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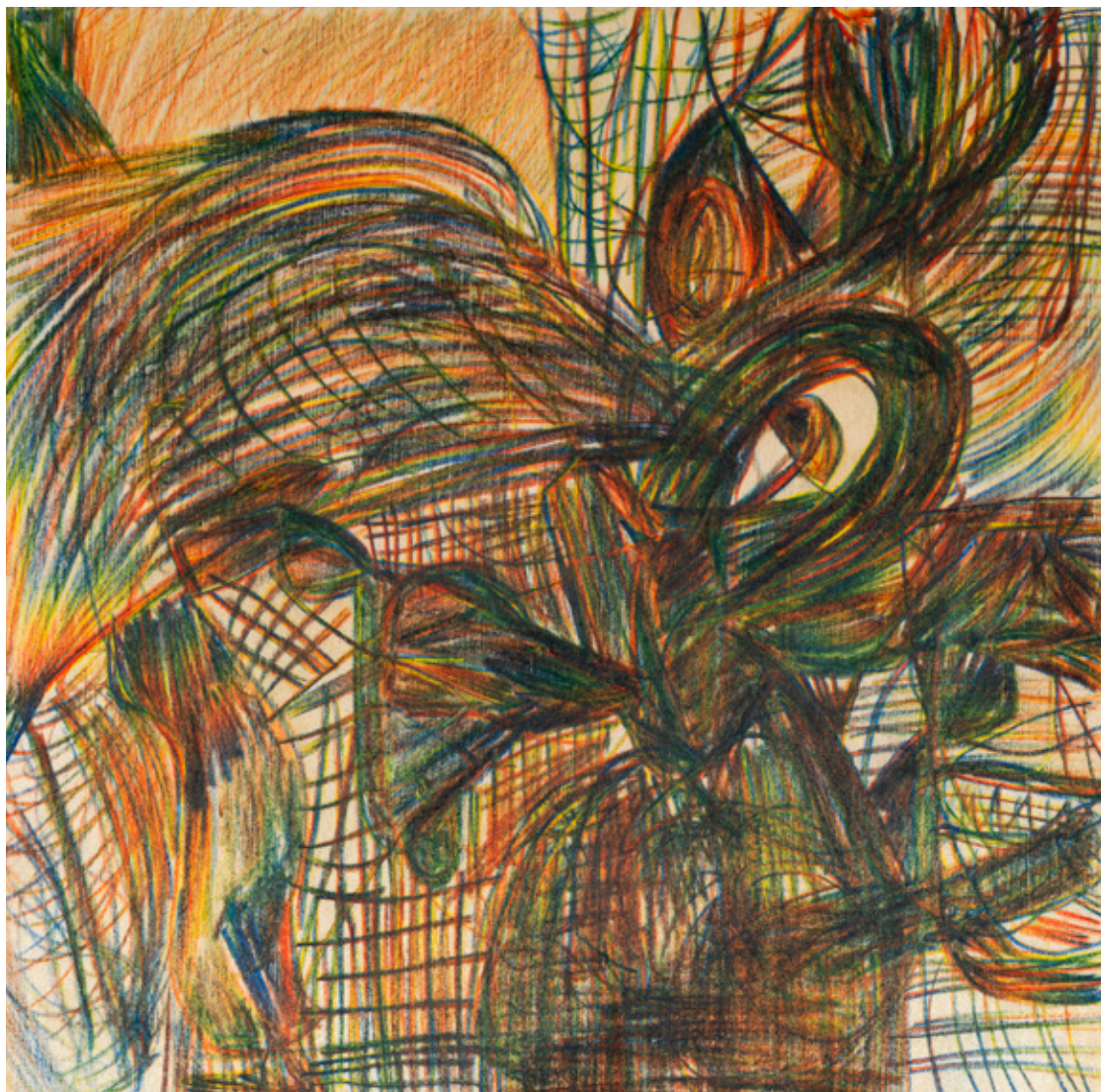
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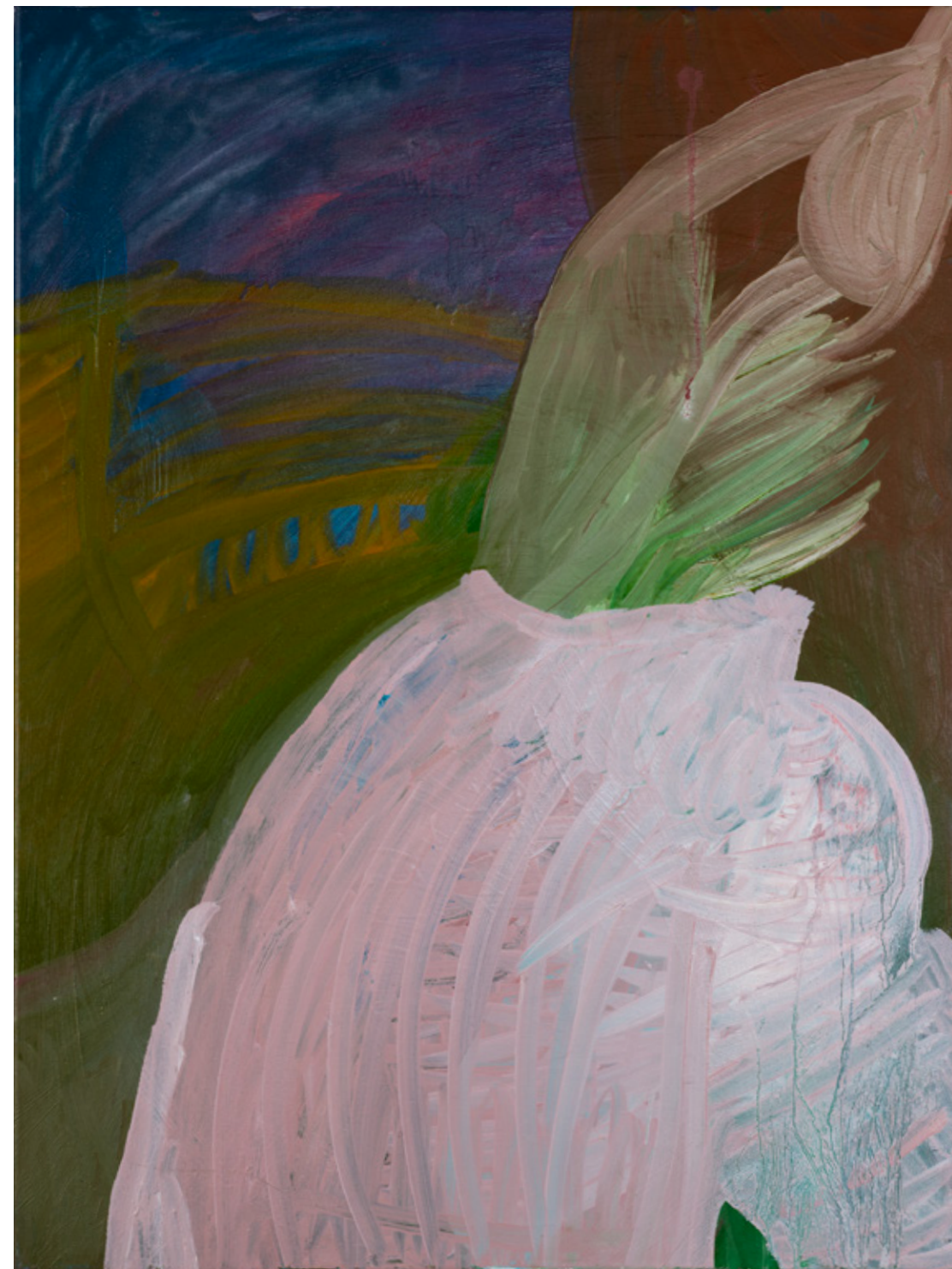
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OMAR KHOLEIF EMOTIONAL MATERIALISM, A QUADRIPTYCH









FOLD 1
POETRY TO BE READ, PICTURES TO BE SEEN

Your T-shirt alone does not constitute your identity. Brandishing slogans in isolation does not institute a realm of poetics. It does, however, connect one to a realm of *Poiesis*—bringing forth something that did not exist into being. That is, making visible that which otherwise might be concealed. It forms part and parcel of a *process* of language—one of the many versus poetry itself, which is the singular act of laying name and claim to a finished product. Authored prose that bears a singularity of expression. *Poiesis*, one can argue, is the semi-public act of *processing*—what at times may read as hermetic forms that conceal, withhold, or subvert. Often, poetry must do this, merely to exist in its given context—to be decoded to not be weaponized or mis-appropriated.

My interest in poetry began because of my mother. Once a noteworthy poet who wrote in the Arabic language. A physical assault from a reader in broad daylight rendered her fearful of assuming that pen again. The situated space of the gallery, with its impulse to archive historical events, would later become another place to subsume lyric and prose, or rather to comprehend and subsequently assume its tactics of aesthetic and political programming.

