


MAPPING DIASPORIC IDENTITIES

DRAFTS 6
DRAFTS 6
DRAFTS 6
DRAFTS 6
DRAFTS 6
DRAFTS 6



DRAFTS 6: Mapping Diasporic Identities
October 04, 2025 to February 28, 2026
Grebel Gallery
Conrad Grebel University College
140 Westmount Road North
Waterloo, ON

Curator: Soheila Esfahani
Art Director: Faseeh Saleem

Book Layout & Design: AX (Artistic Xploratorium)

Editor: Soheila Esfahani
Publisher: AX (Artistic Xploratorium)
ISBN: 978-1-0695957-2-0
Copyright © 2025 Soheila Esfahani



Foreword

Mapping Diasporic Identities brings together six artists whose practices traverse painting, sculpture, installation, video, and multimedia storytelling. Rooted in personal histories and cultural lineages, each artist draws from the complexities of living within and across diasporic spaces. Their works engage with the fluidity of identity, how it is carried, negotiated, and continually reimagined through movement, memory, and lived experience.

Through themes of displacement, resilience, gender, inheritance, and cultural hybridity, the artists offer nuanced perspectives that unsettle dominant narratives surrounding belonging. Their practices illuminate how identities are neither fixed nor singular, but layered accumulations shaped by journeys, ruptures, and acts of reclamation.

By working with diverse materials and methodologies, they invite viewers to reflect on how stories migrate across borders, geographical, emotional, and generational. Mapping Diasporic Identities becomes, in this sense, both an exhibition and an unfolding dialogue. It asks how we hold onto the places we come from, how we adapt to the spaces we enter, and how new forms of selfhood emerge in the in-between.

Center for Peace Advancement

Preface

DRAFTS 6 – Mapping Diasporic Identities marks the sixth iteration of the DRAFTS series, an ongoing artistic research platform that explores how ideas evolve through the act of making. Conceived as both a curatorial and research framework, DRAFTS examines the artifact as a site of thought in progress, an unfinished gesture that embodies the fluidity, speculation, and openness central to artistic inquiry.

Co-founded by Faseeh Saleem, PhD., Artistic Design Research, and Dr. Vidmina Stasiulyte, DRAFTS was initiated in 2020 and launched in 2021 as a transdisciplinary project highlighting the dynamic processes of thinking, ideating, and suggesting ideas through the medium of design artifacts. It’s a series of experimental exhibitions and symposia that present diverse interpretations of what a research artifact is, or could become. Inviting dialogue across artistic, academic, and material disciplines.

At its core, DRAFTS embraces the draft as a generative and speculative state valuing uncertainty, experimentation, and iteration as essential to creative and intellectual inquiry. Across its evolving trajectory, DRAFTS has unfolded through a series of thematically connected iterations, each expanding the conversation around artistic research, material knowledge, and embodied experience.

The inaugural exhibition, Design Research Artefacts as an Intermediary Knowledge (Pakistan Institute of Fashion and Design, Lahore, 2021), introduced the concept of design artifacts as bridges between making and knowing. This was followed by Design Research Artefacts in the Context of Exhibition (1st International Art Triennial “Unpredictable Futures,” Lithuania, 2021), which examined how exhibition spaces influence interpretation and knowledge dissemination. In 2022, Communicating Knowledge Through Design Research Artefacts (designntransfer, Berlin University of the Arts) expanded on how material forms can communicate tacit, situated knowledge.

In 2023, Body and Space Relations (Artaddress, Oakville, and Textile Museum of Borås, Sweden) investigated the embodied relationship between

movement, material, and environment, while Diasporic Bodies (ArtLab Centre, Western University, 2024) delved into the intersections of body, memory, and migration. These explorations have culminated in the current edition DRAFTS 6: Mapping Diasporic Identities (Grebel Gallery, Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, 2025–26), which extends the dialogue on displacement, hybridity, and belonging through the lens of diasporic experience.

Through these evolving iterations, DRAFTS has emerged as a living platform for artistic research, one that values collaboration, critical reflection, and the ongoing dialogue between making and knowing. It continues to foster cross-cultural and interdisciplinary exchange, affirming the artefacts potential as a form of living inquiry.

