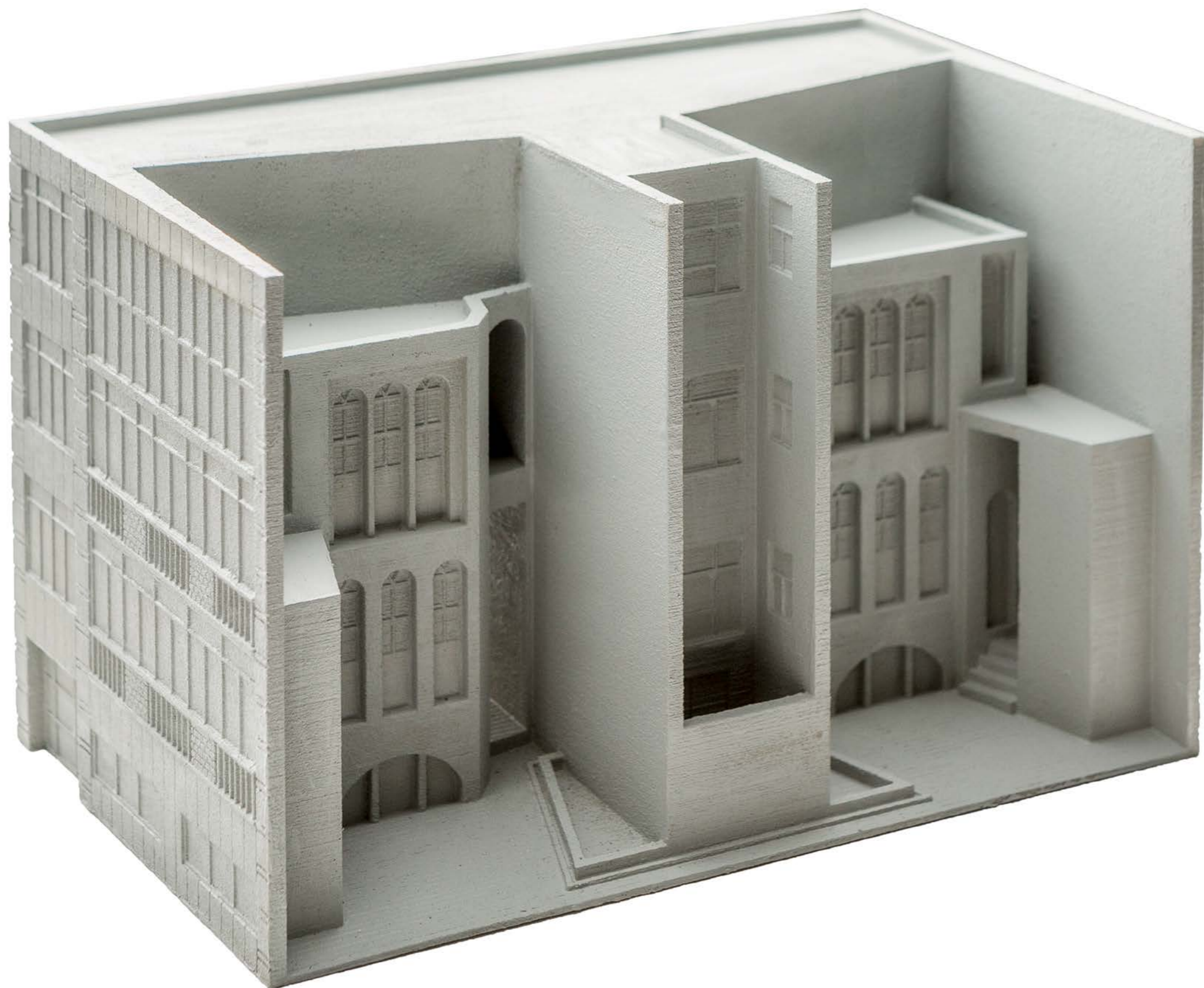


Nazgol Ansarinia. *Residential building / Shah-neshin and veranda on Satarkhan highways. Fabrications*, In collaboration with Roozbeh Elias-Azar. 2013. Plaster, resin and paint. 13.50 x 20.50 x 15.50 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Green Art Gallery, Dubai



WHERE IS HOME?