It has been my long-held belief that the role of the curator is to serve as conduit, interpreter, but also as co-conspirator with visual artists. To make sense of the sanctioned vocabulary of the institution, to carve out navigable space for novel, wayward, or dissident art forms, for its politics and aesthetics to take shape. A historical exemplar of this can be made of curator Jan van der Mark's opening exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, *Poetry to Be Read, Pictures to Be Seen*. A Fluxus-festival that unspooled semantics and syntax into what artist Fiona Banner metaphorically refers to as a site for "picture poems." A place for words to coalesce into architecture.¹

Here, artworks by Alison Knowles, Allan Kaprow, and John Cage, to name but a few, scaled the heights of ceilings in repetitive aphoristic formations. A wall would thus assume a body.² One's sense of visual literacy could be challenged and upturned. Perhaps, if revised today, such an exhibit might include a very different set of references—from Keith Haring's merchandised clothing and documentation of his subway drawings produced out of chalk to artist Cory Arcangel's aesthetically pronounced brand of clothing, Arcangel Surfware. The space of language and its aesthetics that preceded and orbited this domain is one that would become codified around a politics of resistance.

During the politicized realm of what was once described as a countercultural movement in the 1980s, acts of *poiesis*, were enshrined in history via the work of protest collectives, such as ACT UP and ART+, or via the likes of the Marxist productions

1
Conversation with the artist, April 1, 2021, Bethnal Green.

2
Jan van der Marck, *Pictures to be Read. Poetry to be Seen*, exhibition catalogue, (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 1967).

3
See: Daniel S. Berger and John Neff, *Militant Eroticism: The Art Positive Archives* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018).

4
Heather Phillipson, "Heather Phillipson: Forces of Change, The Friday Event," *The Glasgow School of Art*, February 26, 2026.

5
On the occasion of the "1-54 Forum of Contemporary African Visual Art: Continent Drift," Kuouh suggested that Kholeif and Mitchell work together to constitute a poetry of their own.

of British collective, Art and Language; the latter work of Aboriginal artists such as prominent Kamilaroi (Gamilaraay) artist, Richard Bell, and his epic acrylic paintings, tents and other ephemera, blanketed with text.³

Conversely, there are makers of visual poetry who took the reins in the 1990s, assuming a personal and performative interventionist approach—one that privileges an interiority of self. One that assumes visual culture as an individual experience of affective signification. Artists such as Emily Jacir or Sophie Calle might be pivotal poets in this sphere. But why practice poetry when speaking of and for a kind of emotional materialism? Emotional Materialism, defined here, is a lexicon for the recuperative recapitulation of a material culture gleaned from experiencing visual art through the physical and material; the located and embodied act of doing, looking, and reflecting theoretically, all coterminously.

As this quadriptych seeks to sketch out—it is *the* doing—as poet and artist Heather Phillipson—in the hand, not necessarily by projecting outward using one's larynx, not in the reverb of the voice, or in the shape of the mouth, where aesthetic politics for her (as for me) finds its form.⁴ The structure of poetry is thus a collective act of processing, but its result is a singular, intellectual, introspective, and lonely act of coalescing and reflection. We begin this journey by diving into a series of collaborations between two individuals who have worked to translate each other's ideas since their friend, Koyo Kouoh, afforded them this platform in the year 2020, and which first materialized publicly in 2021.⁵

Bellicose by Omar Kholeif
and Blake Karim Mitchell (2025)⁶

*The absence of everything
Subtracted from everything*

*Madness
in the bones
in the bloodstream
thaw next lifetime, after drowning*

*Crippled toes
Clutch the
Foot. Like a
Fist.*

*There is no splendor
in the winters or falls—
there is no current
in the electrical field.*

*No lyte.
tenderly succumb to stiffening
thicken
fall into a bog, for
dis-assembly
where militant bodies lay and lie
without complaint.*

* *

Fathers III (Mothers), 2024 (For Sean)
by Omar Kholeif and Blake Karim Mitchell

*There is an ocean blue, and sometimes red.
It swallows me.*

*This is the church of after-tomorrow, where
wounds cradle wounds
wounds can be found
cradling wounds
Giving birth to erstwhile wounds—
feeding others.*

*Hold onto each-other,
for dearest life.
A wound-making machine, we have made.*

* *

All poems by Omar Kholeif and
Blake Karim Mitchell included
here are previously unpublished,
translated and collected specifically
for this context, for the first time.

From *Red and Blue* by Omar Kholeif
and Blake Karim Mitchell (2026)

*Reckonings are felt
occasionally heard.
an utterance
a reverb
a scream
has been left here,
to be picked up, again.*

* *

From *When Literature is Not Enough* by
Omar Kholeif and Blake Karim Mitchell (2026)

*Did you know that in the future you'll be able to Amazon Order
your friends to specification. Not inflatable friends, but customizable people
like Jolly Ranchers Sour Gummies with or without HUGE FRUIT FLAVOR.
Tailored to your every need
That will make life easier.
Not just easier, but more efficient, too
No more lonely weekend walks alone by the river looking like a YOU KNOW WHAT
autism disorder no more
SMOOTH, PACED, MIDDLING-CONVERSATION will always be on tap at all hours of day
What if I get exhausted?
Like they say, practice makes perfect
Everything in life is as easy as riding a bike, we just need to be given a shot.
But I do not know how to ride a bike.
Are you fucking kidding me?
Have you seen the BORIS CYCLE LANES?
I see my life flash before my eyes every time I pass them.
I'd rather stay in bed.
I'd much rather stay in bed than dream of the future-anything anymore.*

* *

Hollow Men without Wheels
by Blake Karim Mitchell, trans. Omar Kholeif

The first LAB COAT insisted on putting me in a wheelchair.
I took to it like a porn STAR must have to a LOVEHONEY VIBRATOR
That was until a new doctor felt that my loose joints would be better suited for a kind
of gymnastics and tried to dispense of it.
He insisted that I had Acrobatic joints—ones that would allow me to bounce across
private viewing balconies
to dangle and drape
from the balustrades OF V.I.P booths at London's Royal Albert Hall.

I waddled back into the world on foot with one-eye
the other patched up from THE INCIDENTSS once called me a racially confused Pirate.
He was not wrong
At the time, I used to clutch onto a little black book with pill-designations
and their assigned times for ingestion
A great start to Life

Half a life later
I have been worn down to brittle bone.
The Riddle of Anxiety Embedded in me
seeps, leaks, and weeps.

Keeping OFF/WHEEL
requires dosed exercise.
I *still* associate gyms with air-conditioned torture facilities
designed for VENTURE CAPITALISTS

THE RETREAT, once the preserve of the lonely writer
now recapitulated as a space to LULL said VENTURE CAPITALISTS off Xanax
with banana leaf
and coconut oil.

Next door to this NON-PLACE wilderness, you will find a concept store
A TINDER sponsored event night
a forcibly orchestrated sex night
EVERYONE is entitled to SPICE IN THEIR LIFE.

During a good 20-minute section of day:
I am afforded time for dreaming

GROSSE BRITANNIA: What have you done?
My body has been ‘landlocked’
All the cute Poles are gone, not to mention—
The free market, my business and trade contacts, higher education, etcetera, ad nauseum.
You sickos.
Cameron-Cleggs
CLEGG-CAM
CAMSTER, CLAMMY, CLAMSTER-CLEGG
I CAN *not* forgive

I keep holding in the hold
Holding in the hold.

I move things
I am moving things
*because it’s good to know that you have things
when you have nowhere to go, no place to be,
no-where to call home.*

Perhaps, I should have looked up from my book, or my phone
more often
worked a little less hard
I might have allowed myself to fall in love with you
Recast you from weak political force to
MY PRINCE CHARMING

Seen you for what you are
A PRESENCE
with strong political willpower
certainly, you are better dressed than most:

dapper, svelte, bisexual, and confused enough
to compensate for the error of your ways
and I, I would not have to spend my life
moving things to no end
from one place to another
no, not with you.
Maybe, we would still be living at NUMBER TEN.

YES, I admit. I’d let you do to me as I do to an oven glove
you can be TOO SEXY, IT HURTS.
Walk past the endless windows and they’d be playing a video of you.

I prefer you without your shirt
When you hold me
When you say, “Oh brother, what a bother”
when you tell me this is oh so wrong—
welcome me to Temple
and then offer me sound business advice for the future
as you gently caress my hair.
Would you think me sexy had I resisted falling again, had I not entered back into
the wheelchair?
Had I been a little tougher, more picture perfect?
READY to GO FOR the FRENCHIE before the cameras after the BREXIT VOTE?

There are *some* benefits to WHEELS.
I could be your crutch, or clutch.
I could turn life into an every-day visit to the SIX FLAGS theme park.
I could come to you on all Fours.
Just like your favorite animal.

Hysterical impulses aside,
I am LOVING.
When I stop speaking altogether
bar a few ticks, flimsy fucks, ducks and pucks,
I am PRETTY, normal.

I can even withstand “everyday” activities such as seeing MATILDA
in a proscenium theatre
Watch “The Kardashians” on the STREAMER.
I have enough musings for table chatter.

Soon: the eye patch will be gone
And you will be able to look inside my soul *again*.
You won’t be able to hold back
no one has ever managed to

Then I will want you to fuck me as proficiently as Josh O’Connor
did to his friendly companion in GOD’S OWN COUNTRY
For I have never been made love to, no, not in 40 years, has *anyone* ever made love to me.

The Script still needs some tweaks
We are still HIGH BUDGET indie

We were aiming for BILLY BOB SLING BLADE territory.
We have ended up somewhere between MULHOLLAND DRIVE and HACKERS.

