

# An Account of Practice for the exhibition *Translations,*

featuring the artwork of Jamelie Hassan and Soheila Esfahani (Campbell River Art Gallery, July 9 to September 2, 2020)

Curated by Jenelle Pasiechnik

2020 was a year of incredible tumult, insecurity, and isolation for many. It changed the way the CRAG team did everything at the gallery and presented many new challenges, as we tried to reopen after the shutdown. The team at that time was very small with 3 core members: the curator, operations manager, and director, plus fluctuating student positions. Our first exhibition was a dialogue between the works of Jamelie Hassan and Soheila Esfahani on acts of inter-cultural translation in the Canadian context. We had originally planned for both artists to travel to Campbell River and activate the exhibition through live performance, site-specific artwork, and discussion. Jamelie Hassan was scheduled to re-create the special moments involving sharing food and surprising connection, which inspired her work *Al haq al Canadiyya*. Soheila Esfahani was scheduled to create a site-specific installation of *Cultural Palettes* and hold an open studio during installation. After we realized the impossibility of travel due to the pandemic, we had to change what would be exhibited, and pivot the way we engaged our audiences completely: planning virtual events, creating incentivized and connective activities using social media, and activating distant artist networks.

The relevance of the show wasn't diminished, but took on additional meaning in light of the mass changes and uncertainty going on all around us. The concept of 'translation,' or a lack of, can invoke a sense of loss and isolation. That can convey a loneliness that results from a lack of shared perspectives, not being understood, or not understanding: something that people in every community around the world were experiencing. We were all put in a position of not knowing or understanding what was going on around us and the future became precarious and unpredictable. This drew many Canadians into understanding the experiences of newcomers and folks living in the third space.

As this is a self-reflective piece addressing key issues on contemporary art curation, I would like to locate my practice for readers. During my graduate work I specialized in the art of contemporary artists of the West Asian diaspora. My case study focussed on Parviz Tanavoli, an Iranian-born sculptor living in Vancouver, BC. As my studies deepened, I came to an awakening that Western culture positions itself as superior in terms of knowledge transmission. It seemed as if the varied cultures of West Asia and the Mediterranean basin were often regarded as inferior 'borrowers' of culture and information. This skewed version of history belies the rich contributions to knowledge, art, and culture that have been made by artists in countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan. As a result of this shift in my thinking, I have formed a dialogic curatorial style that aims to help people understand and come to empathize with outsider and underrepresented perspectives through the study of cultures across different geographies. This work is done by amplifying artistic voices and highlighting the contributions they make to our cultural landscape through sharing their cultural knowledge and their unique perspectives.

As an early career curator I feel grateful to work with incredible artists that so generously share their insight. I also feel gifted with the opportunity to

start meaningful dialogues that may bring about better understanding for our diverse communities. Working in the field as a curator has allowed me to take extremely valuable seeds of information learned through study and to turn them into platforms for public discourse that promote the improvement of relations between members of our society. This is a rising concern across institutions in Canada where the voices previously unheard are now being amplified, the erasure of lives lived is being combatted, and the acknowledgement of privilege experienced as a result of the oppression of others creates spaces for healing. A few examples of curatorial projects that highlight these issues are: *Rembrandt in Amsterdam: Creativity and Competition* curated by Stephanie Dickey, National Gallery of Canada; *Water, Work, Space* curated by Nicole Stanbridge, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria; *Black Drones in the Hive* curated by Crystal Mowry, Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery; *Sovereign Intimacies*, curated by Nasrin Himada and Jennifer Smith, Plug In ICA; *Hope Meets Action: Echoes Through the Black Continuum*, developed by the BC Black History Awareness Society in partnership with the Royal British Columbia Museum. The decolonization of individual selves, institutions, and the field will result in a better understanding of the complexities of history on Turtle Island, and a wider knowledge of how to reconcile the damaging effects of those histories. One method of engaging actively in reconciliation is to acknowledge the difficulties and joys of communities with histories of oppression by creating platforms to voice their stories and perspectives.

