

# Embodied Engagements

The artwork of  
Jamelie Hassan &  
Soheila Esfahani  
in *Translations*

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ART GALLERY



Figure 1. Jamelie Hassan, *Boutros Al Armenian/Mediterranean Modern* (1997/1998), salvaged oil painting on drywall from the ceiling installation by the artist in 1998 at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa presented with projection of filmwork (8 minutes)  
Collection of the artist  
Photo credit: Sarmad Almouallem

**AS CURATORS AND MUSEUM PROFESSIONALS**, we often speak about the gallery as a place of dialogue, and the desire for visitors to engage with the artworks through embodied participation – being present – and by bringing their personal knowledge and experiences as tools for interpretation. The point at which the viewer meets the artwork and engages with it is an integral point of cultural translation and meaning making. The two-person exhibition *Translations* includes a selection of artworks by Jamelie Hassan and Soheila Esfahani that address the translation of aspects of Arabic and Iranian cultures into the Canadian context. The artworks invite varied acts of translation, and represent a diverse array of mediums and approaches including: video, painting, mixed media sculpture, and installation. Through a discussion of two specific works – *Made in Iran* by Soheila Esfahani and *Boutros al Armenian/ Mediterranean Modern* by Jamelie Hassan – I will examine the integral role of the audience in meaning making, and the way in which acts of cultural translation occur.

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, 20th century Russian literary theorist and philosopher of language, artwork is a world that is animated and “lives only by coming into contact with another.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the visitor plays an integral role in making meaning through the act of engagement. The artworks become sites of intersection between the artist and the viewer, brought to life through presence and participation.

When a viewer enters the *Translations* exhibition, or any exhibition in which the artists communicate an alternative worldview, culture, or language system they encounter two forms of translation, the translation of experience and the translation of culture. According to Homi K. Bhabha, scholar and critical theorist, “Translation is the performative nature of cultural communication... And the sign of translation continuously tells the different times and spaces between cultural authority and its performative practices. The time of translation consists in that movement of meaning...”<sup>2</sup> In the *Translations* exhibition the audience will encounter artworks created through the artists’ acts of cultural communication, the performance of their lived experience, and the interrogation of power structures commanding history and language. The viewers’ performed experiences of engagement will guide them

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1 Bakhtin, Mikhail, “Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences,” *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Vern W. McGee Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006, 163.

2 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, New York, NY: Routledge, 1994. 20.

to create meaning and a better understanding of the differing contexts from which the artists come. The artworks are constructed as negotiations, “where cultures meet and mingle in the process of cross cultural dialogue and translation.”<sup>3</sup> The audience is tasked with asking questions and moving towards a better understanding of cultural symbols and perspectives outside of their realm of experience.

A third space arises at the intersection of the artist’s translation of culture and the viewer’s translation of experience. Homi K. Bhabha originated the concept in his seminal text *The Location of Culture* from 1994. It is a place of dialogue that stretches across subjects and disciplines where the meanings and symbols of culture are not homogeneous or fixed. Known signs can be “translated, rehistoricized, and read anew.”<sup>4</sup> Signs are recognizable symbols of language and culture that are understood as having a fixed definition. Soheila Esfahani applies third space theory to the way she thinks about her art practice and the importance of audience engagement: “I have departed my original home (Iran) and now live in the third space, identifying as neither Canadian nor Iranian, but someone in-between. Since the third space hinges on an act of negotiation, the audience’s interaction with my art is crucial. Viewers’ unique experiences and cultures inform their “reading” of the work, thus allowing them to enter the third space by engaging in cultural translation: the viewers carry their culture across onto my art and vice versa.”<sup>5</sup>

Jamelie Hassan and Soheila Esfahani disrupt set assumptions of language and history, inserting their own interpretations to create a continuum between the past and the present, the here and there. The effect of the artists’ work is to challenge the western, dominant authorities of history and systems of language, symbolic and pictorial, which include ornamentation. They are creating within the third space, and pronounce their knowledgeability and authority by exercising their ability to redefine and rehistoricize.