Love Bug, Cameron
Recall that lustful feeling
the delusion of dearest, sweetheart, bunny my skunk?

We will carry three suitcases each when we travel
onwards to our honeymoon.
I could not afford one *after my first marriage*.

I am eager to manifest.
To show you my pride
In your act of spearheading the legalization
Of making normative the act of marriage
so that 2 sets of cock and balls
can sit together comfortably in Holy forever.

At the airport,
a coat of melancholy swoops over me
A lapses lazuli.
I begin to fear the loss of the man whom I married before
the person who endured my manias and who did not leave.
The person who always responded to text messages in 24 hours
not with one-word replies
but with essayistic, diaristic, incoherent streams of nonsensical consciousness.

The man who fears sex because of his brush with HIV
his Catholic guilt
And who affords automatic hugs in lieu.
He whose eyes gaze up at me like those of a Border Collie
Tender is the heart
even when it knows
that it alone, can never be enough.

I contemplate the moment that Frantz Fanon
fighting on the warfront
came to realize that he was Black, first
before he was French
a disposition that he could not have previously conceived of.

I feel emotionally inebriated.
Like the HOLLOW MEN
Dragged in mud and shat on in the mouth
not in a good way like in a scatting BDSM scene starring singer Lou Reed.

Is our honeymoon a policy building exercise . . . WHOSE MOMENTUM?
Am I withholding being in the chair with wheels
even if it would afford me a more comfortable life?

I medicate
numb
accidentally call your mum a cunt

I wince and on the stairs of the small plane I see you,
as if for the first time
a blonde man smiling at me.
I look you up and down
I allow the desire to wash over me
to transmit and coarse through me
to believe that I could belong
and be desired
you smirk.
Beside you a child.
A boy circa 12.
The circumstance ever so complicated

All the dreams that I'd had of children of my own
And I can't breathe.

Our delirium
ensues
we sit in echo chambers
Listening cubes.
A seance for one.

This is how the world turns?
You ask
Is this how the world
Turns?
I ask
Is this how the world turns?
You ask
This is how the world turns
I ask
Is this how the world turns?

* *

Wonder
by Blake Karim Mitchell, trans. Omar Kholeif

People wonder why me and Husband begin to prepare dinner at 22.00.
I say it's because we keep a Mediterranean lifestyle
as we slurp the dregs of our microwaveable meals, without fail. A courageous burp ensues.
Tomorrow we must eat vegetables, align our circadian rhythms to the sun, he proposes.
People do like to wonder.
Of the many contradictions that embody everyone else's being.
Without computing that there is a sense of "wonder" in creating one's own inner logic.

Mine is comprised of various forms of wishful thinking, of dreaming, from lives lived,
ceased, creased, and folded.

*

I like to guzzle DIET COKE out of the can when I am thirsty because it SCORES my throat
in that *real* good way.
I like to chain smoke because the burning smell of tobacco is sign that I don't have
COVID.

I drop cigarette ends in the street hoping someone will bring back human street sweepers (CHIMNEY SWEEPS) to remove them.
I live in “OFF PLAN” paper-thin housing because it is reminiscent of the prefab homes we lived in when we were expat children on the move.

*

I sometimes hang paintings at low heights to avoid glorifying any one work of art over another.
I like to read books from back to front because I like to do the same as Husband. He says it is his superpower and I want a superpower. I never wondered, not that anyone did, that he was trying to admit to something that he couldn't do quite like the rest of us.
That's why now I am always adding errors in the books that I write. To check and see if anyone is in fact reading, *any*, ANYTHING, *at all*. If they spot the errata.

*

I like to know that there are people in the world who love me. Even if those people and me, never do meet, nor see each other, nor ever will. Sometimes, the myth of loving in and of itself, is enough, for perseverance.
I like to do good by acquaintances. But I will always resolve to telling myself that I've fallen short. This will keep me on my toes, working to become better. It is a form of inverse Buddhism—from the one God to the many. Except the cohort is self-selected by me.
People wonder if I am wealthy. I have always chosen to believe as much. Even if foreclosure is an always imminent threat, I *must* be convinced that I am prosperous. I do not hold fear of impending homelessness for I have danced with death and her widow.
So long as there is access to COGNITION, I tell ME, MYSELF, and ME that I shall find a semblance of will. There have been days, of course, when those, are far out of sight. *Wonder*: what happens when it's gone? To know you are/is a total and definite *goner*?
WONDER is an unusual thing.
Few people make me WONDER.
Objects, song and lyric; poem and prose that can't be pulled or stripped apart in a crit session.
Wonder is reserved, from end to end, for *some* of the ancestors to resolve.
For the sleeping child, still *in utero*.
For the GOD-like creatures that orbit us, fashioning scenes—nets for our protection.
For to wonder why, would be to forego the very gift of life itself.

7
Ibn 'Arabi, *Four Pillars of Spiritual Transformation: The Adornment of the Spiritually Transformed* (Hilyat al-abdal) (Mystical Treatises of Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi) (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 2008).

8
These ideas are widely explored in Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993; repr. New York: Verso, 2022). See also, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and the Spread of Nationalism* (1983; rev. ed. New York: Verso, 2006).

9
Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 7–19.

10
The term “emotional abstraction” has been widely associated with Sean Scully since the 1970s, although there is no definitive date as to when this association crystallized. Scully cited this in several conversations with me, most recently, June 6, 2024.

11
Arthur Danto's writing about Sean Scully have contributed to this thinking. His “expressive theory of art” and “embodied meaning of aesthetic ideas” contribute to these structural readings. Both notions privilege metaphor, symbolism and expression in a situated context for art. See: Arthur Danto, “Embodied Meaning as Aesthetic Ideas,” *Lecture: School of Visual Arts*, May 27, 2021.

12
Conversation with Sean Scully, May 14, 2025, London.

13
Conversation with Sean Scully, May 21, 2025, London

Carry forth the thought—the process of poesis as if it were a garment. Now we will brush past the first fold to catch the spark that fires the embers of the second fold of the quadriptych. Here, we/Kholeif author begin to sketch out the theoretical framework for Emotional Materialism. Through an exploration of migratory forms, we bear witness to an engagement with a seemingly absent ontological identity, and the uncanny experience of the diasporic imagination that solders it back together. How might we learn, perhaps counter-intuitively, from abstraction—how to think structurally about emotional landscapes, through and across, imaginal worlds and configured stories of embodiment?

FOLD 3 MIGRATORY FORMS: STITCHING, SKETCHING IN THE FIELD OF MEMORY

The landscape of memory is deceptive—its form a composite image stitched together through resuscitative acts of journeying backward and forward via routes, gathering seed and soil to sow, to *story* what Sufi mystic Ibn 'Arabi referred to as “Imaginal Worlds.”⁷ In the diasporic imagination—a cartography that is personified as both fantastical as it is harrowing, the intangible composition of memory is intended to afford space for elders to weave culturally situated expressions of symbolism and metaphor into aesthetic culture.⁸ Contra to now threadbare anthropological testaments that the Earth's Global Majority, chiefly “African” culture [especially, that of Islamic Africa] and “Asia” are sites of “primitive art,”⁹ my returns to the continent have contrarily bristled with visual narratives that starkly oppose such presumption. The constitution of this imagination emerges from within a field—not squarely of looking, but one equally, composed, just as much, of all-encompassing acts of structuring feeling. This relates to what painter Sean Scully discusses in his treatise away from minimalism toward expression, situation and symbolism, as the field of “emotional abstraction,” or what I seek to re-position here and recapitulate as “emotional materialism.”¹⁰

The rubric behind this ontological state is the result of years of looking at and looking with the art of the Irish-born, US-based artist Sean Scully, whose designation of the term “emotional abstraction” affords both credence and the markers for an emotional materialism to find its necessary constitution.¹¹ The genesis of this trajectory of thought in Scully's practice can be traced to the late 1960s, with the artist's move from pointillist technique into what was initially described as geometric abstraction.¹² As a fine art student at Newcastle University, the erstwhile art student was inspired and perplexed by Henri Matisse's paintings produced after his trips to Morocco in 1912 and 1913, respectively. These works of art, Scully argued, resisted the omnipresence of Cubism and posed pivotal questions for Scully.¹³ Could color brim and bristle with metaphor and mood? Could the juxtaposition

of flatness in the abstract field and form of one of Matisse's compositions speak to inner or outer wells of an artist's consciousness?¹⁴

The influence of Islamic and African art and architecture would serve as a recurring point of return, and affords revitalized context in examining Scully's expansive oeuvre. The artist's formative artwork *Soft Ending*, 1969, is a large square painting—a parallax—of 89 × 89 inches, which when installed, seems to exist suspended before the gaze. A slow waltz toward the picture plane presents the eyes with benevolent staccato-like rivulets that activate flesh-like undertones. The back of a torso, coming into form, perhaps. A landscape scorched by landmines. An exit wound, the lateral openings in a cooling wind tower atop a building in Northern Africa or West Asia.

