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Next to a River: Mobility, Mapping, and Hand Embroidery

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Fine Arts

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Abstract

This MFA project explores identity, mapping, and embroidery as broadly considered regarding ideas of place and landscape. Concepts such as travel, the familiar, the temporary, the known, and the unknown are motivating notions that I examine through academic study alongside techniques of hand embroidery. Throughout my MFA project, a series of material and technical choices were crucial to my reflecting on ideas of resemblance, mapping, migration, and archiving in order to further understand my identity.

A series of texts on resemblance, archiving, and mapping by Michel Foucault, Arjun Appadurai, and Tom Vanderbilt, along with references to the art practices and thought processes of artists Mrinalini Mukherjee, Ghada Amer, Anne Wilson, and Britta Marakatt-Labba are shown to be vital in helping to articulate my thematic and materialistic interests.

The thesis can be considered further both in relation to the concept of mapping and to hand embroidery in light of broader experiences of encounters with “place.” I anticipate the potential of this work to relate to other disciplinary contexts, including the Sciences.

Keywords: Identity; Mapping; Embroidery; Archive; Hand embroidery.

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Preface

My artwork and the written documents are two parts of my master's thesis, which focuses on how I am looking at identity in context of my very personal experience of a temporary stay in a new place. I have become more aware of the role of my studio practice as a way to articulate my social position. Culture, mapping, personal identity, labour, landscapes are some frameworks around which where my artistic practice developed during the past two years. Indeed, resemblance, memory, archives, and mapping, play vital roles in shaping my thematic interest.

The materialistic execution of my practice is fundamental to my research, as it makes me aware of the historical significance and contemporary concern with material adaptation as an approach in my art practice. Recycling fabric from thrift stores in London, using discarded fabric from my family and others in India, and employing tarpaulins provided the surfaces for my embroidery work. Single and layered fabric added significance and resemblance regarding the embroidered surfaces of the hand-embroidered quilts from Bengal, India.

My interview with artist Jamelie Hassan was a crucial contribution to my thesis as an opportunity to see my own position, to peruse my artistic research a new, and to perceive her artistic and critical experiences. They involve ideas about identity regarding personal and political history, colonial and postcolonial conditions, problems of translation, and a wide range of analysis of the affects of material practices.

This overall research has an impact on shaping certain experiments I have undertaken to see and question how the approach to display activates the two dimensionality of an embroidered artwork. Showing the recto and verso of the embroidered artwork raises the question of how I understand duality or a binary opposition of any kind. These works enhance and provide opportunities to explore certain sculptural possibilities, by activating the work within a space through its installation.

My research journey took a very important turn when I came to join the program at Western in 2016. At that time, I had a certain understanding and approach to my existing art practice, and when I began here, my confidence was shaken in a positive way.

I needed to unlearn and to learn a lot about almost every aspect of living here. That created for me an experience where the feeling of being in a new place started seeping into my artwork, and it began to raise questions about identity, local and personal history, memory, archives, mapping and many more concepts. However, I know that these areas are well studied and researched in many academic domains; my personal interest became wrapped up with wanting to see how the particular medium of embroidery can link with our fundamental understanding of the previously mentioned concepts.

Having completed my research and study for now, I acknowledge that my introduction to different theories and texts through the two years-long coursework gave conceptual and analytical perspective to my studio practice. My research brought forward awareness that my studio practice is related to the wider field of studies in cultural identity. I have tried to reflect and articulate that reality through Michel Foucault, Arjun Appaduari, and Tim Vanderbilt's texts in my thesis. However, I also know that Homi K. Bhabha's "The Location of Culture" is a well-suited text and will offer me insights for my further research. Edward Said's theory on Post colonialism, Walter D. Mignolo's theories on historiography, cartography, and culture, and Arjun Appadurai's theories on globalization and modernity are future areas to consider, in order for me to see how my artistic practice can take shape in other ways and further reflect my own ideas.

I sometimes feel that the approach to research I have used— making with my hands and reading and looking at the works of others — is a prototype of a larger project. I hope to continue it myself, and that others might take it up in other ways.

Introduction

Preamble: Background to My Embroidery Practice

A major motivation for my pursuit of embroidery as an artistic form is my curiosity about practices such as embroidery becoming ‘cultures’ in their own right. My primary education in the culture of embroidery first started at my high school, which was one of the first schools for girls’ education in British India in Calcutta (now Kolkata). Different embroidery techniques were taught as examples of Indian embroidery, but now I see that they have been widely practiced in Middle Eastern countries as well. For example, I can see that the use of cross-stitch in Palestine closely parallels the use of the technique in Bengal, India, where cross-stitch is used to create ashans, mats for sitting on the floor made from jute. My educational experiences provided an opportunity to look at the history and possible origins of different embroidery techniques from various geographical locations. I have begun discerning the many influences of these embroidered forms through history, observing movements through spaces that blur the lines between distinct styles.

Growing up in rural India always imprinted on me a sense of tradition; customs were passed through many lived, social and ritualized practices. I have seen women from my family doing embroidery individually or as a collective. The practice has a utility and a function in their lives because it allows them to produce needed items like mats and clothing. Indeed, even in my own education, the utility of embroidery was emphasized because I learned embroidery as a mandatory subject until the eighth standard in my school.

After that education, I moved to Calcutta for high school and completed my undergraduate education there as well. I spent my early adulthood in that city, watching the Bengalis adapt to a hybridized life informed by the many British influences layered within the culture of that city: I started to realize the British influences in the breakfast I most often ate, the streets I walked, and the buildings in which I studied. I see these experiences as a remaining effect of the colonial past of India, even after its seventy years of independence from British power. My identity became more nebulous and yet more shaped by that environment, now that I reflect on it.

During my undergraduate studies, from 2003 to 2007, I learned different artistic media, from painting and sculpture to printmaking; I was mostly drawn to traditional media. I then

moved to the Deccan Plateau for the first time in 2007 to do my first postgraduate degree (MFA) at the University of Hyderabad. I chose embroidery again as my artistic practice, but with an intricate blend influenced by traditional European oil painting.

Now, living in Canada has introduced me to new, quite different cultural experiences in many facets of my life. Nonetheless, my previous experience in the globalized culture of modern India has helped me to transition with some semblance of familiarity. My current practice reconnects with my Indian roots through embroidery, allowing me to reflect on my journey to this point. For this reason, my embroidery negotiates the ways in which culture, both traditional and modern, or globalized culture, is conveyed. This definitely brings together the relationship between the embroidery practice of my family and the political history where embroidery played an important role in the West. Given the utilitarian or practical functional most people understand embroidery to provide, I need to navigate how my practice, as art and/or as labour, informs my sense of personal identity.

Thesis Structure

My written thesis is divided into three linked parts, (1) Extended Artist's Statements, (2) Studio Practice Documentation, and (3) Interview with Artist Jamelie Hassan.

Part 1: Extended Artist's Statement. In this section, I describe how embroidery plays an important role in my art practice and highlight some historical facts about embroidery. I also discuss a number of theories that have helped me to articulate my studio practice from the viewpoint of resemblance, archive, and mapping. Several artists who have motivated me to think and visualize my own studio practice from a more focused perspective are discussed in relation to my current thematic and material explorations.

Part 2: Studio Practice Documentation. This section of my thesis is dedicated to documenting my studio practice: it contains a brief statement about my art production and images of different projects undertaken in the past two years. The documentation of my studio pieces reveals personal, theoretical, and medium-related interests across a range of projects. A sense of narrative flows through each of my art pieces and raises significant questions about my personal aspirations and social commitments.

Part 3: An Interview with Artist Jamelie Hassan. The interview with Jamelie Hassan, a London, Ontario based artist plays an essential role in my thesis. My conversation with her was focused on her practice and where I could connect it with my own. Her conceptual explorations, alongside material concerns, were fascinating to me. Personal history, traveling, identity, and theoretical approaches have added different layers to her four decades-long multidisciplinary art practice. Her evolving relationship with land and geography is an area where I see similarities with my studio practice, whereas, I could not connect with Hassan regarding the effects of war and how it reflects on an artist's practice. Experiencing war was unfamiliar for me, unlike my friends and their family members who have closely experienced this. The partition between India and Bangladesh affected numerous families and still how they look at the partition in the twenty-first century, through memories and across generations – this is important for me.

My own experience of growing up in different places in India and traveling outside India has fostered a conversation about attachment and detachment at the same time. The complex feeling about a place and the people I meet brings up the conversation of attachment and detachment, especially when I remember other places and people I am so far from. In light of

this, Hassan's detailed research-based projects motivate me to look more into my own practice through a personal and social perspective.

Concluding remarks

The content of this thesis proceeds from and reflects on my studio practice over the last two years. This research has brought forward important perspectives for me, whereby I have looked at different theoretical conception in the area of resemblance, knowledge, mapping, archiving, and at renowned artists' multidisciplinary art practices.

The thesis is meant to capture the transformation of my material practice, producing hand embroidered images –the development of which are most often process based. They connect with my thematic interest in mapping, and with other schematic approaches linked with individual and personal perceptions developed from attempting to articulate history, culture, and knowledge, through hand embroidery and its effective presentation.

Part 1: Extended Artist's Statement

My current studio research involves a deep engagement with developing a thematic and/or conceptual awareness of several domains such as culture, mapping, personal identity, labour, and space as it relates to my own experiences in a new land. Accompanying these concerns, hand embroidery plays a vital role as medium of my artistic expression.

I consider that the whole process of a life experience is like the slow formation of an image on the surface of fabric. The journey of my mind, linked as it is to my hands as they weave and overlap the thread in each of my pieces of art, recalls the many different layers of culture, of artistic focus, and of labour that make me what I am as an artist.

