

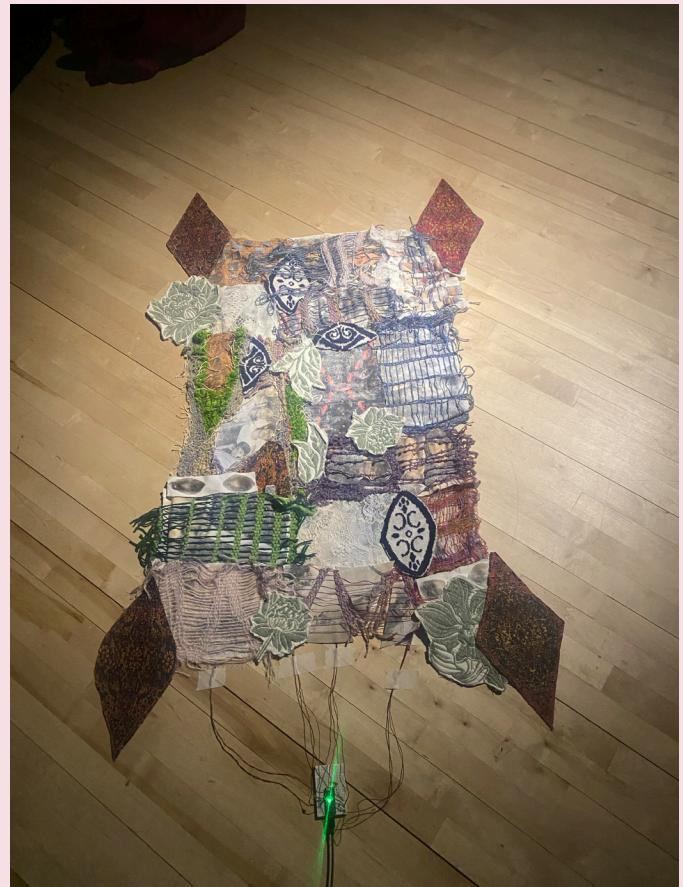
HEART STRINGS

Sarah Massoudi

ABOUT

My name is Sarah Massoudi. I grew up Persian-American in a bicultural household, my dad from Iran, my mom from the USA. While I got to experience many aspects of Persian culture, the desire to flee the trauma and increase in violence experienced in pre-revolution Iran left many parts of the culture unshared between my dad and I. I never learned Farsi, the language spoken in Iran, and I never got to visit. Many cultural practices, such as that around Nowruz (Persian New Year) lost their sharpness in my family. My grandfather, unable to leave Iran due to constraints put upon him by the government, grew older and sicker as time went on. He passed in the summer of 2022. I only saw him the one time he was permitted to leave the country when I was 2 years old, but I saw his face and heard his voice many times on phone calls. On top of being physically and spiritually disconnected from my Persian culture, it was made even more difficult due to clashing American viewpoints on the Middle East, tensions between the USA and Iran, and tensions that were carried by my mom's side of the family against Middle Eastern people. After my father had processed and healed his relationship to his parents, I began to heal my relationship with my father and heritage as well.

"Heartstrings" is a multimedia interactive art piece that consists of a rug made of fragments of photos from pre-revolution Iran, photos of my family members in a youthful, tumultuous time. I took each photo, transferred it onto fabric, and used my handloom and thread to sew and weave the fragments together. I also included secondhand scraps that resemble rug imagery to "collage" it all together. The rug has fragments stemming from it, resembling pieces that were cut from this "central" rug pre-immigration. These pieces depict more images related to my experience with Persian culture, the American lens and the lens of my spiritual approach to connecting with my people. When the rug is stepped on, it plays a sound clip taken from either childhood videos, news sources, or the very personal Zoom calls that my dad and grandfather did months prior to my grandfather's death. While I don't understand the Farsi being spoken, it took a process of truly listening to their conversations to choose the most meaningful sounds. This piece plays a few roles; one is that it serves as a way to reconnect with my family, my culture, and memories of pre-revolution Iran that are carried by many members of the diaspora. It also serves as a sort of memorial to my grandfather, as I was unable to see him prior to his death due to COVID and travel restrictions to Iran. While we barely met, there seems to be an inexplicable tie between the souls of our family, and I wanted to honor and explore that. This piece aims to ask, "what is memory?", "how does memory contribute to the formation of our perspective of the world and our experiences?" I explore the concept of broken memory, broken relationships, broken histories, through "Heartstrings."