Despite being presented in the “avant-garde” scripture of the square, *Soft Ending*'s philosophy is also woven into the lyrical poignancy of its title. Upon returning to Great Britain, Scully was impressed with an after-image that he had witnessed in Morocco. The coil of “falling bands of color” seeping as if through time, as they hung from long strands of dyed wool, taking shape under the Moroccan sun. Scully notes:

In *Soft Ending*, I painted yellow bands in vertical, followed by green horizontal bands, followed by dark-red sprayed bands in a color I saw hanging in drying wool. I didn't want to paint the people [of North Africa] in the same way [Henri] Matisse did. I was interested in their structure. Not their look. I made the work in Newcastle. It is: The North greeting, the South.¹⁵

The citation of “structure” is an allusion to an “inner emotional structure,” as much as it alludes to a rubric of several interleaving architectures. Scully extends the dialogue from representation or formalism's potential to revision and recuperate history through representation, instead, choosing to embed the graduated contours of life into what artist Otobong Nkanga has referred to as “the slow build-up”—the systemic “flow” that situates and locates narrative structures into the stratified modes of everyday life.¹⁶

In the case of *Soft Ending*, Scully's first significant abstract painting, the artist posits the potency of feeling as a central current in the field of geometric abstraction, as well as in painting more generally. Contrary to the epistemic structures that sought to reify a specific London-New York school of minimalist art, which peaked between the 1950s through to 1970s, and which featured artists such as, Dan Flavin, Carl Andre, and Sol LeWitt, who were said to be working with “primary structures” as a means to resist the abstract expressionist tendencies in New York at the time.¹⁷ Scully's art did not concern itself with such *coolness*. For his is an aesthetic

14
The Artist's Journey: Sean Scully on Henri Matisse. BBC: British Broadcasting Corporation (1990/1992). The documentary is currently viewable via the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ynKoopfmNZU&t=19s>.

15
Correspondence with Sean Scully. May 11, 2025, over email.

16
Otobong Nkanga, on “The Slow Build Up,” see: http://www.insituparis.fr/cspdocs/press/files/otobong_nkanga_operates_like_a_political_seismograph.pdf.

17
Kyanstan McShine, *Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculptors* (New York: Jewish Museum, 1966).

18
Jonathon Jones, “Sean Scully: Mirroring review – how can a rectangle contain so much suffering?” *The Guardian*, Friday, October 10, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/oct/10/sean-scully-mirroring-review-how-can-a-rectangle-contain-so-much-suffering>.

19
These words were spoken by Sean Scully at the opening of *Sean Scully: A Romantic Geometry of Colors* at the Pompidou, Paris. More info here: <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/pompidou-plus/magazine/article/sean-scully-a-romantic-geometry-of-colors>.

20
Nguyen, Lan et al. “Feeds, feelings, and focus: A systematic review and meta-analysis examining the cognitive and mental health correlates of short-form video use.” *Psychological bulletin* vol. 151,9 (2025): 1125–1146. doi:10.1037/bul0000498.

21
This metaphor holds multiple, indeed, duplicitous connotations. The first point of reference emerges from Walter Benjamin's “Theses on the Philosophy of History” from 1942, but it is expanded upon by the writing of authors and poets such as Kamau Braithwaite, who introduces the concept of “Tidalectics”—a theory that models history on cyclical, back-and-forth movement of ocean tides rather than linear, Western, land-based progress. I refer to this as Ocean intimacy. See: Braithwaite, Kamau. *ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey* (Staten Island, NY: We Press, 1999).

practice fueled by an energetic warmth. His dialectic scope and use of color, like dress, can serve as metaphor, interleaving horror and romance in picture planes that leak, seep, and bleed through various temporal zones and orders.¹⁸

Scully's configuration of the abstract subject seeks to *retrieve*, or more precisely to *recover*, “the human” in “abstract painting.”¹⁹ Color and contour are cleaved to idiom and metaphor, as much as they are to memory, and to the compositional study of paint's properties—knowing what it does, where, how, and why. It is an imperative, lost too often when the content and form collapse under the shroud of aesthetic homogenization that has come to bear in the visual twenty-first century—a theory also known as “the same-screen effect.”²⁰

“Emotional materialism” can be conceived in this regard as an art that generates a rupture out with the bounds of the linear. It is demonstrative of a narrative where meaning is produced and inscribed in time by the artist to be perceived on the basis of various contingencies. Indeed, emotional materialism resolves to genealogical notions of history, without ascribing to Western history's conceit of conquest. It defies this. It is an art in free-form, at times in circular motion—connected through the shared affinities of fellow travelers.²¹

Despite any semblance in color or perceived even tonality, Scully annihilates the notion of the “same screen” effect by creating paintings that infamously become stagings—event, exhibition, theater, opera. You might conjure a scene of a thick brush as it bristles through turpentine, springing pigment to the surface of copper and aluminum structures, forming an ocular rift. The surface is primed, quadrants of one color, overlaid with another as they begin to leak from the interstice. They reveal the long, physically charged process of folding one's emotions into the Earth's sediments—much like sheetrock. Familiar as the material may be: Are we aware of the complexity of its constitution? Of its vulnerable edge? Situation in the ordering of the work is thus imperative.

In Scully's *Soft Ending*, Morocco is more than a situation, however. It is also texture, root, and anchor. Watching the constitution of wool drying—clothing—people's emotional structure as it was being made, that served as one central point of genesis. Morocco—place, nation, allegory serves to sever a particular evocation of geometric abstraction—a “break” that is as much aesthetic and formal, as it is ethnic, social, and political. Here, the site of encounter is also one of intertwined social history and architecture. For Scully, it was a “coming-of-age,” a first encounter with a bygone era of Islamic art and architecture—much of which he would not fully scope until subsequent visits when he could afford to do so.

ATTACHING AND DETACHING MEANING

To explore the historical “meaning(s)” that could be rendered/conjured by positing *Soft Ending* in the contemporary milieu,



it felt meaningful to build an exhibition around this work, which opened in London in 2025. I sought to use *Soft Ending* as a bridge—a physical beginning and ideological ending to the exhibit, *Finding My Blue Sky*, which presented the work of over two dozen artists across the Lisson Galleries and Edgware Road neighborhood area of West London. The choice of location was intentional. This enclave remains one of the densest Arabic-speaking and Islamic communities in Britain and the oldest Moroccan stronghold.²²

I was eager to traverse constellations of thought around *this specific painting* by positioning it in dialogue with the work of the late Iranian American artist Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, who, like Scully, lived primarily in the diaspora of the United States, in New York. Farmanfarmaian's wall-based sculptural-reliefs, drawings, tapestries, and paintings, at first glance, nonetheless, may seem more resolutely aligned to the typologies of what "encyclopedic museums" denote as Islamic art.²³

Of intrigue, throughout the exhibition's run, a weekly tour was held for members of the immediate neighborhood, as well as the broader world of art. Scully, who also presented a rejoinder work, *Rabat Blue* from 2024, of lurid memory, which was positioned elsewhere in the exhibition, eschewed the audience's semblance of familiar perception. When invited to convene with *Soft Ending*, after having been introduced to Scully's work, on first encounter, few recognized that it was of his making on first encounter.

22

British Broadcasting Corporation, "Arabic London" (2007). Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/london/content/articles/2005/05/27/arabic_london_feature.shtml.

23

The latter, I believe, is an issue of proxy, and kinship. Had the artist's name been different, her presentation or accent, been more outwardly eroded, perhaps, her work, may not have been encased within such rubric.



When the context was revealed, reverberations of awe swallowed up the room, regardless of whether I was convening a small or large group of people around *Soft Ending*. For this author, it presented a significant realization that the artist had been somewhat misaligned—for the space afforded by the artist in the material matrix of his paintings is both generous and generative, allowing one to constitute different constellations of thought based on situation. His—is an art generous to the world, as it is to other artists and their work.

The year 1969 served as an inflection point in Scully's life. Although it is well-documented, most notably in the 1990 BBC-produced documentary, *Artists' Journey: Sean Scully on Henri Matisse*, what remains largely absent from the broader historical discourse around his work since the 1980s is just how acutely his artwork speaks to a particular history of British

life and a specific formulation of a diasporic imagination. Chiefly English working-class life, ethnic social stratification, and gender hierarchies. Scully has subsumed what has been documented in some spaces as a very traumatic childhood and young adulthood²⁴ and chosen to tackle this by being a curious, generous, and capacious traveler.²⁵ The emotional structures that constitute his paintings, nonetheless, do not serve solipsistic function. Instead, Scully favors the belief that he approaches life and art through a “fusionist” approach to iconology. This, one can argue, is an area still rife for further examination and theorization.²⁶

In 1975, arriving in New York City from the UK, “emotional abstraction” would soon emerge as his vocabulary. The practical seed of Vincent van Gogh in the National Gallery of London, enlivened by the German and French expressionism of Ernst Ludwig Kirschner and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, as well as the history of metaphor in literature, poetry, and architecture, would gradually become imbibed and apparent. Within this ambit of references, the allegorical Islamic pattern of the twelfth-century mosque of Tinmal in the High Atlas Mountains is of great significance, as are the words of two Nobel laureates, Bob Dylan, the poetry of Séamus Heaney (who would become a good friend), and John Coltrane’s improvisational music.

