

GALLERY
102



Sobia Ahmad:
IMBRICATIONS

JUNE 3 - JUNE 28, 2019

Opening Reception:

Friday June 7, 2019 // 6:00-8:00 pm

Artist

**Sobia
Ahmad**

Born and raised in Pakistan, Sobia Ahmad moved to the United States at the age of fourteen. Highlighting the inseparability of the self and larger power structures, her interdisciplinary work dissects how social, cultural, and political forces shape personal narratives and community experiences. Ahmad's work been reviewed in several major publications such as Al Jazeera English, The Washington Post, and The Huffington Post and has been included

in multiple collections. She has exhibited internationally— including at the Craft and Folk Art Museum in Los Angeles and Queen Mary University in London. Recently, she was awarded an artist fellowship at the Vermont Studio Center, is the 2019 recipient of the yearlong Next Generation/Sanctuary Artist Fellowship at VisArts in Rockville, MD, and will be a 2019-2020 Halcyon Arts Lab Fellow.

LIVING THE QUESTIONS

Sobia Ahmad



When Denied Home We Build a Memory Palace, 2018
Digital collage on chiffon
Diptych, 36 x 16 in. each

Imbrication is an architectural term - an overlapping of tiles or shingles on a roof. It alludes to home, shelter, and safety. *Imbrication* is also a geological term - an overlapping of rock deposition in an ornamental pattern, almost like toppled dominos. It alludes to passage of time, land, history, and power. *Imbrication* is also a medical term - an overlapping of layers of tissue in the closure of wounds or in the correction of defects. It alludes to inflicted pain and possible recovery. These works trace my own negotiations of identity and belonging, refracted through a potent overlap of the emotional, spiritual, social, and political.

When denied a physical home due to unjust policies - from the persecution of religious minorities in Pakistan to U.S. foreign policy of drone attacks to, most recently, the Muslim Ban - one begins to search for a home that's not tangible. In navigating these realms, I grapple

with questions like: where is home for those who are uprooted? How does one belong? As an immigrant, I sometimes wish to be rooted to a place to call home. Yet, often my desire for home transcends notions of place, group identity, nationality, and country of birth. My works on chiffon approach these questions. On this diaphanous fabric, I visualize what remains unresolved. In *When Denied Home We Build a Memory Palace*, I collaged images of my childhood home and wrote repetitively in Urdu. These fragmented images become imagined recollections, floating on a flimsy, translucent surface that responds to the slightest changes in air and light. As these elements shift, so does this memory palace. In *Searching for Home*, I hand-embroidered onto chiffon a two-part poem that came to me in a moment of desolation on August 11th, 2018, the night before the Unite the Right rally took place in Washington D.C.

The delicate, un-hemmed chiffon may disintegrate over time as my understanding of self evolves, referencing the impermanence of all embodied existence, thoughts, desires and longings.

The question of belonging remains suspended in the vague space between metaphysics and the unavoidable sociopolitical realities that strategically ostracize some. Our intimate struggles to grasp home are therefore inextricably linked with and are shaped by larger power structures. In *Small Identities*, I approach this liminal space by juxtaposing the cultural and political relevance of Islamic-shaped tiles with government-issued ID photos to complicate the Muslim immigrant identity today. In early 2017, against the backdrop of the travel ban, I transferred my own ID photo onto an Arabesque

ceramic tile, a popular wall motif in American homes. I then invited my family and friends to submit theirs, many of whom hesitated, citing fear of violence. Each of these individuals is represented by a blank tile. I do not make these tiles; I purchase them in Home and Kitchen sections of hardware stores. This is an important conceptual choice. Subverting the reduction of identity and belonging to biography, I decontextualize these ID photos. This wall of blank tiles and blurry faces exists in that in-between space, temporarily erected both as a sanctuary and as a reminder of the unsettled nature of home for immigrants. The process creates a literal and metaphorical imbrication; it reinserts these Muslim immigrants into the visual language of a home in the American landscape today, and at once transcends limits of time, place, and nationality.



When Denied Home We Build a Memory Palace, 2018
Digital collage on chiffon
Diptych, 36 x 16 in. each

Language is implicated in both confirming and dissipating our sense of belonging. Language marks relations. As the acclaimed poet Elizabeth Alexander says:

"We encounter each other in words, words spiny or smooth, whispered or declaimed, words to consider, reconsider."

In the works *POWER* and *Remove and Dissolve*, I examine how legal language is used to confer dignity upon some and strip others of their humanity. While reading the Supreme Court decision that upheld the travel ban in June 2018, I was struck by the designed use of language to justify the president's "power" over non-American "aliens." By extracting this language from the legal document and rearranging it into what I consider vague *found poems*, I strip it of specificity of the travel ban. It becomes almost impossible to understand the intended use of these isolated words without contextual clues. I dissect, reassemble, and reinsert this language into history, posing questions about its impact on individual and collective consciousness:

His Power
An Extraordinary Power
Invoke His Power
Power to Render Judgments
Power to Espouse Principles

One wonders: Whose power? A man's or a deity's? Judgements about what?

