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Arab Americanesque

Hannah Shaban

Virginia Commonwealth University

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Arab Americanesque

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master
of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University

By

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Abstract

Arab Americanesque
By Hannah Shaban, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2019.
Major Director: A. Blair Clemo, Assistant Professor,
Department of Craft and Material Studies

Culture, as defined by Edward Said, is a concept of identity selectively curated through imperialism. Through my ceramic practice, I explore what constitutes my cultural identity as a first generation Arab American. My work, primarily influenced by family narrative was initially expressed through investigations in the figure and viewer relationships with my sculpted figures. As my research progressed into Western Imperialism, I began noticing extensive evidence of colonialism's lasting effects, especially within Western consumer markets. Interest in the writings of Said, works by French Orientalist painters, family memory, and a general displeasure with the plethora of Middle Eastern design used in Western decor culminates into *Arab Americanesque*; an installation that explores ideas of cultural obfuscation, power, and belonging.

Introduction

The *salon* is what we grew up calling the guest receiving room in my grandparents' home in Ammatour, Lebanon. You climb the long narrow stairs before being faced with the option of two doors. The door in the middle of the wall opens to the hallway near the kitchen. This entrance is reserved for immediate family, those my grandmother is comfortable with exposing the unpolished interior of the home to. To the right of that door, on an adjacent wall is an entrance reserved for guests. It opens directly to the *salon*, corralling visitors into a space that is curated to receive and reflect well on the family, demonstrating my grandparents' hard earned comfort and status in the village. However, all knock on the door frontal to the stairs. I imagine my grandmother peeking through the peephole to determine which door open. If family, the door is quickly pried open and you are in her warm embrace. If a guest, your visit is momentarily delayed as she shuffles up the hall and through a doorway on her right, correcting fallen pillows, and straightening handmade table coverings before unlocking the door to receive you through the *salon*. The greeting is just as warm but the setting is controlled. Long, beige curtains drape the walls and windows floor to ceiling, filtering the light through the windows and covering the unsightly cracking on the wall closest to the road. The room evolved as monetary comfort increased. Decorative molding was added to the exposed walls and ceilings and ornate chandeliers were installed in all the necessary rooms to complement the original status purchase of the French Victorian furniture set. Fascinated with the set since childhood, I found its textured velvet fabric and

intricate woodworking to be an oddity in its modest surroundings. Back in America as my practice became more influenced by Orientalism, these couches lost their charm and broke down into a fine and complicated example of the lasting effects of Western Imperialism.

The majority of my work in graduate school has been pulled from my relationship with my grandparents and their surroundings. Specifically my mother's parents who still reside in Lebanon. Family questioned my fixation with my maternal grandparents when my paternal grandparents were just a few miles away from me throughout graduate school. I have a kinship with Wahib and Souhaila Abouchakra that I do not have with my paternal relations. Perhaps it is because I only get to see them once a year when we make our pilgrimage back to Lebanon for the summer or because, like myself, they were never quite able to settle into life in the States like the rest of their family. They have become living representations of my culture. My grandmother all things kindness and hospitality and my grandfather equal parts pride and honor. Unlike Edward Said's definition of culture as what the West considered to be a 'society's reservoir of the best that has been known and thought,' my grandparents are the unbridled beauty of my culture that I seek to connect myself with and to expose to others¹. My work leading up to my final installation, *Arab Americanesque*, exposes viewers to the less marketable and consumable aspects of my culture unlike the readily available examples of food, design, and entertainment that have been cannibalized by Western consumers. Throughout this paper, I discuss how I use my ceramic art practice to examine my

¹ Said, Edward W. 1994. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Knopf, xiii.

Arab American identity through the lens of Orientalism, the illustration of family narratives, and ultimately observations of my culture relentlessly decimated in Western interior spaces as the result of Western Imperialism.

Western Imperialism and The Rise of Orientalism

Basic knowledge of the history of Western involvement in the Middle East was critical for me to understand the root of my work and ultimately my identity as a first generation Arab American. My research began with the start of the French Campaign. In July of 1798, Napoleon's first ships made their way across the Mediterranean to Egypt and Syria to defend their trade interests by disturbing the English trade routes. Although ultimately it was a failed campaign, the French succeeded in breaking Egypt from Ottoman rule. For several decades following the French campaign, the majority of the Middle East and North Africa region remained under the weakening Ottoman Empire. Events overseas contributed to the increased interest in the Middle East.

It was actually a series of events starting with the American Civil War that focused British and French interest back on Egypt. With Union blockades on the Southern ports, Europe's cotton supply was choked off. Egypt, along with India, stepped into the market to meet the demands. Cotton became a valuable commodity and Egypt grew incredibly wealthy. Ultimately in 1865 the Civil War ended, the price for cotton dropped, and as a result of over extending their wealth, Egypt became massively indebted to Europe. This gave Britain and France an opportunity to regain power in the region by taking over their banks.

Eventually the British military completely took over, officially marking Egypt as a colony. At that point, French colonial powers already occupied Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria. Leading up to and post World War I, the Ottoman Empire known as "the Sick Man of Europe" occupying Greater Syria, was weakening from

Russian threats and internal revolts; greater Syria being Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Israel. Natives of the region were promised independence for their cooperation in the revolts but the European forces still had their trade interests at heart. Instead, in a secret agreement between the two empires known as the Sykes-Picot agreement, lines were hastily drawn to define national boundaries that to this day are the point of immense conflict. These newly divided nations were placed under protectorate control until the end of WWII. In the wake of the war, the once powerful European empires were in such a state of debt that they needed to dissolve their empires immediately, giving the region independence from European rule².

The decades of colonial control ushered in the curious Westerner who wanted to discover the mystery and intrigue of the conquered lands and to witness the striking natives and their customs. Researchers, scientists, poets, and painters returned to Europe with the results of their inspirational adventures, all of which would fall under the umbrella of Orientalism. Edward Said believes Orientalism can be defined in three ways, all of which are interdependent.

The first is the work of anyone researching, teaching, or writing about the Orient. They are considered Orientalist's and what they do is Orientalism. The second definition is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the 'Orient' and the 'Occident.' It is the basic distinction between East and West accepted as the starting point used for

² Christopher Rose, "European Imperialism in the Middle East," 15 Minute History, May 22, 2013, accessed November 13, 2018, <https://15minutehistory.org/2013/05/22/european-imperialism-in-the-middle-east-part-1/>.

political accounts, elaborate theories, epics, novels and social descriptions. The third definition describes Orientalism as a Western style for dominating the Middle East as the result of ongoing dealings with the Orient: teaching about it, describing it, ruling over it, settling it, authorizing views of it. Said contends that “Without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage- and even produce- the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post- Enlightenment period.”³

However, it is important to note the difference between English and American Orientalism. Unlike Britain, America had no formal or sustained imperial relationship with the Orient. So for Americans, Orientalism wasn’t so much the justification and extension of imperial power as it was the fabrication of an imaginary place for “American pleasures, fantasy, and escapism in the mode of *Arabian Nights*.” To America, the Orient was a theme used in erotic novels, Hollywood adventures of lustful sheikhs, Broadway productions, backdrops for cigarette and perfume displays, and even sexy masquerade balls where men got to act out the provocative role of rapacious sheikh and women the virginal concubines. The Orient was historically used as a stage set or backdrop for a ‘sensual lifestyle’ that traditional Christianity did not endorse.⁴

³ Said, Edward W. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 10.

