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2-23 Ascension 24 – 25 Nadia Haji Omar's Visual Territories by Mary Birmingham 26-41 Natural Selection 42-43 CV 44 Colophon

CONTENTS

ASCENSION

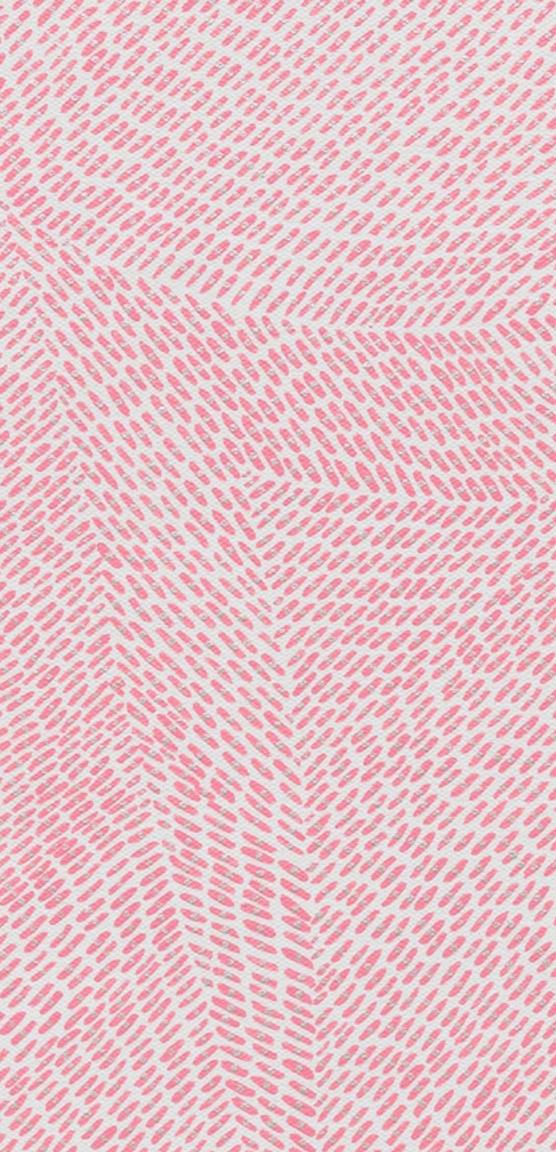
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v (waahid), 2019 Acrylic and dye on canvas 16 × 16 inches (40.64 × 40.64 cm)



۲ (ithnaan), 2019 Acrylic and dye on canvas 16 × 16 inches (40.64 × 40.64 cm)



۳ (thalaatha), 2019 Acrylic and dye on canvas 20 × 20 inches (50.8 × 50.8 cm)





€ (arba'a), 2019 Acrylic and dye on canvas 20 × 20 inches (50.8 × 50.8 cm)

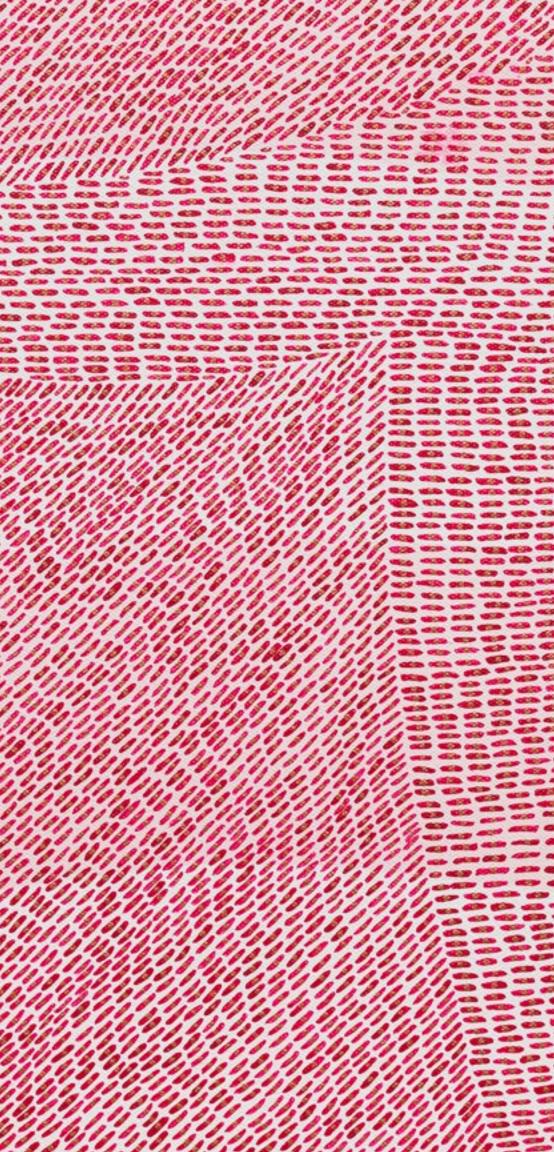


₀ (khamsa), 2019 Acrylic and dye on canvas 24 × 24 inches (60.96 × 60.96 cm)





ז (sitta), 2019 Acrylic and dye on canvas 24 × 24 inches (60.96 × 60.96 cm)







v (saba), 2019 Acrylic and dye on canvas 30 × 30 inches (76.2 × 76.2 cm)





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Nadia Haji Omar: Ascension, curated by Mary Birmingham, Mitzi and Warren Eisenberg Gallery, Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, Summit, NJ, September 27, 2019 – February 9, 2020, courtesy of Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, photo by Etienne Frossard

NADIA HAJI OMAR'S **VISUAL TERRITORIES**

by Mary Birmingham

Nadia Haji Omar is well known for intricate works that explore visual territories of language and place. The artist—whose heritage is Sri Lankan, Indian, and Syrian—was born in Australia, raised in Sri Lanka, and educated in the United States, and this multi-cultural background informs her work. Her study of Sinhalese, Tamil, Arabic, and French led to an ongoing formal and conceptual engagement with these languages in her art practice. She often combines linguistic characters with imagery suggesting landscape, maps, and textile patterns as she attempts to "define something indefinable through abstraction."