Materially unencumbered by the possibilities of inserting a refracting glimmer in the interstice of the picture field, Scully’s ontological provocation is that the “imperfect”—the sleight of the human hand—the site in-between here, there, and elsewhere (i.e., the interstice), is where the situated site of transcendence emerges.²⁷ Dualism: Parsed, re-constituted, soldered. For his paintings are songs without lyrics. Picture planes to be filled in by the spectator’s inner well of feeling and lived experience, as much as they are always overflowing. Propelled by a purpose “to re-inscribe the human into the field of abstract painting”—it is a motivation not dissimilar to Heidegger’s constitution of the animate and mystical realm²⁸—a principal evinced by the artist’s respect and collection of Aboriginal artistic practices.²⁹

A Scully painting regardless of its size can serve as an act of worldmaking. It can bisect the linearity of Western art history and adopt, as Walter Benjamin articulates, the notion that time is a series of “catastrophic events” that have the possibility to “electrify”—to gush, with emotion, as he articulated in “The Theses of the Philosophy of History.”³⁰ This is one possible order of and for my revisionist articulation of “emotional materialism.” One that spikes and whirrs. It is inter-tidal and inter-textual in its sets of principles. Like water, the flow of Scully’s paintings is constituted in and around meandering paths that are pulled from distances and breaths; lives lived and lost; tears shed; confidence lost and regained. What world you make with them is a question that I often ask of my students. If emotional abstraction emerged as a zone to

24
William Cook, “Sean Scully: Fatherhood has given my art a new lease of life,” *Spectator Life*, October 3, 2018.

25
Sean Scully in conversation with Farah Nayeri, “Sean Scully Is an Art Star, but He ‘Won’t Bend the Knee for Anyone,’” *New York Times*, August 29, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/29/arts/design/sean-scully-thaddaeus-ropac-seoul.html>.

26
Conversation with the artist, May 10, 2024, London.

27
Donald Kuspit, “Sacred Sadness: Sean Scully’s Abstractions,” in *Psychodrama: Modern Art as Group Therapy* (London: Ziggurat, 2010), 442–453.

28
Heidegger’s late works, which included his constitution of the “four-world,” also included his belief that humans should be more reflective to that which is nearest to us—being, including all animate species. See: Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude* (Gesamtausgabe Vol. 29/30), trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Indiana University Press, 1995).

29
Conversation with the artist via email, May 24, 2025.

30
“Theses on the Philosophy of History” (or “On the Concept of History”) is a 1940 essay by Walter Benjamin first believed to have been published in 1942. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, trans.

H. Zohn (Schocken Books, 1969), 253–264.

31
Rasheed Araeen / Courney J. Martin, *The Mellon Lectures*, The National Gallery, London, 2025.

32
See: “Heidegger, dwelling and the Fourworld”: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger/other-beginning.html>.

33
Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14. <http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/venus-two-acts/docview/195789319/se-2>.

34
Sadiya Hartman, “The End of White Supremacy, An American Romance,” *Bomb* magazine (Summer 2020), <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2020/06/05/the-end-of-white-supremacy-an-american-romance/>.

35
Krista J. Thompson, March Meeting: <https://www.sharjahart.org/en/march-meeting/mm-2023/speakers/details/krista-thompson/>.

36
“Looking Sideways” is the title of a keynote inspired by Kamau Braithwaite’s work presented at the University of Southampton on January 9, 2026, titled, “Colonial Topographies of the Internet.”

37
Edward Kamau Braithwaite, “Submerged Mothers,” *Jamaica Journal*, 9, nos. 2–3(1975): 48–49.

repudiate the cool formalism and aloofness of minimalism, then emotional materialism is the physical, cyclical wash—the push and pull. The space of explosive abundance. Emotional materialism is the material form, as much as it is the structure; the composition; the color and light, bursting through to play with one’s hermeneutics—an unheralded interplay of the senses. Where will you find yourself? Could it be toward a wayward path, a situated site of “becoming”?

BECOMING FOUND

Revisionist histories of modernism in the field of exhibition-making, of which I have been party, have focused on the specific exclusion of historical figures from art history. The particularity of *imagining* “otherwise” has not only focused on the excised histories of women, Black, Asian, and diasporic individuals from art history, but also from *all* official record.³¹ Heidegger’s curative act of “worlding”³²—imagining a cosmological four-world, and Saidiya Hartman’s narrativization of dispossessed life³³ through *storying*, also referred to as the act of “critical fabulation,”³⁴ has afforded methodologies as art historian Krista J. Thompson argues to reconsider how one might approach the very archive of an artist’s life.³⁵

At the March Meeting Sharjah in 2023, I listened to Thompson’s accounts regarding the life of artist Tom Lloyd, whose exhibition was the subject of the inaugural show at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. At the time, I served as the inaugural director of a nascent state collection in the United Arab Emirates—a nation of abundance at the time, which continues to come under siege in the most unexpected manner. Several discussions with colleagues involved the complex protocoling and platforming of artists whose references were polyglot—their archives so incredibly vast and intertwined with other people’s archives that to situate context often felt an impossibility. This was especially the case as I was staging exhibitions for an audience who were still developing a calculus for comprehending visual culture.

To develop an ontological system of experience, I found myself returning to stories—not as abstractions, but ones that I had embodied, experienced, or that others could locate. To help author a collective script of an art history required that I skewer logic, in favor of “looking sideways.”³⁶ The concept of looking sideways is gleaned as much from poet Kamau Braithwaite’s concept of an oceanic dialectic—tidalectics³⁷ as it is from artist Sean Scully’s series of *Landline* paintings that he began creating in 2013. A back injury had left the artist in excruciating pain—eliciting concern regarding his ability to create his large-scale canvasses. In an expanse of time, the artist began a series of paintings “lying down”—nature compositions—of oil on canvas, wood, and aluminum.

Horizons of thick banded color lines created in



gestural form arch us to the fundamentals of painting: figure and ground, turned upside. Memories become forged into loose stripes, endless horizons, where “sea, air, and earth meet.”³⁸ The varying degrees of thickness suggest an unbounded sense of levity, as much as they do of uncertainty. These are pictures that purport to stretch beyond the color line—unrestrained light forging cornucopias. Progressively, his hues darkened and thickened, as if scaling from the “trenches” to the “sunlight” of the uncharted oceans.³⁹ While some link this body of work to Scully’s love of Beckett and the “Beckettian void”⁴⁰—a site barren of language—one could equally read the work as an act of truth-telling and resistance.

At any given moment, these are sites of situated trauma,

³⁸ Melissa Chiu, *Sean Scully: Landline* (Washington, DC: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2018), 4–5.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Peter Frank, “Sean Scully: Here and There and Now,” *The Art Section*, June 2024: <https://www.theartsection.com/scully#:~:text=For%20a%20painter%20like%20Sean,well%20as%20in%20outer%20space>.

⁴¹ This searching experience began in 2011 after my grandfather’s death in Tahrir Square, and an attempt to solder together the pieces of his personal narrative biography with his public persona.

⁴² Annie Dillard, *Total Eclipse* (London: Spiral House, 1982/2025), 3.

⁴³ Ibid., 24.

struggle, and rebellion against the rigid confinement of images—ones that favor an ontological panorama; widescreen vision, as opposed to the intimacy of a square or the rising mist of fog as it scales, hovers, and towers overhead. That the circumstance that led Scully to this point may have been a form of “essential response,” encourages a re-configuration of the lived experience of artists in the abstract field—ones whose stories have either been withheld from public view or narrated through a particular heroic storying that elides a certain aspect of truth.

My first encounter *with* Scully began as an act of inner remodeling if you will. It was an attempt, an exercise, in wandering, fact-finding, and inscription. One of my mentors, Prof. Jean Fisher, who supervised my study at the Royal College of Art, London, and beyond, had attended art school at the University of Newcastle at the same time as Scully. The two seem to have never met. I believe this would have been due to one of two reasons: Firstly, it is my understanding that Fisher’s father had coterminously required that she complete a doctorate in medical sciences while pursuing her BFA, and/or secondly, Fisher was up until the very end, incredibly anti-institutional, and chose, ultimately, not to adopt a studio-based practice. Her philosophical pursuits and research largely revolved around the history of Ireland and the concept of sovereignty, which she subsequently used to trace and condition deep parallels with First Nations artists, and before her death, with artists in Palestine and of its diaspora.

At the time, I was scratching on what to pursue in my doctoral research, and we had begun a parallel discussion and experience of Ireland and Northern Ireland. I wished to explore my grandfather’s nation, Sudan, from an aesthetic standpoint, which too had become bifurcated due to denominationally conspired conflict.⁴¹ At the time, painting was *being* read purely formally, and dislocated from *emotional* context. Today, painting can be re-stitched into the fabric of life. Discussed in the essence of all aesthetic culture, but also with the sentiment, and value, of an heirloom or a piece of clothing. Here again, we find the score that undergirds my claim to emotional materialism. The impulse for my interest in examining Sudan was fueled by my grandfather’s death in 2011.

This event led to what, in 1982, Annie Dillard articulated as a “total eclipse” of “perception and language.”⁴² I was maneuvering and scaling the social ladder of a cultural milieu that was obfuscating, one that continues to occlude individuals such as myself. As I began my position as the exhibition’s curator at the storied Whitechapel Gallery, London, riddled with grief and confusion, and having barely begun my doctorate, my body felt dislocated, delimited, and distended. It was assumed that I was to perform to a specific narrow frame of ethnicity, a specific purview of Blackness, namely “Brownness,” a darkness of “mystery.” This prevented me from laying any sense of claim to a community.⁴³

I had recently relocated to a bedsit in the Ng neighborhood of London, also known as Highbury Hill or Highbury Barn. It was the first time that I had lived with a companion and had resolved that what was innately “queer” or differential regarding my person was no longer a perception of orientation. Despite the locale, a different performance was to take center stage—an expectation of association and affiliation, of class and tastes brokered along lines circumscribed by a genealogical pool of aesthetically inclined civil servants.

