

Re-claiming the lost home: The politics of nostalgia and belonging in women's art practices in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, discourses on migration and movement have been featured prominently in contemporary art and curatorial practices. For example, during the past decade, the migration crisis was a central theme for several pavilions at the Venice Biennale. Considering current developments, understanding critical issues regarding the migratory experience is a matter of urgency. This article addresses the issue of how the migratory experience is articulated in the works of women artists who use domestic objects to create uncanny environments that represent their contested homelands. This article also emphasises women's experiences, as women have frequently been marginalised from official histories. Through visual analysis of the works, a new perspective is gained in understanding women artists' strategies when representing their home in exile, and their homeland (both 'lost' and existing). The discussion unpacks projects that use 'un-homely devices' to re-construct the experience of 'home': home as a site of personal and family histories, and home as the place of danger and distress. It will specifically examine the work of Klitsa Antoniou, Lia Lapithi, Raeda Saadeh, and Andrea Shaker, all of whom have challenged in their practice the concepts of 'home', 'exile', and 'belonging'.

Keywords: Uncanny, home, exile, migration, belonging, nostalgia.

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Hitting home: representations of the domestic milieu in feminist art

Introduction

Despite the major changes that have happened in the West following the interventions of second-wave feminism, women from the Middle East are still greatly affected by the politics of patriarchy, nationalism, and militarism.¹ The past century saw a series of political upheavals that caused regional conflicts. Notwithstanding the cessation of European colonialism following World War II, western countries continued to intervene and sustain conflicts. The region has since experienced numerous armed conflicts and civil wars, including, among others, the 1974 invasion of Cyprus, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the civil war in Syria. The enduring armed conflict in the Middle East has left scars on those societies and their people. Although both men and women are affected by the conflict and its consequences, women's experiences are impacted by gender-specific injustices.² Nadjie Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt (2009:12) write on the gender-specific issues of conflict: 'Men often continue to be the major decision-makers, politicians, generals, "leaders" and the militia members/soldiers involved in "making war"'. Al-Ali and Pratt also emphasise the gender-specific issues of flight and post-conflict:

Women and children often make up the majority of refugees and internally displaced who are fleeing the violence. Whether they stay under bombardment or flee the sites of violence, it is often left to women, almost universally viewed as the primary carers and nurturers, to ensure the day-to-day survival of their families (2009:12).

Another problematic situation for women living in the Middle East is that their experiences have not been given an equal voice when producing evidence and records. Of course, this issue is not only relevant to Middle Eastern countries. Simone de Beauvoir (2010:166) wrote, 'representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth'.

In this article, I explore the work of contemporary women artists from the Middle East who are challenging in their practice the concepts of 'home', 'exile', 'nostalgia', and 'belonging'. The works discussed here are not intended to be geographically inclusive. Rather, the discussion focuses on artists who use domestic objects to create 'uncanny' environments that represent their contested homelands.³ In my readings of the works, I refer to 'uncanny' to emphasise certain familiar elements that appeared homely but became unhomely once the home was threatened. Crucial to my analysis of the works is Nira Yuval-Davis' description of the notion of belonging (2006:197) as 'feeling safe' and 'feeling at home', and becoming 'articulated

and politicised only when it is threatened in some way'. Also important to my analysis is the notion of nostalgia (from the Greek *nostos* meaning 'return home', and *algia* meaning 'longing'). Nostalgia, according to Svetlana Boym (2001:xiii), is a 'longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed'. Boym distinguishes between two kinds of nostalgia: 'restorative nostalgia', which focuses on *nostos* and the restoration of the lost home, and 'reflective nostalgia', which focuses on *algia* (longing) or the homecoming to the lost home (xviii). My article builds on these concepts and the idea suggested by Hamid Naficy (1999:3) that 'exile is inexorably tied to homeland and to the possibility of return'.

This research is the first that brings together the practices of women artists in the Middle East who use 'un-homely devices' to re-construct the migrant experience of home: home as a site of personal and family histories, and home as a place of danger and distress. My intention is to provide a platform that highlights the artists' interventions in relation to their contested homelands' socio-political events. I therefore provide my own close reading of the artists' works while weaving together personal narrations from the artists. This synthesis will enable new knowledge as it examines how the 'lost home' has been conceptualised in contemporary art practices by women artists whose work has been insufficiently explored in art history. I specifically examine the work of Klitsa Antoniou, Lia Lapithi, Raeda Saadeh, and Andrea Shaker. Through visual analysis of their works, I explore how the artists provide important insights into the ways women experience displacement and their quest to return to their homeland.