The elements of history that are used to create a sense of the past are often fragmentary, and subjectively arranged. In *Boutros al Armenian/ Mediterranean Modern*, Jamelie Hassan proceeds from a tumultuous

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3 Jordan, Miriam, “Chronotopic Bodies and the We of Aesthetic Discourse,” from *The Films and Videos of Jamelie Hassan*. PLATFORM: Centre for Photographic and Digital Arts and Art Gallery of Windsor in Association with Blue Medium Press, 2010. 38.

4 Homi K. Bhabha, “Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences,” *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, Routledge, New York 2006, p. 155-157. 156.

5 Soheila Esfahani, “Artist Statement” Accessed June 2020. <https://soheila.ca/project/trans/>.



Figure 2. Jamelie Hassan, film still from *Boutros al Armenian/ Mediterranean Modern*, U-matic video, 7:39, 1997.

family event, grainy video footage, and a hazily remembered figure of an exiled Armenian painter Boutros (Bedros in Armenian) to create a moving character examination. She uses her own imagination and ideas to fill in the story: "I was no longer speaking from the position of family history but that the work had taken a turn of its own...This refugee of the Armenian catastrophe fully occupied my mind and I continued my dialogue through our common labour, the act of painting, which eventually gave voice and life to this fellow artist...In repainting Boutros's paintings I believe I came to understand him, his generosity and his pain, his patient endurance in the face of his tragedy, his alliance with others and their mutual reciprocity."<sup>6</sup> When you watch the film *Boutros al Armenian* you are watching a reassembling of history that is both part of Jamelie Hassan's family history and herself, connecting the past and the present. She engages with the experience of Boutros through the making of the film and through the act of repainting a portrait medallion of a woman, lost when the house in Kar'oun, Lebanon was modernized (Figure 1). The film reveals the destructive aspects that accompany modernization, mirrored by the grainy quality of the

6 Jamelie Hassan, "Not Laura Secord," from *The Films and Videos of Jamelie Hassan*. PLATFORM: Centre for Photographic and Digital Arts and Art Gallery of Windsor in Association with Blue Medium Press, 2010. 197.



Figure 3. Jamelie Hassan, film still from *Boutros al Armenian/ Mediterranean Modern*, U-matic video, 7:39, 1997.

decaying videotape, the static and skipping.<sup>7</sup> But, it also reveals the deep engagement that Hassan experienced with the painter's story and how she was able to answer to that experience through her work. The way she responded recalls Mikhail Bakhtin's declaration in *Art and Answerability*: "I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in art, so that everything I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life."<sup>8</sup>

When the viewer comes in contact with *Boutros al Armenian/ Mediterranean Modern* they watch the images of past and present interwoven. Part of the work of meaning making is to ask the questions: "What is real? What is imagined? What is historical? What is modern? Whose voice is that telling the story? To be present with the artwork, and to interrogate both the presentation of history and stories from history; to question the difference between fiction and documentary. The viewer must translate their own experiences and the responses of their senses to the story of an Armenian painter before they can come to understand how his story will affect them. He is escaping the Armenian

7 Miriam Jordan, 38.

8 M.M. Bakhtin, Michael Holoquist, Vadim Liapunov, and Kenneth Brostrom. "Art and Answerability," from *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*. Austin: University of Texas, 1990. 1.



genocide in Turkey with only his paintbrush and bucket, and has found refuge in Kar'oun, Lebanon in the home of Hussein Shousher, a merchant who sells fabric from Aleppo and Damascus. Jamelie's maternal grandfather.

Boutros recounts his experience painting in the house that encompasses the family's experience of Ottoman rule, French occupation, birth, and death.<sup>9</sup> The grainy film captures images of the wall and ceiling paintings as Boutros explains their significance. Transposed onto the images are workers participating in the demolition of the interior of the house, presenting a disjuncture in time, and undermining the narrator's story (Figure 3). As the music becomes more intense, moving toward a crescendo, the images of demolition become more frequent, and the places where Boutros described his paintings are exchanged for rubble.