⁴ Teo, Hsu-Ming. 2012. *Desert passions: Orientalism and romance novels*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 119.

Figurative Sculpture and Family Memory

Wayn Ahla : Where Better

Growing up in America and experiencing micro aggressions undoubtedly derived from the imagery of the exotic East ingrained in American entertainment culture, I found it necessary to illustrate my formative relationship with the Middle East and with those who dwell in the region I long to call home. Teta Souhaila, my grandmother, was my first subject while beginning my graduate studies. In September of 2017, I had just returned from a summer trip to Lebanon and love for my grandmother was occupying my heart. Days passed slowly with her in the kitchen, the gathering space in their mountain home, where I watched her almost obsessively. Her hair had grown thinner, her wrists were less full than the year before, and her eyes seemed to sink further into her once round and smooth face. Although years of hard winters in a less than comfortable dwelling seemed to be catching up to her, her fierce generosity was still intact.

Meal preparation was an all day event to feed the masses of her expatriate family who all returned briefly for the summer. She would tirelessly prepare, cook, and feed on repeat. I would be there helping, alongside my mother and sisters until we had a moment to lie back on the couches that lined the kitchen walls. She'd lie still on the couch resting after exerting herself and I'd gaze upon her translucent skin fighting to stop my mind from imagining the bleakness of this kitchen if it was final resting spot she lay in. *Baeed el shar*. (keep the evil from you) One day she reclined on the couch opposite to me, hips turned in my direction, blanket draped across her thighs, with a hand near her face in thoughtful contemplation. Without

her realizing, I took a photo of her in that moment. She was more beautiful than any odalisque depicted by the finest Orientalist painter. The odalisque by Ingres currently hanging near my bed cannot compare to the generosity of the hips that bore five children, the warm bosom that engulfs you in the sweetest comfort, the caring eyes of the most worried matriarch, or the pale skin of the indoor worker, a slave to her family's wants and needs.



Figure One: *Wayn Ahla : Where Better*

My installation *Wayn Ahla* is a tribute to my grandmother who helped raise me into a woman who values family and tradition above all else. A life-sized depiction of her rendered in clay reclines on a bench lining one wall of the installation. Her likeness is represented in as much detail as a reference photograph and memories of her subject allows. The signature moles on her nose and cheek

punctuate her features and the loose skin coating her eyelids gives her an expression of compassion and concern. To meet her benevolent gaze, one must nestle into her side in the intimate manner of conversation between kin and child. However, knowing the distance a responsible viewer places between themselves and the art, the connection of the gaze is surely unachieved, leaving her with an expression that can only be interpreted as distant if not vacant.



Figure two: *Wayn Ahla :Where Better* (grandmother detail)

With closer inspection, one might notice the laborious paisley detail of the shirt, or the button that has come undone, threatening to expose the matriarch. I have an empathetic urge to button it for her and return her wardrobe to its modest respectability that I hope resonates with the passing viewer. If that subtly is lost in the abundance of detail, I used the bulging veins that stretch across her hands and

exposed feet as a strategy to earn the empathetic response I desire for viewers to have for the devoted grandmother.

Positioned adjacent to the reclining figure is a ceramic version of a plastic chair commonly found in stacks five high on the porch of every home I've visited in Lebanon. These chairs are a staple in any large gathering whether it's a simple visit, a celebration, or a mourning. To me they symbolize unity of family.



Figure three: *Wayn Ahla :Where Better* (chair detail)

The single plastic chair next to the image of my grandmother highlights the absence of that unity, a stand in for where I long to be sitting and whom I long to be seated beside. The common mass produced item rendered in clay becomes a new object all together. With added weight and its inability to stack or be reproduced with any haste or accuracy makes it reminiscent of the immigrant and first generation

experience, each one unique and never in complete congruence with its surroundings no matter how apparently similar.

Across from the 'plastic' chair and grandmother is a mounted ceramic rock wall formed into the shape of a traditional Middle Eastern doorway.



Figure four: *Wayn Ahla : Where Better* (wall detail)

The color and texture are inspired by the retaining wall holding up the hillside behind my grandparents' home. That wall was also the backdrop of every visit from the village locals coming to greet the American visitors. We'd rush to put out a circle of plastic chairs and with each visit, the same question was asked of my sisters and myself. 'Wayn ahla, Amerca ow Libnan?' Where's better, America or Lebanon? As a child, I would hardly have to think before choosing America; a land of central air conditioning, green grass, fresh never powdered milk, and an uninterrupted supply of electricity. As an adult, that question became increasingly difficult to answer. So I gilded the question 'wayn ahla' on to the surface of the individual ceramic rocks as an interrogation to my Arab viewers and myself, where is truly better?



Figure five: *Wayn Ahla : Where Better* (text detail)

Formed into the shape of a doorway, the ceramic rock wall becomes a barrier, walling off access, highlighting geographic distance, and commenting on recent political activity under the current administration. Perhaps it is distance and unattainability playing a part in my current selection of Lebanon as the better place but ultimately it boils down to where my culture is, where my family is. The sculpture of my grandmother lies parallel to the probing rock formation. Behind her a backdrop outlined with the shape of the doorway formation marks her and all she represents to me as the answer to 'wayn ahla.'

Caged Birds Accept Each Other But Flight is What They Long For

I spent the majority of my first year working and reworking various installations with my grandmother and upon completing the final iteration in *Wayn Ahla*, I began thinking about my relationship with my grandfather and more importantly his relationship with America. He was never ever able to assimilate to life in the States, not in the way my grandmother was able to forget Lebanon to be with her children and their offspring. Wahib is known for his pride in his lands, the homes he built with his own hands, and his career serving in the Lebanese military. When he was asked about his health during his time in Charlotte, NC he would say "In Lebanon I am strong like horse, in America I am old man." I began to think of my grandfather and his ineffectiveness or lack of power in America as a contrasting representation to the image of dominant and vengeful Arab males depicted in early themed screenplays and recent media coverage of Middle Eastern conflict.

Jacob Rama Berman's *American Arabesque: Arabs, Islam, and The 19th-Century Imaginary* explains the convoluted history of the term Arab and how it was used in American history. Before the first wave of Arab migrants even touched American shores, "Arab" was used as an all-encompassing figurative term. "*Arab* could and did indicate an intermediary position between foreigner and citizen, black and white, primitive and civilized. Literate black slaves on the Southern plantation, American Indians on the western frontier, and new immigrants in the urban slum were all, at one time or another referred to as Arabs."⁵ This deeply ingrained misnomer along with building stigma following the Barbary Coast attacks, the Gulf War, 9/11, and Operation Iraqi Freedom has continued to fuel the threatening image of the 'other.'