Ascension is a series of paintings on canvas representing the seven levels of heaven-a concept common to Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. Haji Omar has based each of the seven paintings on one of the levels of heaven as outlined in Islam and has chosen a color palette that suggests a quality describing each one: The first level of heaven is made of water; the second, of white pearls; the third, of iron, pearls, or dazzling stones; the fourth, of brass or white gold; the fifth, of silver; the sixth, of gold or garnets and rubies; and the seventh, of divine light or emeralds.

Her process is meticulous and painstaking. Using fabric dye to stain the background of each canvas, Haji Omar creates a basic pattern of seven ascending, arced bands, subtly delineated by two alternating colors. She covers each dyed surface with a layer

of densely repeated marks-short lines painted in acrylic, uniform in size and color—and embellishes them with dots of metallic paint. Each painting features a single Arabic numeral from one to seven, set within the field of marks. (These numerals also serve as the paintings' titles.) Haji Omar constructs the numeric shape by changing the direction of the painted lines, orienting them in one direction for the background and a different direction for the characters, while keeping the colors consistent. The contrasting patterns and reflective metallics create fragmented and shimmering surfaces that allude to the infinite.

Haji Omar created the paintings in Ascension for her recent solo exhibition at the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, where they were installed sequentially from right to left. The paintings gradually increase in size from the first to the seventh. Viewers following their path around the gallery metaphorically "ascended" through the layers to reach the seventh heaven.



While working on the Ascension paintings, she also made a series of thirty-two ink drawings titled Natural Selection. Although these works on paper differ from the paintings in their initial source of inspiration and medium, they share a common formal organization—a single, central shape placed within a field of repeated tiny marks.

A deep investigation of color and form, Natural Selection responds to a painting Haji Omar completed in 2015, Deep Sea Topography. Revisiting the earlier work, she isolated and extracted thirty-two of the small, white shapes that populate the painting's map-like surface and arranged them in a loose grid. She repeats this gridded pattern on each drawing, selecting one of the shapes to render at a much larger scale. Viewed as a whole, the grid resembles an alphabet from some ancient indecipherable language.

Haji Omar composes the drawings by employing the same repeated mark—a small, dashed line that she applies over and over, embracing the natural variations and imperfections of this process. Each unique drawing utilizes a different color for the background, the grid, and the highlighted shape. She creates the forms by varying the color and direction of the lines-vertical dashes for the backgrounds and horizontal ones for the individual shapes. This reductive system of mark making suggests the uniform stitches of hand embroidery or the binary structure of weaving-activities involving rhythmic and repetitive hand movements that are often meditative.

As in the Ascension paintings, the patterns established by the opposing colored marks produce optical effects that trick the eye. Some forms appear to float in layers over others, yet a closer look reveals that the backgrounds and the individual shapes exist on the same plane, like interlocking pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. In some drawings, the interaction of color causes visual vibrations that nearly overwhelm the eye, much like the effect of bright sunlight on water. Haji Omar acknowledges that her work has always been deeply connected to her

dreams, and having grown up on the island of Sri Lanka and currently living in coastal Rhode Island, it is not surprising that she often dreams of water. In the language of dreams, water symbolizes deep emotions, the subconscious, and spirituality-ideas that play central roles in her work. One has only to look out Haji Omar's studio window onto the watery expanse of Mt. Hope Bay to understand its omnipresent influence. She is often captivated by the play of sunlight dancing across the water's surface and sometimes captures this phenomenon with her cell phone camera. The shimmering, mutable expanse of sea mirrors the sky, with tiny points of light suggesting the glimmer of heavenly stars. Haji Omar's use of painted metallic dots on the surfaces of the Ascension paintings helps approximate this dazzling visual effect. Thinking metaphorically, perhaps we should view the sea as a kind of two-

way mirror that provides a conceptual link between these two bodies of work. If the Ascension series directs our eyes and thoughts toward the heavens above, Natural Selection suggests a deep dive into a personal and enigmatic space below. This series is particularly self-referential, not only looking back to Deep Sea Topography for imagery, but also concentrating each drawing on one shape pulled from its own internal grid. The paintings and drawings navigate different but equally compelling visual territories. Natural Selection, with its inward focus, offers a contrasting viewpoint to the paintings in Ascension, which look out toward infinity.