In Soheila Esfahani's collection of small wooden plaques entitled *Made in Iran*, she utilizes language-like glyph forms, motifs and texts gathered from various cultural sources in Canada and Iran<sup>10</sup> (Figure 4). *Made in Iran: The Break in the Tip of the Lotus Leaf* combines "glyph forms based on arabesque designs of the tips of lotus leaves used in illuminated manuscripts" into a set of symbols that look like letters (Figure 5).<sup>11</sup> They are sweeping and graceful stand-ins for language, but will not facilitate the process of translation. When placed next to the grid pattern of motifs and symbols that make up the rest of the work, there is a sense that they could be related, or that one could be used to decipher the other. Soheila sourced the symbols for *Made in Iran* from artists, family, and friends both in Canada and Iran. The symbols range from William Morris design elements, Japanese wallpaper patterns and restaurant names, to graffiti markings found on dumpsters and punctuation.

The plaques are made in the tradition of Persian *moaragh kari*, an ancient technique of inlaying. *Moaragh kari* (wood inlaid working) is the art of substituting different parts of a design with colored pieces of wood and integrating them with each other to decorate the surface of a tableau or wooden understructure.<sup>12</sup> Most of the individual



Figure 5. Soheila Esfahani, *Made in Iran: The Break in the Tip of the Lotus Leaf*, detail, Various types of wood, 4.5" x 6.5" each plaque, 2010.

plaques were crafted by Esfahani's aunt in Iran.<sup>13</sup> The artworks have a complex origin that blurs clear definition. They were fashioned in Iran, from "materials, texts, and meanings" that went through transfers back and forth between Canada and Iran, and have been exhibited in art galleries in Canada.<sup>14</sup> The artist has made these plaques to exist in the third space, in which she reimagines and translates cultural meanings for objects so they are neither Iranian nor Canadian, but exist in a third place where they possess qualities of both. She assumes the creative authority to present symbols and motifs as quasi-linguistic, enunciating her knowledge of the shifting meanings of culture. The audience is presented with a medium and artistic form that is grounded in ancient Persian culture, but that has been imbibed with the perspectives of a

9 Marks, Laura U., "Jamelie Hassan's Archival Encounters, from *The Films and Videos of Jamelie Hassan*. Art Gallery of Windsor, Blue Medium Press, 2010. 24.

10 Soheila Esfahani, "Artist Statement."

11 Ibid.

12 "Moaragh Kari (Wood Inlaid Working)" Isfahan Information Centre. Accessed June, 2020. <https://isfahaninfo.com/moaragh-kari-wood-inlaid-working/>

13 Esfahani, Soheila "Artist Statement," Accessed June, 2020. <https://soheila.ca/project/trans/>.

14 Ibid.



Figure 4. Soheila Esfahani, *Made in Iran*, various types of wood, Installation view, 2010.



Figure 7. Jamelie Hassan, *Internet*, glass mosaic mounted on plywood, 2020. Collection of the artist. Photo Credit: Ron Benner

contemporary maker infusing her work with the lived experiences of both Western and Eastern cultures.

Jamelie Hassan also frequently engages with linguistic forms in her art practice. Unlike the quasi-linguistic lotus forms of Esfahani, Hassan's mosaics represent Arabic words and letters in usage. In both the works *Internet* (Figure 7) and *Habibye, (My love, male) & Habibitee (My love, female)* (Figure 8), the words are ubiquitous and have a fixed and recognizable meaning immediately obvious to Arabic speakers. However, English speakers will see a flowing pattern of linguistic forms not unlike their experience of *Made in Iran: The Break in the Tip of the Lotus Leaf*. The experiences and cultural conditions of the viewers will determine very different immediate responses. *Internet* is taken from a street sign in Morocco and recalls other universal signs met with relief by travellers or those seeking access to the internet. This mosaic gives a side-by-side translation so the viewer can understand the sign's meaning. However, the forms that indicate the word in Arabic are actually a transliteration of the English words, indicating the connection between the spread of new forms of media and the global reach of the English Language. Therefore, there is a disjuncture that occurs when