Caged Birds Accept Each Other But Flight Is What They Long For is an illustration of a different perspective of Arab males, one that appears the expected threat yet is utterly defenseless and inconsequential. The sculpted ceramic figure is a combination of historical Western portraiture, motifs from conquering empires of Lebanon's past, and family narrative. When my grandparents came to America shortly after the birth of their grandchildren, they spoke little to no English. My grandfather loves telling a story from his first year in America where he had his only run in with 'authority.' He was waiting for my grandmother to finish grocery shopping and noticed a gaggle of Canadian geese in the parking lot. Legend says he drives by one of the healthy-looking fowl and snatches it off the ground by its neck. Squawking and thrashing about, he tries to stuff it into his trunk. Like all great

⁵ Berman, Jacob Rama. 2012. *American arabesque: Arabs, Islam, and the 19th-century imaginary*. New York: New York University Press, 1.

storytellers, the ending changes based on his enthusiasm and the audience but ultimately someone yells at him threatening to call the police or the police themselves try to stop him from capturing the goose. Being a recent migrant from Lebanon and caught off guard, he was unable to say anything more than “food” and gesture towards his mouth, miming an eating motion.



Figure six: *Caged Birds Accept Each Other But Flight Is What They Long For*

Simultaneously trapped and emerging from the wall is the image of my grandfather; one hand extended, wielding a ludicrously long lance and the other hand embedded in the wall revealing only the cuff of his jacket and an expressive gesture. Referencing the Roman ruins that remain as evidence of Lebanon’s endlessly dominated past, a simplified Corinthian column rounds off the base of the bust, transforming the figure into an architectural component that carries no weight and can offer no support.



Figure seven: *Caged Birds Accept Each Other But Flight Is What They Long For* (detail)

He wears his signature athletic jacket from the 1990's and it is set in contrast to the antiquated hat referenced from the costumes detailed in Jean Leon Gerome's portraits of Ottoman soldiers that also occupied the region. In the manner of Western generals' portraits, the image of Wahib carries a long pole referencing the masculinity and virility of the subject wielding it. However, his pole is utterly impotent with neither tip sporting a threatening point. The 'spear' cuts diagonally across the wall below his body. From a distance it appears to be spearing a tangled, winged creature. Upon closer inspection, one can see that the spear is causing no harm. In fact the goose is wrapping its own neck around the pole, its face twisted in a signature, disgruntled, goose hiss.



Figure eight: *Caged Birds Accept Each Other But Flight Is What They Long For* (detail)

Its expression is a stark contrast to the calm aloofness of my grandfather. The misinterpretation of the goose's involvement with the figure becomes a representation for the greater relationship between America and the Middle East, specifically how America elects to involve itself in the Middle East's affairs yet claims itself the victim in the honorable fight for freedom.

Hospitality and the Participatory Viewer

I experimented with the subject matter of my cultural identity through many modes: the figure as object, the figure and other ceramic objects in installation, and performance. Stemming from the ingrained generosity and hospitality I'm surrounded by in my cultural community, I thought it important to share that particular form of intangible beauty. The need to serve and give is something that I was raised with and it is an aspect of my culture that I believe all can grow from. I gravitated towards food and how concepts of hospitality have been used in the art world prior. FEAST: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art was an incredible resource. This show, held at the Smart Museum asked artists like Rirkrit Tiravanija, Lee Ming Wei, Ana Prvacki, and a dozen others what hospitality means to them. Rirkrit cooked Pad Thai for the masses, Lee Ming Wei hosted private dinners for conversation with individuals, and Ana Prvacki served a spoon of jelly to each visitor in the Serbian tradition of welcoming and good tidings.

I was incredibly moved and motivated by these examples of generosity so I decided to serve Arabic coffee out of handmade, traditional cups with my mother during the candidacy exhibition, Methods.



Figure nine: *Tfadaloo: Welcome*

I slip cast over one hundred porcelain cups and glazed them in the traditional “beddawi” design. I narrowed it down to eighty-six of the most uniform cups, refusing to serve my guests in anything but my best work both out of respect for the users of the cups and as a representation of my craft. The selected cups were then arranged on the wall in a tessellating pattern creating a lovely pseudo wallpaper. The goal was to remove a cup as guests came in and to serve them coffee, but it was imperative that the motion of removing something from the wall appeared natural. I began to think of the individual cups as precious items that one would place or mount on a wall; like a picture, a medal, or precious figurine. Over time, walls of a house yellow and fade, only becoming obvious when an item’s tenure on the wall ends and it is removed, leaving a silhouette on the preserved wall. I mimicked this

by staining the wall around the cups with the coffee that was to be served, yellowing the wall to create this effect in the absence of each cup.



Figure ten: *Tfadaloo: Welcome* (detail)



Figure eleven: *Tfadaloo: Welcome* (detail)

My mother and I greeted guests in Arabic before handing them the seemingly precious cup from the wall. We began the performance speaking only in Arabic, navigating the difficulties of a communication barrier while relying on the universal commonalities surrounding the niceties of serving and receiving. We poured the coffee into the small cups being cradled by the careful hands of our guests and stirred in small amounts of sugar for them. They were invited to sit on a handmade bench ornamented in traditional woodworking. We treated the space as our living room, and the gallery visitors as guests in our home. With one hand they held their cup and the other hand was filled with 'sfoof', a simple Lebanese cake. When guests finished their coffee and came to return their cups they were emphatically invited to keep it. However, guests questioned the act and in general wanted to have more conversation about the culture.

Halfway into the performance I stopped speaking in Arabic, finding it more effective to directly communicate the hospitality of my culture in a common tongue. My mother and I were then able to teach our visitors the term 'makadame', which in effect translates to 'it is passed along.' In Arab culture I have found it is important to never be in full possession of an item. If someone compliments a belonging of yours it is your duty to make it available to the admirer. While no one has explicitly defined the term or its origin for me, I have gleaned that human nature, specifically pride and fear of rejection, makes it difficult to expose one's need for something. With the gift of giving ingrained in society, it is an admirable courtesy that one offers their belongings to another who may have their eye on it out of necessity. These cups, I am told, now sit on shelves in the homes of various visitors to the performance. Some washed and in use while others preserved as a remnant of the interaction but all hopefully serving as a reminder of the lasting effect of hospitality and generosity.

