



WINTER 2023

ORNAMENTAL GESTURES

CRITICAL WRITING BY CLAIRE HEIDINGER



The Doris McCarthy Gallery wishes to acknowledge the land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River.

Today, these meeting places are still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to live, learn, work, and play on this land.

making
motif
materiality
rest

“personhood is named or conceived through ornamental gestures”

-Anne Anlin Cheng in *Ornamentalism*¹

How can craft act as a form of resistance?

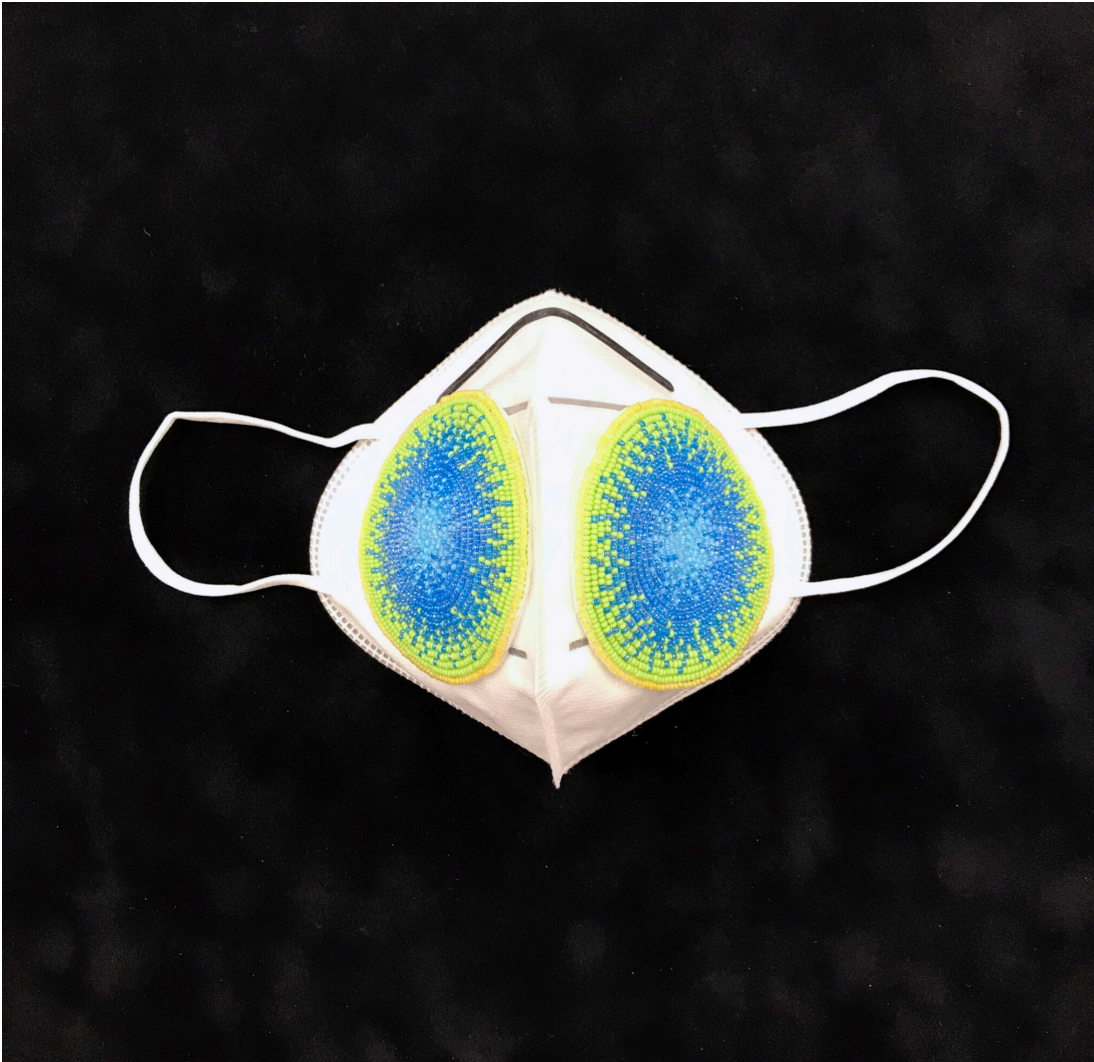
The group exhibition *Ornamental Gestures*, brings together seven artists working in methods of production that recall their cultural heritage. These methods however, have often been considered 'craft' placing the works beneath 'art' in the long-established hierarchy of the two fields. These categories have unnecessarily been present in Western art history, influencing the global market and the ways in which contemporary art is received and displayed. This fictional hierarchy of creative activities continues to challenge or limit craft from entering "high art" spaces.