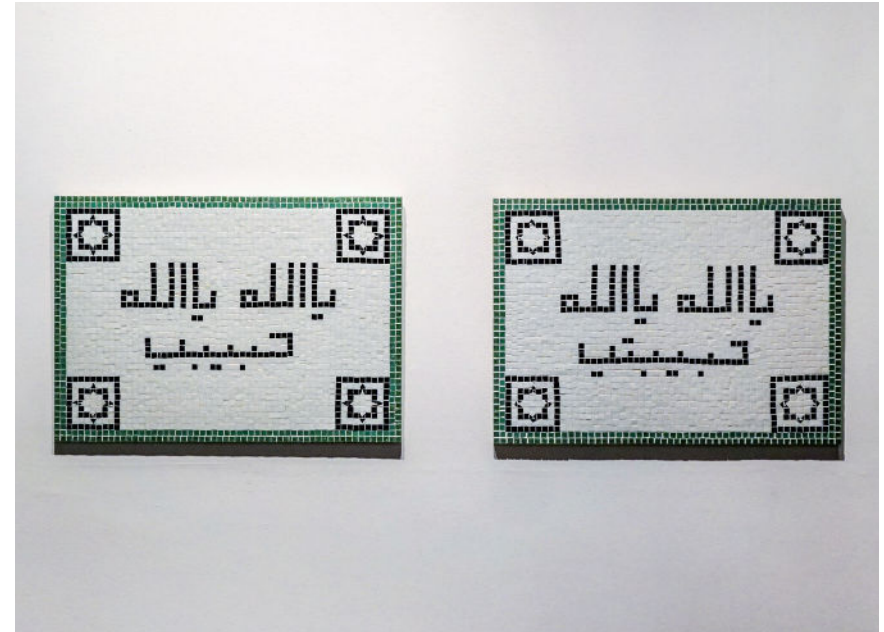


Figure 8. Jamelie Hassan, *Habibye, (My love, male) & Habibitee (My love, female)*, glass mosaic tile mounted on plywood, 2018. Collection of the artist. Photo Credit: The Museum, Kitchener, Ontario

both Arabic and English speakers read the sign. *Habibi* is a common term of affection that translates as "my love". If one meets with the saying and doesn't speak Arabic, they are suddenly welcomed into a world of soft endearments connected with the ongoing history of millions of gestures of friendship, familial and romantic love. The variety of linguistic encounters in *Translations* provide myriad experiences for the forms of translation one can engage in, and for the many resolutions and effects their meanings can enact upon the viewer.

The exhibition *Translations* is about understanding the movement of people and cultures into the Canadian context. More specifically, Soheila Esfahani and Jamelie Hassan draw from aspects of Iranian and Arabic cultures in their artistic practices. How does one share and bring people into a worldview and experiences of life outside their realm of understanding? Art is a powerful vehicle for conducting these acts, but also helping us to better understand the perspectives of the artist and the role that the audience plays. As an art viewer, imagine yourself being an integral part of the process, and answering the call to make meaning and bring your life to bear as you engage in cultural experiences. Being present with all your senses and your understanding not

only brings the art object to life, but it allows the meaning and resonance of that object to take effect upon you. Looking at the artworks presented by these two artists, and the way they speak in relation to one another, also helps us to better understand the perspectives and positions of these artists. Soheila Esfahani so eloquently describes her own experience as being in a third space. She is neither Iranian nor Canadian; her perspective has for better or worse a blending of both. This ability to see additional viewpoints must widen a person's perspective greatly and perhaps make them more empathetic. It can also be lonely existing in a space that is neither here nor there. Imagine how many Canadians exist in that space daily. Let us enter that space through art and cultural connection so we can listen from a position of care and understanding.

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Laura U. Marks, "Jamelie Hassan's Archival Encounters, from *The Films and Videos of Jamelie Hassan*. Art Gallery of Windsor, Blue Medium Press, 2010.





**SOHEILA ESFAHANI** grew up in Tehran, Iran, and moved to Canada in 1992. She received her Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Western Ontario and her BA in Fine Arts from the University of Waterloo. She is an award-winning visual artist and recipient of numerous 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. She is a recipient of 2016 Waterloo Region Arts Awards and was nominated for the Jameel Prize at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, UK in 2015. Her work has been exhibited across Canada and collected by various public and private institutions, including the Canada Council's Art Bank. Currently, she is an Assistant Professor at the Western University and is a member of the Red Head Gallery in Toronto.