For this issue, we have chosen the complex theme of home. Where is it? What is it? How much does it matter? We explore these and other aspects of a concept which is familiar to us all but can assume so many different forms, from the physical and geographical to the purely metaphorical and emotional.

Through the works and words of artists and other creatives, we learn what home signifies to them, how the power of domestic memories drives their inspiration, why being away from home – either by choice or by force – is so significant, and what role architecture and physical objects play in our own personal construction of the place we call home.

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IN PURSUIT OF THE SELF

What does home mean when it is absent or was never there? Especially when global movement and migration are both so frequent and politicised that many artists explore their diasporic experiences through their work as a way of seeking a stable identity.

Words by Vamika Sinha

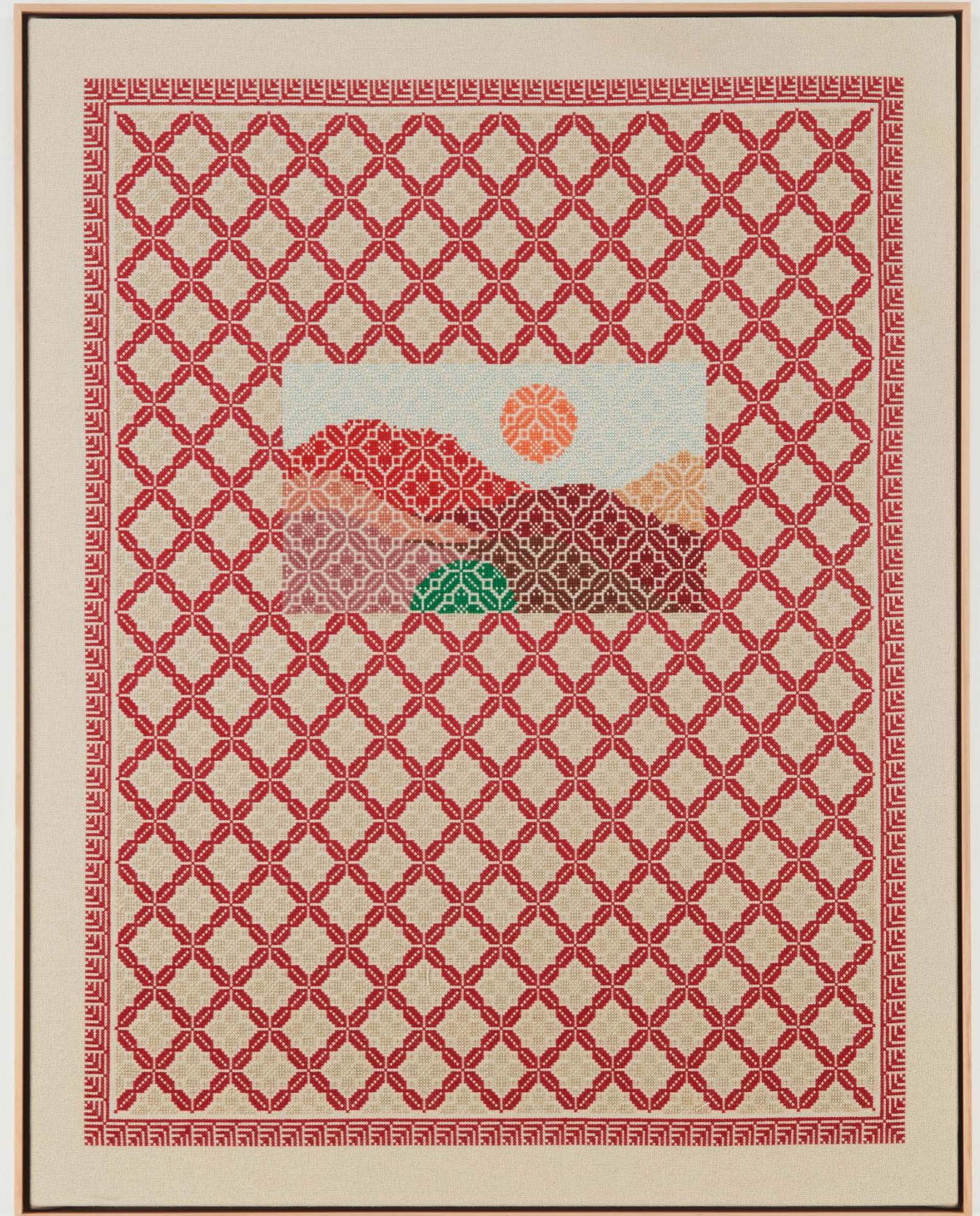


Stephanie Comilang. *Lumapit Sa Akin, Paraiso (Come To Me, Paradise)*. 2016. 25:46 min. HD. Colour. Image courtesy of Warehouse421

Art is characterised by movement, whether between forms, media, themes or capital. Much of it is also animated by movement, particularly personal narratives of migration, loss, exile, immigration and yearning. Many artists today belong to a diaspora, forced or voluntary, gravitating towards making work to maintain a metaphorical umbilical cord to their roots. Their practice is their vehicle to not only understand their uncertain or unstable sense of belonging, but also – perhaps most

importantly – to learn the maps that make up their identity and enable the establishment of a more solid sense of self.

For Palestinian-American, New York-based artist Jordan Nassar, materiality and form are his launchpads to unpack personal history. His familial narrative is marked by the intricacies of US immigration, birthing a need to explore his Palestinian heritage through textiles, in which he employs traditional Palestinian embroidery techniques such as the cross-stitch *tatreez*. “I work in



Jordan Nassar. *In The Heart Of The Rose*. 2020. Image courtesy of the artist



Nazar Yahya. *Toy Gun*. 2016. Oil on linen canvas. 68.5 x 152.5 cm. Image courtesy of the artist