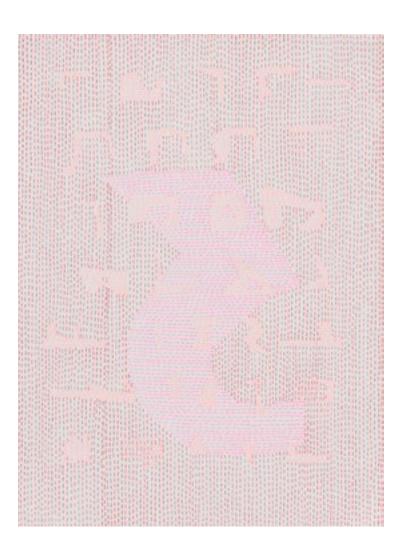
Mary Birmingham is the Curator at the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey in Summit, New Jersey

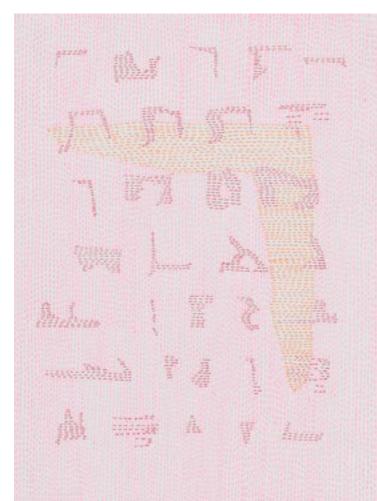
Top Right Artwork: Nadia Haji Omar, Deep Sea Topography, 2015, Acrylic, dye, and ink on canvas, 18 × 14 inches (45.72 × 35.56 cm), photo credit: Jeffrey Sturges

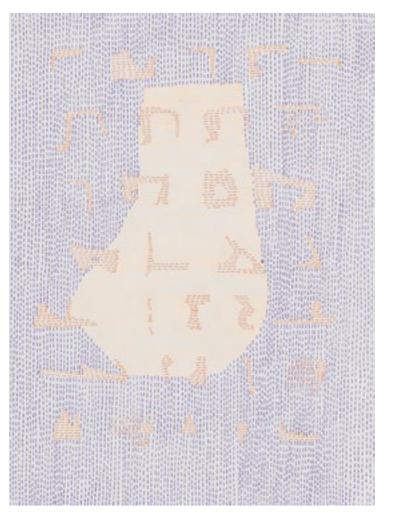


Bottom Left Artwork: Fol 35b Mohammed's Paradise, Miniature from 'The History of Mohammed'. 1030 (gouache & gold on vellum), Persian School, (11th century) / Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, France / © Archives Charmet / Bridgeman Images

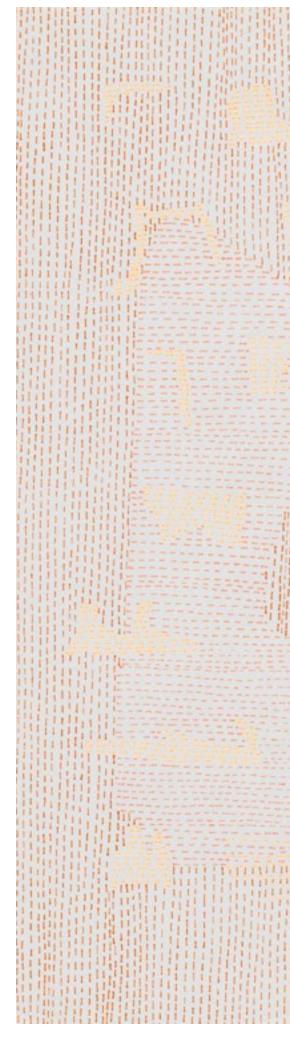
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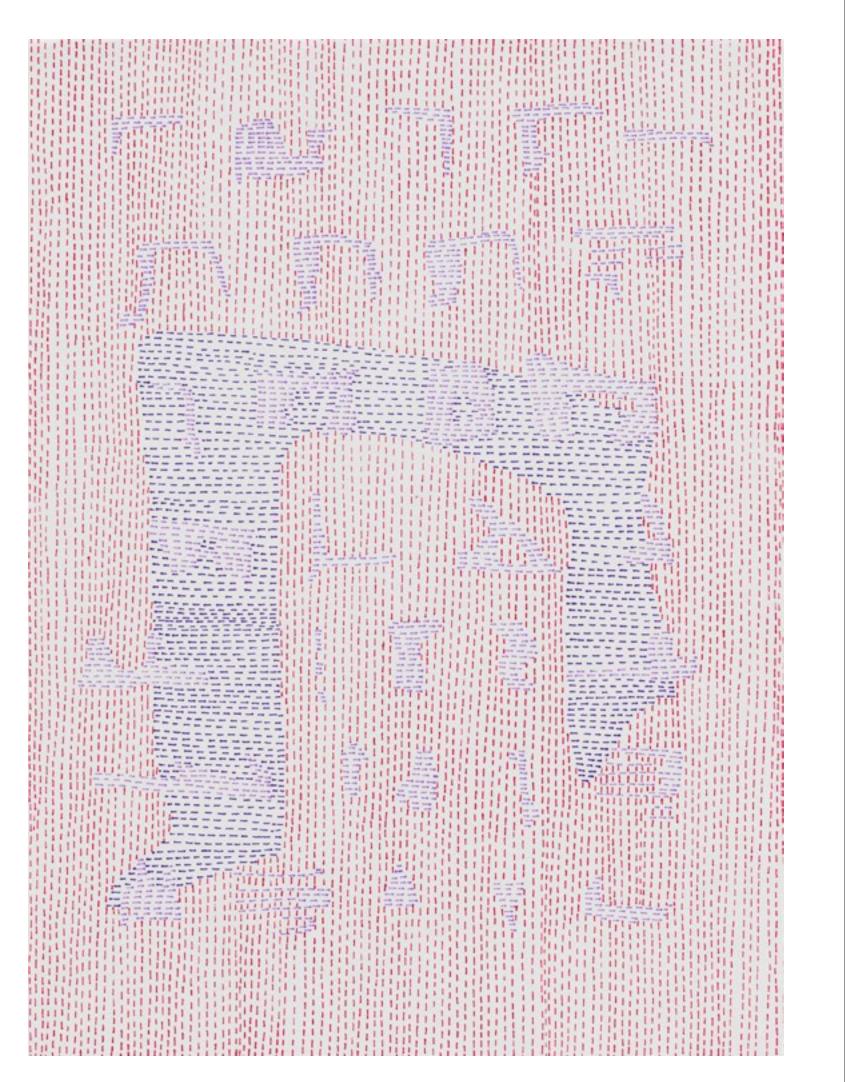