I used my initial research of the Gallery’s archive of exhibitions to further nourish the research that Jean Fisher had proposed—comparative modes and models of affinity in study. Of the exhibition catalogues culled from a group of circa 100 boxes were those of Sean Scully’s 1989 survey exhibition at the institution.⁴⁴ My preliminary curiosity was piqued when I noticed in the catalogue’s in-leaf a portrait of the artist taken by Robert Mapplethorpe in the final year of the photographer’s life. I was equally surprised by the range of “queer” figures from the New York world of art and culture, such as art critic Carter Ratcliff, as well as a painting dedicated to the artist’s late friend, theater maker Charles Choset, who had died of AIDS-related causes, as well as a loan from gay gallerist Ted Bonin, who by that point was also one of my friends.

These boxes did not reveal a schematic for thinking of nation, but I was able to deepen my knowledge of the artist’s biography. Notably, I learned that the artist had attended St. Joan of Arc’s Primary School, where, taught by nuns, he discovered his initial love of art.⁴⁵ The reconstituted school sits within the square frame of the Georgian bedsit, where I have returned to type up this script. These were paintings that contained great suffering—traumatic material certainly, but what was most striking were the evocations of the contents of the checklist itself. Back and forth between the pages, perusing the titles, suggested a literary brutalism. This is a form of literary painting that stepped in when all of language’s formal resonances collapsed. If Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* articulated that the future of a colonized world “would be black,” i.e. then Scully’s thickly underpainted [*Heart of Darkness*—a three-dimensional revisioning of colonial trauma in Africa shimmers in its wavering brilliance and structure, intimating that within the cracks, are breaches, loopholes, for new anchors of life to begin again.⁴⁶

ASCENDING HOME: LITERARY PAINTING

If the surfeit of visual iconology propagated by cross-embedded media,⁴⁷ and the internet’s myriad self-broadcasting platforms has conditioned any sense of a worldview, it is one simultaneously of an illusion of anxiety, smoothness, and polyphony.⁴⁸ Image overflow has shifted the gears on the comprehension funnel. Visual literacy, or the prospect of it, has been hollowed out in early educational schooling in the

44
Archive Entry: Whitechapel Gallery, London. File WAG/PHOT/1/406/1 - Sean Scully Exhibition, <https://archive-catalogue.whitechapelgallery.org/index.php/sean-scully-exhibition>.

45
This was confirmed to be by the artist in a conversation, June 5, 2024, London.

46
See The Art Institute of Chicago’s entry on this painting, which it holds in its collection: <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/72177/heart-of-darkness>.

47
Norman M. Klein, “Cross-embedded media: an introduction,” in A. Broegger and O. Kholeif (eds.), *Vision, Memory, Media* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010).

48
See: W.J.T. Mitchell, “Art in the Age of Anxiety: For Omar Kholeif,” in *Art in the Age of Anxiety* (London and Cambridge, MA: Mörel Books and The MIT Press, 2021), 111–119.

49
Catherine Milner, “Children starved of art lose their creative spark – and the country its cultural future,” *The Observer*, September 27, 2025, <https://observer.co.uk/news/opinion-and-ideas/article/we-are-raising-a-culturally-illiterate-generation>.

50
W.J.T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want?* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

51
Grace Pailthorpe, *Grace Pailthorpe’s Writings on Psychoanalysis and Surrealism* (London: Routledge, 1939/2023), 53–62.

western world⁴⁹ despite arguments that this is one of the crucial frames for the study of history.⁵⁰ Aesthetic culture remains the site of “composite” art forms, where situation and aesthetic politics continue to interleave—to cross-contaminate, germinating flora and fauna for the imagination that, like literature did in the interwar period, fosters time travel. The creative impulse, too, is a necessary biological schema. The increasingly recognized British surgeon and artist associated with a movement known as the “psycho-surrealists,” Grace Pailthorpe, once argued that creativity is a necessary part of human life. She continues that its manifestation serves as a counterpoint to trenchant interior agitation, or worse, violence.⁵¹

Literature’s endgame is not always in what it reveals but also in what it elides. On a blustering winter evening in 2026, I find myself in the basement of a Tribeca building, home to Iranian Armenian American artist, Sonia Balassanian’s five decades’ worth of aesthetic practice. Along the floors on Black wooden planks are examples of the artist’s *Cauterized Literature* (circa 1980s)—charred books laid bare akin to scripture. Gazing at them from above they begin to resemble bodies, scorched embers of knowledge that belong to a place—Iran, where language, whether by choice, virtue, or circumstance, seem to pose the most public threat. I seem to come here every winter to examine what Balassanian, who emigrated to the United States in the early ’70s to study, has pulled for me to examine. We are preparing for an exhibition in Dubai, unaware that by the time we unstretch and roll these linen cloths, they will be impossible to ship. These layered paintings and collages are redolent of a prehistoric language—an enclosure of blues and



Sonia Balassanian, *Untitled*, early 1970s. Acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

grays, which, upon closer examination, hold within their skin, underlayers of script that have been overpainted, time and again—Balassanian’s melancholy for what could not be made evident during her lifetime.

I hasten a joke—that the cave that constitutes the remains of Balassanian’s working studio is the room that Virginia Woolf emblemized in her metaphorical treatise on women—the required material that affords them the right to speak and write.⁵² Balassanian, who is hard of hearing, does not miss a beat. She professes this subterranean space to be a dungeon of lost artifacts that shall never be found. Despite my attempts to story her life in monographic book form, exhibition, and via acquisition into public collections, the shadow of lament continues to loom for her. This is an artist whose material practice is conceived as a series of emotional planes ascending to a home that cannot be accessed. She is forever excised because, as she notes, she is considered a vestige of dissent.

The search for the emotional material is a venture that begins for this author in the quest to connect with the matrilineal—a route to what Stefano Harvey and Fred Moten argue is a “maternal ecology,” whose sense of incompleteness affords us strength.⁵³ That is—it is in our constitution, and from within that we may be afforded breath. My relationship to Balassanian is not unlike that of many other figures who cleave metaphor, symbolism, and myth within the gaps of their paintings: Simone Fattal, Huguette Caland, or Luísa Correia Pereira, for whom I have devoted thousands of hours as comrade, advocate, and as an aspiring son. Within the scope of these relationships, a sense of duty has plagued this author. How does one counter epistemic violence, but not dilute the resulting content? I have resolved that a material study—a physical embodiment as much as a cerebral one is an absolute necessity—a practice of doing and making, unpicking and re-stitching back into the seam.

Archival research privileges physical journeying. Routing through slides and carousel. Annotating primary source material that is governed by a specific genealogy that paradoxically elides many of the subjects to which I am drawn. Digitizing knowledge for a greater whole than for oneself over the course of many years, something remains to be resolved within. The concept of the epistemic object, or rather, structuring the epistemic order of praxes evolved not as a performative mode of study, but to afford artists’ contextual air.

To delimit from the possibilities of being inscribed to institution, but rather to a genealogy of practical knowledge fastened to the situated making of each maker’s individual life and work. This, I would come to recognize, was a missing puzzle piece in my treatise toward emotional materialism. It was a reification of my own voice as a studied, practicing visual artist hiding in plain sight working under heteronyms for 30 years. This is where I began my career—working with material

52
Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1928/1942).

53
Stefano Harvey and Fred Moten, *All Incomplete* (London: Minor Compositions, 2021), 38–41.

54
E.Khazraee and Gasson, S., “Epistemic Objects and Embeddedness: Knowledge Construction and Narratives in Research Networks of Practice,” *The Information Society*, 31(2) (2015): 139–159.

55
The author suffers from a neurological condition, the result of a racial attack that was carried out against them at age seven, where they were hit with a blunt instrument over the head that at the time was believed to have permanently impaired their vision and cognitive abilities.

56
The author’s metaphor of the stem to the episteme, of the tree of knowledge, of the root and foundation of knowledge are intentional. Still, the author has chosen not to situate this within the theoretical framework of Michel Foucault’s thought and instead wishes to cohere this to African philosophy and cosmology, which was their starting point. Herein, the tree, the route, is attributed to “the ancestors” as the source that is given. The present generation who receives said wisdom are subsequently tasked with sustaining these sets of knowledge. See: Bert Hamminga, “Epistemology from the African Point of View,” *Poznan Studies in the Philosophy of the Sciences and the Humanities* (2005): 57–84.

57
See: Dan McDougall, “Working Flat Out – the Child Labor Behind Your Egyptian Cotton Sheets,” *The Guardian*, June 8, 2008: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2008/jun/08/childprotection.humanrights>.

forms. Equally, it was an inscription of a re-visioning to the processes and protocols of embodiment required of my own body to make sense of my subject. Such burden took on added levity as I decided to endure certain experiences of making and remaking during a period of severe illness. The result, however, was a daily return to an embedded objectual process.⁵⁴

Spectatorship, too often, is plumbed and sourced from within the world, outsize, from the capacities of the context of making. As if the context—the source code—the machinations that undergird the making of content is insignificant in the constellation of meanings that an object-subject creates. The impetus, thus, is a new inter-tidal dialectic formulation that situates desynchronous modes of study in a basin of thought to inspire interrogation. If critical inquiry is the function of contemporary art, then its political structures alone cannot be demystified. So too, must its penchant to speak to a consciousness out size logic, reason—to and for a suturing creative impulse.