My Work

Throughout my early life, I developed a sense of attachment, detachment, and sense of the relationship between time, architecture, and memory each time we lived in and left a government flat, always after eliminating the traces of ourselves and of previous families. Travelling and temporary settlement have been regular occurrences in most of my life so far. Therefore, a quality of “being in relation” is important to me, and I think about it on different levels, including with regard to, for example, my relation to a space, to people, or with a text. The constant shifts and surprises that come with being here now, in London, Ontario, is the challenge that I decided to consider more deeply and use as the foundation of my work. And, indeed, the conceptual framework of the MFA program provides me an opportunity to articulate my relationship with history and contemporary art practices within different geographical locations, and so London, and Canada generally, is a particularly fitting place for me, given that I have not experienced this before.

My research for this thesis investigates my studio practice and how it has developed different trajectories alongside material consciousness with respect to travel, history, memory, land, culture, mapping, identity, and labour, specifically focusing on hand embroidery. This important medium that I work with has led me to considerations of the concerns I mentioned above. And in addition, I should add that there are some texts mentioned in my thesis that have helped to expand upon the relationship between my current practice and my stated concepts.

Embroidery History and Related Background

I understand that the techniques and cultural associations of certain practices, influenced over time in different cultures and through other factors, have determined the possible origins of various forms of embroidery. According to historian Stella Kramrisch, printed and painted calicoes (Palampore) from South India, embroidered cottons from Bengal and Gujarat, and twill tapestry woven woolen shawls from Kashmir were eventually produced in response to Western demands, and thus came to be exported in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries onward.¹ This makes me think of the ‘when’ and ‘how’ of art and craft, as well as ideas of commodity culture’s respective associations with the development of a practice. In the North American context, a book entitled *Needlework through History: An Encyclopedia*, by Catherine Amroso Leslie in addition to an online article on American needlework from the Metropolitan Museum (both discussed below) have given me a historical background concerning North American needlework, and I am now able to distinguish two different kinds of practices: (1) a Native American style and (2) a settler-influenced style.

My embroidery practice has always looked for the most suitable conceptual approach through which to blend the most appropriate medium and material regarding my intentions to connect with my immediate surroundings. When I began my embroidery practice, around 2008, I chose Khadi (a hand-woven cotton textile from India) as my surface for embroidery, and gradually I looked for a way to treat the surface as meaningfully as possible. Now, I use recycled fabrics collected from local thrift shops, plastic tarpaulins, and new fabric as well. In my work, there has always been an attempt to look at this traditional medium and determine how I can possibly bring a different notion to the ideas already associated with it through my art practice. Admittedly, I still use hand embroidery mainly on fabric, but I challenge tradition through my choices about size, the surface to treat with embroidery (the front or back, or both), and the type of embroidery.

“Embroidery” is a word I use very frequently while talking about my current art practice. In this part of my thesis, I am attempting to focus on how and why the history of embroidery has captured my artistic interests and has informed so much of my current practice.

¹Stella Kramrisch, “Two Indian Embroideries,” *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 52, no. 251 (Autumn, 1956): 14-18, accessed September 5th, 2017, <http://www.jstore.org/stable/3795089>.

The word embroidery comes from the French word *broderie*, which means embellishment. As far as my research has shown me, it appears that the possible place of origin of embroidery is China and the Middle East.² Embroidery appears to have been something which has traveled across geographies, cultures and peoples, irrespective of the religion, class, or colour of its practitioners.

According to an essay titled “Textile Production in Europe: Embroidery, 1600–1800,” published by the Metropolitan Museum, “the term embroidery generally refers to any textile foundation that is decorated with needle and thread, although embroidery can be worked on other foundations such as leather.”³ I would like to point out another important point that significantly differentiates embroidery history from that of other textiles: Embroidery is “not bound by a geometric foundation as on a loom.”⁴ It requires the attempt to make a pattern-based or pictorial composition, and it involves a needle and thread, which may be used variably, with cotton or strong grass, for example. This shows the breadth of possibility of the medium. Thread and needle and fabric, or any soft pliable surface, are the primary materials for an embroidery art practitioner, like paint and canvas for a painter. In recent times, we see embroidery practice within various domains, informing individual or social identity across a spectrum of cultures.

According to scholar Avinash Tripathy, human beings probably practiced needlework before they had been exposed to the use of fire.⁵ As they migrated into new environments, early modern humans would have stitched together the skins of their pets and animals to protect their naked bodies from the cold and rain. In this respect, the origins of needlework are rooted in a very necessary utility: protection from the elements. Yet needlework, and more specifically embroidery, did not remain entirely utilitarian for long. By the time of the first major human civilizations, embroidery had become a common practice for decorating royal clothing. In other words, by at least 6500 B.C.E., needlework had progressed from a practice intended to create objects of practical value to an aesthetic practice that produced objects whose value was based

². Catherine Amoroso Leslie, *Needlework through History: An Encyclopedia*. Westport, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press, 2007).

³. Melinda Watt, “Textile Production in Europe: Embroidery, 1600–1800,” Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2003, https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwjVn4HW3ZzcAhUk54MKHUC0Cx0QFggnMAA&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.metmuseum.org%2Ftoah%2Fhd%2Ftxt_e%2Fhd_txt_e.htm&usg=AOvVaw0M58PFK9stcD9abXhhSdZA

⁴Ibid.

⁵Avinash Tripathi, “Needlework in India,” *Important India*, July 2, 2013, <http://www.importantindia.com/32/needlework-in-india/>.

on appeal rather than function. This distinction between the practical and artistic dimensions of embroidery as a practice is one of the major concerns of my thesis work.

This introduction to the historical existence of different types of embroidery techniques has raised a few concerns, such as the need to understand the transmission of different techniques to various geographical locations and the difficulties in identifying embroidery's origins. There is a strong need to acknowledge embroidery histories and how new approaches can make a positive impact on pre-existing methods. Such knowledge has helped me to determine my chosen embroidery style, which suits my current thematic concern best and has motivated me to look at other contemporary artists who use embroidery as their main medium of art practice and why they do so.

Theoretical and Textual Interests

My primary chosen texts serve to narrate a story of my thinking processes regarding how I am trying to understand my studio practice in order to connect with different experiences, places, and people. Therefore, in the following brief study, I focus my theoretical interests initially through a text titled "The Four Similitudes," from *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, by Michel Foucault,⁶ where he examines knowledge, cognition, and resemblance in the universe. I note his four different resemblances between diverse entities in the universe, or in nature, as the main focus of the text. The next material I unpack is from scholar Arjun Appadurai's article titled, "Archive and Aspiration," wherein he discusses social memory, the gap between neuro-memory and social memory and how this gap is negotiated. The archive and its role are crucial to my thinking and I see them as similar to a space, which is fragile but strong enough to provide a fact, like a soft shelter. A further reading on the idea of mapping is also important. I therefore write about the text entitled, "Cerebral Cities" by Tom Vanderbilt, wherein he writes about people's experience of locations and maps, invoking the concept of the cognitive map/cognitive collage, which enables us to understand how people remember their own experiences in order to locate things in place.

Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of The Human Science*

'Line' is the word that stuck in my mind while reading this text. A line here can be with or without an entity existing in nature or can even exist within the self. It can suggest the way I feel connected with things and people around me and beyond my reach. Prior to reading this

⁶Michel Foucault, *The Order Of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Science*(New York, Pantheon Books, 1970)

book *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of The Human Science*, I did not have a very clear idea as to how to express this feeling of connection—a feeling that persists when I think of people I know and objects that I connect and live with. Focusing on Foucault’s ideas of resemblance, I can see direct connections between myself and the people and places that inform my sense of personal identity, as well as some forgotten ones, which I now remember.

All of these thoughts might not be directly relevant to my work; nonetheless, I went through a phase of remembrance and connection within myself while reading “The Four Similitudes,” within the section entitled, “The Prose of the World.” I became interested in understanding what the four similitudes referred to and in Foucault’s discussion of “resemblance that organizes the play of symbols, made possible knowledge of things visible and invisible, and controlled the art of representing them.”⁷ Resemblance and knowledge are some key aspects to understanding the four similitudes. Here the author makes references to the universe, earth, sky, plants and paintings in order to define space. Foucault mainly draws upon references to sixteenth century Western culture and how resemblance played a constructive role in the knowledge of what was considered extremely valuable. Out of many possible similitudes, he chooses here to talk about four, which are: *Convenientia* (convenient: which is sufficiently close to one another); *Aemulatio* (emulation: a sort of ‘convenience’ that has been freed from the law of place and is able to function, without motion, from a distance); *Analogy* (where *convenientia* and *aemulatio* are superimposed); and *Sympathies* (sympathy: here no path has been determined in advance, no distance laid down, no links prescribed). Each and all of these four similitudes made me think a lot about myself and of my preconceived notion of relationship, in general. From the very beginning of my encounter with this text, I loved the way the author tried to show the links between different entities, including between the universe and the earth. The visible, invisible, touch, reflection, attachment, detachment, closeness, distance, “natural twinship,” “immediately opposite to one another,” and “the fundamental duplication of the world”... all these concepts fascinated me!

This part of my study brings to mind my role as an artist and how I am trying to reflect all my concerns through my art practice while being situated within a new geographical domain.

⁷. Michel Foucault, *The Order Of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Science* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1970), p 19.

How can I visualize or create a language that reflects these themes? How does my medium reflect or enhance ideas of temporality and attachment and detachment at the same time?