Remembering home: *A Wall of Roses*

Klitsa Antoniou's (b.1968) exhibition *Traces of Memories* took place in Nicosia, Cyprus, in 2002.⁴ The exhibition showed the multimedia installation *A Wall of Roses* (Fig. 1), which was made of many roses tied together and hung vertically to form a wall.⁵ The roses are hanging upside down, with their desiccated buds pointing towards the ground. On the floor is a line of cooking utensils (plates, pans, and pots) positioned directly below the roses and filled with a red liquid. Behind the *Wall of Roses*, the audience can scrutinise a completely different setting. Here, several tables are positioned in the broader area of the space, along with an old white ceiling fan and a video projection showing roses (Fig 2). The tables are painted white and have imprints of scissors, knives, irons, and hairbrushes on their tabletops.



FIGURE **N° 1**



Klitsa Antoniou, *Traces of Memory*, 2002, Multimedia installation, latex, pots, roses tables, video projection, sound, roses. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.



FIGURE **N° 2**



Klitsa Antoniou, *Traces of Memory*, 2002, Multimedia installation, Detail. Image courtesy of the artist.

The space has a strong sense of ambiguity: everything is white except for the red roses and the red liquid in the cooking pots. Lucy Watson (2002:23) states that the colour red ‘flows through the work like a rivulet of blood connecting the sculptures, collages and installations together to form a passionate body of pieces sharing a common theme; the trauma and injustice of displacement’. Antoniou was six years old when Turkey invaded her homeland of Cyprus in 1974.⁶ The invasion caused the displacement of 200,000 Greek Cypriots, forcing them to abandon their homes. Even today, refugees are unable to return to their homes. Antoniou talks about the war’s impact and her experiences of the conflict:

Being a survivor of the war of 1974 has had a traumatising effect on me. [...] While hiding in our home, my family and I [...], until UN soldiers rescued us and transported us to the south, the non-occupied area of the country. That was when my life as a refugee began, living in tents with absolutely no remnant of my previous life: no possessions and no reminders (2014:428-429).

Antoniou negotiates her experiences as a refugee and the nostalgia she has for her lost home in her art practice. This is obvious in her installation *Traces of Memory*, where she imprints domestic objects on the surface of the tables. The inspiration for this work came from an activity executed by Antoniou’s acquaintance, film director Jesus Garcès Lambert, when he visited her occupied hometown. While crossings were forbidden between the two communities at the time, Lambert managed to persuade the United Nations Peacekeeping force in Cyprus to escort him to Antoniou’s deserted home. He found the home following the instructions drawn on paper by Antoniou’s mother. During this visit, he took photos of the house’s table, which held the belongings of Antoniou’s family, left there before their flight. The belongings on the table were covered in thick dust from the many years of abandonment. Lambert removed the belongings and took photos of the imprints left on the table and on his return, gave the photos to Antoniou.

Inspired by Lambert’s photos, Antoniou imprints the domestic objects on the tables. I will use Gabriel Koureas’s (2008:321) description of the tables as ‘tortured surfaces’ to analyse the connection of the objects to nostalgia. Such ‘tortured’ objects embody elements of restorative nostalgia and become symbols of absence and remembrance of the lost home. By imprinting the domestic objects onto the surface of the tables, Antoniou creates a site to explore the complexities of loss. Moreover, by using domestic objects (such as irons and scissors), Antoniou creates a powerful strategy for renegotiating the post-1974 trauma; she transforms ordinary domestic objects into ‘reminder instruments’, which act as metaphors of trauma and nostalgia. To support this argument, I draw on Watson’s (2002:23) argument that the household objects are transformed from ‘beloved mementos to ominous reminders’.

By preserving the corporeality of each object through its preservation in layers of latex, Antoniou de-associates their domestic function, transforming them from mundane objects into uncanny ones. In addition to recalling the notion of *unheimlich* (unhomely), her practice associates ordinary utensils as objects that evoke danger and threat.⁷ Previously familiar objects that had functionality in the daily life of a household have now been transformed into uncanny objects that evoke a sense of menace, threat, and danger. *Traces of Memories* exposes a deep sense of ambiguity and disorientation. Through her uncanny modification of domestic objects into threatening devices, Antoniou creates an ambiguous space for the viewer: the plates, pans, and pots are not used as traditional utensils for the preparation and serving of meals but instead used as ‘un-homely devices’ and a metaphor for the conditions of exile and trauma. Antoniou constructed *A Wall of Roses* as a confusing and distressing scene; the roses are staged as if they are bleeding, with the cooking utensils on the floor filled with blood (Fig. 3). The installation becomes a subversive scene of violence and a powerful metaphor for the trauma and injustice of the forced displacement the artist and Cypriot refugees have experienced. Antoniou explains that the roses, ‘with their ephemeral and worldly nature, reveal the passage of time and its effects. Something like the idyllic metaphor of love and beauty that fades, gradually overtaken by death and deterioration’ (quoted in Corbi 2002:8).