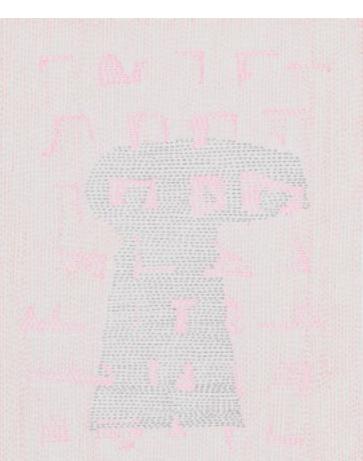




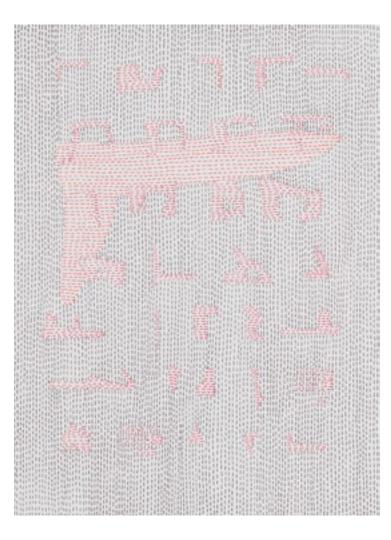
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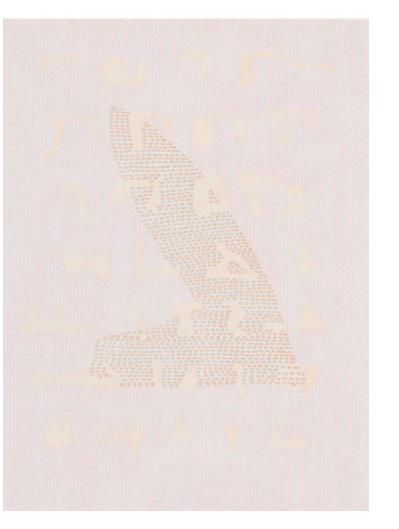






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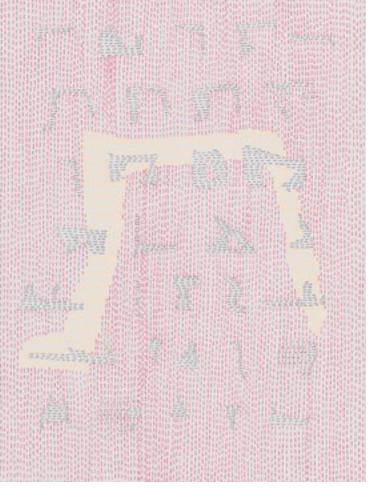


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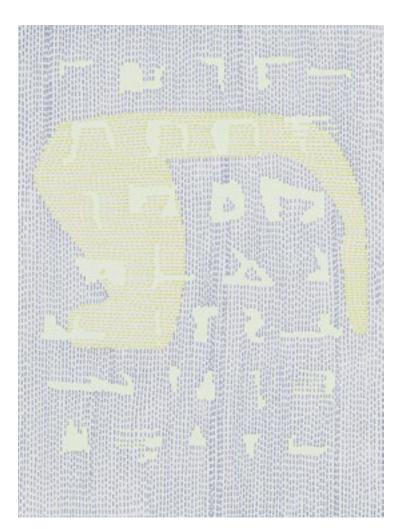


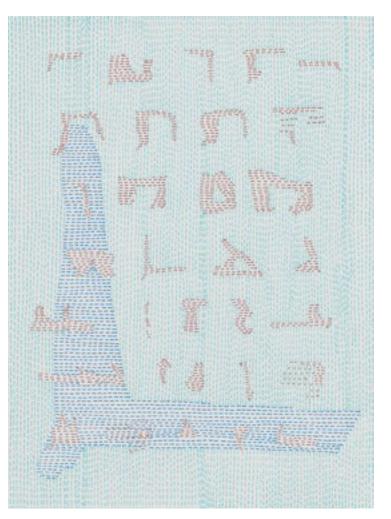
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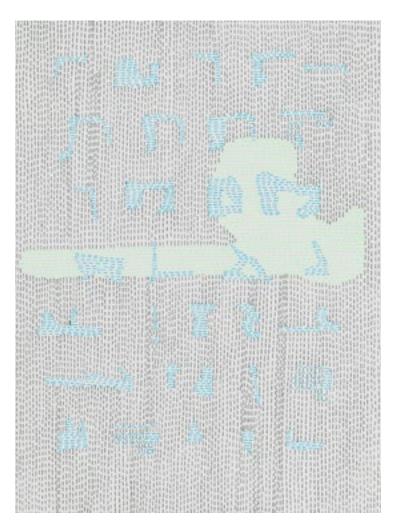