Arjun Appadurai's "Archive and Aspiration"

The journey of my mind, linked as it is to my hands as they weave and overlap the threads in each of my pieces of art, recalls the many different layers of culture, of artistic focus, and of labour, that make me what I am as an artist. The Appadurai text focuses on social memory and the gap between externalities and internalities of our memory. He also acknowledges that there is much excellent research concerning this type of thinking within other academic disciplines. This includes an explanation of the "Cartesian gap," in which biochemistry describes memory and its social location and its functions.⁸ Of particular interest to me is that a gap exists between the accuracy of our memories of an event and how exactly that event actually transpired. An archive, such as a piece of art, allows us to trace our way through to the past without relying entirely on memory.

But what about anticipation of future events rather than memories of the past? For example, when I first planned on coming to Canada, my attempts to "know" this place by reading about it and studying its culture, presumably a "vital space," did not adequately prepare me for what I experienced when arrived here in the actual, physical space. In this respect, the archive gave me an "incomplete experience" of knowing a place. This suggests to me a question about how I, as an artist, could possibly map an experience of both physical and virtual space through my practice, to link the social and geographical proximity of "Canada" to myself. Appadurai's article helped me to understand and question what an archive is and what the role of accidental traces might be. He explains that Foucault wanted us to see the archive according to its panoptical function, but the archive is also a "product of the anticipation of collective memory."⁹

I feel that this description connects well with a Marxist notion concerning labour that I see as important to my work. Specifically, the way in which average people have used media like embroidery (which is often seemingly attached to industrial labour practices) to instead tell their own stories and enhance their own collective memories disrupts Foucault's notion that all

⁸. Arjun Appadurai, "Archive and Aspiration," in *Information is Alive*, ed. Joke Brouwer and Arjen Mulder (Rotterdam: V2_Publishing/NAI Publishers, 2003), 14-25.

⁹. Ibid, 16.

archives might be instruments of state control. I think that artists wrest that control from the state when they create work that prioritizes their own viewpoints and values.

In the chapter titled “Migration, Memory and Archival,” Appadurai refers to his 1996 book *Modernity at Large* to suggest how, in this time of globalization, “the circulation of media images and the movement of migrants [has] created new disjunctures between location, imagination and identity.”¹⁰ To explain these disjunctures, he talks about how “moving images meet mobile audiences” to highlight the destabilization of sender-receiver models of mass communication whenever the media exerts its influence on migrant populations.¹¹ This condition potentially creates an increased number of imagined worlds and imagined selves. “The capacity to aspire” is the important phrase he mentions in talking about both current migrants and those from a historical perspective.¹² What are the expectations migrants might have when they move, either to escape from a horrible life, to seek a better life elsewhere, or, in some cases, due to both of those motivations? Appadurai’s point is that, thanks to social media, migrants can access other people’s stories and experiences to inform their own journeys and their constitutions of their possible selves.

Memory is very important for a migrant in many ways, and media always plays a crucial role in revealing “accidental” traces that lead to the archive. According to Appadurai, diasporic stories always suggest breaks or gaps, which is why migrants always look for images or narratives of their own stories to build diasporic or migrant archives. Later, he argues that, “the migrant archive cannot afford the illusion that traces are accidents, . . .and that archives are repositories of the luck of material survival” because the stories are, themselves, more powerful and a greater influence on how migrants situate themselves in their “new world.”¹³ because the stories are, themselves, more powerful and a greater influence on how migrants situate themselves in their “new world”. And, as Appadurai further explains, “collective memory [is] an ethical basis for the sustainable reproduction of cultural identities in the new society. For migrants, more than for others, the archive is a map.”¹⁴

¹⁰. Ibid., 18.

¹¹. Ibid., 19.

¹². Ibid., 25.

¹³. Ibid., 23.

¹⁴. Ibid.

An expansion of the idea of a map in my studio practice considers that same term as a verb that refers to making. The idea of mapping suggests various ways of understanding a “place” more than providing spatial information. This could point to a complete or incomplete understanding or a gap between two ideas or experiences of a setting or location. The concept of mapping need not have any cartographic reference, as it could be purely cerebral and experientially based.¹⁵ Imagery or mark making in a work may vary between images that reference and images developed out of the process of embroidery on the fabric. Because embroidery, as a medium, requires somewhat slow and deliberate movements to continually draw the thread through the fabric, it allows the artist to deliberate on how it is a unique act of making that involves both physical and cerebral movements across a space. As an artist and researcher, I consider the incompleteness of all these experiences and the gap in my understanding of these different concepts an area of interest.

In the very last part of this article, Appadurai mentions that the archive is always a meta-intervention because all archives are collections of documents. He further elaborates, saying that the archive is “not only about memory but about the work of the imagination, about some sort of social project.”¹⁶ An archive is a conscious site of debate and desire through migrants’ perspectives and, through the lens of electronic forms of mediation, “collective memory is interactively designed and socially produced.”¹⁷ At the end, he talks about two locations of memory—neuro-memory and social memory—and their possible different immaterialities and architectures. But the gap between these two terrains is negotiated by building archives: bodily, electronically, and institutionally.

In response to the foregoing, I ask, “Can I consider a work of art as an archive?” I feel through my studio practice, I am trying to capture a transitional phase of portraying cognitive knowledge, lived experience, and memory as layered information.

Tom Vanderbilt’s “Cerebral Cities”

Vanderbilt’s work expresses the idea that individuals create their own, unique paths through this world as per their need. I am interested in how Vanderbilt proposes the idea of the imaginary cognitive map and the perceptions produced by cartography through some interesting examples.

¹⁵. Tom Vanderbilt, “Cerebral Cities,” in *Else/Where: New Cartographies of Networks and Territories*, ed. Janet Abrams and Peter Hall (University of Minnesota: Design Institute, 2006), 176.

¹⁶. Appadurai, “Archive and Aspiration,” 24.

¹⁷. *Ibid.*, 24

One example refers to the activity of giving direction to a stranger to reach a particular spot; another is from the famous movie *Memento*, where its main character remembers and overcomes his disease (called anterograde amnesia), which “prevents people from having short term memory.”¹⁸ Another example involves a survey of taxi drivers where “they were asked to provide the shortest route between two points without a map.”¹⁹ For me, the condition whereby “a person had formed an internal awareness of a familiar environment, but was unable to render that knowledge into anything resembling a map: is especially important.”²⁰ Vanderbilt mentions that psychologists and geographers use the terms “cognitive map” and “cognitive collage,” though the latter one is considered a more “fitting phrase” by Barbara Tversky, a professor of cognitive studies at Stanford University.²¹ Many different ways of looking at the relationship between knowledge and space and how one navigates the two are explored in Vanderbilt’s text. The effectiveness of this navigation varies according to certain functions of the human brain, many of which determine gender and knowledge. One term I would like to retain in the context of my studio practice is the “hippocampus,” which is the place in the human brain where memory and spatial navigation occur.”²²

Reflecting on Vanderbilt, and knitting together ideas from the foregoing texts, I recognize that my work always starts developing either from my knowledge, spatial experience, or memory. I lose direct connection with my current state whenever I connect with a different locus; then I start feeling incomplete because I am not actually in that other place, and so I suspect I have visualized the connection incompletely through my imagination! It has been said by cartographers “most cognitive maps not only fail to reflect all the details from environment they represent, but they also have systematic errors caused by the processes that encode them into memory.”²³ If I believe in this, then I find that it causes me to cast doubt on all the maps already represented and instead to strongly believe in their changing, illusive qualities.

I wonder how important it is to focus on the idea of the “gap” while navigating a place through memory and losing its spatial details. Is it possible to navigate the process of

¹⁸. Tom Vanderbilt, “Cerebral Cities: An Overview of the Article on Cerebral Cities,” accessed May 27, 2018. <https://cct370-w07.wikispaces.com/Vanderbilt%2C+Tom+%282006%29%2C+Cerebral+Cities>

¹⁹. Ibid.

²⁰. Vanderbilt, “Cerebral Cities,” 176.

²¹. Vanderbilt, “Cerebral Cities,” 177.

²². Vanderbilt, “Cerebral Cities: An Overview of the Article on Cerebral Cities,” accessed May 27, 2018.

²³. Vanderbilt, “Cerebral Cities,” 176.

understanding a place only through knowledge and imagination? Is it attainable to portray this idea through an artistic medium? I am exploring navigation as it affects identity in my studio practice and through witnessing; reflecting on my process and on the products of my work, I try to understand the possible encounters between technique and ideas and memories.

Artists of Interest

My selections of these artists is informed by my current studio practice and its growing interests and preoccupations because I feel I can connect my thoughts and interests with their approaches in some way. Sometimes it is the thematic interest of the artist or their material exploration that inspires me to think critically about my own approach. In the following passages, I liberally weave together my observation about my chosen artists with references to my own thinking and practice.

Mrinalini Mukherjee (1949-2015, India)



Figure 1: Mrinalini Mukherjee with her jute sculpture *Woman on a Swing* in 1989²⁴

I will start by describing the life and work of one of my all-time greatest inspirations, whose art practice compelled me, despite my hesitation, to pursue embroidery as sculpture or installation medium. Mrinalini Mukherjee (1949-2015, born in Mumbai, India) is one of the pioneering sculptors working with organic material, weaving in three-dimensional forms beginning in the 1970s. Coming from an artist family background, Mukherjee's institutional education in painting and sculpture is clearly reflected in her practice. In 1978, she went to continue her studies in the United Kingdom with a British Council scholarship, at West Surrey Collage of Art and Design in Farnham. She continued her exploration of material with dyed

²⁴. "Mrinalini Mukherjee with her jute sculpture *Woman on a Swing* in 1989," TATE ETC, October 29, 2017. <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-41-autumn-2017/lives-of-the-artists-mrinalini-mukherjee-by-rosalyn-dmello>

hemp and sculpture. It is believed that she was interested in this area because she felt she lacked skill in these processes and so hoped to turn that weakness into a strength.