The aim of *Translations* was to address the isolation one can feel when they come from one culture to another and exist neither here nor there. In addition, I wanted to celebrate beautiful facets of Arabic, Iranian, and Third Space Canadian culture. With those concepts in mind, I could think of no two better artists to examine this subject than Jamelie Hassan and Soheila Esfahani.

I'll introduce Jamelie Hassan as a talented and decorated figure of Canadian contemporary art; she is also a powerful advocate for women's voices, Arabic-speaking voices, Lebanese voices, and Muslim voices whom have been previously unheard and unrecognized. Born in Canada, she has been investigating the cultural roots of her family through her art practice for decades and illuminating countless experiences beyond her familial circle, while enriching the landscape of Canadian art. She is a Governor General's Award winner for her outstanding career in artmaking and activism.

Our second artist, Soheila Esfahani, is an Iranian-born woman who very astutely addresses the spaces between cultures, where so many live, as she makes waves through our academic and cultural system. She is an exciting artist with an escalating career and a strong grasp on her own position and power as a diasporic voice. Esfahani is a lecturer in the culture and language studies department at the University of Waterloo.

Together, these two artists created a compelling dialogue on the different approaches to and understandings of cultural and linguistic translation that touches individuals in their cultural isolation, linked to the desire to be heard, understood, and seen for who they are.

## **THE EXHIBITION**

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>1</sup> Viewers play an active and critical role in meaning making. These varied acts of translation that we witness help us to understand more about the politics, space, and culture of the time in which we live.

When I considered the audience response to *Translations*, I hoped that viewers would be inspired to ask questions and move towards a better understanding of cultural symbols and perspectives outside their realm of experience. In the *Translations* exhibition, the artworks are created through the artists’ acts of cultural communication, the performance of their lived experience, and the interrogation of power structures. The viewers’ performed experiences of engagement guide them to create meaning and acquire a better understanding of the different 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>2</sup> We can think of the space between the viewer and the artwork itself as a place of negotiation, a third space, where their own personal experiences and cultural understandings come to meet those of the artists’ and new meaning is created. This sometimes requires the public to place themselves in a space of unknowing and lean into the discomfort.

A third space arises at the intersection of the artist’s translation of culture and the viewer’s translation of experience.<sup>3</sup> Bhabha described it as 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,

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<sup>1</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 1994. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Miriam Jordan, “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.

<sup>3</sup> Homi K. Bhabha developed the concept in his seminal text *The Location of Culture* from 1994.

rehistoricized, and read anew.”<sup>4</sup> Signs are recognizable symbols of language and culture that are understood as having a fixed definition.

I was thrilled to learn that 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> Esfahani corroborates the necessity of audience interaction with her work through welcoming them into the third space where she and many others live. This act of welcoming and personal connection exemplifies the spaces where the transition from misunderstanding to empathy becomes possible.

For example, in Esfahani’s collection of wooden plaques entitled *Made in Iran* are language-like glyph forms, motifs, and text gathered from sources in Canada and Iran<sup>6</sup> (Fig. 1). The plaques are made in the tradition of Persian *moaragh kari*, an ancient technique of inlaying (Figs. 2-3).<sup>7</sup> Most of the individual plaques were crafted by Esfahani’s aunt in Iran, but the designs were sourced

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

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

<sup>6</sup> Esfahani, “Artist Statement.”

<sup>7</sup> *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. “Moaragh Kari (Wood Inlaid Working)” Isfahan Information Centre. Accessed June, 2020. <https://isfahaninfo.com/moaragh-kari-wood-inlaid-working/>.

from artists, family, and friends from both countries.<sup>8</sup> They have complex origins that blur clear definitions. They were fashioned in Iran, from “materials, texts, and meanings” that went through transfers back and forth between Canada and Iran; in addition, they had been exhibited in art galleries in Canada, thereby acquiring transnational qualities that elude definitions of origin, materially manifesting the third space experience.<sup>9</sup> The artist has made these plaques to exist in the third space, in which she reimagines and translates cultural meanings for objects: they are neither Iranian nor Canadian, but possess qualities of both. She assumes the creative authority to present quasi-linguistic symbols and motifs, enunciating her knowledge of the shifting meanings of culture by imbuing an artistic medium grounded in ancient Persian culture with contemporary content. Based on her sense of meaning-making, her work was infused with the lived experiences of both here and there, then and now.



