

ART @ BAINBRIDGE

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM

Jordan Nassar / Between Sky and Earth

August 17, 2019 – January 5, 2020



Jordan Nassar / Between Sky and Earth

2

Jordan Nassar (b.1985) uses geometric patterns characteristic of Palestinian cross-stitch—most often found on pillows, clothing, and other domestic arts—to hand-embroider pictures that he stretches and frames, bringing this embroidery practice into a dialogue with painting. Born, raised, and currently living and working in New York City, Nassar grew up in a home decorated with such objects, which his father brought back from visits to his ancestral homeland and which now inspire Nassar's practice. *Jordan Nassar: Between Sky and Earth* includes works from multiple series, revealing the artist's evolving use of patterned embroidery to explore themes of abstraction, collaboration, and color as well as to picture a utopian landscape that he has long imagined from afar.

Through the artist's evocation of home and belonging, and his exploration of how these issues shape our understanding of identity, *Jordan Nassar: Between Sky and Earth* speaks to the notion of shelter, which has been selected as the theme for the inaugural year of programming at Art@Bainbridge. As a theme, the idea of shelter responds to Bainbridge House's past as a private home, student dormitory, and historical society while also touching on many of the most pressing political and social concerns—migration, economic justice, national and cultural identity—of our present. *Jordan Nassar: Between Sky and Earth* inaugurates a new chapter in the site's story and invites us to ponder the ways individuals and communities envision faraway homes.

3

The conversation between Jordan Nassar and Alex Bacon, the exhibition's curator, that follows elaborates on the artist's working process, his collaboration with artisans in the West Bank, and the theme of a diasporic individual's complicated relationship with the idea of home.

What is your process for making these works?

All of my work is based on traditional Palestinian embroidery patterns. While embroidery has been made for hundreds, if not thousands, of years, this kind of embroidery in Palestine really coalesced and became in vogue in the 1800s, growing and differentiating between villages and becoming a social identifier. Two things make these patterns specifically Palestinian: the symbols or patterns formed from groups of stitches, and the composition of those symbols or patterns on a garment. Some of the patterns are found elsewhere around the world—a zigzag, a square, a diamond, an eight-pointed star. Others, however, are very recognizably Palestinian—various cypress tree motifs, for example.

However, the way I compose the patterns is not traditional. For example, if there is a floral motif in a certain traditional pattern, I might take that floral motif and multiply it all over the canvas. This would never happen in a conventional Palestinian craft object.

There are two creative processes for me: the patterning process and the "painting" process. For the former, I'm looking at Palestinian patterns, drawing from them and manipulating them. To start, I plan the pattern on the computer, then print the pattern out and sketch over it, which is where the "painting" begins, choosing colors and imagining the composition. I then start to embroider the composition, using the sketch as a guide. I make adjustments and tweaks as I go, much like a painter choosing this or that color, and where to stop one form and start another.

Do you do all the embroidery yourself?

For years I was doing it all myself, but about a year and a half ago I started working with a group of women in the West Bank who do this embroidery, making dresses for themselves and for women in their local community and things like that. I developed a collaboration with them, in which I plan patterns for them to embroider, which become frames or backdrops for me to then embroider on as well. We have continued making works that are collaborative, with both myself and a Palestinian woman working on each piece.

How did this collaboration come about?

In 2017 I did a residency in Jaffa, and during that trip I met a couple of local craftswomen. I was working with an Israeli fashion brand that was also working with Palestinians to make embroidered clothing items. They invited me to come along with them to meet these women for the first time. The women ended up doing embroidery that I designed for the clothing. As that relationship grew, I had the idea to have them help me make me some artworks as well. Now I have a group of about ten women in Ramallah who I work with consistently. Since we work together continuously, they're getting specialized in my style and patterns. I want to draw out the narrative, the history of the culture. So I want them to embroider the borders of the collaborative works according to their own inclinations. It makes it all the more powerful when I interrupt it with a landscape. I'm surprised by it every time still.

The parts they embroider result in colors applied in traditional ways—each flower one color and the stem another, or a single color for each symbol, or for each unit within a symbol, as dictated by tradition. I apply color to the embroidered patterns in a way that they don't—I "paint" across the patterns, so to speak.

This collaboration with them is fun and always results in visuals that I find really special and unexpected, so I'm excited to continue making these collaborative works in addition to making those I do entirely myself.

When and how did you learn to embroider?

Although most Palestinian girls are taught by their mother or grandmother, I was not taught in a familial context. But I grew up with this kind of embroidery all around the house—on pillows, wall hangings, serving trays, and wallets that my dad would bring back from Palestine, which is how I first encountered it. I taught myself by picking up a needle and thread and pattern books of Palestinian embroidery. It's now been eight years since I started experimenting with this type of embroidery.

Because I'm self-taught and influenced by the Western context I grew up in, I am especially interested in collaborating with the women. I want to capture the tradition as it exists now in this region by seeing how they apply patterns and colors, which reveals what they were taught by their mothers and grandmothers. Even the direction of the cross-stitch—all my stitches go the same way, but theirs go both ways, because the direction isn't important in the folk tradition. I don't see this as inconsistent; I like that there are slight variations in how we each do it.