This exhibition brings together six artists whose practices span painting, sculpture, installation, video, and multimedia storytelling. Each draws on personal histories, cultural heritage, and lived experiences in the diaspora to create works that question conventional ideas of identity and belonging. Their art reflects on themes such as displacement, resilience, gender, memory, and cultural hybridity, offering alternative narratives that challenge dominant perspectives. Through diverse materials and approaches, these artists invite viewers to consider how stories are carried. Aligned with the Grebel Gallery’s mandate to explore peace and artistic expression, DRAFTS 6 – Mapping Diasporic Identities approaches art as a catalyst for empathy, dialogue, and coexistence. It challenges singular understandings of culture and identity, offering multiplicity and shared experience as pathways toward collective understanding and peace.

As both an exhibition and research project, DRAFTS 6 embodies the spirit of the DRAFTS initiative, embracing the unfinished, the fluid, and the speculative as fertile grounds for encounter and reflection. It stands as a testament to the transformative power of art to bridge geographies, connect experiences, and map the evolving landscapes of belonging.

Soheila Esfahani and Faseeh Saleem

PARTICIPATING ARTISTS

Tazeen Qayyum

www.tazeenqayyum.com

Faseeh Saleem

www.faseehsaleem.com

Sumaira Tazeen

www.ststudio.ca

Wen Li

www.wen-art.com

JJ Lee

www.jjlee.format.com

Paria Shahverdi

www.pariashahverdi.com

Tazeen Qayyum

Qayyum has been developing an ongoing body of work that adopts the cockroach as the central motif, creating intricate installation patterns that cover large surfaces, such as building facades and interior walls, as well as self-contained sculptures and paintings. Generally branded for evoking abjection and repulsion, the cockroach motif in her work serves as a social commentary on how, in today's war-driven and hate-filled environment, the value of human life diminishes due to discrimination and political intolerance; yet it also narrates everyday human stories of resilience and triumph over adversity. Drawing from complex issues of belonging and displacement within her socio-political context, Qayyum's practice navigates notions of identity and social participation while living in the diaspora.

For this exhibition, Qayyum creates a sculptural installation that employs her cockroach motif in a concentric pattern, symbolizing endurance and continuance as we navigate the social and political complexities of our time.



Infiltration
2025
Laser-cut acrylic
48 in. diam. x Ht 5 in.

Faseeh Saleem

Through this evolving archive, the project questions the act of selection: what do we carry with us, and what gets left behind? In the process of relocation, certain objects become repositories of memory, while others are discarded or forgotten. This tension between remembrance and erasure lies at the heart of diasporic identity, inviting reflection on how material culture can both preserve and disrupt narratives of belonging. This project traces a personal and collective journey of migration across three continents, exploring how identity is shaped, remembered, and reimagined through objects. Born and raised in Pakistan, the shalwar kameez, worn daily and deeply embedded in cultural and national symbolism, becomes an anchor of belonging. Alongside the Pakistani flag, it forms a visual and emotional vocabulary of home. As the journey continues to Sweden, the Dala horse, a traditional carved and painted wooden figure, emerges as a poignant memory and emblem of a new, unfamiliar place. These symbolic objects transform into research artifacts, carrying layered meanings that transcend borders.



Objects in Transit (series)
2025
Kameez (shirt), Shalwar (trouser)
Cotton fabric

Faseeh Saleem



Objects in Transit (series)
2025
Installation
Metal pins, textile waistcoat



Objects in Transit (series)
2025
Dala Horse
Traditional carved and painted wooden figure, print on archival paper

Sumaira Tazeen

“(Dis)Entangle” is a visual exploration of the intricate and often invisible bonds that form within the confines of marriage, particularly when those bonds are rooted in emotional abuse. Through this work, Tazeen seeks to unravel the complexities of love, dependency, and power dynamics that entangle individuals in relationships where the lines between care and control blur.

The title “(Dis)Entangle” reflects the dual process of unraveling and disentangling oneself from the web of emotional manipulation while also acknowledging the lingering threads that continue to bind, even as one attempts to break free. It speaks to the simultaneous experience of being caught and trying to escape, where the process of healing involves both undoing and rebuilding.

In this video piece, Tazeen uses symbolism and duality to represent the cyclical nature of emotional abuse. Delicate threads, tangled and knotted, represent the subtle yet powerful ways in which words and actions can bind and restrict, trapping one in a loop of doubt, fear, and dependency. The patterns are repetitive, reflecting the insidious nature of emotional abuse, where hurt is often hidden beneath layers of routine and normalcy.