FIGURE **Nº 3**



Klitsa Antoniou, *Traces of Memory*, 2002, Multimedia installation, Detail. Image courtesy of the artist.

Such a tactile metaphor exposes the distressing memories behind it. That all vessels contain red fluid cannot but remind the contemporary audience of the 1974 trauma. The entire installation represents the conflict: the *Wall of Roses* can be seen as a reproduction of the Green Line that divides Cyprus, and the objects in the background represent the past and the grief for the lost home and the missing people. Like most of the other displaced people, Antoniou spent the post-war years grieving for what and who was lost in 1974, including her missing grandfather. She talks about her exilic experience:

I know what it is like to be a refugee, and I also know how it feels to be the child of a refugee, and thus to inherit the uncertainties of this rootlessness and some sense of what it means to endure pain caused by the very country of one's birth. One way of dealing with these transgenerational questions was through creating art (2014:429).

The uncanny setting of *A Wall of Roses* exposes the experiences of exile and the ongoing displacement in Cyprus. I suggest that this potent installation exposes the vulnerability that the occupation and division imposed in the post-1974 period. Such vulnerability is obvious in the installation's stillness: the stilled fan, the open drawers of the tables, and the imprinted surfaces on the tabletops. Faced with this vulnerability, the installation could be seen as what Walton describes as an act of 'exorcism of dark and distressing memories' (Watson 2002:23).

Re-visiting the lost home: *There will be no Homecoming*

Lia Lapithi (b.1963) produced the work *There will be no Homecoming* in 2013.⁸ The installation displayed a doormat with printed text on it in two different locations in Cyprus's divided capital, Nicosia (Fig. 4).⁹ For this project, the artist imprinted the words 'There will be no Homecoming', which are reflected on the doormat. She then positioned the doormat in two locations in the old city of Nicosia, where access is controlled and prohibited: one at the United Nations (UN) Sector 2 controlled buffer zone and the other at a Greek Cypriot military guard post. The two locations Lapithi chose to make an artistic intervention are significant, as they have been predominantly controlled by masculinised politics.

Strolling through Nicosia, one would face streets ending with barriers and barbed wires. The city is divided by a buffer zone—a zone guarded by the UN—separating Greek Cypriots to the South of Cyprus and Turkish Cypriots to the North. Yael Navaro-Yashin (2003:115-116) describes the experience of strolling in Nicosia's



FIGURE N° 4



Lia Lapithi Shukuroglou, *There will be no Homecoming*, 2013, Printed doormat, 93x153cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

streets as 'walking through a half-dead city' where houses are abandoned and space 'is kept unkempt, ruins of war are unrepaired, [and] wrecked buildings are left intact'.

Lapithi's wording, 'There will be no Homecoming', reflects the important changes Cyprus underwent in the past decades. In 2003, the authorities of the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) opened the Green Line borders, and for the first time since 1974, citizens could travel to the other side. Before that and for nearly thirty years, the Green Line was a closed border and crossings between the two communities without permission were prohibited. During the first weeks of the border's opening, thousands of people visited their home of origin, where they faced the painful reality of their homes now being occupied by someone else. Lapithi (2011:8) talks about this experience:

My home (or family home) has been sold by the occupation regime without our consent. After the 'Green Line' crossing opened, many visited their houses as 'guests' and this continues to this day. Greek Cypriots visit their houses as 'guests' to Turkish nationals and/or Turkish Cypriot living in their houses, and Turkish Cypriots have similar experiences. This remains a surreal situation for people from both sides.

Lapithi's words reflect the journey many refugees experienced during their 'return'. During their time in exile post-1974, refugees had a strong desire to return to their homes, which later became known as the 'myth of return'. William Safran (1991:83) talks about this in relation to people who 'regard their ancestral home as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) return'. Within the Greek Cypriot context, this myth was based on the memories and accounts of what refugees had lost in 1974: their homes, lands, community, and sense of place and belonging. The 'myth of return' was a central theme of Greek Cypriot politicians, who insisted for decades that any political settlement to

the Cyprus Problem would ensure the return of refugees to their properties. In *There Will be no Homecoming*, Lapithi represents the reality refugees faced after the crossings' opening: the 'assured return' might not be feasible.