How do you choose your colors?

Are they traditional to Palestinian embroidery?

For the most part, the colors and combinations in my work are not the traditional Palestinian ones. The traditional combinations are, for example, red and black, blue on a black background, and pink or magenta on a white background. You sometimes see more colors these days, but it comes down to what's available locally to the embroiderer. My color sense is more Western and painterly, a full palette because, yarn-wise, everything is available to me here in New York. In my collaborations with the Palestinian women, often I'll ask the women to use a traditional color combination, and then I'll play off of those colors. I might use some of the same colors, but also opposing ones, responding to what the women have done.

Could you tell me about your background? How and where you grew up, and how this affects your work?

I was born and raised in New York City, to a Palestinian American father and a Polish American mother, and was raised to identify especially with my Palestinian side. Having grown up in a Palestinian household, this kind of embroidery was all over the house. For me it was a very visceral and immediate connection to Palestine. The use of Palestinian embroidery in my work, or what first sparked me to pick it up, was that I felt an urge to connect to something Palestinian. But this is only half the story. My husband is Israeli, and a few years ago we learned that my Polish Catholic grandmother was born to a Jewish father, so it's complicated, and it all affects my work.

How did you arrive at landscape?

I suppose my use of landscape has developed my work both technically and conceptually.

Before the landscapes, I was doing embroidery pieces, but they were abstract, very conceptual, very mathematical, all about symbols and patterns.

The impetus to experiment with landscape came through the life and work of Etel Adnan (b. 1925), the Lebanese landscape painter and poet, whose life story, and the way it relates to her painting and poetry, really inspired me. I read everything by her and about her, and I feel like she's a mentor of mine, somehow, even without having met her. But her work gave me the idea to "break the grid" of the cross-stitch pattern and to cut through with colors to make mountains, to make sky, to make the sun.

How has your use of landscape developed over the years?

While I have experimented with purely abstract color-block versions of these embroideries, making it a landscape gives viewers a point of entry—they know

what they're looking at, they know "which way is up"—that provides access to appreciating how it's done, and the color and compositional choices that were made.

Working with landscape not only inspired the technical push for me to figure out how to "paint" across the patterns, it also opened me up to an opportunity to discuss a more human and emotional side of being a diaspora Palestinian, namely the hope, the longing, the inherited nostalgia we all feel for this homeland that becomes more imaginary, more mystical and magical, than any real place actually is.

How does your interest in the formal balance with the political element of your subject matter?

The works themselves aren't overtly political. I hope they're emotional and visceral and beautiful, but they're not political themselves, aside from perhaps the fact that the type of embroidery is Palestinian and that some are made in Palestine. But for me the political enters into the treatment of the work—how we talk about it, what context we put it in. In many ways, these conversations are what is important to me about my work. For example, I like to discuss these landscapes as versions of Palestine as they exist in the minds of the diaspora, who have never been there and can never go there. They are the Palestine I heard stories about growing up, half-made of imagination. They are dreamlands and utopias that are colorful and fantastical—beautiful and romantic, but bittersweet.

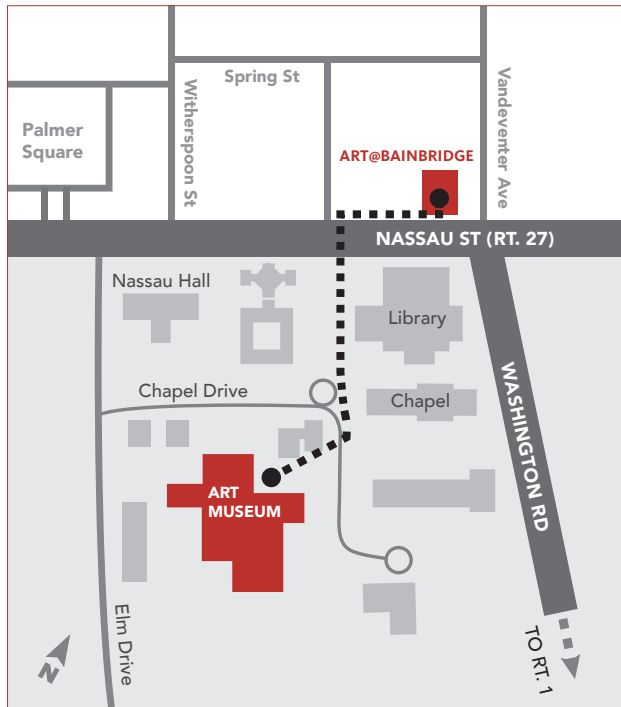
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Art@Bainbridge is a gallery project of the Princeton University Art Museum that highlights the work of contemporary artists in an intimate setting. Located in historic Bainbridge House in downtown Princeton, Art@Bainbridge extends the Museum's reach into the community and invites new visitors to experience the visual arts while also acting as a gateway to the Museum, located at the heart of the Princeton campus.

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