I am interested in her approach to know how materials such as hem can transform into a medium of expression. Hemp probably encouraged her confidence, given its familiarity, and also brought different challenges in terms of its employment on a large scale and in free-standing sculptural form.

Most of her free-standing soft sculptures represent particular cultural beliefs associated with nature. In an overview of her practice, I will attempt to sew a connecting thread between her artistic fears, confidence, cultural roots, and positive challenges to reveal a socially relevant material that has been embedded (or embedded?), through Mukherjee's practice, within an avant-garde vantage point from which to understand her identity. I hope to achieve this same type of amalgamation in my embroidery practice.

I have always questioned my own material choices reflecting my very personal experiences, even though I was trained to accept and use different media beyond what I learned in my institutional education. Her practice gave me the courage to adopt a material that is culturally rooted and to try executing beyond its preconceived orientation while keeping a connection to its origin. Indeed, I was introduced to thread as an artistic medium indirectly by one of my professors Rakhi Peswani in 2008 through her work, but I could not use it immediately in my own work. It took four years and the life-experience of travelling and living in different places in India to prepare me for this type of art practice. Nonetheless, Mukherjee's work will always remain a central inspiration, in many different ways, for my own.

Ghada Amer (b. 1963, Cairo, Egypt; currently living and working in New York City)



Figure 2: Ghada Amer, “Julia's Pink,” acrylic, embroidery and gel on canvas, 162.8 x 193.3 cm. 2005.

Ghada Amer (b. 1963) is an inspiration for my material choice and my questions as to how to “represent” culture in a different location from where I originated through art practice. Her personal experience of living in different places, from Cairo, Egypt to France and then the USA, has greatly impacted her art practice in terms of how she understands herself. She says “I did everything to look like others” to fit into a new culture.²⁵

According to Fereshteh Daftari, former curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art, New York (1988 -2009), what we should try to understand about Amer’s practice is where she is anchored and where she is really “break[ing]

²⁵. FereshtehDaftari, “Beyond Islamic Roots: Beyond Modernism,”*RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 43(Spring, 2003), 175-186, accessed August 21st, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1086/RESv43n1ms20167597>

loose and wander[ing] free.”²⁶ Her main practice deals with femininity, colonial identity, and the Islamic culture she grew up in, intersected materially with an approach to layering embroidery on canvas. Her particular way of handling thread and imagery builds a language of abstraction and expressionism.

I am personally drawn to her remarkable materialistic execution, the way she uses hand embroidery such that her images are intentionally extended, as well as her use of entangled thread to generate an abstraction for viewers that reveals more than her thematic concerns. Her technique forms a spectacular effect or creates a veil over the embroidered overlapped linear images on the fabric. For this, she has been criticized several times in her career.

Ghada Amer’s subject matter is different from mine, but I connect with her and her work because she confronts many of the same themes, such as identity, migration, and labour.

²⁶. Ibid.

Anne Wilson (b. 1949, United States)



Figure 3: Anne Wilson, *Topologies photos*: Severo Barreras, George Bouret, Merrill Mason, Stephen Pitkin, Daniel Torrente, Christopher Wiley, Wilson studio²⁷.

As a further influence on my work, I have chosen to discuss artist Anne Wilson, whose practice deals with many different media of art practice, such as sculpture, drawing, performance, and video animation. Her projects are research-based and developed from mundane materials like table linen, bed sheets, human hair, lace, thread, glass, and wire.

I will discuss one of her research-based series called *Topologies*, which is an important example that relates to my current interest in the area of mapping. Wilson talks about the scale of her work and how she reached *Topologies* through different steps in the development of her larger art practice.

²⁷Anne Wilson, “*Topologies photos*: SeveroBarreras, George Bouret, Merrill Mason, Stephen Pitkin, Daniel Torrente, Christopher Wiley, Wilson studio,” *Topologies: Texts and Credits*, <https://www.annewilsonartist.com/topologies-credits.html>

Feast was one of her stitched installation pieces for her solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in the Fall of 2000. Found clothes and hair were the materials used for this project, executed on a huge horizontal table 22 feet in length. She addressed themes like mapping, navigation, architecture, and landscape in this work. The project suggested both micro and macro worlds through its overall size and the intricate detailed employment of stitching.

Topologies extended from Feast, where Wilson focused on woven structures produced with damaged clothes and also works with a study of historical lace. How this precious traditional form became cheap commercial fishnet is also addressed in this project. This piece was displayed several times after its first execution in 2002. Regarding it, Anne Wilson states,

I set about working within a conceptual structure in creating Topologies that allowed three references to exist simultaneously: relationships between traditional systems of materiality (textile networks) and newer systems (Internet and web); microscopic, specimen-like images of biology and the internal body; and macro views of urban sprawl—systems of organization of city structures, interdependent or parasitic process of expansion.²⁸

As part of her further research for the project, Wilson focused on ideas of interconnectivity and relational concepts from recent architectural theory, new media studies, and philosophy. She thought of the metaphor of landscape, too, in the broadest sense.

Anne Wilson refers to a curatorial statement by the Chicago-based architect Douglas Garafalo concerning an exhibition he curated. Her thought process for her own series has similarities with Garafalo's comment on ideas of alienation and entangled networks present within given systems and spaces. She also noticed that she has common concerns and interests with architects, artists, and designers, which definitely connect with and widen her realms of research.

Speaking as an artist, I may think the same way in terms of my studio practice when I talk about mapping and my interest in the experience of knowing something. In the series, I am referring to, Wilson talks about materiality (in regard to textile), newer systems of communication (Internet and the web), and internal structure of a body, and all of these ideas are important to my thinking.

²⁸. Caroline Picard, "Center Field [Threading Infrastructure: An Interview with Anne Wilson]," *art21 magazine*, last modified May 31, 2011. <http://magazine.art21.org/2011/05/31/center-field-threading-infrastructure-an-interview-with-anne-wilson/>.

Wilson’s material concerns made me consider when she draws attention to the way traditional lace led to the development of a commoditized object—fishnet—regarding what happens when lace is used in fragmented ways as part of an artwork. Does it elevate the already associated history or suggest a new way to look at that material?

In this regard, I see my tarps, with their own associated history as industrial products, as having more “personal resonance” when they have been used in the way they were intended. This sort of association between material, daily use, and art is important to me and accounts for my interest in the work of Anne Wilson.

Britta Marakatt-Labba (b. 1951, Idivuoma, Sweden)



Figure 4: Britta Marakatt-Labba, “History 2003-2007” (details), Embroidery, 2003-2007²⁹

Britta Marakatt-Labba is an artist of interest to me, and I have conducted a brief study of how her art practice is culturally rooted in the history of her birthplace, people, beliefs, and in her personal upbringing in a large reindeer herding family in Sweden.³⁰

Her early career introduced her to experiences of illustrating books, designing costumes, and working as a performer. Accordingly, Maine, USA-based freelance writer and editor Katy

²⁹. “Britta Marakatt-Labba,” *Textile Forum Blog*, October 1st, 2017. <http://www.textile-forum-blog.org/2017/10/britta-marakatt-laba/>

³⁰. Beatrijs Sterk and Britta MarakattLabba, “BittaMarakattLaba,” *Textile Forum Blog*, last modified October 1st, 2017. <http://www.textile-forum-blog.org/2017/10/britta-marakatt-laba/>.

Kelleher describes the general content of Marakatt-Labba's work as, "abstract yet precise images of her northern landscape."³¹

The everyday life of the indigenous Sami people involves the modern and the traditional, combining "elements of twenty-first century technology with ancient customs, beliefs, and practices."³² In that spirit, Britta's practice derives from the very core of her life, people, and the place she has been living for years. The natural world, changing of seasons, history, culture, mythology, and political reflection of the Sami people are subjects for her long embroidered narrative art works.³³ About her art practice she states, "It is a journey in time and space in which every stitch breathes experiences and reflection, and creates stories."³⁴

Britta explains how storytelling was an important part of her life as it was typically considered a form of relaxation after the hard grind of a working day. This helped her as an artist, not only offering relaxation, but motivating her to share her own story through her images.

I admire the transparency and capacity to articulate her own life that Britta demonstrates through her art practice, which is so lucid. I can also connect my interests with her emphasis on narration and with the slowness of embroidery in the way she uses it. The slowness of embroidery gives birth to many thoughts, producing moments unconsciously that I can use in my practice. Britta's extremely expressive compositions with colour enrich with drawings of human and animal figures, as well as the sense of vastness, which is ultimately fascinating. As well, large void areas of fabric draw attention to the embroidered figures in her pieces and produce a complementary relationship between people and space.

Studio Practice

As an artist, the theories I have encountered and the subsequent thoughts that have populated my mind have compelled me to challenge myself. Over the time of my MFA, I have thought about myself and my current studio practice along with the thematic areas I am exploring, and I have recognized that my concerns about medium, technique, and my interest in embroidery as a practice have coalesced into a more focused praxis over time. For example, I now better appreciate how the idea of line as both continuous and broken can be seen in drawing

³¹. Katy Kelleher, "Britta Marakatt-Labba's embroidered scenes of Sami life." *Katy Kelleher*, last modified March 16th, 2017. <https://katykelleher.com/tag/britta-marakatt-labba/>.

³². Ibid.

³³. Britta MarakattLabba, "Britta MarakattLabba," *Caught by [UMEÄ]* Sweden, accessed DATE, <http://www.caughtbyumea.com/inspiration/the-sami/the-sami-people/britta-marakatt-labba/>.

as well as in hand embroidery. In relation to this, I have considered that the 5th century B.C.E. philosopher Zeno's paradox of motion, which, although complicated for me, has led me to understand the larger ideas of motion, and of movement from one place to another, as applicable to my own moving from India to Canada. I have also thought of the process of making a line on a surface with a pencil as similar to following a visible or invisible line on fabric by piercing a needle and, too, about weaving using the warp and weft. I wonder what is happening when this third line is traveling back and forth through the existing thread. Sometimes it passes smoothly, but sometimes it tears the previous two. How does this relate to my experience of immigrating?