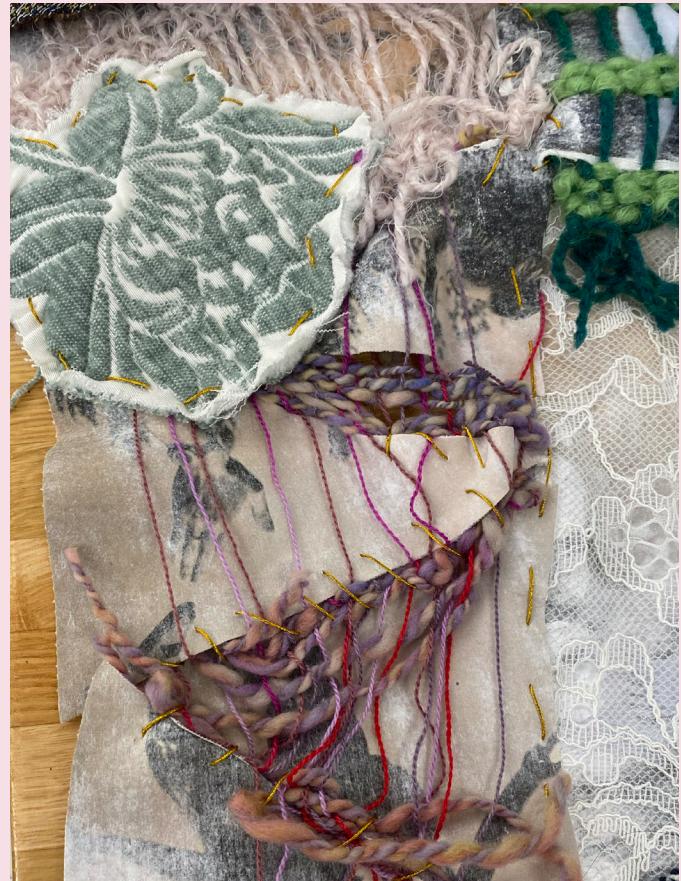
IMAGERY



My grandmother, Faye
Iran, early 1970s

My grandmother left for the USA in the late 60s. She sought out a life as an actress, facing quite a bit of exploitation and hardship in attempting to reach success in that field. She eventually found success in other areas, bringing my father to the states and then returning him a few years later in the early 70s. My grandmother was young, (one could say) a child herself while enduring the struggle of teaching herself English and assimilating with American culture. She was part of a Girl Scout's troupe, and pictured here is her doing the Girl Scouts' handshake with a troupe member in Tehran. Laid on top is a woven window of fuzzy, purple yarn. The woven piece covers up the image enough to make it incredibly fuzzy. One has to physically move the strings away to see clarity. My grandmother currently struggles with early-onset dementia, which makes it incredibly difficult for her to see her past clearly. She made it clear, while talking to me, that she does not wish to revisit the memories of her past in Iran.

IMAGERY



My father and grandfather
Tehran, 1960s

My dad talks about his time as a very young child as “the happiest time in his life.” Here, my dad is being thrown into the air by my grandfather. With the good memories of his childhood came lots of trauma and hardship, enduring a broken relationship with my grandfather that would last up until a couple of years before my grandfather’s death. My grandfather was sent to prison for revolutionary activity during the Shah’s reign. He was absent for a large majority of my father’s early childhood, leaving my father with my great-grandmother, whose death my dad witnessed as a 5-year-old. And, even though my dad spent decades away from my grandfather after he left for the USA, they were able to reconcile and talk about our family’s story. While this broken relationship has made it difficult to connect with my Persian family, I am reminded of the sheer simplicity that early childhood brought my father and I into our lives. This section of the rug is an homage to the joys of childhood, the fading memories that connect us with times before everything unfolds.

IMAGERY



My father
Tehran, 1960s

Just a bit older than he was in the previous image, my father is pictured here as an older child. Already having been through many struggles at this time in his life, one can see his relationship with life beginning to form. I chose to overlay this image with a piece of lace, offering windows into the world in which my father grew up. As this piece aims to dig into the origins and the meanings of memory, what this image asks is, "how much is memory a survival mechanism?" What little connection I have to my father's life story is what lies in the images I have collected for this piece. I can only begin to fathom what my father and family have been through, yet their memory of a country I've never been to lingers through the stories told to me, the world they've created for me, through my features and the little things that make me a "Massoudi."