Following this performance, I was inspired by the directness of performance and quite literally giving the viewers something to chew on. While continuing my research into food related performances, I was interested in finding Arab artists working in a more participatory fashion, such as the Iraqi artist, Wafaa Bilal. His works are a heavy political commentary on the Iraq war and its physical and psychological effects on a population constantly under siege. While viewers aren't generally in the same physical space as him, he allows for participation via digital platforms. For example in his piece *Dog or Iraqi*, he opened up the polls to an online audience asking whether they would rather himself or a dog to be tortured through

waterboarding. The online community was in an uproar over the welfare of the dog and instead voted in favor of waterboarding Bilal. He proceeded to go through with the torture to prove the lack of preciousness placed on an Iraqi's life. In another participatory piece called *Domestic Tension*, Bilal staged his living room in a gallery for one month. He had installed a camera with a paintball gun connected to it. For twenty-four hours a day, online viewers could access the camera, turn the gun towards him, and shoot at him whenever they liked. Bilal was shot at over 40,000 times during the durational performance. Some participants shot at him relentlessly while others formed alliances to defend him, guiding the gun away from him when they were able to access the system. He brought the trauma the Iraqis were experiencing thousands of miles away to our domestic sphere hence implicating viewers in the distant destruction. I was fascinated by the way he was able to expose himself to the mercy of others while simultaneously incriminating viewers in Middle Eastern conflict. Inspired by his work, I was keen on experimenting with more viewer participation and evoking a semblance of the incrimination Bilal sourced through a sense of discomfort in my viewers.

In congruence with my artist research, I was looking into Western travellers' writing on the MENA region, specifically their perspective on the women inhabiting the region. Other than crude metaphors related to veiling that I will discuss later, I was struck by the harsh description of the mannerisms of the Arab women who welcomed the Western ladies into their home. The visitors often described the women as frightful and beautiful but claimed the creatures they visited were simple if not stupid, could hardly make eye contact, and could communicate in nothing but

giggling laughter. I found their descriptions to be incredibly harsh and unforgiving. What reaction did they expect with such a language and culture barrier? I wanted to combine this distasteful description with the memory of childhood interactions with an Arab woman I am most familiar with, my mother Wafaa Shaban. While my sisters and I were growing up, my mother often piled a large round tray with a selection of simple, fresh ingredients and a large *rgheef* of pita bread from the local Lebanese grocer. She would sit down on the shag carpet of our home in the early 90's and begin feeding us individual *lakmaat*, small bites. Olives brought back from her parents' farm in Ammatour would have their pits removed, then nestled in a small piece of pita, topped with a slice of tomato, and dipped in rich olive oil before finding a mouth eagerly awaiting the bite. I would dig my fingers in the medium pile carpet, excitedly rocking my body back and forth while chewing on the sizeable *lakmee*, getting ready for the next one. The memory of the simple tastes of childhood and Lebanon, enhanced by my mother's touch was something I wished to share with others.

While I wanted to give plentifully, I felt the need to add an element of discomfort gleaned from the interactions of Western travellers with Arab females. So I piled my tray high with slices of tomato and cucumber, mint, labneh (kief cheese), olives, zaatar, and olive oil. In an untitled performance I donned my grandmothers blue housedress and a black headscarf and positioned myself in the center of an 8x 10 segment of beige carpet.



Figure twelve: *untitled (performance)*

Participants sat around me on the carpet and using only prompting noises and faint giggles, I began to feed my audience. I hardly made eye contact and worked in a haste to feed the mouths that surrounded me. Some *lakmaat* were small and other's too large to chew comfortably. However all seemed to enjoy the offerings, sticking around for seconds, and thirds and weren't too put off by the nonverbal communication or giggling. It was more of an element of confusion as opposed to discomfort that I believe requires altering and experimenting with in future performances. However, like when I was a child, the participants sat, waited, and picked at the carpet they were seated atop.



Figure thirteen: *untitled (performance)* detail

The carpet itself was selected to evoke a distinctly American interior my viewers and I were familiar with. But in thinking of my Arab American identity and Arab history with America, I used an adhesive to flatten down the carpet into a simple arabesque design. It appeared less like a stain and more like an imprint of culture, which was incredibly fitting having found out later that carpet itself was originally a Middle Eastern technology. Having spent the last few years increasingly noticing examples of the appropriation of Arab and Islamic design in Western interior spaces, I was fascinated to learn of the adoption of carpeting techniques from ancient Middle Eastern societies. It was only fitting to continue explorations in carpet as a vehicle to the concept of appropriation in design and imagery and its consequential muddling of Arab identity, sense of ownership, and belonging.

Arab Americanesque: Performance and Installation

Prequel in Performance

My research on the depictions of Middle Eastern women through the Western travellers written perspective, Western imperialism, and political tactics used in lavish and pseudo realistic paintings of French Orientalists like Gerome, culminated to form the final two projects; both iterations of my concept *Arab Americanesque*. The first exploration began as a performance piece designed to demonstrate a history of colonialism in parallel to its lasting effects on my Arab American culture and identity. My stage was a 6' x 8' segment of off white medium pile carpet that I layered with a hybrid of Middle Eastern carpet motifs using brown slip- a slurry of refined dirt.



Figure fourteen: *Arab Americanesque* (performance detail)

I must specify that it is an imagined designed. Through my research on the colonization of the Middle East and North Africa, I found it hard to claim one design over another. With trade routes connecting the cultures under one Empire to the next and borders drawn so recently and haphazardly, I was and am decidedly confused about where one Middle Eastern culture and its visual motifs end and another begins. So at that stage in my research I elected to come up with a beautiful design that felt familiar to me. Its ironic that when I look to find visuals of interior spaces of specific regions, I am exclusively finding imagery created through the fanciful eyes of a Western man, delighted by the rich design and desire to catch a glimpse of the famed Arab beauties of Orientalist poems and novels. What I find the most disturbing is how much of myself I see in this imagery or perhaps how hard I want to associate my cultural history and identity with the depicted subjects. But it is a false image and one can only imagine that if a contemporary Arab woman like myself feels like they are defining imagery, a Western viewer will likely perceive the same thing.

With the design now embedded into the carpet like a deep stain, I situated myself in the center concealing my body with a length of black cloth from head to toe. Slowly I prepared myself beneath the watchful gaze of my camera, rocking back and forth like a rhythmic prayer.



Figure fifteen: *Arab Americanesque* (performance detail)

A hand eventually broke free of the cloth scrubbing a brush against the surface of the water soaked carpet. Starting at one end of the carpet, I slowly and methodically attempted to scrub away the design in a clockwise rotation. As I extended my body and began scrubbing with more force, the black cloth began to slip away exposing more of my body with every movement. By the time I was half way through laboriously scrubbing the carpet, my entire body was exposed. As I continued my efforts to erase the design on the second half of the carpet, I began to adjust the cloth, slowly bringing it back up to completely conceal my body by the end of the performance. My decision to wrap my body in the black cloth was derived by the uninspired similes Western writers often used when describing Middle Eastern

women on the streets. “A black specter between the walls... she looks like death out for a walk.”⁶ “...black shapeless phantoms stealing silently along in the shadow of the walls.”⁷



Figure sixteen: *Arab Americanesque* (performance detail)

The cloth itself, stripping away from my body paralleled the way that lascivious imagery of Arab women initially defined Arab culture in Europe in the form of Orientalist paintings and pornographic postcards. The moment I began pulling up the cloth marked the internal recognition of the mistreatment of Arab image and culture and the “returns” these misrepresentations evoked. Edward Said describes

⁶ Mabro, Judy 1996. *Veiled Half- Truths: Western Travellers' Perceptions of Middle Eastern Women*. New York: I.B Tauris, 51.

