

Sukaina Kubba discusses her recent work with Zoe Chen, April 2025

Zoe Chen: You describe your time at a residency in Chile as your origin story. From what I've read, you've had a fascination with Persian rugs beforehand, but that moment seemed kind of magical, that this Chilean rug suddenly appeared to you, and now you're seeking out rugs. How do you think your work has evolved since 2022 and what surprises have you encountered?

Sukaina Kubba: Good question! That rug allowed me to be a bit more intuitive about what I select to look at, finding a reason to dig deeper. In researching lace artifacts, I went to a lace mill in Scotland in early 2024 and became attracted to the work they were doing. I knew I wanted to dig into the lace, because some of the works I had made referencing the rug drawings were quite lace-like, and it led me to want to research lace itself as a manufactured fabric and its role in the history of craft.

ZC: There are some formal similarities between the rugs and the lace, but did you also find in your research how the lace has been shaped by globalization similarly to the rugs you were looking at before?

SK: Some of my rug drawings began to resemble other drawings because of the material I was using, especially when I was tracing outlines. I'm at an early stage with the lace, a bit like the rugs before 2022 when I was just looking at them, but now I know a bit more about where I'm going. I'm looking at different types of embroidery or lace-making in Belgium around the 17th century. Belgians migrated to Scotland at various periods for political reasons and this was when lace making became a cottage industry. Slowly textile factories opened all over Scotland. They often made fabrics that mimicked different textiles from all over the British Empire. The lace mill manufactured a kind of scrim, a sheer fabric resembling calico called Madras, named after the Indian city. The mill started making this fabric with mechanical looms, almost killing the industry in Madras. They mass produced the fabric and to be sent to India to be embroidered into lace and send it back. When the Jacquard loom was invented, the whole lace process could be made in the mill in Scotland, so they didn't have to send it back to be embroidered. I'm interested in this technological shift where the lace was still manufactured with cotton and other natural fibers, but it was mechanically produced. The Jacquard loom almost gets towards the digital.

I'm also looking at synthetic lace, another industrial revolution: a synthetic revolution. Not only was the means of production changed, e.g. using petrochemicals, they also didn't need much labor for these processes. The materials are almost infinite. They don't need to be grown either, there is no reliance on agriculture. There is still labor, but it's also like a self-generating production.

In the early 2000s when I started looking at rugs a bit more before I went to Chile, I started researching at the Textile Museum of Canada during COVID, and they have this amazing online archive that you could access: a huge textile collection. The artifacts that I'm looking at from this collection are all handmade lace, they're not manufactured. In the lead-up to making the work for this show, the Textile Museum shut down, we don't know if it's going to reopen. Its future is unknown. I thought it'd be interesting to look at the online archive again, because it cannot be accessed in person.

ZC: Throughout your practice, you've worked with 3d pen, laser etching, silk screen printing, etc. Have you done any new experiments for your lace project?

SK: The printing started a bit late. I used to work a lot with materials like latex and other industrial materials. I was always interested in various types of synthetic and natural manufactured fabrics such as sheet latex, liquid latex and PVC. The 3D pen came after 2022, I began using it after I had drawn that Chilean rug. I had wanted to trace it. I wanted to have a drawing that has no backing, a drawing that you can lift off and put anywhere, on a wall or somewhere else. I wanted to use the 3D works as matrices for printmaking, as I can easily apply them to make an imprint.

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For this show at Western Exhibitions, all the works are colored 3D filament. I'm looking at the texture. Some of the works follow the thread of the lace. It's not quite one-to-one, but I'm trying to work much more with texture rather than filling in color or lines, or tracing lines. I am attempting to mimic the materiality of sheer lace fabrics, and that has been quite a challenge, just trying to go into detail and work with thinner and thicker lines. I couldn't have done this two years ago. I think it helps that I work with the material with a lot of ease now.

ZC: A year ago when you talked about the process of translating fibers into these sculptural drawings, you said you don't know what it means to give them a life that way. Do you have any new thoughts on that?

SK: With some of my recent filament drawings, people feel that they look like rugs, but you come up close and you realize that they're more sculptural or solid, or made from this other material. I am navigating the space between manufacturing textiles or clothes or rugs and making an image of them or an object about them. I need that distance from the original making process to look at them. It's always just being interested in how things are transformed when they shift materiality. Sometimes I think of how the embroidered lace shifts into manufactured lace, and then more manufactured lace and then into the synthetic fabric. Not always progressively, because there are always overlaps in the processes. I'm interested in what happens also with the material shift on my side.

ZC: Before you started pursuing your MFA, you were formally trained as an architect. Do you find that some of your experience as an architect has helped inform your work in some way?

SK: Because I studied architecture a long time ago, I was in one of the last classes where we still did hand drawing. We didn't use a computer, and some folks were starting, but most of the class wasn't yet. When I graduated, my first job, I was doing hand drawing, and from then on, I was using AutoCAD. But I remember during school I loved tracing. It almost didn't matter what I was tracing if I was tracing it. There's something about that process that I enjoyed. This is what I do now, tracing and transforming drawings into other things, various iterations of the same thing.

ZC: You and your family left Baghdad when you were five years old because of an oppressive government and now there are barriers for you to attend the show's opening because of the Trump administration. Even though your work isn't directly political, it reflects how politics dictates the movement of people.

SK: I think a lot of my interest in these rugs is that they are objects that people take along with them through migration, whether it's voluntary or not. Rugs and textiles are some of the few objects that are artefacts that people can hold on to as heirlooms, and they're not very expensive. People also take jewelry, but that has a different form of value. Whereas textiles, have much more of an emotional value. I am also thinking how my art objects themselves are an issue; what if they can't make it in time? I'm also thinking of the borders and of the artifacts traveling. Now, there are always issues with trade and transport. It's a weird parallel with humans moving. I was born with an Iraqi passport. I had an Iraqi passport till I was 25 so I'm used to travel restrictions. I think of textiles as things that mirror human movement. I'm thinking about these objects that can also be stopped- which is more likely this time- or interrogated, even though they're just objects based on fabrics. There's something very weird about sending stuff through right now. So, for this show, I can't come myself but here are these textiles I made, as opposed to moving with them.

ZC: You've talked about how rugs can function as space or as boundaries, you roll up a rug and then you use it to convey a space, or this new environment you want to make, and how rugs can operate as portals or oases and storytelling in a community. I was thinking the work is a portal for us to see you since you can't be here in person.

SK: It's weird. These objects that I'm tracing, you don't know who made them, but there's this reference they leave something, the hand that made them leaves something like a trace. It's not that you usually travel with your work necessarily, but I think in this case I would have come, so it's a bit like I'm sending something on my behalf.