**FIGURE 1**  
**Soheila Esfahani, *Made in Iran*, various types of wood,**  
**Installation view Campbell River Art Gallery, 2020.**

Credit: Sarmad AlMouallem.

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<sup>8</sup> Esfahani, “Artist Statement.”

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



**FIGURE 2**  
 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.  
 Credit: Soheila Esfahani.



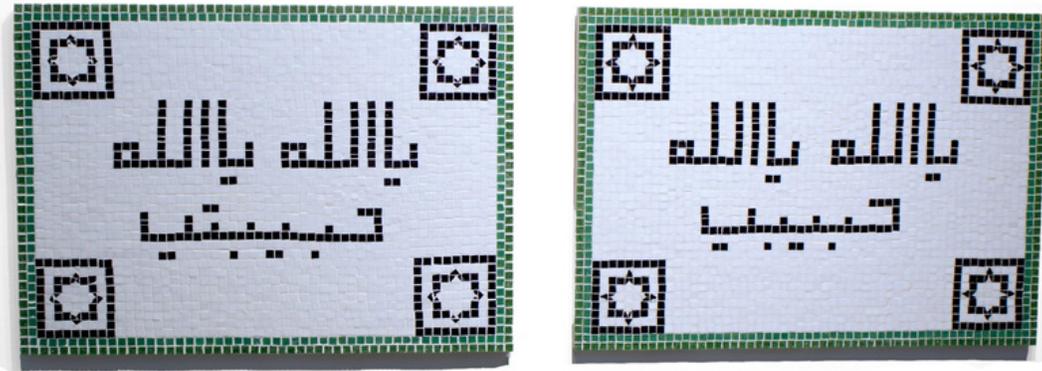
**FIGURE 3**  
 Soheila Esfahani, *Made in Iran*, detail, various types of wood, 4.5” x 6.5” each plaque, 2010.  
 Credit: Soheila Esfahani.

Illustrating the concept of translation in a visceral way, Jamelie Hassan frequently employs linguistic forms in her art practice. In the works *Internet* (Fig. 4) and *Habibye*, (My love, male) & *Habibitee* (My love, female) (Fig. 5), 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 their responses. *Internet* is taken from a street sign in Morocco and gives a side-by-side translation so the viewer can understand the sign's meaning. However, the word in Arabic is a transliteration of the English words, indicating



**FIGURE 4**  
**Jamelie Hassan, *Internet*, glass mosaic mounted on plywood, 2020. Collection of the artist.**

Credit: Ron Benner.



**FIGURE 5**  
**Jamelie Hassan, *Habibye*, (My love, male) & *Habibitee* (My love, female),**  
**glass mosaic tile mounted on plywood, 2018. Collection of the artist.**

Credit: Sarmad Almouallem.

the connection between the spread of technology and the global reach of the English language. Therefore, there is a disjunction that occurs when 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 introduced 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, acknowledging the impact of migration and diasporic possibilities. The exhibition exists within an ongoing and necessary dialogue in Canadian contemporary art. Soheila Esfahani and Jamelie Hassan draw from memories and lived experiences that originate within Iranian and Arabic cultures.

The mandate of the Campbell River Art Gallery is to create space

for artists to share and bring visitors into underrepresented worldviews and experiences of life that may be 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 artists and the role that the audience plays in activating meaning. 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. Soheila Esfahani so eloquently describes her own experience as being in a third space. She is neither Iranian nor Canadian; her perspective is, for better or worse, a blending of both. Imagine how many Canadians exist in that space daily.