The works exhibited in *Ornamental Gestures* seek to confront these categorizations and critique these exclusionary Western biases. Craft is used to occupy space and reappraise ideas of contemporary artmaking. This includes weaving, beading, looming, and calligraphy, all of which are tedious, labour intensive, and require technical proficiency and precision. However, decoration, ornamentation, and any form of this cultural production is often seen as purely for aesthetic decoration, like wallpaper meant to fade into the background. These practices are subjected to the term 'craft' and associated as 'women's work' thus erasing/diminishing the labour/meaning of the work. By referencing traditional forms and methods, these new contemporary works deconstruct the hierarchy of art and art-making imposed by biased oligarchical critics.²



making

How do you see the artist's hands?



These acts of making reveal deliberate human intervention through tactility, form, function, and texture. For instance, in Tazeen Qayyum's work *Brabri/bartri (equality/privilege)* and *Sabr (patience)*, the act of making is evident through the repetitive patterns of Urdu calligraphy. Qayyum is a Pakistani-Canadian artist trained in miniature painting, working in a variety of disciplines including drawing, installation, sculpture, video and performance. In both of these works, Qayyum uses methodological devices through repetition, rhythm, balance and geometry.³ Though it seems that labour and process take energy and movement, the process itself can bring rest to the mind and move the body into a meditative state. This is the power of artmaking and craft. It is enjoyable and it is tactile.

Derived from quillwork, beading is also a laborious technique that requires precision and intention that is a collective knowledge and process.⁴ *COVID-19 Mask No. 7* is from an on-going series of beaded KN95 masks by Ruth Cuthand. Cuthand, a Plains Cree artist, creates images through the act of beading to comment on the mistreatment of Indigenous people in healthcare.

Especially relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic, Cuthand examines the way disease, pandemics, and pathogens affect the often overlooked Indigenous communities. *COVID-19 Mask No. 7* combines the beauty of colourful, traditional beadwork with the KN95 mask, a common sight during the pandemic. The struggle to physiologically endure and stay healthy, now represented by the mask itself and beading too, becomes a metaphorical act of survival; by remembering cultural tradition against the disease that is complicit in the death of many Indigenous lives. Cuthand is creating historical documents by memorialising these significant events by beading as a resource to understanding the lives of Indigenous people.

The production of re-imagined pieces epitomizes personal earning, re-skilling, as well as a system of knowledge transmission. Their creation allows me to restore the cognitive processes that have been the backbone of Native cultures; in revitalizing a material practice, I am performing a decolonial gesture and forging a cultural identity.

-Nadia Myre⁵



Tazeen Qayyum, *Brabri/bartri (equality/privilege)*, 2020, archival ink on acid-free paper, 76.2 x 55.9 cm



Tazeen Qayyum, *sabr (patience)*, 2018, archival ink on acid-free paper, 76.2 x 55.9 cm



motif

Chinoiserie & Globalisation



The act of repetition can be found through the patterns and flowering vines that adorn chinoiserie vases, chairs, cabinets, and walls. The influx of the Chinoise and *le gout ture* (the Turkish taste) appeared as a frenzied fashion in the imaginary construction of the European mind. This is where Edward Said wrote the iconic book *Orientalism*, criticising the portrayal of the so-called 'East'. It is an amalgamation of multiple cultures into one, pulling elements of each for desired taste, blurring identities and culture, erasing bodies as a denigration of the Other. Literary scholar Anne Anlin Cheng, expands on this concept further as she writes about what it means to survive as "object", the idea that artificial invention of the Other through ornamentation becomes the conceptual framework of building the image of a racialized person.⁶ The perception of personhood is limited to its ornamentations and built by false imaginations, to be consumed.