FOLD 4 THE PHANTOM OF DRESS

Learning is a process of constant kinesia. As a young person, Pan-African ideals were articulated to me by my fraternal grandfather as a mode of *connecting with my ancestors*—marked by moments of listening to and generating kinship. The perception was that this would lead us to knowledge, salvation, protection, after years of brutal colonialism that had scorched our lands and devoured any prospect of hope. Those years—ones where an almost deafening noise plagued the inside of my head,⁵⁵ preventing me from speech, saw the concept of *haunting* become repeated, not as horror, but as an experience of companionship. The stem of knowledge could grow if one dreamt it.⁵⁶ Even if that structure emerged from within me, it was the fire to shred with an inferiority complex that had been *quite literally* situated within me—the result of a neurological and ontological defect that came about after a group of young boys sprung me into unconsciousness when I was living in Great Britain.

Narratives of restitution and reconstitution are part and parcel of the ancestral journey. There is no textbook route. If you have gumption, you will accrue wisdom, but only if you commit to sustaining it. It was in this fashion that I came to learn of pigment and color, of textile and cotton. “Where is that fine Egyptian cotton that they speak of?” I’d ask. Elders shrugged and walked off. Barricaded by the government for Western export was the answer.⁵⁷ We all have our shortcomings. Mine is an anxiety to produce and create publicly—always, while hiding in plain sight—a notion today emboldened by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s thesis of “The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study.”⁵⁸ Their argument seeks to consider the

ontological condition of Blackness and planetary dark matter as “invisible and unknowable, yet still there.” It connects me to Stuart Hall’s “Fateful Triangle”—of race, ethnicity, and nationality. The three things that, in any given place or context, have at times served as my downfall. For my own visual and ontological presentation of self does not proffer *clear* ascription or designation of “knowing, of being there, of ethnic classification, or of belonging,” but merely confusion. Everything was scooped out of me. Back to ground zero, or?

What might at one time seem like an abundance of creative or intellectual outputs, or experiments in form, elides the fact that I am incredibly slow, sensitive, and constantly revising “with” my peers. Who are those *elders* who are “double-blind” peer-reviewers? This is something that is especially triggering for someone who has experienced long-term blindness. Rather than purely subscribe to this notion, I am constantly working with the conception of the commons, as I continue my search for community—home. My closest collaborators, contrarily, are not academics and curators but, for instance, include my husband, a designer who began his career as a pattern cutter for Nicole Farhi and Joe Casley-Hayford. The latter was the first Black designer to open a major store on the iconic King’s Road in the Chelsea neighborhood of London, which was once renowned as the seat of British fashion.

My husband, who prefers not to be cited in my public work, has noted that Casley Hayford’s death at sixty-two years of age after a three-year battle with prostate cancer—made him want get his head back into the game, after he had drifted away from his passion of hand-made unique garments, working instead to make costumes for film and television. My husband and I met a year into his newfound way of being and married the year after that. Our partnership, however, has mostly resulted in un-wearable art.

Wearable art is, of itself, a misnomer. In an age where we have grown to develop “interspecies empathy,”⁵⁹ in a philosophical moment where “queer phenomenology” has come to challenge spatial and temporal concepts of positioning, and with that, destabilized the linearity of looking, questions arise.⁶⁰ Should one presume that artists make wearable art for humans? What of such a definition and this emotional material? Is the artist ORLAN not one total work or piece of wearable art, who cannot be worn by others? Are the costumes sported by Lynn Hershman-Leeson’s avatar in her performative “*alter-life*” as Roberta Breitmore not equally considered wearable art? Was Brandon Teena’s codification, which allowed them to pass for male, a subject I learned of through the artist Shu Lea Cheang, not a performance of wearable art? Or is wearable art something that is ascribed a monetary value greater than the sum of anything which can be worn?

An Haute Couture dress, for instance, is most often worn once, if ever. In most instances, it will be lent by a fashion house to a celebrity, where it will be placed onto the person by

58
Stefano Harvey and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (London: Minor Compositions, 2013), 27–29.

59
Marion Picard and Laure Kloetzer, “The interspecies empathy: an object of an engaged and eco-centric theory coping with ecological crisis,” *20th Conference of the International Society for Theoretical Psychology*, May 2024, Belgrade (Serbia), Serbia.

60
Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (London and Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

61
See: Karin Tybjerg, “Exhibiting Epistemic Objects,” *Museum and Society* 15(3), (2017) Open Issue. Also see: Max Planck Research Network: *History of Scientific Objects*, <http://scientificobjects.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/scientificobjectsPublic/index/Projects/epistemic-objects.html>.

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See the various list of members/maisons or couture houses here: <https://www.fhcm.paris/en/haute-couture-week/maisons>.

a team of individuals. It will be photographed, subsequently dismantled, and returned to the museum that is the fashion house. As necessary as clothing is to the assembly of daily life—its aesthetic, form, and function, what ascribes value to it, is also what keeps it out of people’s sight and touch—from bearing the possibility of ingesting the material. It is instead a residue, an imprint that recedes—a bruise craving for more luster so that its pain can be felt.

Beguilingly, I am often asked if I would be willing to write, and/or curate exhibitions of artist Huguette Caland’s wearable art. Caland was a Lebanese painter, born in 1931, who died in 2019. To summarize her influence on my work as a practitioner would be to hollow all the beauty out of our encounters. Her multi-modal output proffered an abundance of possibility, a sensuous urgency that unbuckled my senses. The cultural theorist in me could no longer orientate of and for *meaning*. It was as if the prospect of the gaze had begun to move like the movements of the wind. Orbitals—smooth, wide, and narrow, swung me into an amorous affair that resulted in eighteen years of scouring, absorbing, and deciphering. Here, the myth of great art finally presented itself to me.

I authored and that was published in 2025, *Huguette Caland: imagine otherwise*, unfolded in epistolary form. It was a work of literature, criticism, and science. In it, I discuss the concept of making and unmaking the epistemic object⁶¹—a term gleaned from the sciences that revolves around the incomplete process of curiously engaging with the material processes and engagement of one’s investigation. This is how I approached Caland’s work over the course of years of acquiring it for museums; rescuing it from sites so that it may be restituted into safe hands; exhibiting it in biennials, and museum group shows. I authored several drafts of my book, many of which I chose to destroy. Throughout this development, I authored poetry, letters, and polemic; I made dozens, hundreds of paintings, deploying Caland’s signature technique of working straight onto her large square canvases, without performing preparatory work. The revelation, unraveled formations at every turn, illuminating possibility between the folds—the material itself began to speak to me.

The works that offered the most challenging prospect were Caland’s garments. The artist has been notoriously celebrated as the first and possibly, the only woman from the Arabic-speaking world to design a collection for a major French fashion house or couturier, in this case, Pierre Cardin. That, this dying practice—the elite act of creating haute couture, of which there are only thirteen-sixteen houses remaining, and of whom two design houses are led by Lebanese talent: Elie Saab and Rabih Kayrouz—is noteworthy.⁶²

Yet, the Caland Estate and several others, including me, have broached the topic of archival material, press clippings, and the like of Caland’s “one-off” Nour Collection with Cardin and others surrounding it. The resounding answer is



Huguette Caland, Kaftan designed for Nour Collection: Pierre Cardin, 1979.
Fabric. Courtesy the Estate of Huguette Caland.



Huguette Caland, *Tendresse Dress #5*, 1975. Front thread on fabric,
54 × 19 × 12 in. Photo by Sharjah Biennial 14: *Leaving the Echo Chamber*.



that nothing exists. Cardin is no longer an Haute Couture house but a brand that has been associated with “destroying fashion”—one that is primarily sold in outlet stores such as TJ Hughes or TK Maxx, which is the preserve of a certain overstock culture that is worn as college prep.⁶³ Fascinating what semblance the archive holds, if anything.

The struggle with Caland’s clothes, then, is that they bear no semblance to the Pierre Cardin of today. The Collection that Caland visioned, “Nour” [Meaning: Light in Arabic], consisted largely of modular kaftans that are accented and layered with hand-painted motifs by the artist. Caland’s embodied forms may at times bear semblances to the Palestinian technique of embroidery known as *Tatreez*—a unique form of cross-stitch. More acutely, they are representative of animate lifeforms that seem to effloresce and transmute across the shape of the body as each layer is applied. The signature piece in the collection from 1979 is a brown silk kaftan that has been widely exhibited and was made for the shape of the artist’s own body.

Huguette Caland, *Bribes de Corps*, 1979. Oil on linen, 99.7 × 99.7 cm.
Courtesy of the Sharjah Art Foundation Collection.

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See: John Horvat, “Pierre Cardin: The Death of a Man Who Destroyed Fashion,” *The Imaginative Conservative* (2021), <https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2021/01/pierre-cardin-death-man-who-destroyed-fashion-john-horvat.html>.

