

Muscle  
Memory

# Majd Abdel Hamid

Sat 24 Sept — Sat 11 Nov

Tue - Sat / 11am - 6pm

**CCA:**

Centre for Contemporary Arts,  
350 Sauchiehall St.

This new body of work by **Majd Abdel Hamid** emerged from the aftermath of the 2020 explosion in Beirut, the city in which he is based. That event occurred when a large store of ammonium nitrate exploded in the city's port district, wiping out one-third of the surrounding city and leaving 300,000 people homeless. As one of the most powerful non-nuclear explosions in history, it had a devastating and ongoing impact on the centre of Beirut.

The blast caused a chain reaction of violent bursts of an ecosystem of "bubbles," both private and public. These bursts have proved to be an intense factor of disorientation, a debilitating imbalance from losing the centre of mass. For the artist, the question was/is how to move forward from this event without getting sucked into the double-trap of melancholic aesthetics and nostalgia. As large swaths of people are seeking refuge, how do we grieve the future? How do we grieve a potentiality? How do we grieve the possibilities lost in the city, or grieve an experience of a city? Cities do not die, but their futures morph, vanish and transform.

Hamid's practice borrows from the history of embroidery in Palestine, and attempts to impersonate the autonomous historical practice of embroidery as intimacy, creating a set of motifs in relation to the lived experience of Beirut.

### **A Tradition of Palestinian Embroidery**

Majd Abdel Hamid is mainly drawing on a tradition of embroidery in Palestine that runs approximately from 1850 to 1950. During that time, women's costume in the country reflected different regional approaches to aesthetics. Each piece of clothing was an individual expression, and dress in general drew on a subtle and

detailed system of pattern, needlework and colour schemes. Any particular costume could communicate the wearer's social status and geographic origins in the country while also reflecting something of a woman's personality and character.

Embroidery patterns often absorbed imagery from the world around their makers – political motifs were regularly absorbed into their pattern-making, whether they were local emblems or designs emanating from the Ottoman Empire or the British Mandate.

The events of 1948 brought the stability of this period to an end and it was only in the 1960s that the practice of embroidered costume began to emerge again. Now, makers were decorating cheaper fabrics that were more readily available in occupied areas and worked on sewing machines as often as by hand.

With the intifada of the 1980s, embroidery had a strong revival as part of a wider expression of identity and resistance under pressure. In a context where people were imprisoned for carrying flags or publicly demonstrating solidarity, this was manifested in the emergence of specific and explicit motifs in embroidery pattern. At a time when mosques could be silenced and graffiti could be erased, 'flag dresses' prominently used the colours of the Palestinian flag. Other motifs such as the Dome of the Rock mosque, kafiya patterns and maps of Palestine were woven into dress designs. Hamid's relationship to this development of the tradition is ambivalent. While he very much admires those dresses and the motivations behind their making, he also recognises a potential danger to another aspect of the tradition. For him, embroidery has a meditative power in its repetitive actions and its deep focus on detail. The repetitive process of embroidering almost induces an out-of-body experience and has a social dimension that has grown around this activity. That process also

leaves the maker open to a more improvisatory act while the 'flag' embroidery demands a more conscious precision and adherence to ideological detail that hinders the possibility of getting lost in the act. This ambivalence towards a more explicit political expression in embroidery may also influence Hamid's choice of abstract pattern work in *Muscle Memory*. The response to Beirut may be reflected in the grids and diagonals that evoke the ruined street plans of the city after the explosion in 2020. In a personal statement on the work Majd explains:

*This work is an attempt at reclaiming a practice. I want to reconcile a relationship with a city and claim a small repair space: not as a reaction to disasters but as a continuum of interaction, openness, and reflection. The practice of embroidery as a responsive medium is fragile and borderline neurotic.*

*One aspect of this work is about the continuation of the practice. How do I situate myself in relation to the identities I have inherited? And how do I deal with the socially constructed image of that identity, and deal with troubling separation anxiety from this coping mechanism, a perpetual trauma, an intergenerational palpable sense of loss and the nostalgia of an inherited memory.*

*Embroidery is this soft spot that can heal. Reclaiming the practice is a process of reclaiming a sense of normalcy. It is a much-needed connection with locality, not to fall into the trap of national manic episodes or the depressive episodes that soon follow.*

*There is a lingering question on how to mourn for a city. In 2019 an uprising brought life to the city. In retrospect, it feels like a farewell collective action. The economy collapsed and hyperinflation was a slow cruel death: "value" changed every day, all*

*savings evaporated, and soon the lights were turned off. The city seemed almost unrecognisable, broken, and profoundly debilitated.*

*What to do then? It is unavoidable. Is it possible to grieve and allow another relationship with the city to grow, unhindered by nostalgia and projection?*

*A story about the tradition of mourning has lingered in my head since I learned of it. A handmade dress is drenched in indigo as a visual testament of bereavement, in the beginning the dress is rendered completely dark, but being washed over time, its colour starts to reappear, making for a very poetic, performative grief.*

*Muscle Memory is an intuitive attempt to transform the experience of colour, lines, and geometry into a motif, that is then repeated until a pattern emerges. the motif is embroidered on three pieces of cloth: a cotton sheet, pyjamas and a towel. The pieces are drenched in indigo dye and scrubbed using soap and a toothbrush until some colours reappear.*

## **CCA 1**

1.

*Video I*

Digital video

20:50 mins

2.

*Video II*

Digital video

20:04 mins

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## **CCA 2**

*Sketches and Research*

*Various materials: cotton thread & fabric, linen, polaroids, paper, and polaroid photographs.*

3.

Polaroids

4, 5, and 6.

Sketches and Research

7.

Notebook and Polaroids

8.

Polaroids

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## **CCA 3**

9.

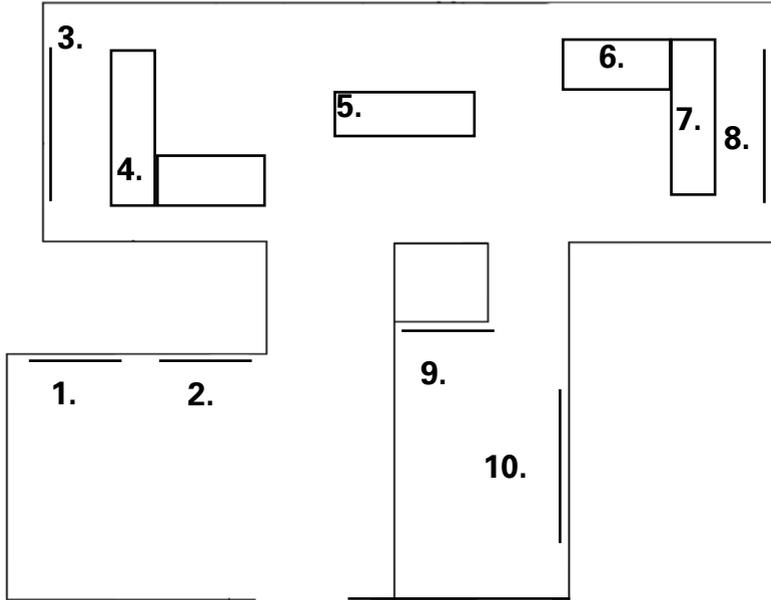
*Video III*

Digital video

18:47 mins

6.

# Gallery Map



**10.**

*Muscle Memory*

- i. 19 x 12 cm, cotton thread on cotton*
- ii. 20 x 21 cm, cotton thread on cotton*
- iii. 16 x 19 cm, cotton thread on cotton*



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