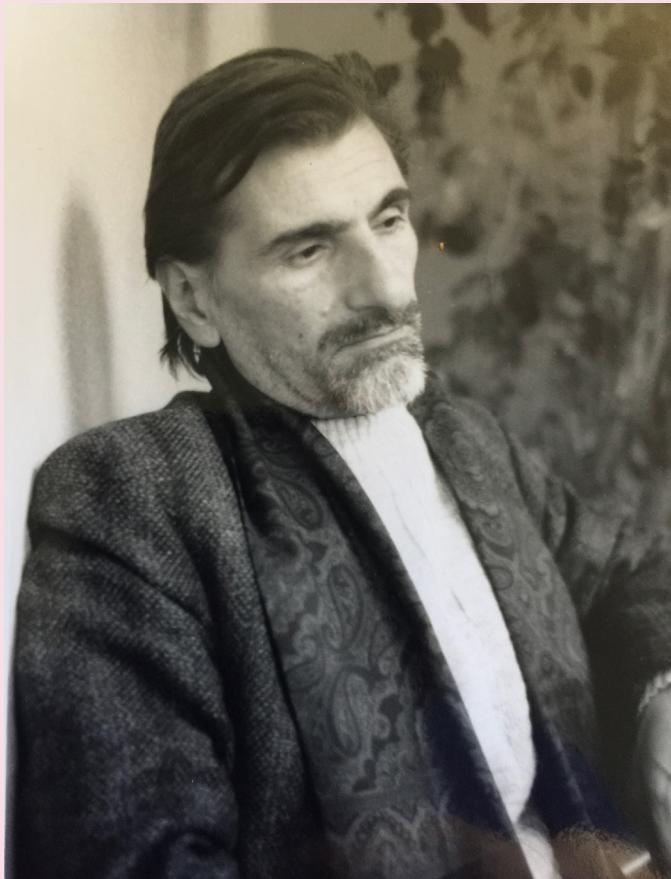
IMAGERY



My father and aunts
Tehran, 1960s

Here, my father is pictured with two of my aunts. Raised in a family of 7 children scattered over the world, this portion of the piece aims to take a look at siblinghood. My aunts and uncles have always played a very important role in my life. Many Massoudi children still remain in Iran, and quite a few of them I have never met or don't remember meeting. Others, I have spent countless family gatherings with. Pictured are my aunts Mandan and Mona, both of whom have stayed in Iran. My father's relationship with the second oldest (him being the oldest) Mandan mirrors the relationship I share with my brother: tumultuous, but a typical relationship between siblings close in age. However, the vastly different trajectory he ended up on separates them both by space and by mind. I chose to separate my father's silhouette in this panel, pointing out his very different and distant path from my aunts'. This trajectory is what has led my family to where it is now, slowly but surely connecting and healing over generations.