“(Dis)Entangle” is not just a depiction of struggle but also a testament to resilience. It honours the strength required to confront the painful realities of emotional abuse, to recognize one’s own entrapment, and to begin the journey toward liberation. Through this work, Tazeen hopes to offer a space for reflection and a sense of solidarity to those who have faced similar struggles, while also shedding light on an issue that often remains unseen and unspoken.



(Dis)Entangle
2024
MP4 Video Edited on Final Cut Pro
4min and 45sec

Wen Li

As a first-generation Chinese Canadian artist, Li investigates the strategies employed by many diasporic communities to negotiate the “in-betweenness” they experience in their daily lives. “In-betweenness” refers to the circumstance of existing between one’s original culture and a new culture, a scenario that people in the diaspora consistently experience. Li’s artwork series “Names” stresses such negotiations from a perspective of lived experience and investigates how naming becomes a powerful cultural negotiation strategy.

When a Chinese person comes to Canada, their official name is written in the English alphabet but is based on Chinese phonetics. Although composed of English letters, this name is usually meaningless and unfamiliar in English, and its original pronunciation is typically lost. In Chinese culture, and in many others, a person’s first name conveys a multitude of meanings, including references to ancestors, birthplace, and ethnic, cultural, and historical information. The translated names often subvert these meanings, leaving only partial phonetic similarities; nevertheless, these altered names appear on all formal documents in Canada. For Chinese diasporic communities, choosing an English name as a preferred name at school and in the workplace has been a common practice, with this English name contributing to a person’s identity in the new cultural environment. This new name is selected for various reasons; convenience of pronunciation, relocation adjustment, and cultural adaptation are among the popular ones. The pair of names (translated official name and preferred English name) forms a hybrid identity, and naming becomes a negotiating mechanism between the two cultures.

Li collects pairs of names from real people and, with their permission, print the pairs on the opposite side of blank business cards in the artwork. Influenced by Chinese philosophy, the artwork presents a restrained yet firm voice through a minimalistic approach.



Names
2024
Installation, Printed business cards, acrylic base, table
Variable

JJ Lee

“Detail, In My Yesterday, Chapter 2” is one part of a larger installation project that explores family memory, migration, and everyday life through drawing and found materials. At its centre is “Dad and Di Goo (2022)”, a conté chalk drawing of the artist’s father and his sister as children in China around 1934. The drawing is made on brown wrapping paper found in the attic, inside an old laundry bag from the artist’s grandfather’s laundry business. This paper was originally used to wrap clean laundry. Its reuse connects domestic work to family history and the passing down of memory through ordinary materials.

Behind the drawing is a freestanding cardboard screen covered on both sides with vinyl wallpaper designed by the artist (Screen, 2023–2025). One side, printed in blue and white, repeats drawings made by the artist from her own family archives, including portraits and household objects. The other side features orange and white wallpaper based on drawings from the 1970s. The patterns reference toile wallpaper but replace decorative European scenes with visual fragments of family and community life.

In front of the drawing are two wooden stools made by the artist’s grandfather, a vintage red metal thermos that belonged to her grandmother, and a framed black-and-white photograph that the drawing references. These objects link the installation to the artist’s family and to shared experiences of work, care, and adaptation.

“Detail, In My Yesterday, Chapter 2” is a reimagined fragment of the larger installation originally presented at the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 2023. Repositioned in a new context and form, this quieter iteration opens a more intimate space for reflection—on memory, silence, and what is carried forward. It invites viewers to encounter the past not as fixed history, but as something still unfolding.



Dad and Di Goo, drawing of artist’s father and his sister as children in China circa 1934: conte chalk on found laundry paper, dimensions 30” X 40” (framed), 2022

Screen, Freestanding cardboard screen with vinyl wallpapers designed by artist, both sides, 102” (fully extended) x 72” high, 2023–2025

Vintage red metal thermos 15” h x 5” diameter, date unknown, mid-century

Framed print of photograph, 5” x 7”, date unknown, mid-century

Wooden stool 19” x 6” x 7”, date unknown, early 1900’s

Wooden stool 18” x 20” x 12”, date unknown, mid-century

Paria Shahverdi



Suppression #2
2025
Dimension: 84" x 64"
Painting

“Suppression #2” extends Shahverdi’s ongoing exploration of power, gender, and the lingering architectures of violence. The work presents a sculptural-visual form derived from the heavy arms of industrial machinery—figures that both deconstruct and construct. This duality metaphorically embodies patriarchal societies, where the same mechanisms that build societal structures also enforce systems that dictate women’s rights and reduce them to second-class citizens.