Feminist academic and activist Maria Hadjipavlou talked with Lapithi about her return to her parents' house:

It is even worse because I realise it is not only the physical space that is occupied by complete strangers from another country (Bulgarian Turks) who I assume are indifferent to my story and emotional connection but also I experience this double bind. Unknowingly, these strangers have invaded my memories, my own private world which they could not ever know. I go and I find them using what I am not allowed to have as a consequence of force. I feel angry, ambivalent, sad, embarrassed, empathic to the other, and keep hoping that one day we shall find a resolve to what 'filoxenia' [Greek for hospitality] means in a situation where I the real owner feels a stranger and an intruder!¹⁰

Hadjipavlou (2007:64) states that the property issue is 'the most complex and significant one in the Cyprus conflict because of its connection to identity, justice and family history'. The same space (a house) symbolises past and present realities for both parties: 'guests/visitors' and 'owners'. Hadjipavlou (2007:64) talks about an exchange between two men after a Greek Cypriot owner visited his ancestral home, which post-1974 was inhabited by a young Turkish Cypriot family:

GC: This is my home. I was born and I lived here until 1974 when I was 23. I want to return and have my property back.

TC: This is my house too. I was born there thirty years ago and I want to live here on this side. I feel it home too.

Lapithi's work exposes the complicated property issues experienced in contemporary Cyprus. The experience of crossing the border discloses the reality that there are no feasible homecomings to one's home of origin. Lapithi dedicates this work to the people who were forced to leave their homes and cannot return. Since the opening of the borders, Lapithi tried many times to visit her occupied home:

I could never make it past the doormat. My family home was sold illegally, and without my knowledge or consent, to a British lady as a vacation home. She painted the doors and windows blue (resembling Greek islands) and put double locks everywhere, as well as a no trespass sign.¹¹

The words 'there will be no homecoming' was an overarching theme in several of Lapithi's works. However, she soon realised that the words disturbed some people,

as they found them to be provocative and depressing: they felt the title implied that there was no hope of returning and had to accept the possibility of no return.¹² It is evident here how the ‘myth of return’ still resonates with people even after the opening of the borders and the realisation of their homes being occupied by someone else. The words, ‘There will be no Homecoming’, expose the reality exiled artists face due to no longer being welcomed at their home of origin.¹³ Lapithi’s doormat can be seen as an ‘un-homely device’, as it represents a place where one is no longer welcome and ‘homeliness’ is now threatened by someone else’s presence in that space.

The resistant home

The year 1948 has been marked in Palestinian history as the beginning of a national tragedy, one that resulted in over half the population becoming refugees after their villages were destroyed and occupied by the State of Israel. The ongoing conflict has been a dominant theme in Palestinian art: artists such as Mona Hatoum, Emily Jacir, Larissa Sansour, and Raeda Saadeh, among many others, have been instrumental in exposing the Palestinian experience, both from the occupied Palestinian territories and the Palestinian diaspora.

Raeda Saadeh (b.1977) is renowned for using her body to represent gender-based abuse and the ongoing occupation of her homeland, Palestine.¹⁴ In her 2007 video installation *Vacuum*, Saadeh is shown vacuuming the deserted mountains of Palestine (Fig. 5).¹⁵ In this work, Saadeh offers a humorous and sarcastic account of the ongoing conflict in Palestine. Considering that the word ‘vacuum’ originates from Latin and means ‘vacant’ or ‘void’, it is important to consider this work’s meaning for the Palestinian audience. Aida Nasrallah explains that a Palestinian spectator ‘couldn’t help but recall the Zionist slogan: a land without people for a people without a land.’¹⁶ With the vacuuming, Saadeh exposes the problematic situation that resulted in the Palestinian disaster. Significantly, in the video, the artist emphasises the ‘never-ending work that needs to be done in order to survive daily life in Palestine’ (Issa 2012:48). *Vacuum* can also be interpreted as a visual critique of women’s role in patriarchal societies and the associated gendered labour within a household.

Saadeh has been described as the Cindy Sherman of the Middle East. As curator, Rose Issa (2012:8) explains, the artist uses her body as a ‘character’ or a ‘vehicle for ideas’, and ‘creates costumes and props to re-enact famous scenes from art history, fables or legends’. For her 2012 solo exhibition in London titled *True Tales*,



FIGURE **Nº 5**



Raeda Saadeh, *Vacuum*, 2007, Film still from two-channel video installation (17 minutes). Image courtesy of the artist.