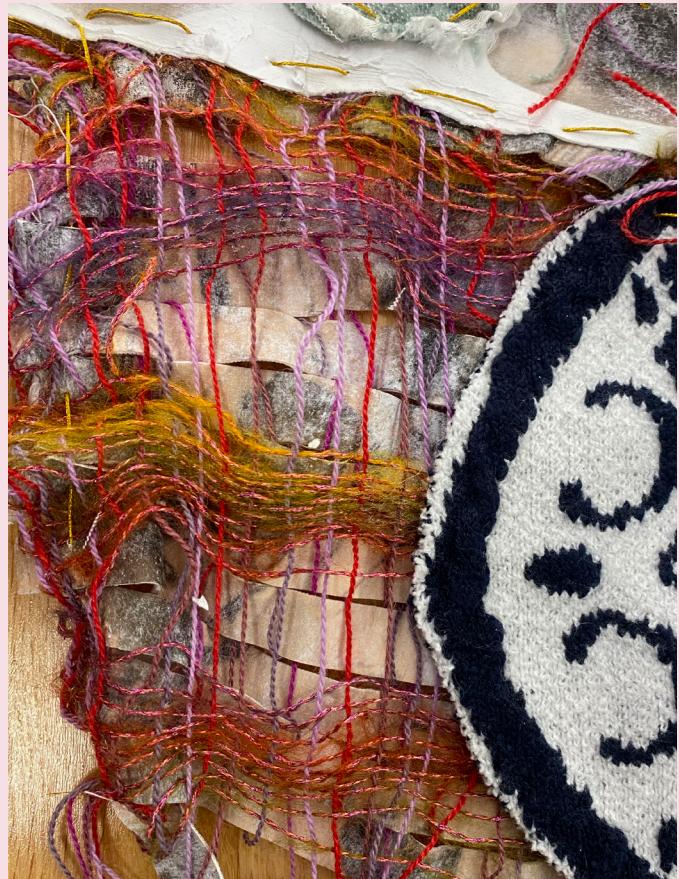
IMAGERY



My grandfather
Amsterdam, late 1980s

While I've sustained a fairly close relationship with my grandmother, I was not able to do the same with my grandfather. Hearing only about him through stories, I know of him as a noble man. He was an incredibly talented artist and inventor, who produced patents for a system to support bridges underwater. He, too, lived a very difficult life, as did many of my family members due to the struggles that come with living under dictatorship, corruption, and systems destroyed by imperialism. While a strong man, he endured Iranian prisons, abuse, and trauma inflicted upon him by family and government. He was not permitted to leave the country during my lifetime, except for two circumstances: once when I was 2 years old, and once after the initial spikes of COVID-19, only one year prior to his death. The woven technique chosen for this piece illustrates his resilience juxtaposed with the fact that I never really got to know him. What I know of him is a sort of idealized version of him. He is spoken of very highly in my family.

IMAGERY



My grandmother and my father
Tehran, 1960s

This image takes place following my grandparents' separation, prior to my grandmother's immigration to the US. Both children, my grandmother and father navigated their lives in the ways they best could. Here, they sit together, though they did not spend many years together. I chose to cut this piece down to strips, put them through my hand loom one on top of the other, and then created a separate woven piece that I laid on top. This image lacks clarity yet sustains a soft passion to it, with its vibrant colors and mohair yarn. I wanted to illustrate the ways in which time and life experience can interfere with the clarity of memory. There are certain aspects of childhood that one can remember and that one chooses not to. My father and grandmother lived a sort of parallel upbringing, finding their ways in the world at the same time, yet separately. Their relationship held tensions that lasted through their process of figuring out their lives, but through acceptance and processing, their relationship has come to a point of connection and love.

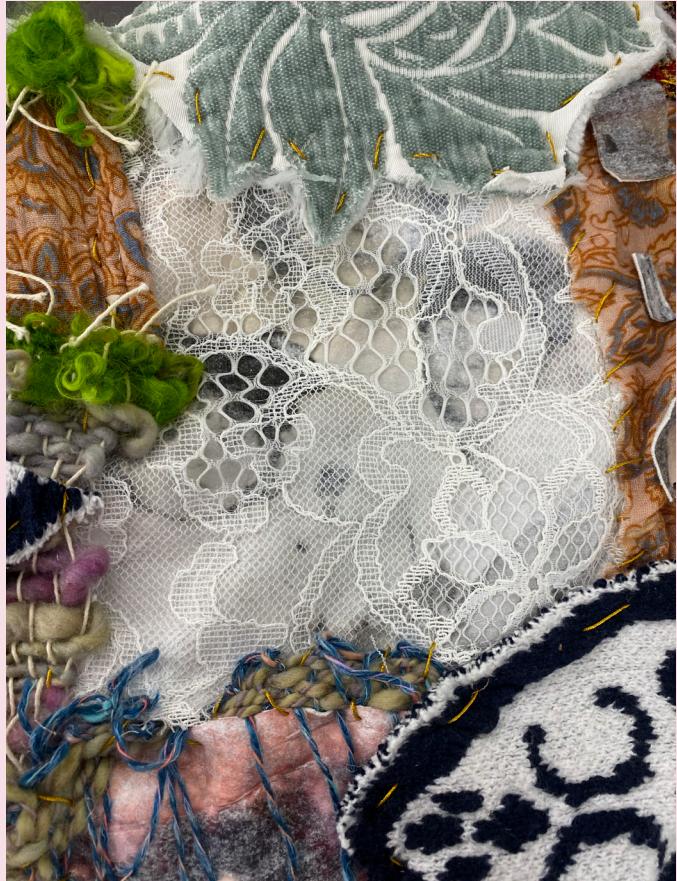
IMAGERY



My father
Tehran, 1960s

Pictured is my father, a child as young as he was in the image of him “flying”, laying down in the grass. There is something so beautiful and peaceful about the image that calls to mind a sensation of newness, freshness, a lack of context about the world that makes one so much more open, kind, and understanding. There are no labels, there is no war, there is just the existence of the world built upon one’s tiny perception of it. The world to the child is so small, yet seems big. Perhaps we need to call upon that smallness in order to expand upon how we can see the world. This panel inspired me to shed my adulthood and explore what my identity means to me beyond the superficial world I have built around myself, the constraints put upon me by narratives, by experiences I and my family have faced. This image is also broken down into strips and kept together by rows of weaving, beckoning the childlike mind to come back and see the world for what it is and isn’t.