A First Experiment—A Meditation

Cutting a thread based on necessity is fundamental. But when making my work, my idea was to question that notion. It occurred to me that we generally encounter a given length of thread/rope/wool as a product of industry. I thought of using one whole roll of found thread to create a form without any cuts as a strategy for my process of embroidery.

The journey of a certain length of thread without any breaks was an important part of one of my first projects, which used the Japanese embroidery technique Bunka. The work was titled, *The Journey of Three Hundred Meters*. I thought of dyeing the roll of thread with a pigment I consume everyday when having tea. I also knew I needed a certain needle that would allow the thread to remain uncut. I chose to use a USA-made cotton thread roll that was 320 metres long. I immersed it in a brew of Tetley Gold tea bags for four days to infuse the thread with the brown tint. I also prepared the surface for the embroidery by using two different fabrics from India and from Canada. Once I began the work, the needle eventually pierced and overlapped with another needle, which caused two unintentional breaks in my thread, and therefore in my journey. I consoled myself, however, with the realization that “detachment is an eternal desire for closeness” and so, in the same respect, I can say (perhaps) that “continuity is the eternal desire for interruption” because no journey is without complications. (I saw these texts on one of my friend's personal posts on social media a while ago, so I cannot attribute them beyond that.)

In making the work I am describing, I simultaneously experienced my own thinking process and the technique of embroidering the long thread without any separation. I should say that the thread separated three times—due to the overlapped piercing I mentioned and also an already existing join through a knot—and I was conscious of these each time needle pricked my

³⁴. Ibid.

finger. Small, visible embroidered threads come to look like contiguous dots, which create a continuous line. The process of making this work started from a dot, and the needle travelled across the fabric and slowly expanded the developing form of a circle on the fabric's surface. When I began, I was not sure how this particular process of needlework would develop a form on the surface of the fabric. I started from the approximate centre of the fabric and the form slowly grew and spread out to a circular form, which connected the layers of the two fabrics I was bringing together. Making the work, my eyes were stuck on to the "point" where the needle was piercing the fabric. I slowly developed the "dot," with many dots becoming a bigger form. This entire dot holds both fabrics together as a result of my journey. In the process, I feel happy and proud both to use my hand and with the labour involved in this method.

I grew up with limited infrastructure and resources. I prefer to work as an artist with a minimum of required resources. I am not yet sure how to fully understand or analyze the amount of time and labour involved in the method of working I just described. But, I know that the articulation between thinking and producing a work of art is an area with which I increasingly am interested in working. At this point, I am certain that I must consider thread as any other formal material such as paint, clay, or wood in art practice in order to move beyond any essential idea of a genre.

Thematic Developments and My Working Method

This first work with the new method motivated me to try to carefully articulate my embroidery method in a way that connects to each thematic interest. Indeed, I started incorporating this thinking alongside my experience of unfamiliarity and newness when I arrived in Canada. My initial experience of being here was fresh and challenging, and my work developed slowly. It was challenging to portray these thoughts through my studio practice as it overlaps and compares with my other experiences of traveling and living in places like India and the United Kingdom.

I always enjoy the process of remembering: I started making notes about my expectations before coming here to Canada.

In the beginning of my studio practice here, I bought fabric from thrift stores to address my interest, including the materialistic touch like cloths of local people within my projects as part of my new experience. Fusing this local used material from thrift store with new fresh fabric from India and Canada made a special surface for some of my artworks. In one of the first pieces, I

used fabric from a thrift store in London to allude to my sensitivity about being “welcome.” The technique Bunka, and the use of recto and verso, which invokes the binary opposition on each side of the fabric, enhanced my commitment to linking known and unknown factors visually. This method unexpectedly conferred the visual effect of a reference to land due to the tactile development of the surface of the fabric. This was not done to represent any particular cartographic image, but rather provided a sense of one unintentionally. Ultimately, anonymous embroidered landscapes became the base motif of most of the pieces.

A sense of “temporary presence” was an inevitable thought in my mind, and I needed a way to reflect this in my work. But living for two years in Canada wasn’t a misplacement or displacement for me; rather, it was a chosen or earned placement, which I cherish.

The tent became an important idea for me, more than as an architectural form. This form changed and has become more simplified or minimal in my recent pieces. Using the geometric form of a parallelogram or rumbas to represent one roof of a tent became vital for me. I wanted to experience repeatedly embroidering one form hundreds of times, with different compositions, on tarpaulin. I wonder whether this process enhances the importance of the idea of tent or if it dissolves its significance.

The tarpaulin is a new material for me to explore with hand embroidery. The series of my three embroidered works on tarpaulin brought together the idea a commodity product and care. Tents are generally made of tarpaulin, and tarpaulin has many more uses as well. Tents, of course, have different cultural connotations. For me, a tent may be a temporary shelter of hope and optimism. The scale of each tarpaulin certainly presented a challenge to me in how to handle it while doing the needlework. I had to stand to embroider rather than having the surface on my lap. I enjoyed seeing my developing images appear on the surface through the process of embroidery. I came to believe that both the given material of the tarpaulin and its size become an important part of each work.

The display of the embroidered pieces was an area I really wanted to work on to activate the surrounding space. I wanted to work on the display of certain pieces to convey curiosity when the viewer looks at the work in order to emulate an incomplete experience. Two dimensional embroidered pieces also activate the space when I put them close to the wall while keeping a limited gap between the work and the wall by suspending them from the ceiling. The

translucency and opacity of the surface acts as a key factor to emphasis interesting visual and tactile effects, with the help of various sources of light.

Conclusion

This chapter is dedicated to understanding a “known” medium with more clarity. The conceptual supports I investigated opened up my relationship with history, theoretical ideas, and related contemporary art practices that I have investigated over the course of the past two years. Conceptual aspects of resemblance, archiving, and mapping have enabled me to explore certain possibilities in order to understand mapping and related strategies through traditional embroidery techniques. These understandings reveal the interdependency between the medium and the image. Additionally, the thinking processes and various media used by the chosen artists helped me to investigate my own practice technically in order to reflect on my inspirations and then articulate them. This enhanced my understanding of the critical quality inherent to the technical adaptations within my studio practice. These aspects of my studio practice are discussed further in the next chapter, titled Studio Practice Documentation.

Part 2: Studio Practice Documentation

Material choices have been a major part of my two-year long studio practice at Western. I have used new fabric from India and Canada, and I have used fabric from Canada bought at the thrift store, too. Some of my embroidered pieces have used material from a sari belonging to my mother. I always use these fabrics in layers in order to bring these different places and emotions to the surface in order to create a new image of my current experience. Layering fabric comes from the Kantha technique, but I add my personal interpretations when using this technique.

Another major technique I have used is kind of Japanese needlework called Bunka, which originated in the beginning of the twentieth century in Japan, along with running and back stitch. Bunka is not a popular technique for most of the embroiderers I have met because of the delicate handling it requires. I, however, appreciate its fragile quality, which signifies my sense of the impermanence of my identity, since the thread can easily pull away from the surface, erasing the image but leaving the needle hole on the surface of the fabric.

I experience many different feelings while working on my pieces using Bunka, as it creates a very significant sound quality during each piercing. Attention to this could contribute to something meditative in that my conscious mind “dissolves” and reaches a “saturation point,” but I am always brought suddenly back to physical reality when the needle pierces my fingertip instead of the material. Despite the occasional pain of the process, I enjoy creating these images on the fabric’s surface while at the same time using the image to bind together several layers of different materials, which, though in some cases unseen, nevertheless contribute to each piece’s “identity.”



Figure 5: “Map of London” (image reference from St George-Grosvenor Heritage Conservation District Study. Volume II Appendix A. 2016. City of London, Ontario, Canada.), 105 cm x 95 cm, Hand embroidery on layered fabric, 2016-17

The work displayed in Figure 2, “Map of London,” is the result of a newcomer’s desire to see the Forest City, London, from a historical perspective. The work is based on the image of a 1893 “bird’s eye view” of the city from a lithograph printed by the Toronto Lithographing Company.¹ I have used two layers of fabric, one from India and one from Canada. I have used a

¹. St George-Grosvenor Heritage Conservation District Study. Volume II Appendix A. 2016. City of London, Ontario, Canada.

https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwj-ofeGjZXcAhVliqwKHY1VCRwQFggoMAA&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.london.ca%2FAbout-London%2Fheritage%2FDocuments%2FVol-II-St-Geo-Gros-HCD-Study-Rev.pdf&usg=AOvVaw0NuktsupvoGZ_sUxKvvJRi

running stitch to bind the layers of fabric in a style similar to Kantha, the handmade quilt approach from Bengal, India that is famous for capturing different images of mundane life. Bunka is used for the map and, in the process of making the image, the approach brought both pieces of the fabric together.



Figure 6: "Binary gaze," 27 cm x 39 cm, Hand embroidery layered fabric, 2017

This piece, titled "Binary Gaze" (fig 6), further enhances the idea of the gaze and depicts both clear and blurred gazes together. This juxtaposition reflects my simultaneous feelings of the known and the unknown. Both the pieces have three layers of fabric from India, Canada, and my mother's sari in order to emulate Kantha and to share my history. For each piece, I stitched one eye from the recto side and one from the verso side, with the result that each piece has both a clearly defined eye and a more indistinct eye. In one piece of embroidery, a viewer focuses on both eyes, while the other piece suggests a more neutral gaze with its open-eyed expression.