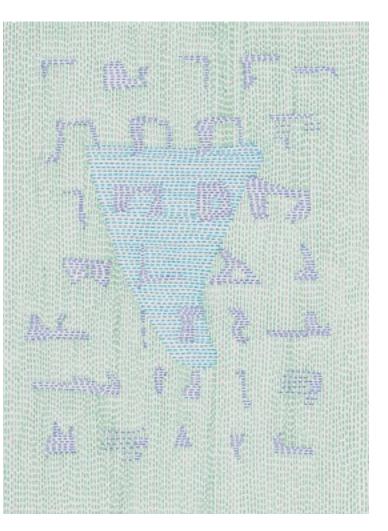


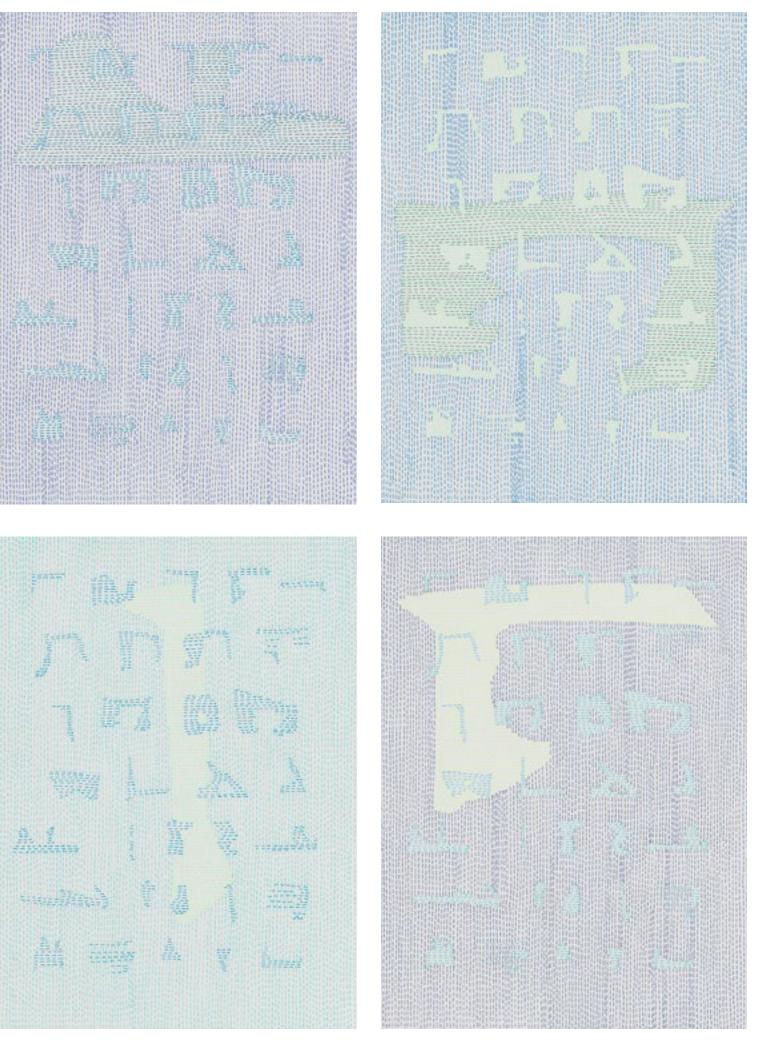
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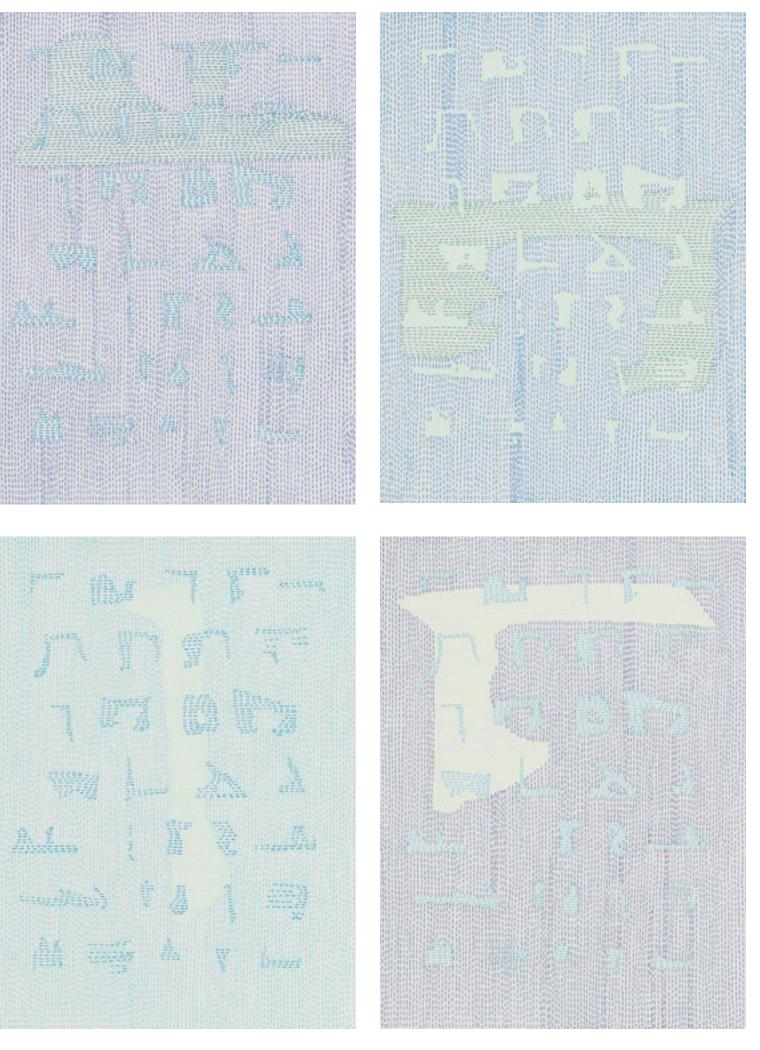