In the process of creating “Suppression #2” Shahverdi developed a sculptural form inspired by the mechanical arms of heavy machinery—forms that simultaneously embody force and fragility. These arms deconstruct and reconstruct everything around them, acting as instruments of both creation and domination. The resulting structure emerges as a suppression form layered atop multiple visual and conceptual strata, symbolizing the weight of oppressive systems that continue to press upon women’s bodies, histories, and voices.

Through this work, she investigates how the aesthetics of industrial power can be reinterpreted as metaphors for systemic suppression. The machinery’s arms, stripped of their utilitarian purpose, become abstracted figures of control—extensions of authority that seem to both uphold and crush the layers beneath them. The composition intentionally oscillates between aggression and balance, resistance and surrender, capturing the tension between the societal forces that shape and constrain feminine identity. “Suppression #2” functions not only as a sculptural entity but also as a spatial narrative. Its visual language evokes the machinery of progress while simultaneously questioning who benefits from that progress and at what cost. The accumulation of materials and textures—echoing industrial density and human vulnerability—invites viewers to confront the physical and psychological weight of suppression.

EXHIBITION OPENING

Oct 22, 2025







2019
PAKISTAN FLAG
Pinned to belonging
A nation held in a
brooch pin

2022
Dala Horse
Dalachäst
Symbol of good luck
A strength of belonging



Material juxtaposition
Drape
Wrap
Conical
On hand mint









ABEL GALLERY

DRAFTS 6
MAPPING DIASPORIC IDENTITIES

please
sign
the
guest
book

Thank you
Francesca Patterson and the
Patterson Rozzee Family Foundation
for supporting this exhibit



Tazeen Qayyum (she/her) is a Pakistani-Canadian, multidisciplinary artist. Trained as a miniature painter of South Asian and Persian traditions, Qayyum continues to explore new materials and processes through drawing, installation, sculpture, video and performance. Drawing from complex issues of belonging and displacement within a socio-political context, her art is a way for her to navigate identity and beliefs living in the diaspora. Qayyum's work has been exhibited across the globe and is included in the collections of the Royal Ontario Museum, Canada; Art Mill Museum, Qatar; Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa; TD Canada Trust Permanent Collection, Toronto; Welt Museum, Vienna; Doris McCarthy Gallery, University of Toronto, Canada; Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pengzhou, China; National Gallery of Amman, Jordan; and National Art Gallery, Nepal. Along with her artistic practice, Qayyum teaches workshops in traditional miniature painting. She co-founded Art Address in 2018, an interactive space for artistic discourse in Oakville. She currently serves as a member of the Arts Council, Oakville Trafalgar Memorial Hospital, and has previously served on the Board of Directors, Oakville Galleries and the Advisory Board, Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto. Qayyum received her BFA in Visual Arts from the National College of Arts Lahore, Pakistan in 1996 and currently lives and works in Oakville, Canada.

Faseeh Saleem is a Pakistani-Canadian interdisciplinary artist based in Oakville, Ontario. Working at the intersection of art, material inquiry, and embodied research, his practice spans drawing, installation, sculpture, and video. Central to his work are contemporary socio-political themes such as memory, identity, migration, and belonging. His practice explores alternative conceptions of the body and investigates how knowledge is produced through material and process-based approaches. This inquiry is deeply rooted in his doctoral research; he completed his PhD in artistic research at the Swedish School of Textiles, University of Borås, in 2024. He has exhibited internationally at respected institutions including Artlab Gallery, Western University, London (Canada), Richmond Hill Public Library (Canada), Textile Museum of Borås (Sweden), the 1st International Art Triennial UFNA (Lithuania), Berlin University of the Arts (Germany), and KHOJ Studios (India), among others. These experiences have allowed him to engage with diverse audiences and expand his artistic dialogue across cultures and disciplines.

Sumaira Tazeen is a Canadian visual artist, educator, and curator of Pakistani origin. She completed her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Miniature Painting and Sculpture at the National College of Arts in Lahore in 1996. Since then, her work has been featured in numerous group and solo exhibitions across South Asia, the United States, Canada, Europe, and the Middle East. Notably, her art has been presented to esteemed figures such as the late Queen Elizabeth II and Queen Rania of Jordan, and it is included in various international public and private art collections. Recently, her paintings were acquired by the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), Canada, for its Global South Asia collection. Throughout her career, Tazeen has received several national and international accolades, including the Haji Muhammad Sharif Award for Miniature Painting in 1996, the Charles Wallace Trust Fellowship in 2004, and a scholarship from the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) for 2003–2004. Additionally, she has been awarded Ontario Arts Council project grants for Visual Artists in 2014, 2016, 2022, and 2023. She has participated in notable artist workshops, including the Vasl Artist Workshop in 2001, and completed a residency at the Living Arts Centre in Mississauga in 2009. In 2018, she was honoured as the Artist in Residence for the City of Kitchener.