Figure 7: “Knowing John Harris and Amelia Harris,” 31 cm x 39 cm, Hand embroidery on layered fabric, 2017

One of the important and widely known families from the city of London is the Harris family. The first occupants of Eldon House, John Harris (1782-1850) and Amelia Harris (1798-1882) are the subjects for “Knowing John Harris and Amelia Harris” (fig. 7), which demonstrates my developing knowledge of their contributions to the local political scene from the early to mid-19th century. Seeing the other side of the work through the reflection on the mirror brings the two-dimensional work into the realm of installation. Looking through a mirror has many different readings in academic texts, but I wanted to reveal the other half of my embroidered image through employing a special medium for the benefit of the viewer.



Figure 8: “Next to a River,” 122 cm X 46 cm, Hand embroidery on layered fabric, 2017

“Next to a River” (figs. 8 and 9), which is also a part the title of my thesis, an embroidered piece referring to Eldon House, acknowledges my first experience of seeing it on an afternoon in January, when it was covered with snow. My intention with the abundant silver threads, many of which dangle loosely from the piece, was to suggest the organic shapes and lines of the natural setting, but other artists have mentioned to me that the effect is, for them, more haunting or at least “creepy.” Given the age and colonial history of the house, I also consider these interpretations valid because, as I have stated earlier in my statement, differing understandings based on different life trajectories are part of the reality of identities shaped by multiple perspectives.



Figure 9: "Next to a River," (detail) 122 cm X 46 cm, Hand embroidery on layered fabric, 2017



Figure 10: "The Journey of Three Hundred Meters," 31 cm x 36 cm (approx.), hand embroidery on layered fabric, 2018

“Four Similitudes” from *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of The Human Sciences*, by Michel Foucault, is a prime inspiration behind “The Journey of Three Hundred Meters” (fig. 10), where I examined the idea of resemblance. This is an important piece as I used Bunka to stitch a 300 meter long thread without ever cutting it. Using scissors is usually almost an unavoidable part of needlework, and I wanted to see what would happen if I tried keeping the available length of the thread intact. This was a journey of 300 meters with three accidental cuts.

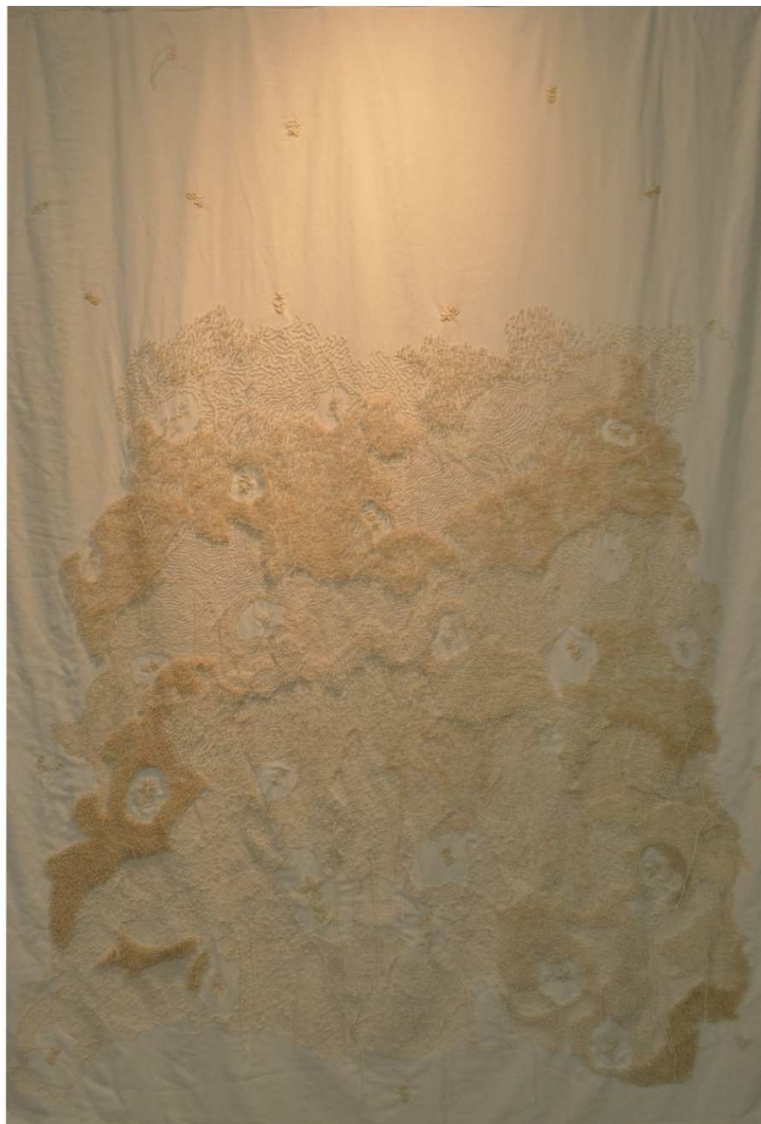


Figure 11: “Anticipation,” 190 cm X 135 cm, Hand embroidery on layered fabric, 2017

The title of this work, “Anticipation” (fig. 11), says a lot about what I had on my mind when exploring this new place, London, Ontario, when I first came to live here two years ago. A fresh start with a welcoming gesture with flowers and a sense of land evolved on the layered fabric, bought from a thrift store in London. I enjoyed making both the recto and verso images, which were important to the eventual image depicted on each surface of the fabric, leaving many approximately foot-long threads dangling from the finished piece.



Figure 12: "...who walks always beside you," 190 cm x 135 cm, hand embroidery on layered fabric, 2017



Figure 13: "...who walks always beside you," (Installation shot), 190 cm x 135 cm, Hand embroidery on layered fabric, 2017

Rivers are fundamental to human society because it was in river valleys and deltas that the first great civilizations were founded. For this reason, I am very interested in the connection between a river as a space and the development of the culture within that space. I have experienced this myself, both in Bengal, India with the Damodar and Rupnarayan rivers, and here in London, with the Thames River. I see the Thames almost every day, especially when crossing one of the many bridges that span it, and I am always fascinated by the fact that the human structures around rivers depend on the river as a place, yet are static, fixed and linear,

much like bridges. The rivers, however, are organic and take different shapes at different times, regardless of the human societies developing around them. In this piece titled “...who walks always beside you,”(fig. 12 and 13), I wanted to capture this quality by using my embroidery to depict the natural, non-duality, yet sublime character of a river, which establishes that it is not only a space, but also a space with a life of its own. This resemblance with its changing character came into my everyday life when I moved from India to Canada.



Figure 14: “What are the roots that clutch,” 147 cm X 99 cm, Hand embroidery on fabric, 2017

Continuing with this juxtaposition of fixed vs. flowing, changing space, I developed “What are the roots that clutch” (fig. 14 and 15) to explore temporariness in terms of shelter within a lived space. In India, many construction crews use tents as temporary housing on different work sites, which suggests that the spaces they occupy are places they consider unimportant or uninformative regarding their senses of self. But I am using embroidery in this case to explore my own sense of identity as it is represented in these kinds of changing, or impermanent, spaces—because my life history of moving between spaces echoes this same impermanence, yet in a way I consider significant.



Figure 15: “What are the roots that clutch,” (detail), 147 cm X 99 cm, Hand embroidery on fabric, 2017



Figure 16: “What are the roots that clutch,” (detail), 147 cm X 99 cm, Hand embroidery on fabric, 2017

Shelter generally speaks of a space for temporary living. Again, I connect my art practice with my personal experience of living in many different places in India and abroad for various reasons related to my education. Soft Shelter, a temporary structure is present in diverse ways in our lives, especially in many contemporary images of refugee camps, full of people displaced from their known spaces and temporarily placed in limbo, both physically and in respect to self-identity. For this reason, such shelters are considered emblematic of loss and suffering, but I have used silver thread in “Soft Shelter I” (fig. 16) to symbolize the idea that such shelters also offer hope to those people transitioning into a new space. I am familiar with this particular form of tent from a building construction site in Hyderabad, where I lived for seven years.



Figure 17: “Soft Shelter II,” 274 cm x 365 cm, needlework on tarpaulin, 2018

Questioning the form of a tent and its importance to the occupation of a space, either permanently or temporarily, became the subject of this series of needleworks on tarpaulin. The parallelogram is used to signify one side of a tent’s roof and to question its role in our lives by repeating it, which eventually created a form on the surface of the tarpaulin. “Soft Shelter II” (fig. 14) documents my approach to finding an industrial material that reveals more than its given physical presence through my needlework. This series really reflects a major change, where I can think of a minimalistic approach and an image developed via the process of a particular embroidery technique.