Fairy Tales, Saadeh exhibited a series of photographs based on well-known fairy tales. However, Saadeh's fairy tales do not portray idealistic pictures entailing happy endings; her fairy tales expose the Palestinian experience of living under ongoing occupation and conflict.

In *True Tales*, *Fairy Tales*, Saadeh plays the role of various fairy tale characters, including Rapunzel, Red Riding Hood, and Cinderella, as well as ancient Greek characters such as *Penelope*. In her version of *Penelope*, Saadeh is shown sitting on the rubble of a Palestinian home that has been destroyed by the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) (Fig. 6). Palestinian owners are forbidden to rebuild their homes on their own land. Sitting among the ruins, the artist is shown knitting using an oversized ball of red wool while staring towards the horizon. Her posture and expression appear calm yet determined to complete her knitting. Crucial to this work is the sense of 'waiting': within the Palestinian context, there is a strong sense of the 'right to wait' for something to happen that will allow them to live in their homeland without the terror of conflict and destruction. As Rana Anani (2021: 110) writes:

[A]lthough they live in “Palestine” they still dream about (the other, real) Palestine. The Palestine they live in is occupied, while the one they dream is free. Palestinians living in exile experience a similar situation, they can see Palestine on a map but in reality it is not accessible to them. They cannot return to their homes.



FIGURE **Nº 6**



Raeda Saadeh, *Penelope*, 2010, from the *True Tales, Fairy Tales* series of photographs, C-type colour print, 91.5x122cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

In *Penelope*, Saadeh reflects what is being documented internationally by media and human rights organisations. Even today, the IDF are invading Palestinian cities. Like Homer’s Penelope—the Queen of Ithaca, who waited twenty years for her husband, Odysseus, to return —Saadeh portrays the Palestinian’s wait to live in their homes. Also similar to Homer’s Penelope, Saadeh is engaged in weaving a fabric. According to Homer’s *Odyssey*, while waiting for Odysseus’ return, Penelope had to devise various strategies to delay marrying her suitors. One of these strategies involved a scheme where she claimed she would choose a suitor once she had completed the weaving she was preparing for Odysseus’s late father. During the day, she would weave, while at night, she would unravel part of the textile to delay completing the shroud. As Efi Kyprianou writes (2017:11), ‘Penelope is by no means a helpless female character or simply a renowned weaver; she is an earnest, strong minded woman who acts with cleverness and ingenuity – capacities that in the Greek culture are associated with weaving’. In *Penelope*, Saadeh’s juxtaposition

of the oversized red yarn positioned within the ruins of the house acts as a reminder of the uncanny home and the conditions of exile.

As a contemporary Penelope, Saadeh is also determined to confront the ongoing socio-political issues. As she explains, the woman she represents is ‘filled with ambition, saner than she should be and yet she is also a little mad. She is both fragile and strong, she is fully aware and responsive, and she is constantly on the move’ (quoted in Amirsadeghi *et al.* 2009:248). Saadeh’s *Penelope* also engages with history and symbolism by using the red yarn. The colour red has been used globally throughout history to represent women – for example, the Suffrage Movement adopted red lipstick as a symbol of power, and during World War II, European and American women wore red lipstick as a symbol of resistance and faith in victory.¹⁷ More recently, in Italy, red shoes became the symbol against femicide and violence against women.

Similar to Lapithi, who positioned her doormat in Nicosia’s buffer zone, Saadeh also positions ‘homely’ devices in spaces that are charged with politics and conflict. Saadeh’s vacuum and knitting become ‘un-homely devices’, which remind contemporary audiences of the ongoing, unsettling situation her homeland is experiencing. Both Lapithi’s and Saadeh’s work not only articulate homes that are lost but also the faith in being able to return to them. Naficy (2001:229) writes on the return: ‘Every journey entails a return, or the thought of return. Therefore, home and travel, placement and displacement are always already intertwined. Return occupies a primary place in the minds of the exiles.’

home. not home

The theme of ‘home’ is pivotal in Andrea Shaker’s 2012 experimental film *home. not home*.¹⁸ The film presents a series of three interior rooms, with the camera focused on the rooms’ windows. The opening scene shows a window and then fades when the title *home. not home* is shown. Next appears the first interior scene, titled *making tabouleh* (Fig. 7). In this scene, while seeing a close-up of a window’s curtain, we hear someone chopping ingredients. We then hear a civil defense siren, which conceals the chopping sound. After approximately 40 seconds, the siren stops, and we hear the chopping of ingredients again. Finally, the scene fades out.



FIGURE **N° 7**



Andrea Shaker, *home. not home.*, (7:14 minutes). Film still from scene “making tabouli,” © 2012 Andrea Shaker, all rights reserved.