Sree. *Vaadaka*. 2022. Installation view of *Zemanna* at Manarat al Saadiyat. Image courtesy of Manarat al Saadiyat

embroidery because of the sentimentality we often associate with textiles," he shares. "The act of embroidering with my own hands in Palestinian traditional embroidery is something that ties me to Palestine. It is an expression of my Palestinian-ness." Nassar's intentionality to express through this tactile mode is also an act of cultural, ethnic and even political participation, given that he has always been an 'outsider'. He also sees his work as a method of bringing awareness to the wider Palestinian experience beyond that of simply the territory, through highlighting its rich culture and traditions of craftsmanship.

For Iraqi-born artist Nazar Yahya, who is currently based in Houston, Texas, the Iraq War (2003–11) prompted a massive physical and psychological pivot. He left Baghdad in 2008 for the USA, the so-called enemy, an irony that he addresses as "fitting" as "they know about oil here too." On his website, he writes: "I have a country no longer. I might not have had one, ever since I

was born. I grew up there, fell in love, went to school, went to war, as those dead bodies in the Tigris swam with the fishes."

Yahya's departure from Iraq runs through his practice like a solid coloured thread. Given his experience as an infantryman, Yahya's works centre around themes to do with the military, mortality and power. *Toy Gun* (2016), for instance, depicts an AK47 in plastic, childlike, bright colours, emphasising the absurdity of war and the human potential to hurt one another and to rob each other of innocence, land and ultimately the self. The tragic irony of a rifle presented as a plaything is disturbingly salient. In *Boy King* (2016), meanwhile, he imbues his work with randomly placed circles – bullet holes – to critique the emotional detachment of killing under orders and the dismissiveness towards human life. For Yahya, art is a way of preserving and processing his memories of his homeland, a place he still loves dearly and visits despite the professional growth and relative safety that the USA has

offered him. Continuing to make work about Iraq is a "necessity" for him to grapple with his complex selfhood, he says.