[www.soheila.ca](http://www.soheila.ca)



**JAMELIE HASSAN** is a visual artist and activist based in London, Ontario. Since the 1970's, she has exhibited widely in Canada and internationally. She is also active as a lecturer, writer and independent curator and has travelled and worked within Canada and internationally.

In 2001 she received a Governor General's Award in Visual and Media

Arts in recognition of her artistic achievement. She was also acknowledged for her activism, curatorial work and contributions to the artist-run centre movement in Canada.

[www.jameliehassan.ca](http://www.jameliehassan.ca)



Figure 6. Soheila Esfahani, *Made in Iran*, detail, Various types of wood, 4.5" x 6.5" each plaque, 2010.

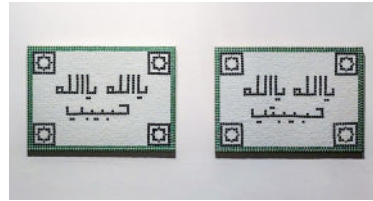








*Internet*, 2020, glass mosaic tile mounted on plywood.



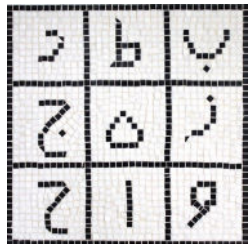
*Habibye, (My love, male) & Habibitee (My love, female)*, 2018, glass mosaic tile mounted on plywood.



*Made in Iran*, 2018, mixed media.



*Found Text: Composition Series*, 2016, hand-cut wood on birch panels.



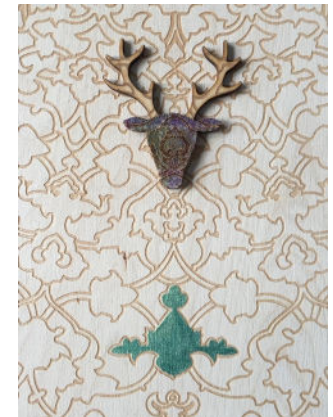
*Magic Square, Talisman (letters)*, 2019-20, glass mosaic tile mounted on plywood.



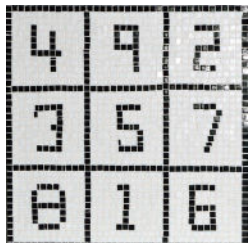
*Al Haq al Canadiyaa*, 2017, mixed media.



*Made in Iran: The Break in the Tip of the Lotus Leaf*, 2018, wood plaques.



*A Trace of the Traceless*, 2009, acrylic and laser etching on collected objects, on wooden panels.



*Magic Square, Talisman (numbers)*, 2019-20, glass mosaic tile mounted on plywood.



*Souvenir of Lebanon Made in Canada*, 2009, cedar.



*Snowball Cafe*, 1919-1920, reproduced vintage photo mounted on board.



*Boutros Al Armenian/Mediterranean Modern*, 1997-1998, Salvaged oil painting on drywall, presented with a projection of filmwork, 8 min.



*Seven Must Have Elements of Willow Pattern: Two Birds, Fence, Weeping Willow, Orange Tree, Boat, Pagoda, Three Men on Bridge (from left to right)*, 2019, glass paint on photograph.



*Birds: Pattern (dis)Placed*, 2019, 3D printer resin.



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Title: Embodied Engagements: The artwork of Jamelie Hassan and Soheila Esfahani in Translations

Format: Other digital

ISBN 978-1-7773039-1-4

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The Campbell River Art Gallery is pleased to present *Translations* a two-person exhibition of Soheila Esfahani and Jamelie Hassan. This exhibition features artworks ranging in media, and investigates the translation of aspects of Arabic and Iranian cultures into the Canadian context and is on view from July 9 to September 2, 2020.

This exhibition was made possible through the generous support we receive from our funding partners and our many members and donors. Thank you for your continued support.