The adaptation of chinoiserie fits under the umbrella of Orientalism, portrayed as docile and inferior. Its associations with non-European people justified a social order. Any change to this hierarchy led to a growing anxiety of the Other where depictions of Asian dominance amongst the Western world and therefore, threatening Western power, became known as the Yellow Peril. Since 2020, we've seen similar gestures of xenophobia in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Inspired by his own backyard garden and observing miniscule life, Ed Pien's *Invasive Species* series and *Wallpaper* video adopts the formal elements of flowering chinoiserie and depicts hybridized plant creatures that "resist simple categorization, while bearing witness to the disruptions and unease brought on by the pandemic."⁷ For Pien, chinoiserie becomes a tool of language to exceed stereotypes of chinoiserie aesthetics and access a new visual vernacular.



Installation view, *Ornamental Gestures*, photo by Toni Hafkenscheid



Millie Chen is a Canadian artist who uses visual, auditory, and performative works to disrupt habits of viewing. Her installation, *wallpaper*, was produced onsite at the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris, France in 2007. Chen altered the prefabricated wallpaper design, *Cathay Pastoral Vine*, made by Stroheim and Romann Inc., a U.S. design company that manufactures copies of chinoiserie decoration.⁸ Using the wallpaper as a readymade object, Chen paints over the pre-fabricated design to change the narrative; figures wearing pre-revolution French royal costume, Victorian mourning gowns, religious and military headgear, a reference to Fragonard's *The Swing*, and saw-wielding children.⁹ *wallpaper* inverts chinoiserie and contemporary craft scholarship by re-orienting space and altering perception. In doing so, Chen creates a site-specific intervention of a hybrid of cultures that critiques the consumption of ornament and ornamental displays that urges us to look closer at socio-political contexts of imperialist and institutional histories in contemporary and historical decorative arts.

Ornamentation as a method of hybrid cultural transfer and transformation is also explored in Soheila Esfahani's work, *My Place is Placeless*. By using wooden pallets decorated with laser-etched patterning and ornament, Esfahani investigates the functionality of the pallets that are used to ship trade goods around the world. Through the ornamentation used, Esfahani recalls the original mode of cultural exchange where decorated porcelain vessels carried goods *and* aesthetic culture through trade.¹⁰ *My Place is Placeless* speaks to the process of carrying/moving/shifting as she also explores the spaces living in-between from one's homeland to new home.



Soheila Esfahani, *My Place is Placeless*, 2013, laser-etched wooden pallets, 239.3 x 365.8 x 101.6 cm

Materiality

We take home and language for granted; they become nature and their underlying assumptions recede into dogma and orthodoxy.

The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience.

-Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile*¹¹

Where the location of cultures is fluid and culture is shared, hybridization and cultural in-betweenness create a “third space” that exists simultaneously apart and together.¹²

