Embodied Narratives: Tracing Sensation and Memory in Deena Qabazard's Work

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by Vanessa Perez Winder

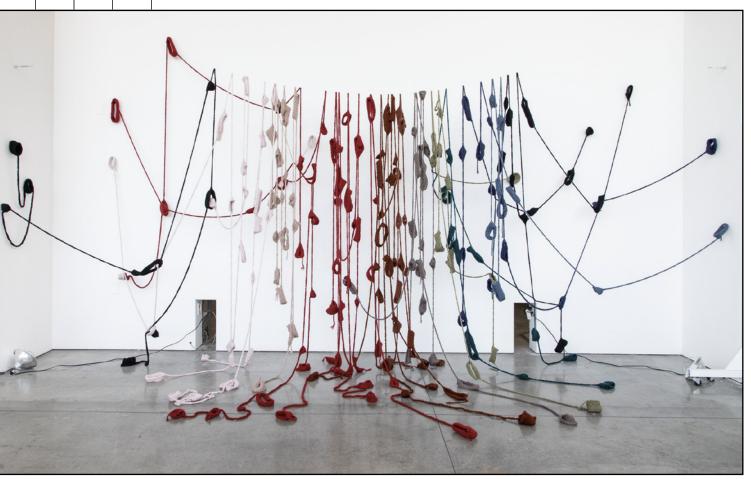




Photograph of Deena Qabazard by Noëlle Gaberman

Courtesy of the artist

When Deena Qabazard (MFA Fine Arts 2024) first hurt her ankle last year and found herself unable to make it to her studio, she compensated by crocheting loops of yarn in bed. Initially a siloed act of experimentation, at some point, the crocheted loops of yarn became something more. She began wearing them, drawing with them, dancing with them, taking photographs with them, and even taking them with her during her travels, including on a summer trip to Iceland as part of CCA's Study Abroad program. The loops have since become both medium and muse for Qabazard, as she immerses herself in her own material creations, exploring their depths and potentialities through ongoing personal and formal research. Her multi-layered engagement with them, spanning installation, photography, and performance, has formed the aesthetic and conceptual basis of her MFA thesis work, including her most seminal piece thus far, an installation aptly titled Beginnings (2023).



Deena Qabazard, *Beginnings* (2023). Installed at CCA PLAySPACE Gallery. Photo by Nicholas Lea Bruno, courtesy of the artist.

A connective web of multi-colored, chain-like crochet loops in various shapes, illuminated with soft, colored light, Beginnings was first shown in its towering entirety in Between Friends at CCA's PLAySPACE gallery in September 2023. In November, it was adapted into a smaller iteration for the ceiling corner of one of the single-stall bathrooms at the Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco as part of Mutability Stalls. Both exhibitions were notably curated by fellow student Sam Hiura (MA Curatorial Practice / MA Visual & Critical Studies 2025). Described by Qabazard as a "living document that keeps evolving," each time the work is rooted somewhere new, it springs to life to produce a new sensory experience through its transformation of space. At times enveloping and entrancing viewers, it appears almost as a portal to an alternate dimension. Eliciting the guiet sense of comfort and introspective tranquility associated with the meditative act of stitching, the work asks us to pause, move closer, and consider our own feelings and relationships to our surroundings.



Deena Qabazard, *Beginnings* (2023). Installed in the bathroom stall at the Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco.

Photo by Nicholas Lea Bruno, courtesy of the artist.

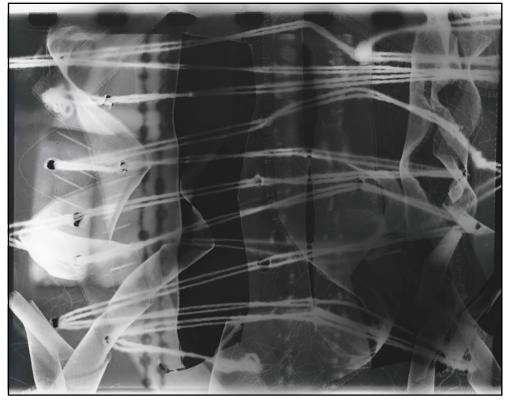


Deena Qabazard, *Soft Tissue* (2023). Silver gelatin print. Image courtesy of the artist.

Exploring the connection between materiality and embodiment is central to Qabazard's broader artistic practice and lived reality, partially informed by her early upbringing and cultural experiences. For one, she's always been a mover and performer, enticed by dance and theater well before turning to visual arts in college. She's also been a dedicated yoga practitioner and instructor for over a decade now. However, she cites her multi-cultural heritage and experience spent going back and forth between Kuwait and California throughout her entire life as primary reasons for her interest in the sensations, limits, and possibilities of body and spirit. Having had a sense of simultaneous belonging to multiple worlds instilled in her by her parents, Qabazard critically explores

acts of fragmentation, repair, and syncretism across her mixed media and interdisciplinary work. For her, art has become a way of crossing physical and temporal boundaries; in her words, "a space to embody all of these places at the same time, to go above the physical place to a third space where I can hold all the parts of me that I love together."

Throughout her artistic journey, Qabazard has deftly navigated the complexities of identity and representation. While her experiences as an Arab woman undoubtedly inform her work and are held close to her heart, she rejects the imposition of a biographical lens, preferring instead to connect with audiences through material experimentation and environmental manipulation. Creating spaces where the boundaries between the abstract and the tangible blur, she allows us to dance between what she deems "the familiar and the strange." This thread is woven throughout Qabazard's thesis work, which also includes evocative, enigmatic experiments in black and white darkroom photography and installation. In this way, her art continually acts as a conduit for dialogue and understanding, touching upon the universal experiences that bind us and embracing multiplicity.



Deena Qabazard, *Soft Tissue* (2023). Silver gelatin print. Image courtesy of the artist.

Asked about what might come next after graduate school, Qabazard says sees her work living in all types of spaces that engage the public. Currently, she is one of four artists in the Residency Program at San Francisco's waste management company, Recology, through May 2024. This is a cyclical initiative that grants selected artists access to discarded materials, a stipend, and individual studio space, culminating in a group exhibition. There, she has been enjoying spending time scavenging through dump piles and thinking through material and object histories with fellow artist in residence, CCA student, and friend Kelley Finley (MFA Fine Arts 2024). Although their practices are quite distinct, the two share an interest in storytelling through a transmutation of malleable mediums, and have established an affective and energetic connection with one another that drives their collaborative process in a way that feels exciting to witness.

As part of the 2024 Graduate Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition, Qabazard's work will be on view at the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts from April 4, 2024 through April 18, 2024. Her work with Finley will be exhibited as part of the group show at Recology's SF Transfer Station (otherwise known as the Dump) on May 17, 18, and 21.

Vanessa Perez Winder (MA Visual & Critical Studies 2025) is a writer and RRR's Assistant Editor. They believe in working toward liberatory and experimental forms of art historical study and curatorial action, and are interested in collaborative, community based, and site specific artistic practices and public interventions.