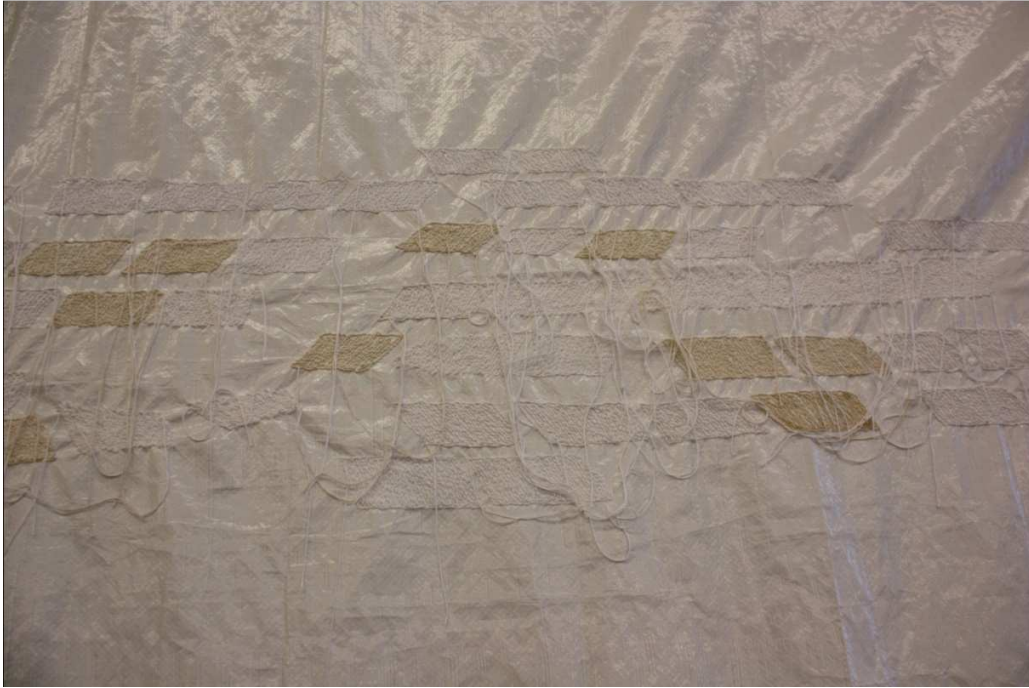


Figure 18: "Soft Shelter II,"(Details), 274 cm x 365 cm, Needlework on tarpaulin, 2018



Figure 19: "Soft Shelter II," (details from a different display), 274 cm x 365 cm, Needlework on tarpaulin, 2018



Figure 20: “Routes”, 147 cm X 99 cm, Hand embroidery on fabric, 2018

In my work, I am acknowledging the importance of histories of embroidery, not just to know about different types of techniques, but also to see how they travelled across places through trade and colonization routes over centuries. I have used an image of a Viking ship in “Routes”(fig. 20),to represent this vast idea of travel. The image I employed was found on a coffee mug here in London which looks similar to Mayurpankhi, a boat from India. I chose one of the oldest forms of ship (based on the Viking age of 793-1066 AD), not just to suggest raids or conquest, but trade.



Figure 21: "Routes," (detail) 147 cm X 99 cm, Hand embroidery on fabric, 2018

Part 3: Interview with Artist Jamelie Hassan
(London, Ontario, Canada)

A Short Background on the Artist

Jamelie Hassan is a senior artist, curator, and writer. Her creative excellence has been shared with people over five decades in Canada and internationally. I was introduced to her through my current MFA program and made myself more familiar with her work when I decided to explore her practice and thought processes.

Our first interview will remain special to me. I can still remember the moment when I found her after looking for her studio building. I saw her first seated next to a beautiful fountain outside in her garden, writing in her notebook. Natural light had a dream-like effect on the surroundings. I felt as if I was not in real time—as if I had travelled somewhere to meet her. However, Jamelie Hassan’s interests in memory, personal and social history, text, identity, and travel drew me back to reality. Prior to the interview, and following it, I familiarized myself with her art practice through various resources, including, for example, information from the internet, published catalogues including *Jamelie Hassan: At the Far Edge of Words*,¹, and through various printed available texts on her artistic projects.

The following interview, conducted in person and over email from June 2017 to October 2017, illuminated topics such as diaspora, post-colonial encounter, the problem of translation where I became personally interested in Hassan’s various artistic mediums, from drawing, to installation art, to her comment on a range of personal and socially relevant topics over the years.

¹. The publication of her survey exhibition held at Museum London in 2009 and travelled nationally. *Jamelie Hassan: At the Far Edge of Words*, ed. Melanie Townsend and Scott Watson (Museum London and Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 2009)

Interview transcript

Interviews were conducted in person and via email beginning in June 2017 and completed in November 2017.

Date and media of interview: August 4th, 2017; media for interview was email

Sharmistha Kar (SK): Dot Tuer noted that issues of identity and “ties of language and the politics of place that bind her as a Canadian artist to her Arabic background”²- Could you please talk about how you think language factors into the conceptions of identity that exist within your art?

Jamelie Hassan (JH): I grew up in an Arabic-speaking household in London, Ontario. I travelled extensively both in Canada and internationally from the time I was a teenager. I became aware of the significance of language very early on. I was also surrounded by books in many languages in our home. My parents established the first Arabic language program in London, Ontario in the 1950s, and they were part of the London Muslim community that established the first mosque in Ontario in the 1950s.

My parents raised their children with a very philosophical approach. They wanted their children to stay connected to their Arabic language and ideas and other aspects of our culture. At the same time, they were very conscious of issues of racism in Canada. My parents greatly valued education and encouraged all of us to study hard in school and try to go into many different fields. We lived in the city, but were very close to a beautiful natural environment—the coves—and this was a place of significant influence for us as we were growing up. Influences of culture and nature together became intertwined.

We were encouraged to be close to nature and to be independent—both in mind and spirit—as children, we learned about different ways of being resilient in what could be a very suffocating Anglo-Canadian social order in a small, provincial city in southern Ontario.

SK: This is extremely fascinating to know how strength builds and gives courage to a child in order to help her to look at the outside world! I wonder if it was a bit challenging at any time as a child for you to deal with these two different kinds of cultural ambience inside and outside your

². Dot Tuer, “At the Far Edge of Home,” *Jamelie Hassan: At the Far Edge of Words*, ed. Melanie Townsend and Scott Watson (Museum London and the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 2009), 17

home. I myself felt the difference understanding “society” when I moved from a village (Kulgachia) to a city (Calcutta) in India for my schooling.

Date and media: August 4th, 2017; media of interview is email

SK: Your art practice blends many spheres and I see personal, social, and political reference points. I would like to know more about how you create such an expressive and sensitive language of art to show your serious concerns and commentaries on history, war, and suffering. I would be happy to hear more about the drawing series of “Qana, Lebanon” from 2006. The images in those drawings are so strong it keeps me thinking about the impact of war on those people. My impression from the work is that it is making a statement about fragmentation, the breaking up of families through violence and war. Can you explain how you are able to convey these ideas with such subtlety and without using more obvious images?

JH: Many years before, I was given four sheets of handmade paper that had been made by the artist Helmut Becker.³ My mother and I had given Helmut materials—linen from our collection of fabric materials, and he returned to me the four sheets of paper he had created from the linen. I kept this paper for many years. When I read the reports on the destruction of the village of Qana during the Israeli war on Lebanon in July 2006, I pulled these 4 sheets out to use for this ink drawing. This hand-made paper had embedded within its material a profound history of where my family had come from, and the images in black ink reference the tragedy of this war through images based on press photos of the day juxtaposed with representations of a few of the everyday objects in my home in London that are common to homes in villages in Lebanon.

SK: This work makes me think of the history of the “Partition” of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. I might not have directly experienced that period, but the political history of my country made me think about the suffering and hope of the people who were directly or indirectly affected. I felt a gap when I learned about my friend's family and their shift during the separation of Bengal from India. I did a work on those known and unknown factors involving these three lands that I still connect with when I see your work. I have attached an image of the embroidered piece based on a pre-separation map of these three countries.

³. “Helmut Becker was born in Canada and is a Professor Emeritus at the University of Western Ontario, in London, Canada. He is an artist papermaker with an extensive career history of exhibitions, research, and publications for which he has acquired an international reputation.” <http://www.westlandgallery.ca/blog/meet-the-printmakers-helmut-becker>.

Date and media: August 4th, 2017; media for interview was email

SK: After seeing a wide range of different mediums in your art practice, from watercolour to video installation, my curiosity has increased to know your process in making these various choices. Do you think there is any hierarchy of mediums in art practice now? I would like to know more about the choice of medium for “Los Desaparecidos” (1981), for example where you created ceramic kerchiefs, in light of the fact that both cloth and clay are very distinct in their everyday immateriality.

JH: No. There is no hierarchy of mediums – rather mine is a mode of working that is not limited to one approach or medium. Each approach is determined by the issues and the material is very dependent on finding a point of reference that has a rational basis for working in that material. The introduction of various materials may come about because of an encounter, or by accident, or an illness. In regards to Los Desaparecidos, I had completed some ceramic works at that time and I wanted to move from working with earthenware to porcelain. Specifically, blue and white porcelain – porcelain itself is a much more fragile medium to work with than what I had been working with in my clay works and it lent itself to the idea of the fragility of the lives of those who had disappeared.

Also there is a link between ceramics and textile design with many borrowings back and forth between the two mediums.

In the late 1980s, I did two ceramic murals—one was a mural in blue and white porcelain for the Ottawa Courthouse and Land Registry in 1986. The other was a ceramic mural for the Cancer Clinic for London Health Science Centre. In this later work, the design was inspired by the design of an Islamic prayer carpet called “Four Rivers of Life.”

I am interested in maintaining this connection working with clay to some degree, but it is now very limited for me as I developed an allergy to the clay dust, making it difficult to do large projects.

If I were to undertake a large-scale ceramic project, I would like to do something that is site-specific and try to make sure the artwork has a relatively long life in that space.

Let me give you a more recent example of work coming about by accident. A large tree fell on our property during a wind-storm. It turned out that this tree was hollow. When Ron⁴ began to cut the tree, I asked him to cut the tree up in such a way that I could use the cut sections of this tree. I did not have an idea at the time of what I would do with those fragments of the tree, but I felt that they would end up as part of a work. I filled the hollow space with fragments of Arabic calligraphy that were mounted onto a mirror-like material. This work is called From neither the east nor the west. (2014)

In your question, you use the phrase “everyday immateriality.” I do not understand what you mean by this. Could you elaborate?

SK: Thank you very much for this Jamelie. I meant that in everyday life we see a kerchief merely as fabric, and not as clay or ceramic. So, I was interested in this meaningful material shift from its connection to an obvious material.... I was wondering if this surprising material transformation was part of your concern in making the artwork?

