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Primal Heart, 2020, Reclaimed fabric applique, 108 x 60 in

Artist Spotlight with Aneesa Shami

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ArteEast is pleased to present an interview with artist Aneesa Shami as part of our Artist Spotlight series.

Aneesa Shami is an artist and researcher based in Los Angeles using recycled materials to create fiber art. Her work references the sublime and world mythologies to evoke a sense of the collective unconscious within her imagery. Shami holds Bachelor of Fine Arts degrees in both Fiber and Art History from the Kansas City Art Institute. She was the Textile Arts | Los Angeles AIR at Helms Design Center in 2018, and was a Fellow for the Mildred's Lane Attention Labs: Order of the Third

Bird in 2015. Shami's work has been exhibited nationally and internationally in galleries and museums. She recently created costumes for *Planet City* (2020), directed by Liam Young, which was commissioned for the NGV Triennial 2020 in Melbourne, Australia. Aneesa Shami is also the co-owner and director of Studio 203, an artist-run space in Los Angeles that collaborates with artists to create exhibitions and host workshops and performances.



(https://arteeast.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/05_Shami_On-Prayer.jpg)

On Prayer, 2019, Reclaimed fabric applique, 18 x 24 in



ArteEast: Can you tell us about your work in general and the main themes you return to in your practice?

Aneesa Shami: The uniting theme across my work as an artist, educator, and researcher is exploring how one connects to the creative process. I am drawn to methodical and tedious ways of working, like many fiber artists, and most of my work is process-oriented. Spending hours replicating tiny stitches or knotting yarn provides mental space for self-observation. I like to collect “research” during this meditative state, noting the conscious and unconscious decisions I make when arranging my imagery into compositions.

This making-while-meditating mindset is an important step, especially in my recent series of abstract landscapes that combine my memories of Lebanon with imagery from Islamic folklore. I tend to utilize universal themes that the viewer can connect with by referencing the sublime, drawing on world mythologies and sharing an otherworldly sense of the human conscious and subconscious.

Using reclaimed fabric, collage methods and applique techniques, each landscape captures the notion of abstract memory through material exploration. I want to connect with others on a visceral level through the use of formal elements: movement, color, and form. I hope my work evokes a larger understanding that we are all human and we are all connected.

AE: Your textile works are comprised of reclaimed collaged fabric. How did you come to use these recycled materials in your work? What was the creative process behind the technique you use to make your pieces?

AS: Collecting material is an important part of my practice, like many other artists, and textiles speak to me the most. While pursuing my undergraduate degree in Fiber, textile deadstock would be sent to the school for students to use in their projects. This made it easy to source material that was readily available (and free), rather than ordering fiber online and waiting to see it in person. Surrounded by castoff material, this led to a natural rhythm of creating: gathering materials, and then starting a project inspired by my collection.

This is probably why I always have a wide collection of textile scraps and castoffs – all donated to my studio – which includes knitted swatches and yarn samples, scraps of hand dyed fabric, moth-eaten sweaters, etc. I’ll spend hours sorting material and taking inventory of each donation, making piles based on texture, fiber content, color and tone, or size/length for future use.

After collecting and sorting, I focus on how to transcend the initial “look” of the material. I enjoy playing with the viewer’s eye, using materials and/or methods that are not immediately recognizable when looking at a piece. Currently, I am working with fabric samples from a local design firm in Los

Angeles, and use traditional applique techniques to mimic the informal look of collage. Though I am not hiding the use of fabric in my work, I try to draw attention to the imagery of a piece, rather than the use of fiber as a medium.

AE: You founded Studio 203 in Los Angeles just as the city was shutting down as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. Why did you initially decide to found this space and to keep it open throughout the pandemic?

AS: Studio 203 started as a daydream that my husband and I talked about one night over dinner just months before the pandemic spread worldwide. I wanted a larger space to host my own workshops, collaborate with fellow artists and create new bodies of work. We decided to rent a commercial suite that had been gutted by the previous tenant (just subfloor and studs left!) so we could create a hybrid studio/gallery space. As the space slowly transformed, our spoken dreams became reality. We lined up an exhibition and workshop schedule for the next year, had our first two events early in 2020, and then the pandemic reached L.A. and paused the foreseeable future for everyone. In-person plans were postponed indefinitely while events slowly crossed over to live streaming or Zoom territory. Not ready to let go of our dream, my husband and I worked to create online versions of the workshops, artist talks, exhibitions and collaborative projects we had planned. While we didn't have groups of people hanging out in Studio like we imagined, we were still able to foster community and offer thoughtful content for folks.

Finding new methods to launch Studio 203 has been hard, but so far we have found hope and meaning in our efforts. Our main goal with the Studio is to share interesting art and support other artists, which we have managed to do, despite the uncertainty we are all facing.

AE: You currently have organized a two-person show at Studio 203 featuring your work alongside pieces by Yasmine Nasser Diaz. What was the impetus behind this exhibition and to put your works in conversation together?

AS: I was introduced to Yasmine's work via Instagram and immediately fell in love! I had previously collaborated with a couple of artist friends on exhibitions for Studio 203, and was looking for another partner to work with. Yasmine and I touch on similar themes in our work, including SWANA third-culture identity, and I wanted to explore this topic more in depth with another artist. We connected and began brainstorming, ultimately deciding to illustrate "third-culture identity" as alternative realities (or "utopias") beyond the world we are currently living in. Rather than depict specific experiences as first-generation Americans, we allude to larger themes of ruination, recovery and hope through fantastical scenes and alternate dimensions. Ocean imagery became the common ground for us to work from, providing concrete visual references for our two different bodies of work

to intersect. Yasmine's work on paper features hybrid beings that coexist in Earth's post-anthropocene oceans, and my textile pieces narrate a destruction similar to the Port of Beirut explosion that takes place in a parallel universe.

AE: You regularly teach workshops on textile techniques, such as weaving on looms as well as collage with fabric. How does your work as an educator fit within your overall practice? Has teaching weaving techniques and holding space with students taught you something in turn or influenced any aspects of your practice?

AS: Teaching workshops is another way I am able to share my practice with others. I am constantly exploring how to use techniques I've learned in new ways, updating and manipulating them to fit my way of working or the imagery I want to capture. The workshops I teach aim to share my perspective on rug knotting and applique, as well as exposing folks to how textiles can be created. I encourage students to blend their creative process with my teaching, so that the technique becomes theirs for the keeping.

Workshops are also an excellent way to foster community, which is a huge aspect of fiber and textile history, not to mention the main goal of opening Studio 203. It's a great way to meet people with similar interests and share information with one another. I am always introduced to new books, podcasts, and other artists from the students. Though I am teaching the same content multiple times a year, each class is unique. Everyone always makes a piece that is inherently theirs from the pool of tools and supplies offered – it is always inspiring!

AE: What and who are some of your major creative influences, and why?

AS: Most of my influence is drawn from my surrounding environment. Growing up in the Midwest, I loved observing the season changes, especially how the sky rendered thunderstorms and all of the intense colors in spring and fall. Los Angeles has an entirely different climate than where I grew up – it's more muted in color and I've never lived so close to the ocean or mountains before. Even the brief time I spent in Lebanon left an imprint on my imagination, finally visiting places I'd only heard about in stories or seen in photographs. All of these experiences mix together and become creative fuel for my abstract landscapes.

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