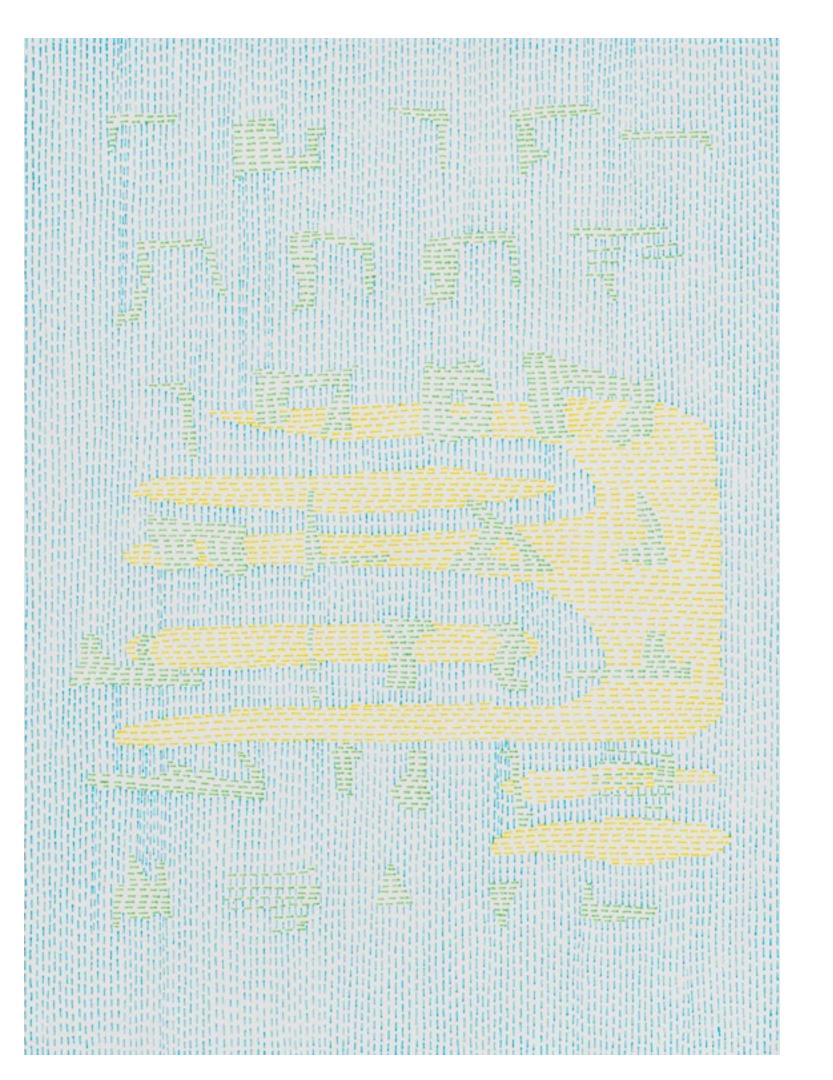


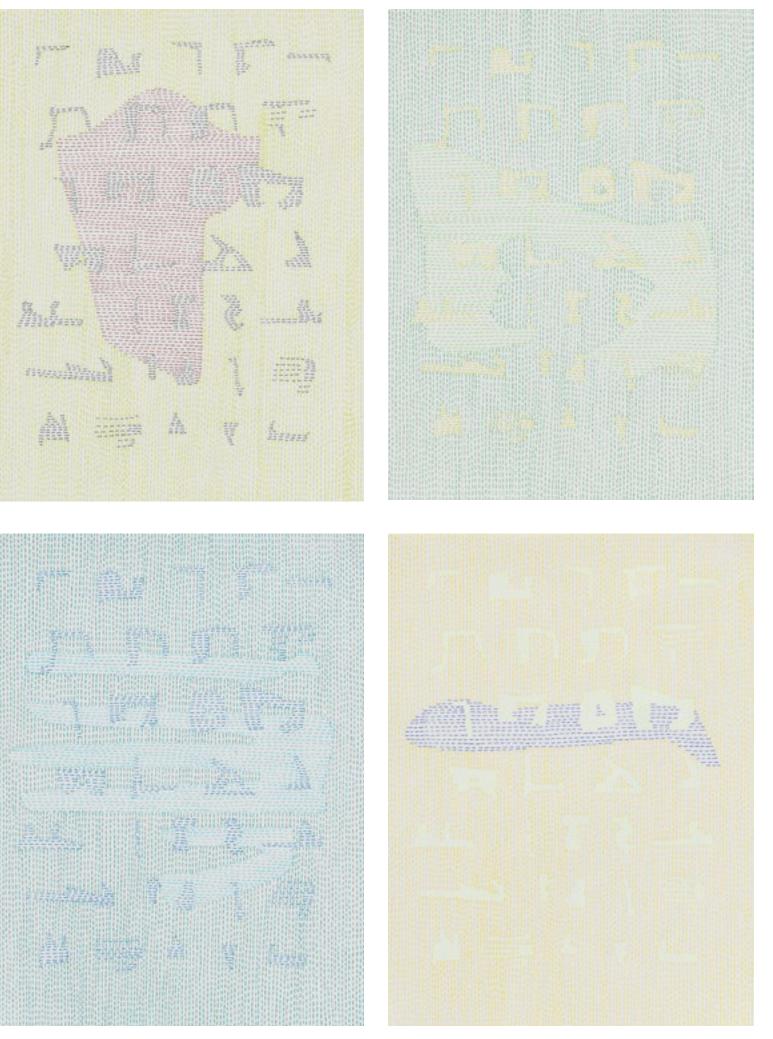


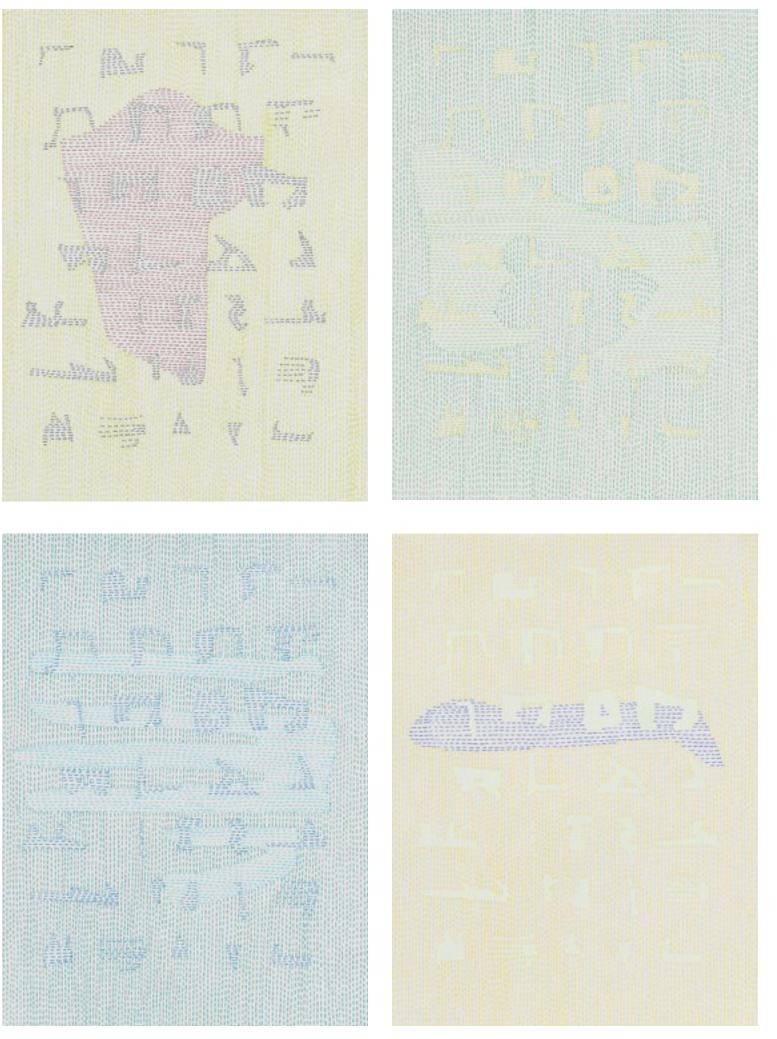


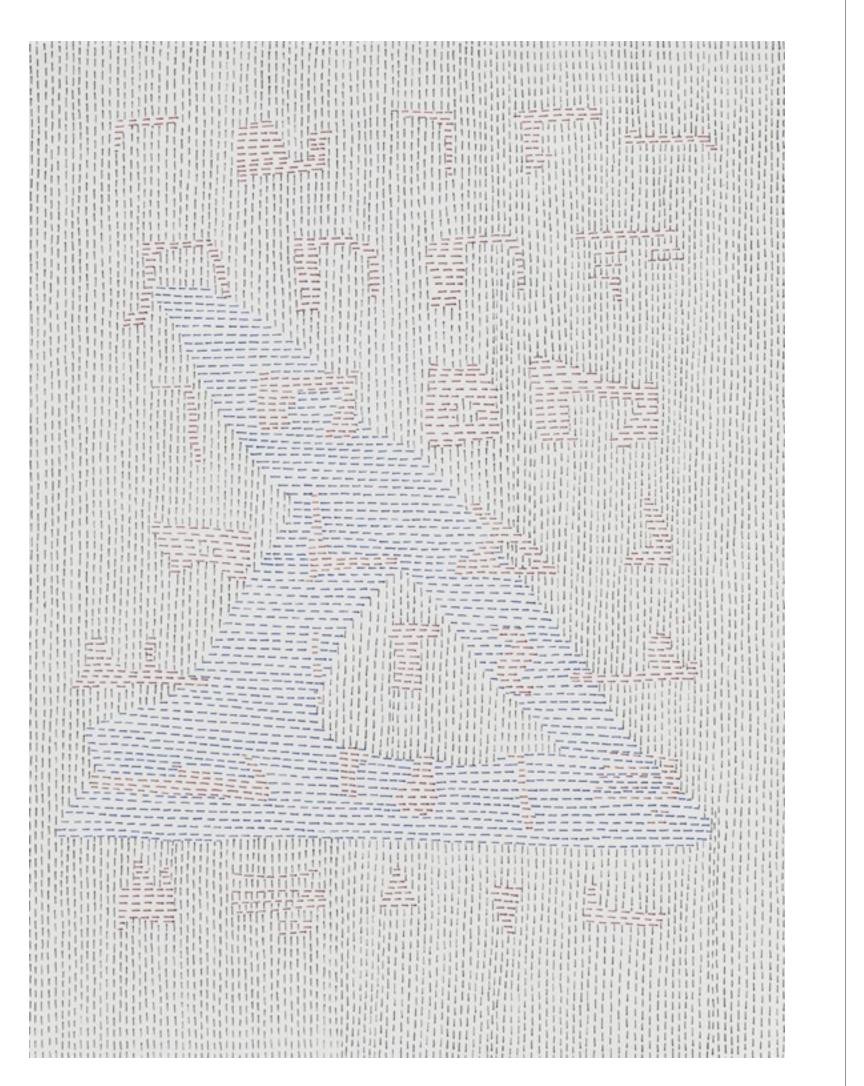


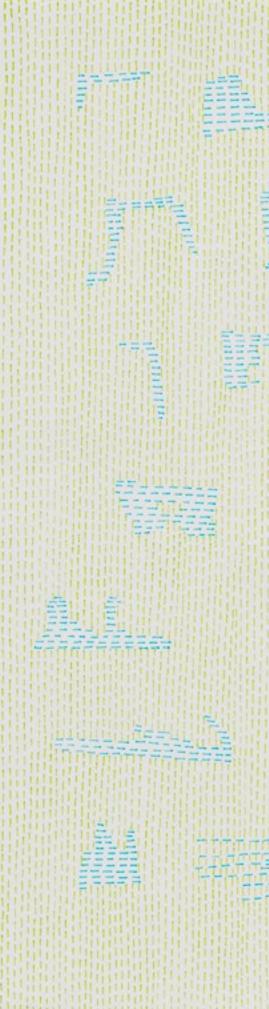












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NADIA HAJI OMAR Born 1985, Melbourne, Australia Lives and works in Warren, RI

	EDUCATION	2017
2014	Master of Fine Arts, School of Visual Arts, New York, NY	
2007	Bachelor of Arts, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY	2016
	SOLOEXHIBITIONS	
2020	Ascension, Kristen Lorello, New York, NY, September 15–October 17, 2020	
2019	Ascension and Natural Selection, curated by Mary Birmingham, Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, Summit, NJ	
2018	On the Wall: Nadia Haji Omar, curated by Jamilee Lacy, Providence College Galleries, Providence, RI	2015
	Nadia Haji Omar: Ellipsis, Kristen Lorello, New York, NY	2010
2016	Nadia Haji Omar, Kristen Lorello, New York, NY	
2015	<i>I Dream of Water</i> , Saskia Fernando Gallery, Colombo, Sri Lanka	2014
	Easy Life of the Gods, Achter de Boom, New York, NY	
2013	It's Not Polite, XVA Gallery, Al Fahidi Historical Neighborhood, Dubai, UAE	
2010	<i>you animal</i> , The Warehouse Project, Colombo, Sri Lanka	