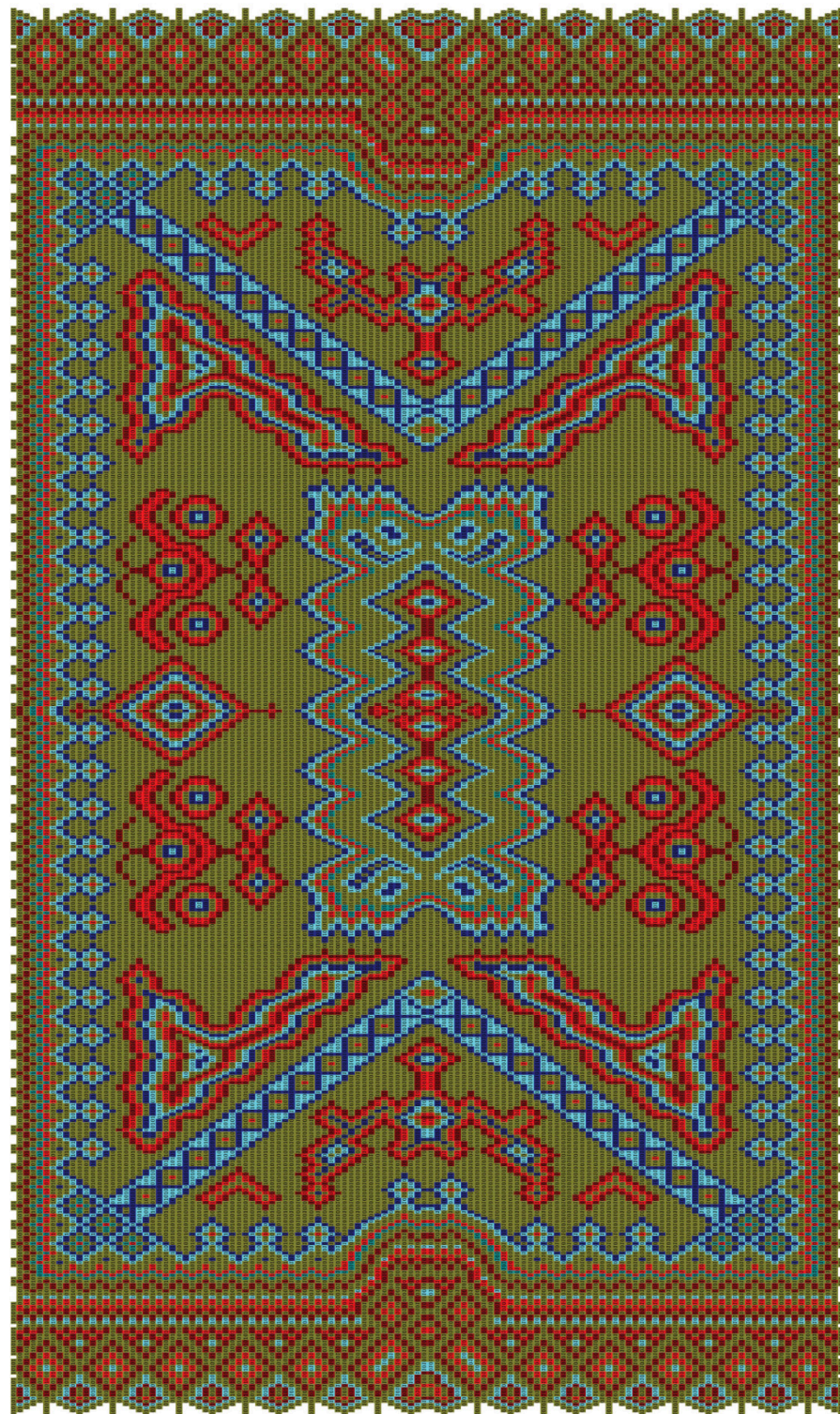
We are landscapes of longing. What do you call home when you are a global migrant or descendant of immigrants? In what ways can you connect to your home?

For those in the diaspora, longing for one’s home and creating new ideas of home is a difficult reality. The artists in *Ornamental Gestures* use materiality as a means of connection to one’s culture and homeland. The object of the material is a stand-in for the re-learning and pilgrimage that each artist takes in efforts of connectivity.¹³ For instance, Esfahani’s work evokes a landscape of longing through the movement that one experiences between cultures and hyphenated spaces to return home. The wooden pallets stacked directly on the gallery floor draw attention to grounding oneself and yet, the very function of the pallets are meant to move.

This movement of circulation is also explored in the work of Shaheer Zazai, through digital technology as a source of pattern making. Zazai, a Toronto-based Afghan-Canadian artist, works in both painting and digital media to investigate the development of a contemporary cultural identity. *Carpet No 4* is one of many in Zazai’s series of carpets that are displayed both on the ground and vertically on the walls.

The rug is a sort of garden that can move across space... that occupy a liminal realm between figure and ground... The lesson that a carpet offers is the lesson of taking in the world from the perspective of the ground and of the many ancestral and communitarian memories associated with such a perspective...Carpets form a connection to the body, but from underneath and therefore some distance from mind and sight.