Wen Li is a multi-media artist from Waterloo, Ontario and is currently pursuing her MFA at Western University. She received her BFA from the University of Waterloo. Her artwork has been featured in both solo and group exhibitions since 2021. She has received several awards in juried exhibitions since 2022, and multiple grants from the Ontario Art Council between 2023 and 2025. In 2024, Wen was awarded the Arts Awards of Waterloo Region in the “Emerging Artist” category. Wen's minimalism approach in her artwork is deeply influenced by her Chinese background. By simplifying the format, she purposely creates space for unpredictability and allows contingencies to emerge from our thoughts, bodies, and environments. Her engineering experience in China and fine art training in Canada have enabled her to explore cultural hybridity from a unique angle, blending multiple perspectives in her art practice. Her research at Western University is specifically focusing on cultural translation and cultural negotiation.

JJ Lee, born and raised in Halifax, NS, is the daughter of Chinese and Hong Kong immigrants. Through mixed-media paintings and drawing installations, Lee explores the hyphen between identities and representations that result from colonization and immigration. For over 30 years, she has exhibited in public institutions and artist-run centers across the country, winning multiple grants and awards both for her individual work and The Drawing Board collective. Her artwork is in both Canadian and American public and private collections. Recently, her highly lauded exhibition, "In My Yesterday" at the Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 in Halifax, NS, traces her family's multi-generational emigration from China to the Maritimes. Lee won the top award Journalistic Excellence (Print Category) from the Canadian Ethnic Media Association and Silver for One-of-a-Kind Storytelling from the National Magazine Awards for her work featured in Canada's History Magazine in 2023. JJ Lee is a tenured Associate Professor, Contemporary Issues of Representation at OCAD University. In 2022, she received OCAD University's Price Teaching Excellence Award. She currently is Acting Chair, Contemporary Drawing and Painting program. She is represented by Prow Gallery in Halifax, NS, and Gallery on Queen in Fredericton, NB.

Paria Shahverdi was born in Tehran, Iran, where she earned her first degree from the Fine Arts University. In 2004, she immigrated to Canada, where her artistic practice flourished. Her drawings were selected annually for the Toronto Annual Drawing Exhibition, marking her early recognition in Canada's art scene. In 2016 and 2018, Shahverdi presented solo exhibitions featuring her distinctive mixed-media series, earning critical attention and public acclaim. In 2017, she was awarded a grant from the Ontario Arts Council to support her second body of work, which received further recognition through interviews on CBC Radio and CBC Television. Her artwork, deeply rooted in personal and socio-political narratives, has been exhibited widely across Canada and Iran. Shahverdi pursued her academic journey alongside her professional career, earning a second Bachelor of Fine Arts degree as an honorary student at York University. She later completed her Master of Fine Arts at York University, where her research focused on creation as a form of individual and critical artistic practice. Her work often explores themes of identity, displacement, resilience, and the lived experiences of women, drawing from her personal history and cross-cultural perspectives. Today, Shahverdi continues to create, exhibit, and research as

an independent artist, committed to producing work that bridges personal experience with broader cultural and political dialogues. Her practice integrates painting, drawing, and installation, inviting viewers into immersive narratives that reflect on freedom, struggle, and transformation.

Soheila Esfahani (curator) and Faseeh Saleem (art director) would like to express their gratitude to the team at Grebel Gallery.

Soheila Esfahani is a visual artist and Assistant Professor at Western University. Her research and art practice navigates the terrains of cultural translation in order to explore the processes involved in cultural transfer and transformation and questions displacement, dissemination, and reinsertion of culture. She is a recipient of grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Region of Waterloo Arts Fund. Her work has been exhibited across Canada and internationally including at the Aga Khan Museum, Canadian Cultural Centre Paris, Doris McCarthy Gallery, Cambridge Art Galleries among others, and collected by various public and private institutions, including the Canada Council's Art Bank. Her coin design for the Royal Canadian Mint's Celebrating Canada's Diversity Collection was released in January 2024.



Kindred Credit Union
**CENTRE FOR PEACE
ADVANCEMENT**