⁷ Mabro, Judy 1996. *Veiled Half- Truths: Western Travellers' Perceptions of Middle Eastern Women*. New York: I.B Tauris, 53.

the process of decolonization as the reclamation of culture, manifesting itself in increased nationalism and religious fundamentalism.⁸

The process of scrubbing the slip design off the surface of the water soaked carpet resulted in a shift in color. With every stroke of the brush, the design was incredibly obscured and a tan brown tone spread across the surface of the carpet.

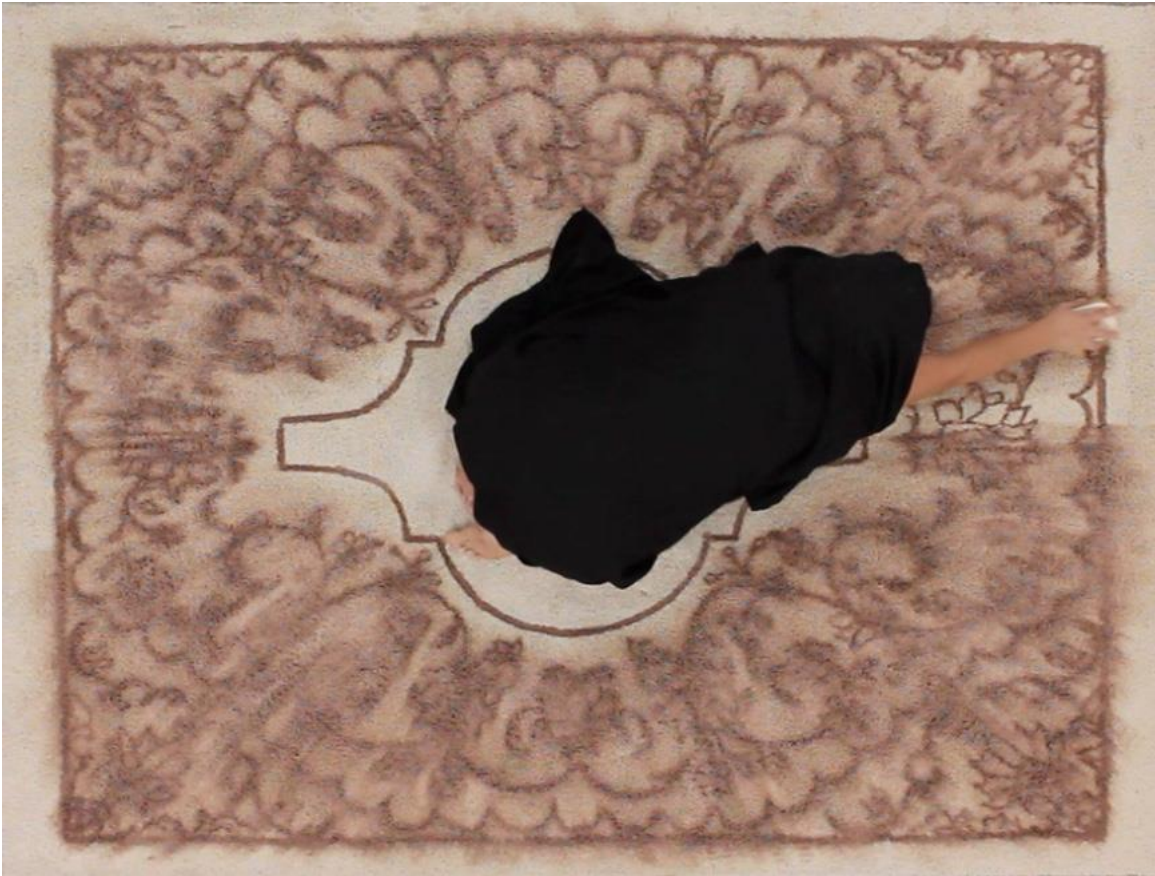


Figure seventeen: *Arab Americanesque* (performance detail)

By the end of my task, the entire carpet was just a few shades darker than my skin tone and the majority of the design had been somewhat erased. One slip border remained, trapping my body in the outline of an 'arabesque.' Its the simplified iteration of traditional Middle Eastern design now found tiling Western kitchens and

⁸ Said, Edward W. 1994. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Knopf, xiii.

bathrooms, covering facial tissue boxes and to-go cups, patterning your neighbor's shirt and your friend's dog bowl. An apt metaphor for the Western curation of Arab culture.