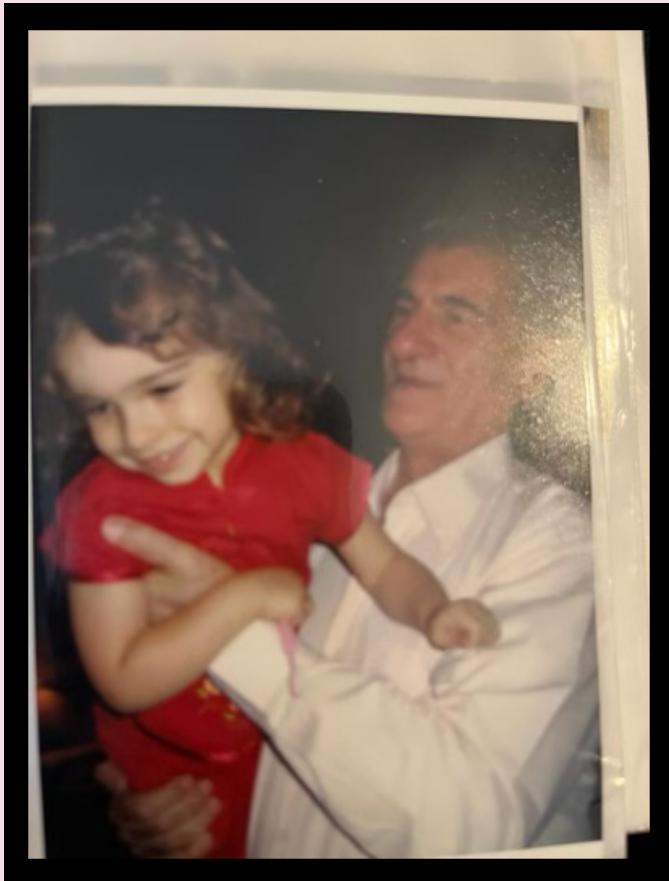
IMAGERY



My grandmother, my father, and my aunt
Tehran, 1960s

It is difficult to describe the relationship between parent and child, to define it. When one is faced with a difficult situation, such as my grandmother, it is difficult to sacrifice certain parts of one's life. My grandmother faced deep trauma both in Iran and the USA. She has lived an incredibly difficult life, one in which she had to leave her children in Iran in attempt for a better one. I witnessed the tensions between my father and my grandmother when I was a child. I didn't really understand where it came from, but my father made it clear there was a difficult wall between the two of them, a wall that, to this day, keeps them at an arm's length. The shield my grandmother has built for herself has kept the world at an arm's length too. I like to think that, in some way, my father is still being held tightly, held close to the heart by my grandmother, that the wall is a superficial one. Out of understanding and after a lot of processing, my father and the rest of my family is attempting to reach through the wall. While the world is complicated and many strings exist, the mother-child bond gets entangled in it all.