Political conflict has also complicated the diasporic experience of Lebanese mixed-media artist Stéphanie Saadé, who moved to Europe in 2005 to further her artistic education. While she describes the distance as only "intermittent" then, she now considers herself in "exile" following the August 2020 Beirut blast. "It's impossible for me to live in my country permanently after what happened," she admits. "I don't know for how long I will keep this status." To understand her in-flux state, she leans on a concept she calls "Elastic Distances: the distances that relate us to or separate us from the people, places, memories, thoughts that we feel connected to or that we forget that we are connected to."

The idea of elastic distance, also the title of a 2017 work, explains Saadé's frequent creative focus on materialising the physical spaces she has inhabited in order to lend tangibility to what are now just

memories and absence. In *Le Chemin de Retour* (2017), she recreates a garden path she walked along as a student in Paris. In *Nostalgic Geography* (2013), she transposes a familiar route in Paris onto a map of Lebanon, illuminating the obstacles and complications that arise from doing so. *A Map of Good Memories* (2015) is a 24-carat gold-leaf floor installation in which Saadé assembles and recreates the trajectories of 20 personal memories in Lebanon into what she calls a "geographical self-portrait". As visitors walk over it, the map disappears, alluding to absence and the fickleness of memory. Through art, Saadé remaps her identity amid the inability to keep her home and the failure of human-made borders.

For UAE-raised and based Indian installation artist Sree, diaspora is a term that has always described him yet one he felt "clueless" about, given the still limited work and scholarship on Indian immigrants in the Gulf. Instead of reaching for his Indian "home" through art, he focuses on South Asian immigration to the UAE. His



Left: Stéphanie Saadé. *A Map of Good Memories*. 2015. 24-carat gold leaf on floor. 150 x 300 cm. Installation view of *Traversée des états / Crossing states* at Parc Saint Léger, Pougues-les-Eaux, France. 2018.
Below: Stéphanie Saadé. *A Map of Good Memories*. 2015. (Detail). Installation view of *Homeworks 7* at Beirut Art Center, 2015. Images courtesy of the artist and Grey Noise, Dubai



latest installation *Vaadaka* (2022) recreates typical UAE rooms and bedspaces occupied by this population from the 1990s up to now. They contain objects and paraphernalia – a blender beneath a bed, toys spilling from suitcases – that gesture at trying to retain aspects of home while making a new place for oneself, one in which there is negligible possibility for eventual citizenship. Collaboration is an important element for Sree; he works closely with his parents, who arrived in the UAE soon after its unification, sourcing and parsing archival materials and personal narratives.

Sree's process suggests diasporic discourse is perhaps

incomplete without thinking of one's parents; where they bring and place you into the world is your given "home", the later absence from which inspires such fertile art and need for self-understanding. In Filipina-Canadian artist Stephanie Comilang's 2016 film *Lumapit Sa Akin, Paraiso*, a science-fiction documentary on Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong, she incorporates audio of her mother to voice the personified character of a drone. Where many diasporic art practices focus on the past, Comilang's works are more forward-looking, even "dystopic", she says. She calls her work "part-fiction", not only because her videos have self-written

scripts and stories, although still incorporating historical and current factual structures and realities, but also because they use imaginative, magically realist elements to reconceptualise how diaspora operates. In *Lumapit Sa Akin, Paraiso*, phones, vlogs, cameras and drones are also markers of how diaspora primarily remains in touch with home – through technology. Comilang's own videos, an "accessible form you can easily upload to YouTube or online", are her way of self-connection through art and telling stories of a country she may not live in (being based in Berlin and Toronto) but to which she still asserts her sense of belonging.

The act of movement is inherently linked to instability, something that globalised society encourages and exacerbates on many levels. Whether choosing to probe from the past, present or future, through tactile media, technology or the recreation of spaces and maps, diasporic artists across the world use their art to address and ultimately honour their origins. When the self is so often dictated by socially constructed borders, artists can find catharsis exploring where they have moved – and why – in their practice. After all, where can one find any grounding but in oneself? ■