



*Don't Forget To Count Your Blessings*

a response to Christina Hajjar's work from Abedar Kamgari

A colourful tablecloth. A cup and saucer. Two voices, one high-pitched, the other lower, accented. These were my first glimpses into Christina Hajjar's solo exhibition at PLATFORM, titled *Don't Forget to Count Your Blessings*. Through video, photographs, wallpaper, poetry, sound, and repurposed objects, the exhibition presents a view into spatial and material facets of queer diasporic experiences.

A bright flashing LED sign of a hookah hangs above the entrance, appearing oddly cheery and displaced in the white-walled gallery. It illuminates the space with a cool, blue light that transforms the feeling of the gallery. The sharp sound of dice on a backgammon board, water bubbling, indistinct conversations, and other ambient sounds of a hookah lounge play softly. By setting up these elements, Hajjar frames her exhibition in context of such social environments where many Southwest Asian and North African diasporic peoples go to forge their own communities.

In the intimate space of the exhibition, a deep sky-blue patterned wallpaper covers one wall from floor to ceiling. On this wall, a flat screen television exhibits the video *Don't Forget the Water* (2021), complete with a phone receiver cleverly hooked up for listening to the audio. The wallpaper shows repeating patterns of a bottle of rose water, ceramic cup, gold pendant, and candy heart with the word *habibi* written on it in Arabic. Hajjar tells me that the gold pendant was a gift from her late godmother and the candy heart was created by artist Muna Shami. On the adjacent wall, three large framed photographs depict a woman wearing a flowy, patterned dress playing with a white, floral plastic tablecloth as though it's a scarf in the wind, a cloudless sky behind her. The pattern of the person's dress (whom I later learn is the artist's sister) draws a visual parallel to the wallpaper motif, both set against what appears to be a deep blue sky.

The video-centerpiece of the exhibition depicts a circular table covered with the same white floral tablecloth used in the photographs. It is patterned with rustic images of fruit and clay jars in green monochrome, clipart-style bold red roses, and an Arabic phrase written in bubbly font. A ceramic plate and small cup (the same one as on the wallpaper) rest in the center of the table. Abruptly the tablecloth seems to shift in the moving image. I see an impossibly large hand adjusting it, and after a moment of confusion, perceive the projected image of the tablecloth on top of its physical counterpart. A casual phone conversation between Hajjar and her mother envelopes the aural space. Hajjar is out walking her dog Cosmo as her mother instructs her on the process of making Arabic coffee. She attempts to give measurements for coffee, water, cardamom, and sugar based on what the two of them estimate to be the size of the pot. Meanwhile, the ghostly projection of the tablecloth flits through numerous translations of the Arabic phrase, glitchily supplied by the Google translator app, between shadowy clouds of hookah smoke obscuring the image. The phrase transforms with every translation, each more abstract than the last, as its original meaning becomes increasingly uncertain:

*Don't forget about nurturing*

*Don't forget about development*

*Don't forget to breathe*

*Don't forget about labour*

*Don't forget to name it*

*Libnan* (2020), a poem written by the artist in the emotional aftermath of the Beirut explosion in August 2020, is mounted high on the opposite wall in vinyl. Written as though speaking to and about a long-lost lover, the poem braids together Hajjar's complicated feelings of love and longing for Lebanon, a place she has never visited. With its broken-up verses, the poem structurally mimics the fragmented nature of the artist's dis/connection to her ancestral communities, amplified by both physical and metaphorical distances. Here, too, Hajjar pulls the sky and clouds into verse in search of remnants of what could have been home.

By involving her mother and sister in the creation of her work, Hajjar contributes to a growing diasporic methodology to rely on one's immediate family to help fill knowledge gaps caused by forced or coerced migration. This aspect of the work not only reveals an intimate diasporic corporeality experienced adjacently amongst family, but also patterns of assimilation and hybridization they all navigate. For instance, at one point in their conversation, Hajjar's mother instructs her to put a spoonful of sugar in the coffee "because this country they don't like it bitter." When Hajjar prompts her mother on how she would normally make it for herself, she responds "Yeah, like that." This exchange points to deeply rooted cultural hegemonies that pressure immigrant assimilation, trickling all the way down to small preferences like how bitter or sweet Arabic coffee should taste.

The LED hookah sign above the door departs from the gentle femininity and domestic aesthetics embedded in the photographs and video, respectively. While the video sets up what appears as a domestic space, the flashing sign denotes a late-night social space outside of the home. With *Don't Forget to Count Your Blessings*, Hajjar emphasizes the spaces where diasporic peoples—whether it is family, chosen family, or both—create community for themselves. Not a linear or straightforward process by any means; it is a messy, uncertain, emotional, nurturing, complicated, everyday practice of survival. Don't forget to breathe.

**Christina Hajjar** is a queer femme first-generation Lebanese-Canadian artist, writer, and cultural worker based in Winnipeg, Manitoba on Treaty 1 Territory. She is passionate about collaboration and skills-sharing as tools of community-building and resistance. Her practice considers domesticity, labour, and place through diaspora, body archives, and cultural iconography. She is a 2020 PLATFORM Photography Award winner, co-founder of Carnation Zine, and creator of Diaspora Daughter, Diaspora Dyke zine. Hajjar was a 2020-2021 curatorial intern at the School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba and a 2020-2021 recipient of the Foundation Mentorship Program at MAWA (Mentoring Artists for Women's Art). Learn more at @garbagebagprincess and <https://christinahajjar.com/>.

**Abedar Kamgari** is an artist, independent curator, and arts worker based in Hamilton and Toronto. In her art practice, Abedar traces diasporic archives and body memory through embodied and relational approaches to video, performance, and sound. She has performed, screened, and exhibited in a range of institutional contexts across Southern Ontario. Abedar is currently the Programming Director at Hamilton Artists Inc. and an MFA candidate at OCAD University. [www.abedarkamgari.com](http://www.abedarkamgari.com)

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**IMAGE** | Christina Hajjar, from *Don't Forget To Count Your Blessings*



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