JH: Material is a significant factor in determining any work—and in relation to the concept it often varies. The fragility of the medium of porcelain was central to recreating the kerchiefs in *Desaparecidos* and the use of blue glaze for the text, which is the colour that was originally used for the kerchiefs worn by the grandmothers and mothers of the Plaza de Mayo.

SK: I see many theories which influence you and enrich your work. For example, Walter Dignolo’s *Border Thinking*. Also, words such as: translation, subaltern, orient and occident, personal and political history, archive, memory, travelling, colonialism, migration, and immigration are strong and essential, and which I personally recall when I think of your almost five-decade long art practice. I surely see activism and poetry too. How do you see art and activism together? Do you see spirituality and meditation functioning in your works?

JH: I read extensively and cultural theory is something I spent time thinking about and being part of a discourse on ideas around Orientalism and Edward Said’s work. I also admire Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and had the opportunity to work with her. Barbara Harlow, a friend and cultural critic who worked with Arabic literature among other areas was an important person for me. She died this year. Judith Butler is also among the other scholars I have a strong interest in. Antonio Gramsci is one writer that I have studied and found great connections for art

⁴Ron Benner is a London, Ontario artist and activist, he, and Jamelie Hassan are long-time partners in art and life.

language and politics. Walter Mignolo's early work is more interesting to me than his more recent writings. Dot Tuer draws on some of Mignolo's ideas in her essay, "From the Far Edge of Home" on my work in the publication for my survey exhibition *At the Far Edge of Words*. In relation to my art, I do not see a separation between theory and practice. As I have written in the past and others have commented on this aspect of my work, that the interconnectedness of issues and multiplicity of voices plays a profound part in the way I work. I do not work from a single perspective, yet I do create works that respond to specific events or locations. The public space and the private narrative/memory often intersect in my work. Sometimes a singular event or memory will trigger a work such as in the case of *Meeting Nasser* and *The Oblivion Seekers*, two early film works/installations from the 1980s.

SK: This is so inspiring to understand this link between practice and theory, which you have been involved with. It is an interesting area to talk about regarding your art practice.

In my work, I am slowly becoming more aware of some motivating concerns and interests with respect to these kinds of ideas, especially after my move to Canada. I am also getting introduced to different texts and thinkers related to my current interests in mapping and the archive. I got to know about Walter Mignolo while reading about your work, and I find his writing interesting. I found ArjunAppadurai, Tom Vanderbilt and Michel Foucault's writing, is very much linked to my recent curiosity too. I am still looking for other writing, which will further link with my interests.

Date and media: August 4th, 2017; media for interview was email

SK: 'Text' plays a vital role in your many works from the 70s, Typewriter onwards. Apart from the specificity of the texts, I see them serving as "image" too. What are your views on using a text as work or part of work? You have used various mediums for executing a letter in different works, from paint to neon. I would like to know your ideas on the role of a textual language in your art practice. I especially love the neon piece on the page of Arabic manuscript.

JH: Yes. Typewriter, from the 1970s, was the earliest work presented in my survey exhibition at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at University of British Columbia in 2010. I was very pleased that this modest, early work was included because it showed that there was this interest in text from the beginning. It is definitely true that text, and the use of multiple languages, are vital to my work. Not only English or French and Arabic, but also other languages: Italian,

Spanish, German, and Chinese are languages, which have appeared in my work and reflect the geographical spaces of where I have travelled. These are not languages that I am fluent in, but happen to reflect the locations of where I have worked or done research. Often there are no translations offered in my works. In *Desaparecidos* (1980-81) the copy of the dossier which documented “the disappeared” and was part of this installation is only in Spanish. The text, name, and date of the person who had disappeared, which was written on the original cloth kerchiefs, was also in Spanish. That is the way that I wanted to represent the kerchiefs as they had originally been written by the individual madres of the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, Argentina. I met the representatives when they came to London to speak to local activists about what was happening in their country, how their families were being targeted by the military junta who were in control in Argentina in those years. Many of these young people were women who were pregnant at the time they were disappeared.

In *Lebanese Tiles* from 1983 I worked with Arabic, French, and English.

In another installation, I incorporated a script in Hebrew within a mixed media installation titled, *Suspicious: For Greg Curnoe* (1993). Some viewers thought the text was Arabic because they assumed that because I was of Arabic background that would be the language I would use in my work. This installation *Suspicious: For Greg Curnoe* also included along with the text panel, ceramics, photography, and found materials. The text panel was in Hebrew and told a story, “Without a passport or a camera,” which was written by curator Ami Barak in France. This curator had previously lived in Israel, and he had been a former Israeli soldier at the time that the Israeli army invaded Lebanon in 1982. This work also reflected my experience of going through the Israeli border in the early 1990s. I, and the belongings which I had with me, were considered “suspicious,” and I was detained by the Israelis at the border and interrogated. This installation brings multiple and often marginalized voices into the public space. I think of some of these artworks as a form of combat. The art and activism are intermingled. This work was created as a response to a disturbing experience and revelation—making visible through the re-creation of the everyday objects I carried with me beyond what the camera alone could record.

This summer, I have been rereading some texts by Michel Foucault from the 1970s which were published in a book title, *Language, Counter-Memory and Practice*.⁵ I strongly relate to

⁵. Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-memory, Practice-Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977.

Foucault's idea that, "counter-memory combats current modes of truth and justice, helping us to understand and change the present by placing it in a new relation to the past."

In the neon and manuscript series, pages of this manuscript are photographically reproduced and blown up to give a visual impact of the open pages of the book with its hand-written Arabic/Persian script. The manuscript is quite old and is a general grammar. It also has several hand-written notes and drawings in the margins and one painted image of a Persian-style angel on its last page.

There is also a dark stain at the top of the pages, which was caused over time, when the reader had held the manuscript too close to the source of light – a candle or oil lamp.

This damaged aspect of the manuscript intrigued and appealed to me. The fact that it was an early source of light that had been the cause of this damage made me think about how we read today with electricity. In many early Arabic manuscripts, the beginning of a new thought or sentence is indicated by a change in the colour of the ink from black to red. I began with the first neon work and manuscript page with Slippers of Disobedience in 1996 and in that work the neon is red neon. Since that time, I have created several neon language or sign-based works, some in green neon or white neon.

SK: Thank you very much for this detailed explanation. I think it is an interesting way of working, where a specific observation of a mark/stain on the manuscript, for example can lead to a major association with a specific history or act of reading. I remember making this kind of association in my school days in Calcutta when I sat and read under the street light or in front of hurricane oil lamp during a power cut in the city.

"The art and activism are intermingled." I love this phrase of yours. Do you think activism became incorporated in your art practice over the years or was it there from the beginning? Was this approach triggered by your personal history and/or the environment around you? Did your art education have any influence on it?

JH: I think the activism flows through my art practice and has been more prominent at different times and in different works. There are works that respond to immediate political crisis and others that take shape more slowly and are perhaps less obvious and direct. There is no one time or place that I could say that was emphatically the point which the political enters my art work. My time in Cuba and Mexico in the 1970s was very significant time and those influences continue to be culturally present in my work.

Date and media: November 10th, 2017; media for interview was email.

SK: I see objects either found or “chosen” for certain factual associations - carrying a great weight in your works. It was a fascinating and challenging part of the Eldon House project to dislodge those animal trophies from the house and install them in the gallery in Museum London. How do you see your process of installation: as a disclosure of these objects “histories,” especially in light of their incorporation into the “new” space of the art museum?

JH: Dismantling the display of the African animal trophies from the walls of this Victorian history museum that is Eldon House was the first request I made to the curator, Peter Smith. This condition was met and allowed for me to enter into the space of the house which was oppressive to me with this history. The questions which raised issues around the environment and the “big game hunt” were much more evident when the animal trophies were removed from the space of the house and presented on the museum cargo blankets in the gallery of the museum. The scale and the immense quantity of animal trophies were also much more dramatic in this space of the gallery, which was a much more public area than the house. Children especially responded to this installation and took to heart the message of mindless carnage that the animal trophies represented.

Summary and Conclusion

In this thesis, I have talked about my past two years of studio practice, wherein I concentrated on my personal experiences of being in a new place. My involvement in material engagement and a thematic focus brought about many exciting challenges for me to work on. Experiments with alternative materials and methods opened up new possibilities.

The chosen texts I discussed are related to the thematic areas of my current research. They helped me to articulate and shape relationships among the many ideas in my head and in my studio practice. As an artist, I read the texts and considered them, and then allowed them to offer me a framework for my thinking. Indeed, I still want to go further with Appadurai's other texts related to archives.

In addition to illuminating my ideas, the selected artists and their unique art practices contributed to my material choices, approaches to display, and the scale of my artwork. For example, sourcing material both locally and from the county I come from presented unique surfaces for my embroidery pieces. These aspects of my studio practice are discussed further in the chapter, Studio Practice Documentation.

The Extended Artist's Statement offered me the possibility of looking at the ideas of mapping, archives, and how hand embroidery can generate questions about knowing a place, memory, and identity.

My correspondence with artist Jamelie Hassan about her artistic practice is a vital section in my thesis. Through this communication, I started reflecting on my own personal history and its relationship with Hassan's practice. Our conversation went beyond the typical question-answer format of an interview. My questions were focused on her personal history, colonial history, travels, education, and the importance of language, artistic media, and theoretical commitments, which were intrinsic parts of her five-decade long art practice. This correspondence served as a great motivation for my ongoing art practice. This interview is a huge motivation for my thematic artistic encounter.

Certainly, there could be further research on incorporating hand embroidery to capture and document multicultural anecdotes in the twenty-first century, which travelling throughout the world through migration presents. It is my hope that this type of study might potentially be further developed by others, including based on my work.

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