FIGURE **N° 8**



Andrea Shaker, *home. not home.*, (7:14 minutes). Film still from scene “making dihan & eggs,” © 2012 Andrea Shaker, all rights reserved.



FIGURE N^o 9



Andrea Shaker, *home. not home.*, (7:14 minutes). Film still from scene “peparing mint tea,” © 2012 Andrea Shaker, all rights reserved.

In the second scene, titled *making dihan & eggs*, we hear someone cracking eggs and then adding them to a frying pan (Fig. 8). Like the first scene, we see the close-up of a window’s curtain. While watching the window scene and listening to food frying, we suddenly hear the sound of a siren. After about 50 seconds, the siren stops, and the scene fades out. The third scene, titled *preparing mint tea*, starts with the sound of someone filling a kettle while the camera shows a window with curtains (Fig. 9). Through a slit in the curtain, we can see the landscape. As in the previous scenes, the sound of a siren conceals the sound of the kettle. When the siren stops, we hear someone pouring boiling water into a mug and then stirring it with a spoon. The film's final scene shows the window from the opening shot, only now it’s shown from a different angle.

Shaker, born into a Lebanese family in the United States, is influenced by the wars and conflicts in the Middle East. The synopsis of the film explains that it portrays ‘home’ as both a ‘place of comfort’ and a ‘place of confinement’.¹⁹ Reflecting on the themes of home, exile, and loss, Shaker (2016:46) speaks about how the notion of homeland has a twofold meaning for her:

I have two homelands. One, the United States, is my *real* homeland. I know it through lived experience. The other, Lebanon, is *not my real homeland*; it is my ancestral homeland, from which I am separated by two generations. It is my *imagined* homeland. I know this imagined homeland through photographs and family stories, which have evolved over the years.

Her work is extremely emotive, reflecting the notion of 'home' and 'belonging' in homelands that have experienced war and conflict. It is significant to consider the importance of the politics of belonging that Shaker has as a second-generation migrant via transgenerational narratives. Her family photographs and narratives act as bridging devices that connect Shaker to her ancestral home. These devices reinforce the 'emotional attachment' and become politicised references to the notion of home and belonging.

Such references are evident in *home. not home*, where Shaker presents an account of her 'imagined' homeland to the audience. In the film, each of the three scenes has a point of reference relating to her ancestral homeland. Tabouleh (referred to in the first scene) is a traditional Eastern Mediterranean vegetarian salad that is very popular in Middle Eastern countries. Making dihan and eggs (referred to in the second scene) is a recollection of Shaker's own experience of her grandmother making dihan: 'As a young girl growing up in a small New England town, I would ride my bike to her house and she would make me one of my favourite meals of dihan and eggs with hot (Arabic) bread' (2012:162). Culinary traditions have been central in diasporic communities, especially as they help generate and reinforce a sense of belonging to the home of origin. The experience of making dihan (a way of preserving meat by storing it in lard and salt so that it lasts months without a refrigerator) became a way for Shaker to experience life and memories from Lebanon. As the artist explains (2016:162), '[W]hat was a means of survival had now become a culinary treat for me; sharing a meal made by my grandmother had become a way for me to travel back to the Lebanese mountains and imagine life there'.

The concept of home as a space of agony and confinement emerges throughout Shaker's *home. not home*. She was eleven years old when the Lebanese Civil War started in 1975. The war resulted in a mass exodus of almost one million people and 120,000 fatalities. Shaker (2019:5) talks about her experiences during this period:

1975 marked the start of the Lebanese war, a war that would continue for another 15 years. There were images and sounds that, while protected behind the glass of the television, seemed to splatter and scream everywhere in our home. [...] The images and sounds provoked fear

and worry that permeated the crevices of our home. While the war was a time in which many Lebanese left or were trying to leave the country, I longed to be there, to belong there, especially as the Lebanon of my imagined memories was being erased.

As a result, *home. not home* is influenced by the Lebanese wars and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The film portrays the conditions of war and concentrates on showing a homely environment that involves preparing Middle Eastern food (tabouleh, dihan and eggs, and mint tea). However, these activities are interrupted by the sound of a siren. What would have been a mundane activity prepared in a homely environment becomes an uncanny reminder of threat, exile, belonging, and (un) belonging. By connecting the film to the memories and the food prepared by her family, Shaker emphasises the reality that Lebanon is no longer as it was when her grandparents left: Lebanon has suffered ongoing wars that has left scars on the landscape and its people.