2008	Sri Lanka: Creative Media in a Time of Conflict, Avery Center for the Arts, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY	2013
2007	The Convalescent, Thesis Show, Fisher Studio Arts, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY	
	SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS	
2019	The Edge Effect: International Open Juried Exhibition, juried by Akili Tommasino, Katonah Museum of Art, Katonah, NY	
	Dot Conference, curated by Kristen Lamb, The Yard, Williamsburg, Brooklyn, New York, traveled to	
	Room 83 Spring, Watertown, MA	2011
	Manifold, curated by Melanie Kress, Bronx Art Space, Bronx, New York	2010
2018	Smooth Muscle, curated by Dominique Palladino, Sophie Parker, and KC Tidemand, Whitehaus, Oakland, CA	2008
2017	Mis, curated by Donna Troy Cleary, 184 Project Space, Brooklyn, NY	
	Drawer, curated by Corydon Cowansage, Deli Gallery, Queens, NY	
2016	[Old / New] Psychedelic Providence, curated by Jamilee Lacy and sponsored by Providence College Galleries,	
	Tiger Strikes Asteroid, Chicago, IL	2020
2015	Nadia Haji Omar / Bayne Peterson, Kristen Lorello, New York, NY	
	Plus One, curated by Melanie Kress, Sideshow Gallery, Brooklyn, NY	