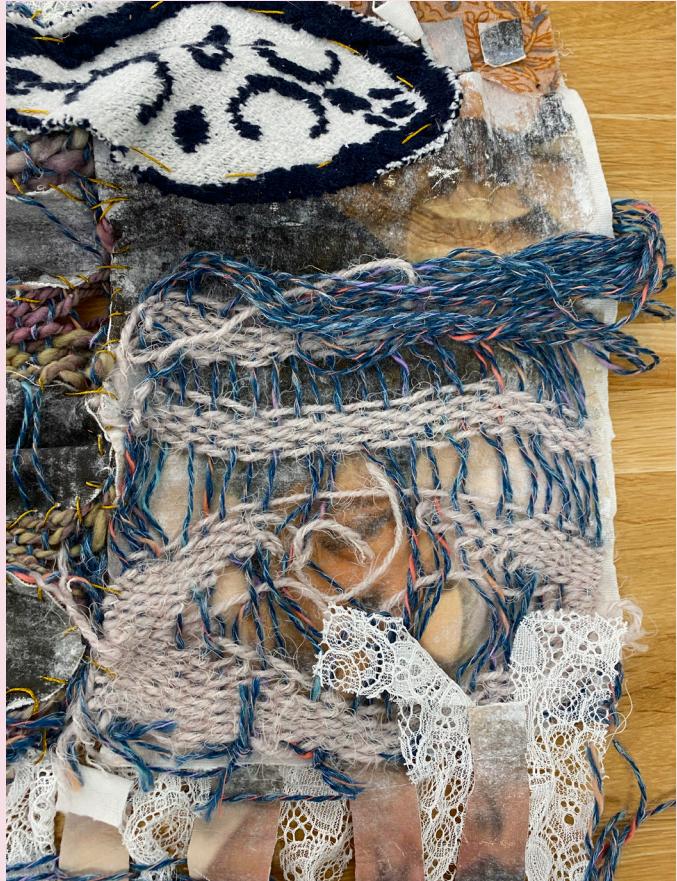
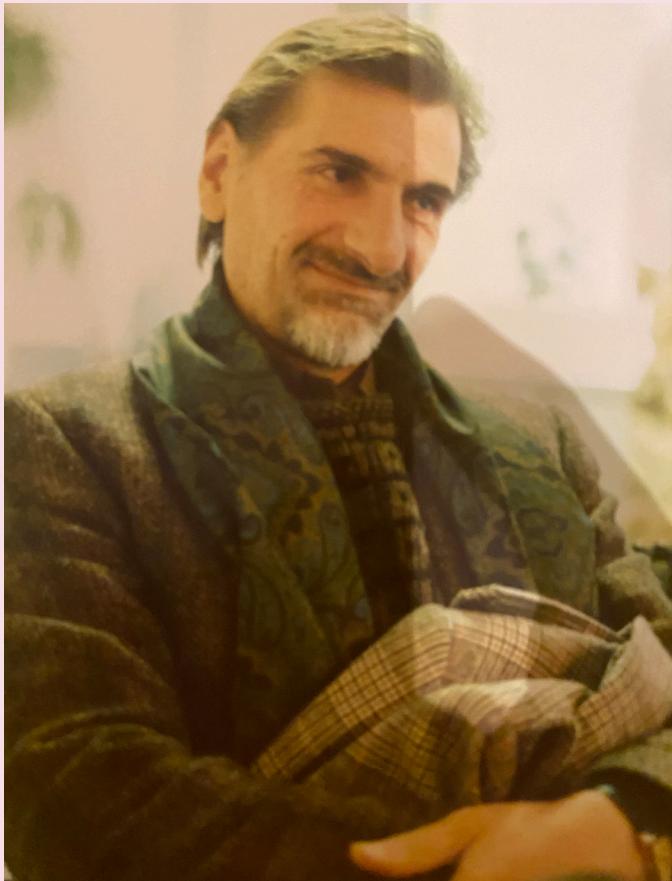
IMAGERY



My grandfather, me
Singapore, 2005

This is the only chance my grandfather has had to hold me. I am 2 years old in this photo. My grandfather was allowed to leave Iran only a couple of times, once in my lifetime, and the family met with him in Singapore. This particular panel means quite a few things for me; it is the only point at which I actually touch my grandfather. It is the only time I am featured on this main rug. Positioned in a corner, this image is barely recognizable. This point of contact is really the only opportunity I've had to physically meet this part of my heritage. While I've chosen to overlay lace directly on top of the rest of the pieces that involve lace, this piece forms a messy tangle that was incredibly difficult to weave, handle, and sew. It begins to dip into the mess that is discovering who I am through my art. However, this piece is more to me than a simple installation; it is a family tree, a portrait, my heart turned inside out. I think that, out of all parts of this piece, this part shows this the best.

IMAGERY



My grandfather
Amsterdam, late 1980s

I was gifted a photo book with princesses featured on it when I was a child. My dad happened to be showing me some photos taken of my father and grandfather on a trip to Amsterdam when my father was much older. I took the photos and kept them safe in this photo book. They remain there to this day, sitting in my somewhat childhood bedroom in California. There is a sort of dissonance between who my father was when this photo was taken, who he was as a father to me at the time I received this photo, and who I feel the both of us are now. It is mesmerising to see the ways in which people are frozen in time, and what the experience is of someone who never witnessed the moment being captured. I am sure that, for my father, this image evokes different feelings than it does for me, or for you. I laid a woven, untied piece atop this image, illustrating that dissonance, that error of translation between times known and unknown. I wanted to play with the ways in which the image holds us in memory, holds us to be immortal, frozen in time with clashing memories that keep us in limbo.

