benglis' practice and portfolio. She has been an inspiration to me for this process in the beautiful mysterious quasi-figurative pieces of work she creates. Considering her work in the 70's with poured polyurethane forms, the floor and gravity contributes a key roll along with the lighting. In her negation of gesture and material and how that reflects into the visual gravity of the piece. Additionally, the ambiguity of the material at a quick glance, and the body-ness of the forms create a visual tension and presence. However, her pieces appear to be paused within a moment of time. That the polyurethane is no longer in the midst of performing against gravity, but more so a history of what it had endured because the plastic compound has cured, implying of its kinetic actions in the past. It's important that I acknowledge that I am creating something that does not cure or solidify or freeze after some point in time, but, is an ongoing event and changes with each new installation.

When I think of fragility I think of Sculptor and Installation artist Shrizeh Houshary's work *Sheer* and its precarious placement. Off center, brick-laid connections with a looming threat or falling over. The visual tension the piece creates from strategic construction. She speaks of this process on her work *Sheer* "It is as if the same object is constructed and collapsed simultaneously, and actually these works are really about the

space inside...”¹⁵ I find that comment really fascinating because she dispenses an object of beauty in the physical make up, and presents a fragile state through its placement, but the true meaning of the work lies beyond the physical elements that compose them. The implied life within the work is not something to be touched or viewed as a physical matter, giving a sense of imminence. Though I would argue that the spiritual elements of Houshary’s work and an implication of an internalized space is one that is more closely related to the conceptual practice I stride for within my own practice. Because, to consider “the space inside” begs the question: Who is the space for?



Image 4: Lynda Benglis Phantom, 1971 phosphorous pigmented polyurethane , 102 x 420 x 96 inches¹⁶



Image 5: Shirazeh Houshiary *Sheer*, 2012 anodized aluminum 48.03 x 32.68 x 32.68 inches¹⁷

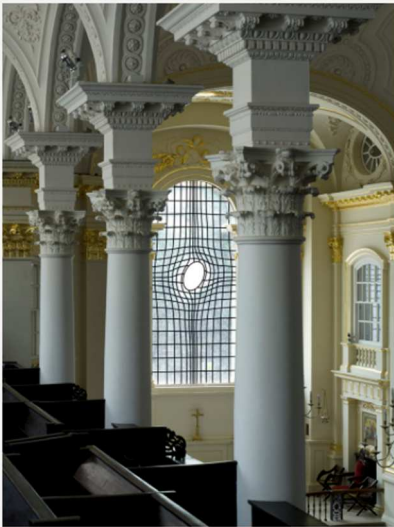


Image 6: Shirazeh Houshiary *East Window*, 2008 Church of St. Martin in the Fields. London, UK.¹⁸

The identity politics of being a mixed race American Muslim women is a

multifaceted view that is being increasingly addressed by artists who identify as such. However, Baseera Khan, an American-Muslim femme artist encounters traverses the intersections of her identity through social relationships, capitalism and pop culture aesthetics. In 2018, her solo show “iamuslima” was featured at Participant Inc. in New York. “The works in *iamuslima* function not only as an extension of that history, but also manifest an intersectional American experience, in terms of the works themselves as well as the collective spirit of their making.”¹⁹ Her work connects religious practices of family and cultural histories, particularly in her piece Acoustic Sound Blankets. With their shape and wearable function create visual connections to the Islamic practice of covering modestly (hijab) while creating deafening soundscape within the blanket. The blanket is embroidered with patters not only typically seen on Qurans, but are also specific patters passed down in her family.²⁰ Another notable piece were her “iamuslima” custom Nike shoes, which were made in response to Nike banning the word “muslim” as an option people could have custom embroidered into their shoes at the time. I argue that Khan is also doing an act of Queering in her works, more specifically the “iamuslima” Nike shoes.

However, the making of this work is a different type of material queering; occurring through reconstituting what is considered “Islamic dress”. There are easily identifiable dress codes associated with Muslim women such as head scarves, loose fitting clothes or full body and face veils like the niqab and burqa, however name brand sneakers typically do not have that identifiable function in the same way. Though, Khan is queering Islamic dress through embroidering the title of her piece “iamuslima” on the shoes;

associating them with Islam as Islamic dress through their appearance like other traditions in “Islamic dress.



Image 7: Baseera Khan, *iamuslima*, 2017 Nike ID Tag customized Nike Air Force One mid-top shoes ²¹

Existing in a state of precariousness is a peculiar event. The threat of tipping over and falling apart; the tiny threads that hold it all together snapping away and collapsing what was so desperately and urgently held together is a looming threat. For me, this event is realized through the oppositional forces that identities can create outside and within an individual, and the act of merging them together is one that is a constant struggle in that fragile state of precariousness. However, the specificities of that, such as being a “Queer Muslim” is not necessarily the most important readable element, if at all, but seeing a material perform the act of both submission and struggle. Submitting to the variants of its physical make up, yet struggling against the situation it performs within. Nonetheless, this

struggle in precariousness is not a bad experience, it is a different one, a 3rd experience. A fragility that acts as the transformation of oppositional forces when they meet. Within that continuous transformation, the body containing the forces becomes the desired self. This desired self is one that resists submission to forces that would otherwise push for the collapse of its current state, a state that is in perpetual struggle, or becoming. It is that state of becoming in the merger of oppositional forces or the 3rd experience, that is illustrated within the body of the sculptures. The unity of these forces becomes not only within a mental space, but also within a physical body adrift in-between.

CONCLUSION: IV

In the many months I had spent preparing this work and text, I could only imagine what the sculptures would look like and hope that they would do their job when finally installed. This installation consisted of five forms all strung up in suspension, reaching and connected through the piping that held them above the ground. All hovering quietly in a black room with warm muted spot lighting. This work did as it was supposed to, for with each passing day they would rip and tear more, displaying the ruin brought to them through the circumstance of their creation and setting of a precarious existence. I found this feeling not dissimilar to ruins I've encountered. I argue "ruins", archeological spaces of the past in an advanced state of decay, are still sites of awe. Like the great pyramids of Giza or the Karnak temple in Luxor, places of ruin that many come to marvel at despite their severe deterioration. Ruins are fascinating in that they are sites of awe and inspiration although they are in a state of collapse and decay, without the need of seeing it in its original state as a primer for the experience of encountering them. They can be appreciated for what they are in their present form. Although my forms are decaying at a much faster rate than limestone and granite and do not have aeons of historic dramas to be imagined in their wake, like ruins my sculptures are delicately looming as if after some calamitous event. There could be the question of what my sculptures looked like, or what they degraded from, but the visual intention is the performance of unraveling. The degeneration of a material form into a different gesture; the effect of decay in transformation.

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