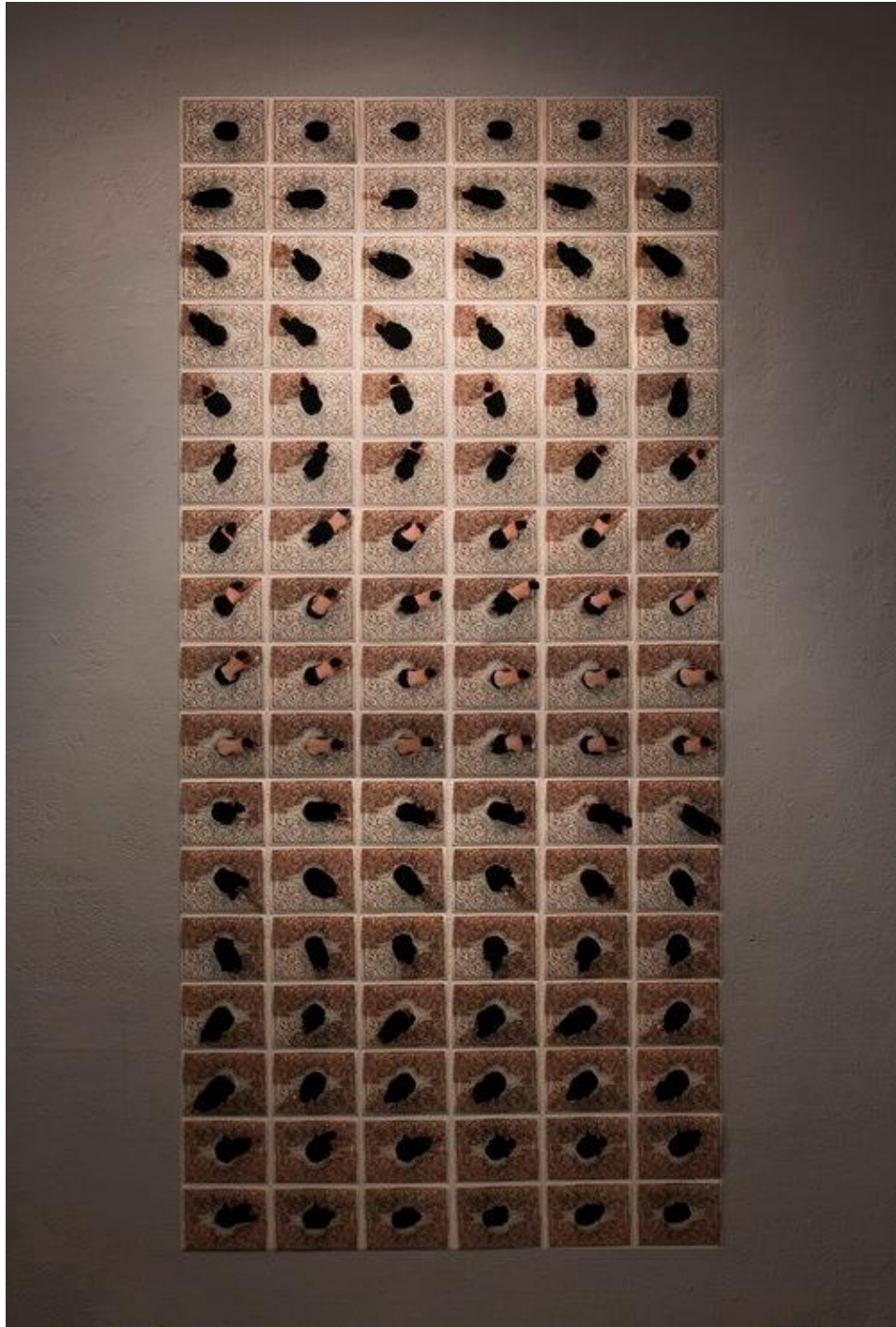


Figure eighteen: *Arab Americanesque* (performance images)

The film stills of the performance when viewed together in a grid illustrate the passage of time through the clockwise directionality of my actions and the slow spread of color across the white surface. Thinking about the journey of my family and tales of assimilation and rejection haunted me throughout the performance along with odd encounters I've experienced because of my appearance and people's cultural ignorance. The stills become not just a record of the history of culture and imperialism but of the misconceptions that remain today that shape my identity and the identity of Arab Americans like me trying to understand where they belong in a society that takes but continues to "other".

While I recognized the strength in the approachability and conciseness of the arrangement of stills I could not fully believe in it. I loved the beauty of the visual gradient at a distance and the close up element of viewer discovery within each frame, but I felt as if I had made it too easy, too universal. I understand the concept of universality to be something desirable in art but I do not want to make something that would allow a non-Arab viewer to believe that from viewing this piece they now understand the Arab experience or that my cultural identity is definable. That is impossible, for I still do not understand. Although I used my body in this piece, I questioned where was I? Where was my family? Where is the accusation? Where is the Western gaze that defined my culture to the non-Arab world? I doubted the ability for such a succinct piece to be able to address all of the questions I have about my culture, all of the fingers I want to point, and all of the influences on my identity.

Final Installation

One of the first and most guilt-ridden influences on my cultural identity was and is my infatuation with the works of Orientalist painters, specifically the French artist, Jean Leon Gerome, whom I have mentioned multiple times. His paintings hang in the Metropolitan Museum of Art like scientific images recording his seemingly objective observations of Arab subjects. Viewers pause in front of the gilded frames, admiring the way he was able to capture the light shining on the fabric of Ottoman uniforms, the photorealistic quality of the mosque interior and the men bent in prayer. To the patrons of the French salons, he was bringing to their view unaltered scenes from the exotic Orient. So what did the French men, women, and subsequent viewers glean from the images of dark males inspecting the teeth of a female slave who looked suspiciously European with her fair skin and straight hair? What male fantasy did they deem fact when they gazed upon an exquisitely rendered bath scene teeming with supple nudes? These images, questionably lacking the presence of colonizing Western forces defined the MENA region to be an exotic and erotic destination filled with the deviance of dark, barbarous men in possession of pale and helpless women. Not only did they perpetuate a false image of Arabs, but they were used to define the “other,” all that the civilized West was decidedly not. While Europeans used images and literature of the same nature to serve as justification for the colonization of those lands and the attempted spread of Christianity, America used it as theme for entertainment and escape from the conservative prescriptions of their faith.



Figure nineteen: *Arab Americanesque* (installation image)

For my final installation of *Arab Americanesque*, the incredibly effective tactics used by Gerome in his painting the *Snake Charmer* particularly inspired me. In an essay titled “The Imaginary Orient,” Linda Nochlin outlines Gerome’s use of ‘authenticating detail’ as a political tactic. She explains “the major function of gratuitous, accurate details like these is to announce ‘we are the real.’ They are signifiers of the category of the real, there to give credibility to the ‘realness’ of the work as a whole, to authenticate the total visual field as a simple, artless reflection- in this case, of a supposed Oriental reality.’ She goes on to discuss his pseudo scientific accuracy down to the meticulously painted cracked tiling in the scene’s architecture. “Neglected, ill-repaired architecture functions, in the century Orientalist art, as a standard topos for commenting on the corruption of

contemporary Islamic society.”⁹ Viewers were to look at the disrepair and think Arab people unable of appreciating and preserving the abundance of beauty that is wasted upon them.

I wanted to use Gerome’s tactics as a ‘naturalist’ or ‘authenticist’ against him and the other Orientalists using a similar mode of communication and deceit. My goal was to create not just an installation but to insert my Western viewers in a multidimensional painting that they were historically represented as absent from. Along the back wall of my installation, I crafted a 13’ by 20’ wall of meticulously carved traditional detail.

