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BAY AREA SCULPTURE RIGHT NOW: SAHAR KHOURY REVELS IN RUPTURE



Looking out from Khoury's studio; a concrete sculpture outside.

Behind Sahar Khoury's Oakland home, her studio is filled with works in progress for the sculptor's upcoming solo show at the Luggage Store Gallery. With the opening just a few weeks away when we meet, Khoury's working space is expanded beyond the 15-by-18-foot studio to include nearly every room of the home she shares with her partner, artist Alicia McCarthy. And while any solo show would be cause

for a focused period of intense making, this exhibition occupies a special place in Khoury's personal trajectory as an artist. It was one of the first San Francisco galleries she would visit regularly, along with Jack Hanley Gallery and Gallery 16. "I feel like it's a really neat full circle," she says. "I'm really proud to show there; it's a sentimental show in many ways."

Khoury's sculptural works -- made with papier-mâché, concrete, ceramic and textiles -- open in the Luggage Store's third floor gallery on Feb. 18; a simultaneous solo exhibition by Oakland artist Anne Walsh will occupy the second floor. The two

exhibitions share one title, THEY, a word Khoury says fits her need to understand what's happened in the United States since the Nov. 8 election.

"I'm just trying to understand people's fears rather than hate them for it." Otherwise, she says, "I can get very very angry."

Khoury studied anthropology in college, arriving at visual art through printmaking classes at the Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts. Under Michael Roman's tutelage, she began learning screen printing and monotype techniques. "I made these huge bed sheets," she says, remembering her space-saving techniques in her first studio at 16th and Mission. "You could silkscreen this huge thing and then fold it up and put it away." She looks around her current studio, where almost all the sculptures and wall reliefs contain clothing or other domestic textiles. "It's funny," she says, "as much as you think your art is changing, it's not changing at all."

She looks around her current studio, where almost all the sculptures and wall reliefs contain clothing or other domestic textiles. "It's funny," she says, "as much as you think your art is changing, it's not changing at all."

Khoury balances hard and soft elements in a practice she compares to painting. Much like a painter's canvas becomes the vehicle for a personal vision, Khoury's sculptures build a new reality around her. Structural and material decisions happen as she works, leading to process she calls "creative repair," like a broken tail light fixed with duct tape.

In one finished piece, a narrow strip of beige carpet sits on top of an L-shaped shelf of rough concrete and rebar. Above that, a rugged arc supports a two-handled vessel covered in patchwork scraps of leather and woven fabric, the seams and hems still visible.

Khoury's forms open up to the viewer; many look like they've been cut down the middle as part of a scientific cross-section. Khoury describes them not as unfinished, but coming into themselves. "I like that moment where you get to see how the thing is made and you can see the interior of the piece," she says.

"I'm an obvious materialist," she says. "The material is the message and that's all I want to say about the work."

She states this emphatically, but Khoury's work can't be reduced to simple material explorations. Against the wall of her studio stand a series of tall thin numbers supported by concrete bases. Their tubular shape comes from rolling copies of The New York Times around an armature and stacking them three high until they reach the same height as Khoury herself. Just as the Luggage Store is a marker on Khoury's artistic timeline, these numbers mark important dates in Khoury's family history.

"I'm going to choose the moments in history that brought me here, by way of my parents and their struggles," she says. 1979 is for the Iranian Revolution; her mother fled Iran a few years prior. 1948 is for her Jordanian Palestinian father -- the year of the Nakba, when over 700,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled from their homes during the 1948 Palestine war. To Khoury, these dates are significant not just in the context of

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her family's personal narrative and the history of the Middle East, but as moments that help explain the state of global politics today.

She's hesitant to make public the significance of the dates. "No one needs to know that, I'm not going to tell anyone that," she says. "I just kind of feel like, if we want to talk about Middle East turmoil, let's really think about the specific moments in history when colonial powers and imperialism have played a part in shaping that history."

As resistant as she is to assigning meaning to her work, Khoury admits things have changed since Nov. 8. More than ever, she sees sculptures as demolished, hurt and wounded. The concrete reminds her of rubble.

"I'm abstract to the core. I love it, that can't change, but I just feel like I'm making so many destructive pieces," she says. "Some of them are hard for me to look at."

But that doesn't mean she'll change her process or her approach to artmaking. "I just don't think we're in a pure society, so I don't know how my art can be very pure," she says. "I like the clashing of things that aren't supposed to go together, because that feels truer to my experience than something that's all pure."