-Ken Lum, “The Other in the Carpet”¹⁴



Considered as landscapes of longing, carpets act as a space that exceeds the dimensions and functions of art. This is evident through Zazai's method of pattern making. First, the artist creates carpet patterns on Microsoft Word and then exports the labour to Afghan weavers in Kabul who in return, interpret and translate in their own manifestations. While there is cultural exchange through the process of Zazai sending the patterns back and receiving them, a distance still exists due to this third space in between. In *Ornamental Gestures*, the physical carpet is intentionally displayed on the wall alongside the digital design, wherein the process and tangibility of the carpet for the viewers are also distanced. In attempts to both shorten and draw attention to this, a communal space with a rug is provided by the gallery inviting viewers to comfortably view the works, relax, and hopefully rest in the space "inbetween." As the completed carpets are displayed vertically, and horizontally on plinths, the process and tangibility of the carpets for the viewers allows for tensions in distance.

Similarly to Zazai, Virgil Baruchel engages with the practice of weaving combined with a contemporary outlook on the digital age we live in. Baruchel explores the human form through painting, weaving, and pastel drawing with a sense of irony and humour. As Baruchel applies his teachings from his pilgrimage to Morocco and his background in painting, he combines traditional weaving to create a contemporary approach to the craft. Made out of woven paracord instead of threads, *What's your net worth?* is a rug that appears both pixelated and painterly. It depicts a body sitting in an archway in front of a mountain seascape with a gold yellow net in the top left corner. The combination of labour and leisure in Baruchel's weaving are modes of resistance that stems from the pleasure of one's work.

Opposite: (Top to bottom) Shaheer Zazai, detail, *Carpet No. 4*, 2022, hand-knotted wool carpet and vinyl, 160 x 97 cm each; Shaheer Zazai, detail, *Carpet No. 2*, 2022, hand-knotted wool carpet and vinyl, 160 x 97 cm each

Following: (Left to right) Virgil Baruchel, *What's your net worth?*, 2022, woven paracord, 266.7 x 85.7 cm; Virgil Baruchel, *Leisure as a form of resistance*, 2022, woven paracord, 142.2 x 185.4 cm





rest

In ways that pleasure and leisure can be resistance, *Ornamental Gestures* attends to how craft can become both an act of pleasure and resistance.

The irony of labour intensive processes in art making is its meditation. Repetitive motion, concentration, and steadiness forces the artist to control breathing and maintain a meditative focus. The same way creativity brings labour, it also can bring rest. Making can be the pleasure of one's practice and resistance against the constant movement of the world.

In *Leisure as a form of resistance*, Baruchel depicts bodies in acts of leisure and active positions of rest. Figures with no identifiable gender or race are captured in moments of vulnerability, where their guard has been let down and their true self revealed. Baruchel describes this vulnerability as something that is not often revealed to others, with the exception of those you are close to and comfortable enough to relax around. Simultaneously, the act of leisure and relaxing can be laborious and hard to sustain. The act of adjusting your body into a comfortable position can only be held so long before moving and trying again. Very much like the process of meditation, it takes energy and effort to reach a moment of clarity.

bell hooks speaks of an undisturbed space, one which is necessary for silent rest and work, for thinking and envisioning. In her article, “Women Artists: The Creative Process,” in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, hooks discusses using leisure as spending one’s time to collect thoughts, a critical part of the creative process. This invisible labour is often not recognized as “work” when physical labour and functional production are more easily recognizable/praised/valued. In the quick movement of the capitalistic world, where nothing stops and nothing slows, we sacrifice our comforts for the sake of rest and making.

“Our need for this uninterrupted, undisturbed space is often far more threatening to those who watch us enter it than is that space which is a moment of concrete production (for the writer, that moment when she is putting the words on paper, or, for the painter, that moment when she takes material in hand.)...”

- bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*¹⁵

The processes behind craft, like the works in this group exhibition, are made possible through invisible labour. What is not immediately seen are the tedious, repetitive gestures used for artmaking that can create spaces that allow for rest and quiet moments that are essential to the creative process.

Art making becomes modes of rest; whether or not the artist feels rested or is just passionate about their work is something I still am unsure of.

Entering *Ornamental Gestures*, you are greeted with artwork that invites you to take a step closer, enjoy the work, and observe the miniscule details only noticeable at a close distance. I encourage you to take some time to sit on the central rug and pillows, and spend time with the artwork in the gallery space.

In garden design, the centre is its core. It is the heart from which water and life flow, and everything revolves. This is reflected in the flora and fauna, architecture, and our bodies.¹⁶ It is mirrored in the design of the garden carpet in a birds eye view.