	invisible visible, curated by Dongsuk Lee and Adam Tyson, AD*DS, Brooklyn, NY	2018
	Cello Conversations with Contemporary Sri Lankan Art, Saskia Fernando Gallery, Colombo, Sri Lanka	
	You Don't Bring Me Flowers, curated by Quang Bao, 68 Projects, Galerie Kornfeld, Berlin, Germany	
2014	Environs, curated by Donna Troy Cleary, 184 Project Space, Brooklyn, NY	
	All together now!, Breese Little Gallery, London, UK	2017
	Site/Displace, Kristen Lorello, New York, NY	
	<i>Emergency</i> , Breese Little Gallery, London, UK	
	<i>The Last Brucennial</i> , Bruce High Quality Foundation, New York, NY	2013–14
	<i>Emrupt,</i> Leigh Wen Fine Art, New York, NY	2013-14
	HOME FRONT, second-year MFA exhibition, curated by Jovana Stokic, School of Visual Arts Gallery (Chelsea), New York, NY	2007
2013	Abstract Intentions, School of Visual Arts Gallery (E. 23rd Street), New York, NY	
	Influencers, TRACX Gallery Space, New York, NY	
2011	SRI LANKAN / CONTEMPORARY / FEMALE, Saskia Fernando Gallery, Colombo, Sri Lanka	
2007	Small Works, Soho 20 Gallery, New York, NY	
2005	Bless our Cotton Socks, City and Guilds of London Art School, St. Anselm's Church, London, UK	

SELECTED PRESS

2018

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