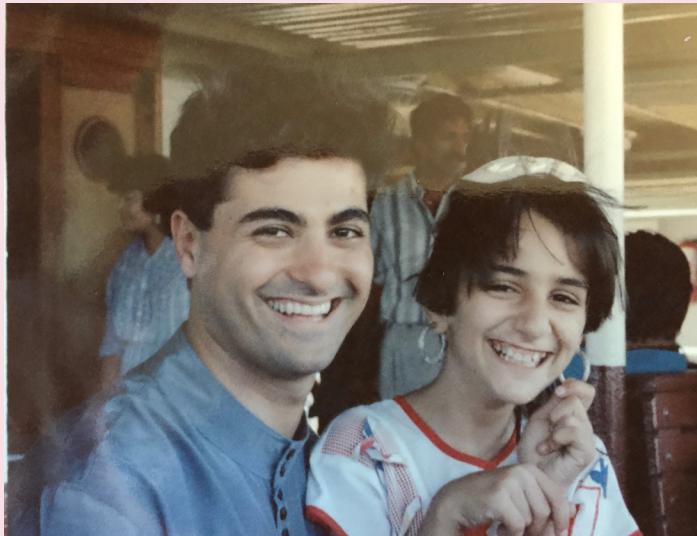
IMAGERY



Family portrait
Tehran, 1960s

This image evokes a sensation of youth from me. All youthful, my father and grandmother are pictured with my great aunt and my grandmother's cousin. The youthfulness also reflects the youthfulness that was coupled with Iran at the time, a blossoming country mirroring the West's success. It marks a moment where the trajectory of the country was away from dictatorship. Taking a different turn after the revolution, what lingers is that which was not destroyed by the aftermath of the revolution. This image existing in a time in which I too am unsure of the direction of the world that I have built around me, the parallels I draw in this piece led me to "frame" the image with a variety of textiles. It sits, existing, representing the buds of turmoil, growth, and death.

IMAGERY



My father, aunt Mona
Turkey, late 1980s

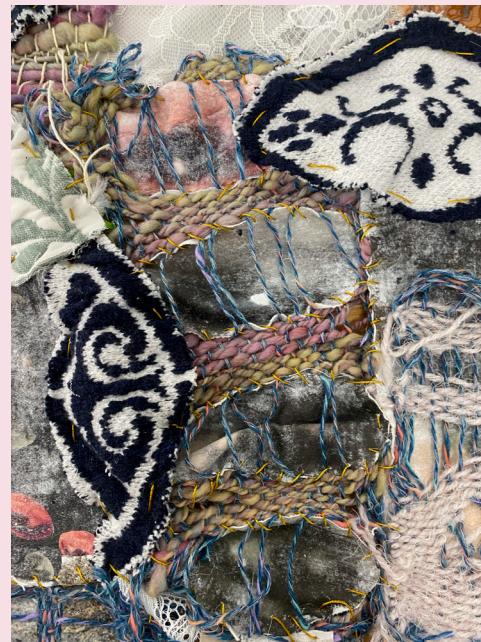
My dad is a bit older in this image. I have chosen many photos throughout time to illustrate the ways in which we are immortalized down to our roots through memory and ancestry. I chose to simply cut this image into squares and lay them on top of a piece of scrap fabric. Most of the image is not “legible,” except for my father’s eyes and mouth. This fragmented piece of the puzzle shows not only the fragments in my perception of my lineage, but also the fragments that exist in the very people who experienced life before me. What exists in this piece is not a full picture, but rather a puzzle box with incomplete pieces. What I aim to do, however, is recognize what remains important, even with forgotten memory and the wall put up by the mind to protect oneself from trauma.

IMAGERY



Here is a collection of eyes taken from my great-grandparents, my grandparents, my father, my brother, etc. I assembled them to resemble the symmetry that comes with traditional Persian rugs and then placed that arrangement atop an image of a Persian rug given to my father by my grandfather. This “rug” represents the buildup to now, the contributions, the struggles that had to be endured in order to create what has been created today. As the centerpiece of the main rug, it is all that encompasses intergenerational wisdom and memory.

Also featured is a set of eyes taken from various images. Eyes, to me, represent the wisdom and life experience that one carries with them. The eyes contain one’s story. Through many of the images I looked through, no matter the expression of the person, the eyes told me what I needed to know.