I believe that activism and allyship happens when people are confronted with spaces that are unfamiliar to them, but create the opportunity and the desire to learn and to support others. This desire may come through having an interest piqued by personal connection, cultural history, compelling story, or material culture. Once some connection or idea creates an appreciation or a shared experience, empathy can take the place of fear and misunderstanding. This causes a new connection to form in the place where only strangeness existed before. As a curator, I try to activate as many sources of connection and forms of engagement to encourage this transition to take place.

### **Moving Forward: The Curator Looks to the Future**

The cultural landscape in Canada is undergoing a process of change that has been brought about through the tireless efforts of the many advocates, very often from underrepresented positions over the last 40 years. Cultural artists/activists like Jamelie Hassan have been working for decades to bring visibility and better understanding to diasporic communities that make their home in Canada. Representation for IBPoC and 2SLGBTQ+ perspectives is becoming

more prominent through changing funding foci, shifts in institutional values and leadership, and overdue amendments to exhibition programming. Smaller and more critical institutions such as university art galleries, and those with social justice platforms have responded with changes to hiring and collecting policies and mandates. It is imperative that the larger, more monolithic institutions, that continue to set industry standards, act as leaders in implementing policies for equitable representation across all departments and exhibition programs.<sup>10</sup>

This is why exhibitions like *Translations* are important: The exhibition was significant to the continued fulfillment of the CRAG's mandate to exhibit the work of professional visual and media artists from across Canada with a specific focus on supporting artistic projects from under-represented positions within

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<sup>10</sup> As a coda to this account of my curatorial practice, I would like to point out that many Canadian institutions are experiencing shifts in staffing and leadership that place women, non-binary, and IBPoC curators, and academics into visible positions, in many cases for the first time: Jamie Isaac 2021 appointment as Chief Curator Art Gallery of Greater Victoria; Whess Harman 2021 appointment as Curator Grunt Art Gallery Vancouver, BC; Haema Sivanesan 2021 appointment as Chief Curator Glenbow Museum and Archives Calgary, AB; Michelle Jacques 2021 appointment as Head of Exhibitions & Collection/Chief Curator at Remai Modern in Saskatoon, Sask; Heather Igloliorte, lead curator of Quamajuq's inaugural exhibit INUA Winnipeg, MB; Eunice Bélidor 2021 appointment as the Gail and Stephen A. Jarislowsky Curator of Quebec and Canadian Contemporary Art (1945 to Today) Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA), QC. Indeed, as a result of mass social movements like Black Lives Matter and Indigenous resurgence, it does seem that the status quo has chipped loose and broken away making space for new pathways to emerge – and the local community art gallery places an important role in creating alternative third spaces for new thinking to emerge. However, there is a status quo that is still deeply entrenched and there is yet a long way to go. Sean O'Neill, "A Crisis of Whiteness in Canada's Art Museums," *Canadian Art*. June 23, 2020. <https://canadianart.ca/features/a-crisis-of-whiteness/>. In 2020 Sean O'Neill surveyed the leadership positions at "Canada's four largest public art museums- measured by attendance and operating budget, these are the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA), the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) and the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG)- to determine who sits on their boards of trustees and senior executive teams. (Senior executives are defined, for this purpose, as the staff members with the most senior positions who report directly to the director or CEO.)" Here is a summation of what he learned: "The directors of all four museums are white; The board presidents of all four museums are white; Of the 24 senior executives across all four museums, 23 (or 96%) are white; Of the 77 board trustees across all four museums, 58 (or 75%) are white; Of those 77 trustees, 3 (or 4%) are First Nations or Métis, 2 (or 2.5%) are Black and 14 (or 18%) are other persons of colour; none are Inuit; The AGO has no Indigenous representation on its board; The MMFA, the VAG and the NGC have no Black representation on their boards."

contemporary art practice. In addition, it contributes to an ongoing dialogue about the activist role of the gallery within the context of social justice and cultural change-making.

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, artwork is a world that is animated and “lives only by coming into contact with another.”<sup>11</sup> We all play an integral role in making meaning through acts of engagement. Those experiences work on us long after the closing of the show.

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<sup>11</sup> Mikhail, Bahktin “Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences,” in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Vern W. McGee, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006, 163.

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