Place yourself at the centre of this exhibition, here, your existence forms a connection to the world around you—a fantastical garden. You occupy a liminal space between nature and culture, liminal to figure and ground. How do you separate yourself between the work and allow yourself to rest? How do artists of the diaspora find rest in these new and un/usual hybridized spaces? I leave you with a 16th century poem “Ode to a Garden Carpet”, by an anonymous Sufi poet.¹⁷

Here in this carpet lives an ever-lovely spring;
Unscorched by summer’s ardent flame,
Safe too from autumn’s boisterous gales,
Mid winter’s cruel ice and snow,
’Tis gaily blooming still.
Eyes hot-seared by desert glare find healing in its velvet shade.
Splashing foundations and rippling pools,
In cool retreats sore-wearied limbs restore,
And tired hearts awake with joy once more.
The way was cruel.



Soheila Esfahani, detail, *My Place is Placeless*, 2013,
laser-etched wooden pallets, 239.3 x 365.8 x 101.6 cm

Installation View, *Ornamental Gestures*, photo by Toni Hafkenscheid

Endnotes

1 Cheng, Anne Anlin. *Ornamentalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 18.

2 Elissa Auther, “The Decorative, Abstraction, and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in the Art Criticism of Clement Greenberg,” *Oxford Art Journal* 27, no. 3 (2004): 350, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20107990>.

3 Ibid 19.

4 “About the artist,” Tazeen Qayyum, accessed January 9, 2023, <http://tazeenqayyum.com/hopeis-thethingwithfeathers/bio/>.

5 Carmen Robertson, “Land and Beaded Identity: Shaping Art Histories of Indigenous Women of the Flatland,” *RACAR: Revue d’art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 42, no. 2 (2017): 13–29, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44378612>.

6 Cheng, 18.

7 “Invasive Species,” Ed Pien, accessed January 10, 2023, <https://www.edpien.com/invasivespecies>.

8 Veitch, Michelle. “Re-Crafting Ornamental Display: Millie Chen’s Wallpaper Intervention in Chi-noiserie Decorative Design.” *RACAR: Revue d’art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 44, no. 1 (2019): 75. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26654442>.

9 Ibid 79.

10 It is suggested by historian Robert Finlay that porcelain is the first truly globalized culture. See more in Finlay’s “The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History.”

11 Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 65.

12 The theory of the ‘Third Space’ and ‘Third Culture’ is explored by Homi Bhabha and many other scholars.

13 Charlotte Jansen, “6 Rising Contemporary Artists Using Traditional Craft Techniques,” *Artsy*, June 8, 2021, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-6-rising-contemporary-artists-traditional-craft-techniques>.

14 Lum, Ken. “The Other in the Carpet, 2016.” In *Everything is Relevant: Writings on Art and Life, 1991-2018*, 255-263. Montreal: Concordia University Press, 2020.

15 bell hooks, “Women Artists: The Creative Process,” in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, (New York: The New Press, 1995), 126.

16 See chahar-bagh originally Persianate design.

17 Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973),135.

Suggested Readings

Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*
Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism*
Tricia Hersey, *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto*
bell hooks, “Women Artists: The Creative Process” from *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*
Ken Lum, “The Other in the Carpet” from *Everything is Relevant: Writings on Art and Life 1991-2018*
Sara Raza, *Punk Orientalism*
Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*

Claire Heidinger (she/her) is the Education and Outreach Assistant, and Educator in Residence at the Doris McCarthy Gallery. Claire is a practicing artist investigating diasporic hybrid cultures and sentimentality through painting, ceramics, and sculpture/ installation. The purpose of this essay is create a more accessible way to activate engagement and critical thinking for *Ornamental Gestures*. The ornamentation seen in the work is only the first layer of interpretation. Access to resources such as this, allows for deeper understanding, deconstruction, and critical thinking.



Installation view, *Ornamental Gestures*, photo by Toni Hafkenscheid



Ruth Cuthand, *Anxiety*, 2022, Glass beads, thread, backing, 28.5 x 28.5 cm



Installation view, *Ornamental Gestures*, photo by Toni Hafkenscheid



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