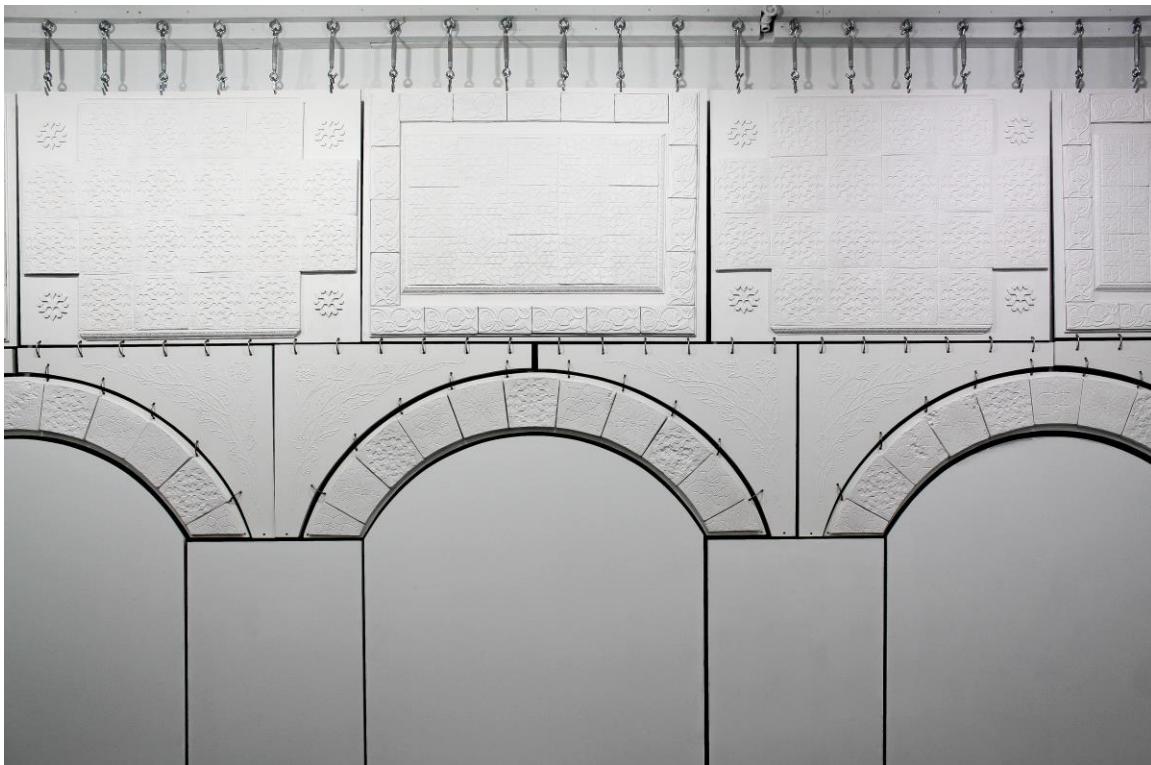


Figure twenty: *Arab Americanesque* (installation detail)

⁹ Nochlin, Linda. 1989. *The politics of vision: essays on nineteenth-century art and society*. New York: Harper & Row, 38.

As viewers approach the wall, stark white inaccessible doors dwarf them. They must tilt their head back and strain to see the beauty of the various geometrical designs that the carefully executed ceramic tiles create. Archways of intricate tiles seemingly crumbling are within the closest proximity to the viewer. Above, they are flanked by segments of flower motifs often placed in contrast to the geometrical precision of Islamic design.



Figure twenty-one: *Arab Americanesque* (installation, wall detail)

As the eye continues upwards, viewers are met with five panels of tile. It was my design to pay respect to these tiles, to perfect my craft in creating them by ways of not just negating their misuse by Orientalists but to also honor the traditional designs that have been gratefully preserved from the Western decorative trends. The tiles I created were arranged and framed almost as paintings themselves, so that they aren't just a tactic or background detail but an element treated in

reverence with visual and physical weight. Painted in white as well, the panels have a ghostly quality to them, like record of the past. I relied mostly on the shadows cast by the harsh gallery lights to provide contrast for the detail, giving the entire look a weighty yet fleeting quality.

I congratulated myself when I heard reviews of how beautiful visitors thought the detail of the wall was and delighted in seeing how small my viewers appeared in front of it and how utterly out of reach said beauty was. But as a reminder of the elements of my culture that have been filtered into the homes of Westerners, I used an abundance of curtain rings to suspend one tile panel from the next. The suspended panels created not just a wall, but also a veil to the unseen and armor against possession even if mocked with the insinuations of it entering one's home. In contrast to teasing my viewers with something they cannot buy in the tile section of Lowes, I wanted to devote time and labor to surrounding myself with a familiar yet distant splendor. Research into the history of Islamic design and production shed an incredible light on the process of making. In the essay "Beauty and Aesthetics in Islam" by Her Royal Highness Princess Wijdan Ali described the development of the norms in beauty as results of faith in Islam.

"For the Muslim artist, the doctrinal foundation of Islamic aesthetics lies in the following Hadith-s (sayings) of the Prophet Muhammad: "God has inscribed beauty upon all things," "God desires that if you do something you perfect it," "Work is a form of worship," and "God is beautiful and He loves beauty." Hence, perfecting one's work by creating attractive and well-made objects that serve a purpose becomes a form of worship and a religious

obligation easily fulfilled by the artist, through adherence to the faith and its principles.”¹⁰

Throughout the making process, I became enamored with the idea of my labor as a form of worship. While my worship was not directed to God in the way traditional Muslim artist’s intended, I was worshipping my culture. To me the wall is a tribute to the beauty that I long to surround myself with and by making such an amount of tile and making them as well as I could, I felt as though the gap between myself and my culture was bridging. Also while I rejoiced in this revelation of religion, culture and design, I wondered what the reaction of Western consumers would be if they learned that every Persian carpet and ‘arabesque’ backsplash that decorated their home was actually a representation of the Islamic faith. In fact, the ever-swirling foliage of the traditional arabesque found on decorative carpets never comes to an end point to represent the perpetuity of the Ottoman Empire, the protector of Islam, so by proxy, the perpetuity of Islam itself. The irony of Islam being readily invited into the Western home for a good price from your local home-goods store does not escape me.

Situated in front of the hung wall is an 8’ by 12’ platform. Atop the decorative platform sit two unmistakably European armchairs, confronting the viewers as they enter the space. The chairs are modeled in clay after the set described at the start of
the paper.

¹⁰ Ali, Wijdan. "Beauty and Aesthetics in Islam." Muslim Heritage. January 2007. Accessed February 2019. <http://muslimheritage.com/article/beauty-and-aesthetics-islam>.



Figure twenty-two: *Arab Americanesque* (installation, chair detail)

They are but two pieces of the set of French Victorian furniture purchased by my grandparents in Ammatour. The French championed Lebanon, being the Arab country with the lowest population of Muslims. In effect, Lebanese were incredibly susceptible to French influence. The language was adopted by many of the locals, especially by Christians and Druze as a way of separating and elevating themselves from the Muslim population that was not favored by their colonizers. Other than learning the language, introducing elements of French décor into the home was another marker of status. Needless to say, my grandparents' purchase of the set was not unknowing or simply by chance. Sculpted with accuracy and detail, the two chairs become stand ins for Western imperialism. With the two chairs angled towards one another and isolated in the center of the room, they no longer imply a living room. Instead they become more evocative of a political atmosphere.

Considering the subtle differences in size, one chair having a slightly taller back than the other, they become less of a set and more like two individuals. I can only imagine Sykes and Picot sitting in a traditional room in Greater Syria while coming to agreements of where borders should be drawn and populations divided. Or perhaps our current president and a member of his cabinet deciding which country should go on the travel ban list.

I ask the viewer to look upon them in their antiquated yellowing and recognize the Western forces that have dominated and attempted to define Arab spaces. Sculpted in clay, I have rendered these chairs permanent and nearly immovable representations of the lasting effect that Western imperialism has had on the region, its natives, and members of its diaspora. As a craftswoman I am pleased with my ability to mystify the viewer with the feat of crafting the chairs in clay and fooling one into believing it is a found and painted set. But I urge the viewer to look past the bit of material mysticism and see the truth behind the seemingly empty chairs.



Figure twenty- three: *Arab Americanesque* (installation, floor detail)

The flooring the chairs are perched upon acts as a key to the entire installation. Nestled between tiles cut to create a traditional, geometric floor motif, are 1' by 1' segments of 'arabesque' tiles preserved in their packaging. These tiles alternate between red in one square and white in the other. Upon closer inspection one will notice imagery of the original *Arab Americanesque* performance decalé onto the very tile it critiqued.

