

MEMORY IS THE SEAMSTRESS

Curated by Murtaza Vali

Hangama Amiri, Cian Dayrit, Melissa Joseph,
Lebohang Kganye, Jagdeep Raina and Raed Yassin

18 September – 3 November 2023

“Memory is the seamstress, and a capricious one at that. Memory runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither. We know not what comes next, or what follows after.”

– Virginia Woolf, 1928

In this famous sentence from her novel *Orlando: A Biography*, Virginia Woolf proposed textile work as a metaphor for the unpredictable processes of memory, its ability to suture together the disparate fragments of daily life into a narrative fabric that can feel both connected and disjointed. This equation between memory and textile has been further complicated by and through the medium of photography, which has profoundly transformed our relationship to memory, making it easier for us to record experiences for posterity while simultaneously weakening our natural faculty to remember. Showcasing the diversity within textile arts, this exhibition brings together artists using a variety of techniques—from applique and felting to hand and machine embroidery—to translate the photographic into fabric, each approach bringing not just different material but also imagistic possibilities. Mixing the personal with the political, it juxtaposes artists who draw on the family photo album to unpack experiences of displacement and loss, with those who excavate personal and collective archives to interrogate colonial and postcolonial histories of violence and oppression.

Johannesburg-based **Lebohang Kganye**’s practice frequently draws on her family album, using photographic cutouts derived from those images in installations and videos that narrate both personal and collective history. The exhibition opens with Kganye’s first ever textile series. Entitled *Mosebetsi wa Dirithi*, it introduces us to members of her matrilineal family, who greet us like in a hall of ancestors. Using applique, Kganye restricts herself to swatches of black, white and grey cloth, so as to stay true to her source images. Isolated from their original contexts, these larger-than-life portraits emphasize presence, both physical and historical, countering the violence of apartheid’s systematic erasures.

Afghan-Canadian artist **Hangama Amiri** uses a similar technique but embraces color and pattern in her ongoing *Reminiscences* series, based on photographs exchanged between her parents during time spent apart, her father supporting his displaced family by working in Scandinavia while her mother raised them in Tajikistan. While the images—of missed birthdays, of loneliness—throb with the heartache of separation from family and homeland, by enlarging them and gradually putting them together using pieces of fabric, Amiri begins to recover familial intimacies lost due to conflict and displacement. Transcending the limited affective potential of the original photographs, the time, care, and attention required to build these textile translations provides a sort of solace, their pliable layers holding space for healing. A soft sculpture, based on a bag of sugarcoated almonds, accompanies the wall pieces. Often sent by loved ones, such commonplace food items, hard to find far from home, help collapse the distance, fill in the absence, if only for as long as it takes to finish a bag.

Hailing from a family of Lebanese tailors, **Raed Yassin** uses his memories, of both the original event and of the photographs that documented them, to resurrect a family archive lost due to repeated displacement. These scenes of gatherings and celebrations—a

birthday, a beach picnic, a Christmas eve—are machine embroidered on factory-made fabrics, making them feel simultaneously personal and universal, intimate yet mass-produced, a duality that speaks to the fundamental impossibility of ever recuperating the lost original, be it photograph or memory.

New York-based **Melissa Joseph**'s felted scenes are created through compression, rather than stitch or weave. Resulting in flattened, almost liquid, forms and softened edges that materially mimic memory's imprecision, they translate the indexicality of a photograph into a subjective impression. Joseph frames these portraits and vignettes within found objects, whose function and significance are not immediately apparent. The film reel-like shape of a vintage stone appam or idli maker breaks up a portrait of her late father. An industrial glove cutter recalls histories of labor. Conjoined into a square, a pair of triangular wooden cases juxtaposes similar scenes of gathering from both sides of her biracial family. Commonly used to hold and display the flag draped over the coffin of a fallen American soldier, they speak to a familial history of military service.

Part of a series entitled *Fever Dreams of Progress*, **Cian Dayrit**'s wall hangings feature archival photographs dating back to the period of the American colonization of the Philippines. These images literally ground the work in history, which Dayrit then annotates with embroidered text and illustrations, drawing attention to the environmental and human costs of capitalist progress. The first, which shows a row of peasant bodies lying in a field, critiques neoliberal developmental policies, which fail to preserve agricultural and forest land instead parceling it out to extractive, destructive, and profit-driven industries, as Dayrit's annotations highlight. The second addresses the harmful legacy of the so-called "Green Revolution," a push to industrialize agriculture across the Global South through the adoption of genetically modified high-yield seeds, chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and intensive irrigation and drainage technologies. In Dayrit's work, peasants tilling the field are shrouded in red barbed wire as green syringes rain down on them like bombs, the chemical plant (cynically labelled "research institute") looming in the background their most likely source.

Promising increased productivity and profits for the Western multinationals that developed them, these industrial innovations have had devastating effects on the environment, leeching the land of nutrients, depleting and polluting the water table, harming biodiversity, and leading to drought, starvation, and mass suicides. Examining similar struggles in Punjab, **Jagdeep Raina**'s intricate and expressive embroideries adapt a traditional style practiced in the region called phulkari. Fast disappearing and made collectively using organic, hand-dyed materials, the shapes and patterns in phulkari are composed of parallel darning stitches, and Raina frequently includes swatches of traditional motifs, sometimes with added text, at the bottom of his works. The phulkari technique gives the central image of his embroideries the look of a densely shaded or colored-in drawing. Inspired by playwright Satinder Chohan's photography, they include scenes of farmers working the fields or a close up of a pair of hands picking cotton. Photographs appear as objects in other works, held up by those who have lost loved ones, mourning their deaths while also bearing witness to the injustice and greed that caused it.

Though distinct in terms of image and technique these are all memory works, engaging in necessary acts of commemoration and remembrance, countering the instantaneity of photographic capture, and the amnesia it paradoxically enables. Instead, the gradual accumulative labor of textile work reintroduces the complex and unpredictable textures of memory, creating room for imagination and play, for affect and critique, softening the sharp contours of an indexical record into a collage, an impression, an annotation, a picture, "and a capricious one at that."

Memory is the Seamstress is the first in a series of exhibitions curated by Murtaza Vali for Green Art Gallery showcasing contemporary approaches to textile and fiber art.