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See: <https://www.twz.com/sea/british-carrier-hosts-largest-number-of-f-35bs-on-a-ship-ever>.

The audacious energy required of a relatively unknown artist to persevere in a French, male-dominated milieu is astonishing when one considers the vast output that Caland produced in dress. But was any of it truly made to be worn? Or was it ever sanctioned by Cardin? In fact, there is a longstanding misconception that Caland’s clothing are pieces of wearable art. They are not. They began as garments for herself—a woman who, in bourgeois Lebanon—the daughter of the first President, did not fit the archetypal size or style. She wore oversized smocks, which she colored, wrote notes to herself on, among other annotated forms and studies, as she did with every one of her blank surfaces. These have been exhibited subsequently and form part of an archive of a life—akin to the remnants of a performance. They were never, *initially*, intended as art.

Still, there are glorious sculptures and images that are suggestive of an intertwined use of fabric making. A suggestion of a doll-like “cut out” figure stands next to Caland in an image of her in red, in her Venice, California, studio. She stands next to this adorned figure, which is redolent of a theater set piece, beaming. The nape area of the this structure’s body is painted in black, and beneath it are two stuffed fabric breasts, which protrude. The sculpture leans against Caland. This direction suggests that dress or clothing were created as aesthetic counterpoints to artworks—avatars, artistic juxtapositions that were strung from her imagination to enliven a world that at the time was simply not yet ready for her distinct form of emotional materialism.

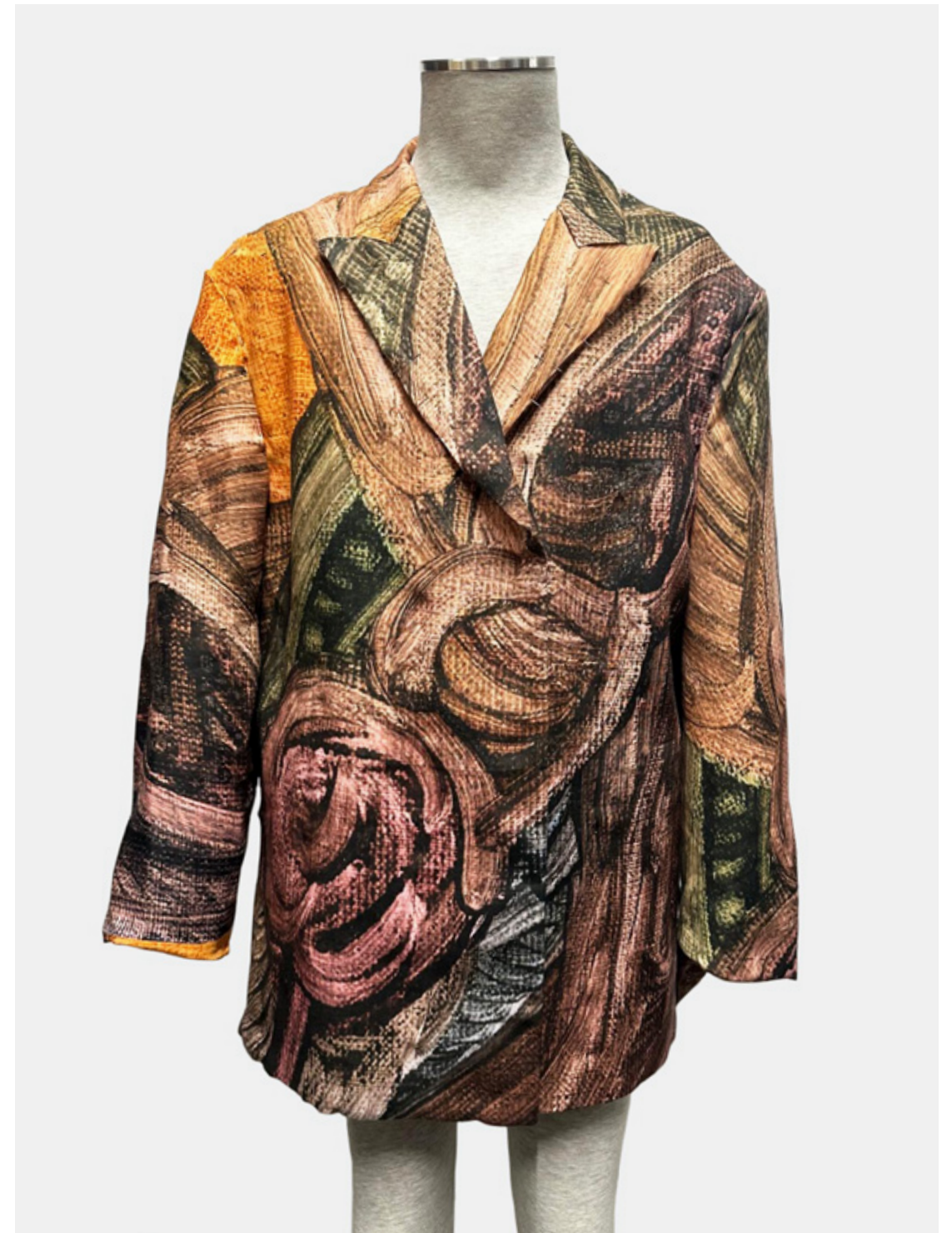
RECONSTITUTING THE PHANTASM / GETTING DRESSED

Life has its way of assuming sadness. Before the UK began hosting US missile vessels to teleport over Iran,⁶⁴ before my brother decided to leave Brooklyn to move back to Dubai, before my mother escaped the winter-chill to go and visit him, before the world’s largest long-haul airport had to close, along with dozens of airspaces, collapsing economies and the livelihoods of my closest of friends and family, seemingly over night, I had finally resolved to an act, a strategy of and for honoring my grandfather. Fellow Travelers are what I refer to as my artworks—two decades of them—my art was installed as rendered ghosts in a virtual museum in the United Arab Emirates. They were then safely packed and wrapped to depart the isle, to be shipped for my first survey exhibition of my creative practice—a full circle result of my thesis on emotional materialism. Now, they must indefinitely go into storage at my expense on a UK educator’s part-time salary. Expressing woe regarding this practicality is acutely selfish when human life is at stake, but the material’s continued presence threatens my own life in ways that are far too complicated to pronounce.

Resource scarcity is one of the primary impetuses behind most conflicts. In the fifteen years that I was

attempting to reconstitute my Sudanese heritage—sight and sense of a place that I had only visited once as a child, it dawned on me that just as my grandfather’s home had been seized, and his papers assumed, so too would all the artworks that related to this context. In attempting to carve a bridge to a nation that did not exist as I had remembered it to be, I chose metaphor. Sudan’s unofficial national flower, I learned, was “the desert rose.” This flower, which can be interpreted as Hibiscus among other plant-life, became the subject of a daily routine of rendering and imagining. I carried a small canvas with me, no more than 4 × 6 inches, and I would make a painting in every new place that I ventured. I photographed the results, and subsequently, I would sandpaper the painting away when it had fully dried.

For the perpetually postponed exhibition, which is to be titled “Forever Someone Else” and is curated by Sofia Victorino, I decided that I would honor my late grandfather by working with my husband to design a wedding suit created out of a composite of these small paintings. As the firstborn of sixteen grandchildren, my grandfather had promised me his wedding digs for my big day. He died three months before I got married. I was never to find or receive any of his belongings nor was I to ever to speak to any member of my fraternal family ever again. Here I am, I am making yet another piece of unwearable art, this time constituted of images of my desert rose on linen, satin, and cotton. It has been halted for now. It was imagined that it would be held in a Perspex vitrine—a monument to him, but also to a nation, a people, a community, who are forever searching for their way back home.



Omar Kholeif and Frank Gallacher, *They Dreamt of Desert Rose* (for Abdelkader Kholeif), 2026.
Two-piece handmade linen suit with silk lining (with hand-painted edges).
Unique. Courtesy of the artPost21 and The Third Line Gallery, Dubai.

FORTHCOMING ISSUE

Vol. 9 No. 2 / Fall 2026
COMIC-EDY

Portable Gray Review (PGR), which is published in each issue of *Portable Gray*, takes stock of the city of Chicago’s thriving cultural scene. With an eye for things that may not get covered by more mainstream media outlets, our critics review recent art exhibitions, films, music recordings and performances, dance, new media art, theater, and literature, as well as other cultural objects and happenings that may fall outside of familiar categories. While Chicago-centric, PGR is not Chicago-exclusive, as we also look for unconventional connections that extend far beyond the city limits.

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Portable Gray is committed to “Ni” or Natural Intelligence in all its various shapes and sizes. While there are no doubt some salutary uses of so-called Artificial Intelligence, we are in solidarity with the independent thought of artists and scholars around the world in retaining ownership of their work and therefore will not accept submissions to the journal that use Generative Ai as a way to circumvent good ol’ honest thought and steal words and images. Call me luddite, call me fool, but my message to big tech is: I ain’t buying what you are selling and will conduct our editorial work accordingly.

—ZACHARY CAHILL, EDITOR-IN CHIEF

PORTABLE GRAY

Interdisciplinary in scope and dedicated to groundbreaking approaches, *Portable Gray* offers a forum for artists and scholars to consider how experimental collaboration can enrich their practices and foster new discoveries. Published twice annually by the University of Chicago Press.

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