The engagement of reconstructing a 'home' under threat into an uncanny environment no longer homely could be seen as a strategy to reclaim the 'imagined' home. According to Maria Holt (2014:2), the 'imagined' home involves a powerful narrative for exilic communities:

There is a tension between the need to recreate home, a secure home in which to enact family life, and a notion of home that exists [...] 'only in the imagination'. The majority [...] have an idea of what [...] [their homeland] looks or looked like and they are aware of the symbolic meaning it possesses. This is a very powerful narrative; although it does not constantly preoccupy them, it is ready to emerge as a compelling discourse, when individuals are invited to reflect.

Shaker has addressed the politics of home and the notion of ancestral homeland in several of her works. In 2017 Shaker travelled to Lebanon for the first time to visit her ancestral home. During this time she made two trips, where she produced a short experimental film and a series of still photographs, both titled *on bayt* (home). While this was her first time in Lebanon, she described the experience as a 'reverse exile': 'in a way, I felt a sense of reverse exile; an exile for a place that was, at once, never mine and always mine'.²⁰ While in Lebanon, she strolled around the village of Ma'asser and took photographs of her family's former home, which had been abandoned since the war (Fig. 10).²¹ Shaker describes her visit to her ancestral family home:

While I felt at home in Ma'asser, and in my former ancestral home, I also felt an absence emanating from the walls. With this absence came whispers of histories, of stories, and the space for new imagined stories

to coexist with older stories of my grandmother baking bread, my grandparents tending to the farmland, and my cousins playing in the winding street.²²

Shaker's visit and *on bayt* work—which depicts the family house's interior, exterior, and garden—can be seen as an act of reclaiming her ancestral home (Fig. 11). Central to Shaker's work is the evocation of narratives of her homeland (via memories, places, and culinary practices) that function as a vessel that explores (be)longing and nostalgia. Considering Boym's description of reflective nostalgia (about individual and cultural memory), I, therefore, propose that Shaker has constructed a highly symbolic work that intertwines her own nostalgic memories with the sociopolitical conditions of her ancestral home (Fig. 12).



FIGURE **N° 10**



Andrea Shaker, *bayt chakar (light bulb #1)*, colour photograph, © 2017 Andrea Shaker, all rights Reserved.



FIGURE **N° 11**



Andrea Shaker, *bayt barakat* (window #11), colour photograph, © 2017 Andrea Shaker, all rights reserved.



FIGURE **N° 12**



Andrea Shaker, *bayt barkakat* (shelf, #60), colour photograph, © 2017 Andrea Shaker, all rights reserved.

Conclusion

Domesticity and the usage of uncanny objects have been employed extensively in feminist art. Since the 1970s, women worldwide have staged domestic settings where—with irony and humour— they have challenged the prevailing patriarchal conventions. Women artists from the Middle East have contributed extensively to this field and have represented the contested domestic milieu in their artistic practices. The representations of the home discussed in this essay have as a common axis the concept of the lost home and the usage of domestic objects as politicised, ‘un-homely devices’ to challenge patriarchal stereotypes and address socio-political issues.

In their representations of the domestic environment Antoniou, Lapithi, Saadeh, and Shaker display ordinary objects that recall the notion of the home to their audiences. However, home is not presented as a place of sanctuary and comfort. Rather, home is presented as a space of agony and threat. The artists found themselves displaced from their homeland, living in exile, and away from home. Boym’s observation (2001:251) on home is highly significant: ‘when we are home, we don’t need to talk about it’. Within this context, I suggest that the exiled artists use their art as a coping mechanism for the trauma and loss imposed by the displacement.

Through their powerful interventions, each artist represents the exilic-conditions of their homeland as a subject-theme, voicing their position as active and informed citizens in this way. Antoniou, Lapithi, Saadeh, and Shaker have developed visual strategies using ordinary objects to re-create distressing environments that convey loss; with this, they provide critical insights into what Homi Bhabha (1992:144) describes as ‘the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history’ and ‘the wider disjunctions of political existence’. Via these art projects, the artists share their experiences of loss and suffering with the audience and their understandings of their homeland’s socio-political oppression. They also remind the audiences of the absurdness of armed conflict and its scars on societies.

In this article, I have aimed to provide an approach that considers women’s experiences of displacement and conflict in the Middle East. By examining contemporary art practices (such as installation, performance, and video) and the artists’ personal narratives, I hope to provide a space to address current socio-political and cultural issues and reconsider women’s experiences in the making of histories. The works discussed here act as a vehicle to give voice to women’s experiences not just locally but also internationally. With ongoing armed conflicts

still occurring worldwide, we need powerful visual art like the ones discussed here to help convey social equity and justice for current and future generations.