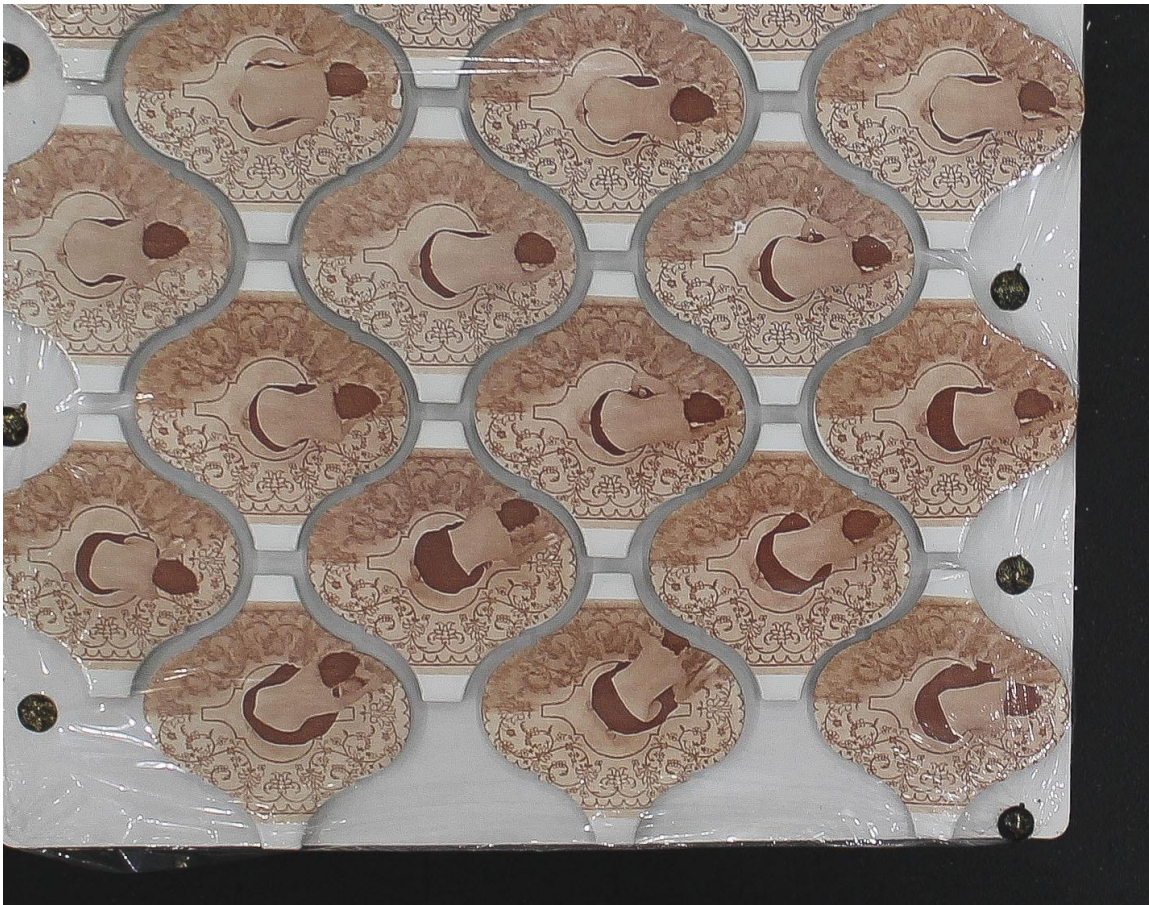


Figure twenty-four: *Arab Americanesque* (installation, tile detail)

I intend this seemingly insignificant detail to be the last thing a viewer notices in their exploration of the space, but it is also an element that requires the most time to understand. It asks the viewer to not only notice it, but also notice its placement in the design, find the start of the patterning and to follow the imagery of erasure that comes to an end underneath the imposing armchairs. While I originally imagined viewers to step onto the platform and trod on the imagery of my performance, the sterile packaging in combination with the abundance of white made it seem off limits to the viewer.

Conclusion

The installation in its entirety asked a lot of me, from conception to production to installation. I want to ask a similar amount from my viewer. Take time to marvel in the beauty that I created but cannot entirely take credit in; for beauty is ingrained in the design of my culture that I yearn to understand and find physical connection that distance denies. Acknowledge that you cannot possess its beauty as readily as you may desire. Look into your home, recognize the cultural appropriation and educate yourself on the cultural objects you commonly enjoy. Note the craft of creating full-scale furniture in clay but see past the ceramic feat to recognize their represented position in history as a force that defined a culture. Lastly take a moment to acknowledge how a culmination of Western Imperialism and a culturally cannibalistic consumer market can increasingly muddle the cultural identity of Arab Americans that live among us between a state of belonging and other.

Enjoy your hummus responsibly.

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Vita

Education

Virginia Commonwealth University, MFA, 2019

University of North Carolina Chapel Hill , BFA, 2013

Experience

Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia

Teaching assistant, introduction to ceramics Fall 2017; advanced hand building Spring 2018

Adjunct faculty, introduction to ceramics Summer 2018 and Fall 2018

Bechtler Museum of Modern Art, Charlotte, NC

Contract art handler; part of the exhibition installation team 2016-2017

Museum Experience Associate 2015-2017

Rawdah High School, Beirut, Lebanon 2013-2014

English teacher for 4th and 5th grades

Character Education teacher for 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grades

Honors and Awards

2019

Graduate Research Grant, Virginia Commonwealth University

VCU Graduate Teaching Assistantship, 2018-2019

2018

Honorable Mention for installation in *New Forms*, Arrowmont School of Arts and Craft

Invitation to Figurative Symposium, Arrowmont School of Arts and Craft

2017

VCU Graduate Student Assistantship, complete tuition and teaching assistantship

2013

Recipient of the Chancellors Award from UNC Chapel Hill

Recipient of the Alexander Julian Prize, highest award from the UNC Chapel Hill Art Department

Two time recipient of the George Kachergis Award

Recipient of the Alumni Sculpture Garden Award (commission for a sculpture to be placed in front of the Art Department building)

Recipient of Tom and Elizabeth Long Excellence Fund for Honors, administered by Honors Carolina

Exhibitions

2018:

MFA Thesis Exhibition, The Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA

New Forms, Figurative Exhibition, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN

RVA Clay Tour, two person show, Fine Arts Building, VCU, Richmond, VA

Methods, Candidacy Exhibition, Artspace, Richmond, VA

Cabinet of Curiosities, East End Brewing, Pittsburgh, PA

2016:

Free For All, Hart Witzen Gallery, Charlotte, NC

Cherry Pie, Goodyear Gallery, Charlotte, NC

Publications

The News and Observer; "Artist says UNC- Chapel Hill statue's destruction was more personal the vandals knew." Online. January 18, 2017

RVA Magazine; "Lebanese American Artist Hannah Shaban Tackles Misconceptions of The Middle East In Latest Work." Online. May 23, 2018