Principles for whom? Outside the legal document, these poems take on a life of their own. They do not resolve these questions; rather, they reference the interconnection of gender, race, class, and nationality in relation to power. I draw out these connections through the size and the materials of the work. The poem *POWER* is projected on a suspended cloth same in length as the height of my body. The plexiglass plates in *Remove and Dissolve* are the size of a standard passport. Rows of these neatly stacked transparent plates are alluring from a distance but up close, the material is sharp and reveals language that wounds. This is an interactive piece – viewers are invited to remove the plates, dissolve the language, and replace them. The water both cleanses and drowns this language that refers to "aliens." The act, simultaneously futile and violent, evokes global histories of migrants and refugees traversing bodies of water and current journeys of those who seek and are denied passage. Dissecting the ideologies that shape intimate experiences, the work reveals truths that are deeply personal and at once universal – simultaneously reaching forward and backward in time. History does not belong to a people; it belongs to us all. Thus, the current political moment does not seem an aberration; it becomes pronounced in the imbrications of time and history, layered between multiple pasts and possibilities of manifold futures.

Given the sensitive and deeply personal nature of this work, my relationship with it is ever shifting. It mirrors the various states I find myself in. I experience periods of hope while holding space for the community and sharing our intimate stories. It is sacred. It is worship. It is healing. Yet, I often battle with the fear of self-othering before a colonialist gaze that inadvertently consumes pain and further perpetuates divisions of "us vs. them." I also wrestle with anger, and consequently shame, which stems from pain. I consider retracting from the work. Such either-or, neither-nor moments sometimes leave me with a creative paralysis. Fear and doubt settles in – is the work endangering the subjects? How do I continue to center my community in ethical, respectful, and responsible ways? How do we process trauma publically and what are the implications of such vulnerability in public? Some of these questions are urgent and immediate decisions are made to guarantee safety of the participants – an ID photo is redacted, a blank tile added in its place, and a voice is masked in anonymous interviews. As I continue my practice, I'm learning that the work is inseparable from my own self and its integrity lies in my ability to honor the contradictory emotions I carry about it.

I want my work to be visionary, not reactionary. I strive to create not from a place of anger, but a place of fierce hope and transformative love. Anger has propelled me to take creative risks and often fuels my efforts for social change, but it is not and cannot be the birthplace of my work. This work requires me to show up in ways that are often exhausting and depleting, but it also allows me to name what wounds us and invariably shapes us. It allows me to share the sacred with others. This process resembles a psychological imbrication of sorts – of mourning and tending to our wounds, and of recovering and healing from them. Moments of uncertainty and confusion, though agonizing, have forced me to pause, reframe the questions, and reinvestigate the root of my calling. I am now beginning to be curious about the contours of these dissonant feelings and, as the late German mystic poet Rilke said, *living the questions*. Perhaps gradually, without noticing it, I may "live along some distant day into the answers." This is a spiritual practice. This process, I suspect, will be relentless – in my art practice and in life – requiring immense dedication and continued patience.



Traverse, 2019
Video with sound
RT 5:18



Remove and Dissolve, 2018
Engraved acrylic plates, ink, water, cloth
33 plates, 3.5x5 in. each



Endure, 2016
Performance documentation video
RT 3:30



Small Identities, 2017 - ongoing
ID photos of Muslim immigrants on porcelain tiles
108 tiles, Dimensions variable



Searching for Home, 2018
Hand embroidery on chiffon
Diptych, 15x30 in. each

POWER

HIS
POWER

INVOKE
SWITCHING
POWER

POWER, 2019
Video projection on fabric

GALLERY 102

Special Thanks

Special thanks to artist Sobia Ahmad, the Student Exhibitions Committee, Gallery 102 Interns, Corcoran School of the Arts & Design, and The George Washington University.

Gallery 102 is committed to the exhibiting of contemporary art, including work from GW & Corcoran students, DC-area artists, & nationally recognized artists of all media. The gallery provides practical curatorial experience to the student body. Students have the opportunity to exhibit work, curate shows, and install exhibitions. The Gallery 102 Committee consists of GW & Corcoran students—undergraduate and graduate, majors and non-majors, artists and art historians—who both develop innovative, original, and thought-provoking exhibitions and invite a select group of guest curators to present exhibitions each semester.

Sobia Ahmad, **Artist**

Jessica Layton, **Assistant Curator**

Ari Golub, **Assistant Curator**

Caitlin Chan, **Director of Communications**

Andy Johnson, **Gallery Director**

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FRONT COVER:
Image from *Small Identities Series*, 2017-ongoing
ID photos of Muslim immigrants on porcelain tiles
108 tiles, Dimensions variable