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Notes

1. I refer to Middle East as the countries around the southern and northern shores of the Mediterranean Sea between Africa, Asia, and Europe (as defined by Britannica Encyclopaedia <https://www.britannica.com/place/Middle-East>). The Middle Eastern region consists of countries with different religions and a variety of ethnic and linguistic groups (such as Arabs, Greeks, Jews, and Turks).
2. Caroline Criado Peren provides an insightful account emphasising the problematic data gaps of the real figures on female-specific injustices in her book *Invisible Women: Exposing the Gender Bias Women Face Every Day* (2019).
3. The term 'uncanny'— in German *unheimlich* (unhomely)—was first used by Ernst Jentsch in his 1906 essay *On the Psychology of the Uncanny*. Sigmund Freud writes in his 1919 text *The Uncanny* the definition of *unheimlich* as 'unhomely' in opposition to *heimlich* (homely). Freud argues that the experience of the uncanny is 'something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed' (2003:xlii). A number of important contemporary publications explore the uncanny from a feminist perspective; for example Julia Kristeva in *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991) and Alexandra M. Kokoli in *The Feminist Uncanny in Theory and Art Practice* (2016).
4. Klitsa Antoniou is a Greek Cypriot multidisciplinary artist and a Professor of Fine Arts at Cyprus University of Technology. She lives in Cyprus and is an internally displayed refugee. See <https://www.klitsa-antoniou.com/index.html> for the full range of her work.
5. The installation was also exhibited in 2006 at the Apollonia Venue in Strasbourg, France, and at the 2006 *Tempus Arti* Triennial Exhibition in Belgium.
6. Cyprus has been divided since 1974, when Turkey invaded in response to a military coup, which was backed by the Greek Government. Even today the island is divided and refugees cannot return to their homes. For an informative account on the gendered nature of the socio-political condition in Cyprus, see Maria Hadjipavlou's *Women and Change in Cyprus* (2010).
7. This a strategy used extensively by Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum. In many of her works, Hatoum (b.1952) modifies domestic objects into threatening ones – for example, in her 1996 series *No Way*, she plugged the holes of stainless steel colanders with blunt studs.
8. Lia Lapithi is a Greek Cypriot multidisciplinary visual artist. She lives in Cyprus and is an internally displayed refugee. See <http://www.lialapithi.com> for the full range of her work.

9. The doormat was previously exhibited at the 2010 *Looking Awry: Views of an Anniversary* Exhibition in Cyprus. The exhibition was held as a celebration of the 50 years of the establishment of the Republic of Cyprus and aimed to exhibit works that examined Cyprus' recent past, present, and possible futures.
10. Lapithi Lia. You are a Guest in my House (<http://www.lialapithi.com/Guest.htm>).
11. Email communication with Lia Lapithi, 27 October 2017.
12. Email communication with Lia Lapithi. 27 October 2017.
13. Lapithi's *Doormat* recalls Mona Hatoum's 1996 *Doormat*, which was made of stainless steel pins that formed the word 'welcome'. Both artists have modified a domestic object into an uncanny one that is no longer homely and familiar.
14. Raeda Saadeh is a Palestinian multidisciplinary artist and teaches at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem.
15. *Vacuum* was exhibited as part of the 2023 show 'Women Defining Women in Contemporary Art of the Middle East and Beyond', at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
16. This problematic slogan implies that Palestine was a place without inhabitants and was used to justify the invasion of Palestinian villages (<https://www.reactfeminism.org/entry.php?l=lb&id=192&e=t>). For more information on this, see https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/quot-a-land-without-a-people-for-a-people-without-a-land-quot-diana-muir#_ftnref3
17. See Palumbo, J. (2020) *Empowering, alluring, degenerate? The evolution of red lipstick*, 12 March [CNN Style]. Available: <https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/red-lipstick-history-beauty/index.html> [Accessed 30 May 2023].
18. Andrea Shaker is Lebanese-American multidisciplinary artist and a Professor of Art at the College of St. Benedict and St. John's University in Minnesota, United States. She is a second-generation migrant. See <https://andreashaker.com> for the full range of her work.
19. *home. not home* was showcased at the 2013 8th Twin Cities Arab Film Festival, the Walker Art Centre during 2014-2015, and aired on Twin Cities Public Television in 2015 with an interview.
20. Email communication with Andrea Shaker, 7 October 2017.
21. *bayt chakar (light bulb #1)* has not been exhibited yet, and this article is the first text mentioning it.
22. Email communication with Andrea Shaker, 7 October 2017.

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