FRAGMENTS



What lies beyond the “core” of what I have become are the fragments that build my identity through life. Framed in this fragment are photos taken on a family computer with my parents and my brother. The childhood I led was completely different from my father’s. The juxtaposition between the experiences demonstrates a sort of generational “progress” yet backtracking in the form of connection to the culture. I think connection to culture and generational “progress” in terms of healing trauma can be achieved together, and is being achieved right now. When stepped on, this pad triggers audio from an interview done with my father in 2022.

I created my own windows into memories, featuring photos of myself as a very young child. I made each part of the eye knowing that this would be a stepping stone to who I would become. When stepped on, it also triggers audio taken from a research project and interview I did about my family in 2022.



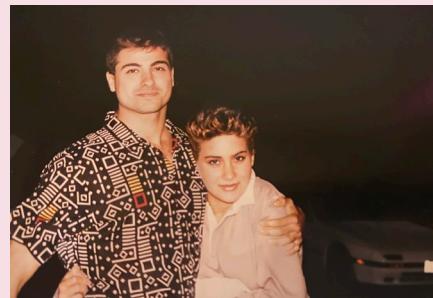
FRAGMENTS

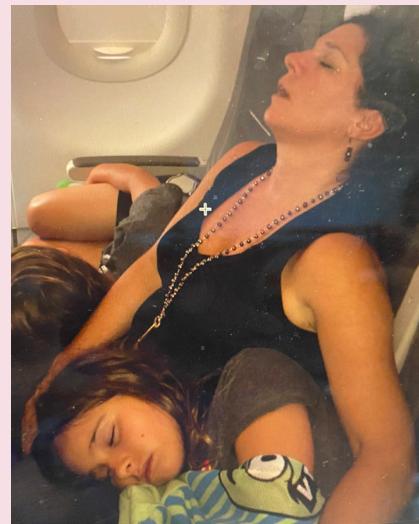
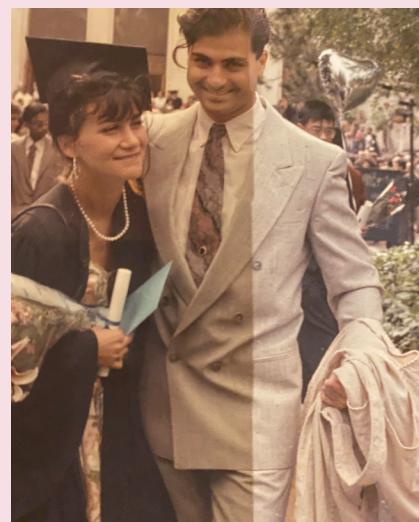
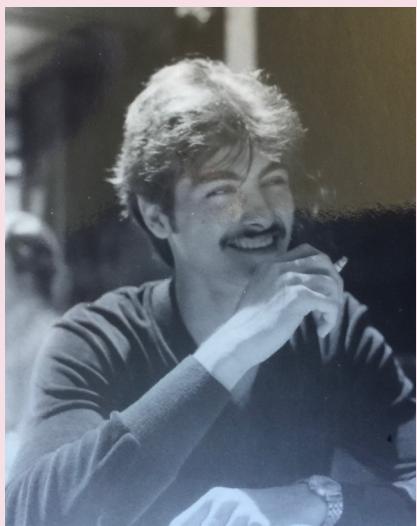
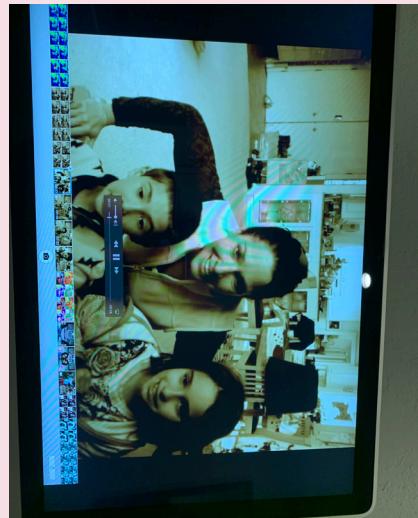


I took pictures of my own eyes for this piece, and took parts of my body that flowed successfully with the way my hands intuitively weaved this fragment. When stepped on, this piece triggers distorted and edited sounds of Iranian song and dance.

I collected recent news headlines featuring “Iran.” The ways in which Iran has appeared in the media throughout my life has shaped my perception of it and the perception of my identity. What does it mean to be a Persian American? Can I even call myself that? I took lace and placed it upon the barely legible words, and then took chunks of a rug scrap found secondhand and placed them upon the piece.







**thank you
to my ancestors, to my family, to Iran**