NEARNESS AND DISTANCE:
EXPLORING THE NOTION OF INDIFFERENCE THROUGH THE LENS OF MIDDLE EASTERN TRADITIONAL ARTS.

A project submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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DECLARATION

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the exegesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed. I acknowledge the support I have received for my research through the provision of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION ........................................................................................................................................ iii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ....................................................................................................................... iv

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS .................................................................................................................. x

ABSTRACT ............................................................................................................................................... 1

INTRODUCTION ..................................................................................................................................... 3

CHAPTER 1: INDIFFERENCE AND SUFFERING ..................................................................................... 7

INTRODUCTION ...................................................................................................................................... 8

1:1 WHAT IS INDIFFERENCE? ................................................................................................................ 10

1:2 INDIFFERENCE; ‘ALLY’ OR ‘ALIEN’? ........................................................................................... 11

FRAMES OF RECOGNISABILITY; GRIEVABLE AND UNGRIEVABLE LIVES ...................................... 12

INDIFFERENCE; AN EASTERN-WESTERN MATTER ........................................................................... 15

ORIENTED AROUND OR TOWARD ..................................................................................................... 16

CONTEMPORARY WORLD, INHERITED ORIENTALISM ..................................................................... 17

CHAPTER 2: CONTEMPORARY ISSUES, TRADITIONAL ARTS ............................................................ 19

INTRODUCTION ..................................................................................................................................... 20

2:1 VISUAL AND AESTHETIC REPRESENTATIONS OF DISTANT SUFFERING ................................ 21

2:2 REPRESENTATIONS OF SUFFERING ............................................................................................. 23

THE FRONTLINE OF THE BATTLE .......................................................................................................... 23

THE AFTERMATH OF THE BATTLE ........................................................................................................ 27

2:3 HIGHLIGHTING MY CULTURAL HERITAGE .................................................................................. 31
5:3 SIT; SEE, DON’T SEE! ......................................................................................................................................................................................... 115

CONCLUSION ................................................................................................................................................................................................... 131

EXAMINATION EXHIBITION .............................................................................................................................................................................. 134

Bibliography .................................................................................................................................................................................................... 142
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

CHAPTER 2: CONTEMPORARY ISSUES, TRADITIONAL ARTS

Figure 2.1. Francisco Goya, What more is there to do?, Disasters of War, 1810 – 1820 24
Figure 2.2. Pierre-Georges Jeanniot, The Massacre at Surice from The horrors of war etchings, 1915 24
Figure 2.3. Farideh Lashai, When I Count, There Are Only You...But When I Look, There Is Only a Shadow, 2012-2013 suite of 80 photo-intaglio prints with projection of animated images, 191.8 x 309.9 25
Figure 2.4. Ahmed Alsoudani, Untitled, 2008, Hard ground etching with aquatint, spit-bite aquatint, drypoint, roulette and scraping and burnishing, 77 x 68 cm, Edition 15/30 26
Figure 2.5. Tammam Azzam, Freedom Graffiti, 2013, Digital Art. Courtesy of the artist 27
Figure 2.6. Tammam Azzam, Untitled, From the series Stories, 2014, Acrylic on canvas, 152x203 cm, Courtesy of the artist 27
Figure 2.7. Kareem Risan, Occupied Bagdad, 2004, Artist Book, Courtesy of the artist 29
Figure 2.8. Kareem Risan, Man is Not Mad to Live Below Zero, 2013, Mixed media on canvas, 150 x 150 cm, Courtesy of the artist 29
Figure 2.9. Dia Al-Azzawi, Sabra and Shatila Massacre, 1982-3, Ink and wax crayon on paper mounted on canvas, 300 x 750 cm, Photo: © Tate. Courtesy of the artist. 30
Figure 2.10. Original Sofreh Ardis before they were used for my artworks 33
Figure 2.11. First two images: Different methods used in tracing patterns on kilims. The third image: Modified working table setup 33
Figure 2.12. Mohsen Meysami, Between the devil and the deep blue seal!, 2016, Detail, Sequins, yarn, and thread. Hand embroidery on found Persian Kilim, 90x140 cm. Courtesy of Wangaratta Art Gallery 34
Figure 2.13. Mohsen Meysami, Between the devil and the deep blue seal!, 2016, Sequins, yarn, and thread. Hand embroidery on found Persian Kilim, 90x140 cm. Courtesy of Wangaratta Art Gallery 37
Figure 2.14. Mohsen Meysami, There for you, 2016, Yarn, and embroidery thread. Hand embroidery on found Persian Kilim, 103x148 cm 38
Figure 2.15. Recognition and resettlement of refugees 2017, by receiving country. The Refugee Council of Australia 38
Figure 2.16. Mohsen Meysami, There for you, 2016, Detail, Yarn, and embroidery thread. Hand embroidery on found Persian Kilim, 103x148 cm 40
Figure 2.17. Mohsen Meysami, There for you, 2016, Yarn, and embroidery thread. Hand embroidery on found Persian Kilim, 103x148 cm 41
Figure 2.18. Mohsen Meysami, Their pain, our gain!, 2017, Detail, Beads, bugle beads, and thread. Bead-work on found Persian Kilim, 115x136 cm 42
Figure 2:19. Mohsen Meysami, Their pain, our gain!, 2017, Detail, Beads, bugle beads, and thread. Bead-work on found Persian Kilim, 115x136 cm

Figure 2:20. Megan Evans, From Keloid Project in Squatters and Savages exhibition, Patrick John and Isabella Kelly, 2017, Found Victorian chairs, velvet, glass beads, thread, photograph by Mathew Stanton, Courtesy of the artist

Figure 2:21. Bleeding Chandelier, 2017, Squatters and Savages exhibition installation at the Art Gallery of Ballarat, photograph by Mathew Stanton, Courtesy of the artist

Figure 2:22. Megan Evans, Curious Cabinet 2, 2017, Found Victorian objects collection, Bourke and Wills maquette, Queen Victoria maquette, (courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ballarat collection) Photograph by Mathew Stanton, Courtesy of the artist

CHAPTER 3: THE SUFFERING OF THE ABSTRACT OTHER

Figure 3:1. Most common image results for searching the words 'Syria' and 'Islamic Art', Google search

Figure 3:2. Faig Ahmed, Singularity, 2016, Handmade woollen carpet, 130 × 305 cm, Courtesy of the artist

Figure 3:3. Khadim Ali, Untitled 3 from the Transitions / Evacuation series, 2014, Watercolour, gouache, ink and gold leaf on wasli paper, 137 x 159 cm, Courtesy of the artist

Figure 3:4. Monir Farmanfarmaian, Mirror Ball, 2014, Mirror, reverse painted glass, and plaster on wood, 10 x 10 x 10 inches

Figure 3:5. The interior side of the dome of the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque, Isfahan-Iran, 1619, Image courtesy of Phillip Maiwald @Nikopol

Figure 3:6. Parastou Forouhar, Red is My Name, Green is My Name II, 2009, Series of 4 digital drawings, digital print on Photo Rag, all 50X50 cm, Courtesy of the artist

Figure 3:7. Parastou Forouhar, Red is My Name, Green is My Name II, 2009, Series of 4 digital drawings, digital print on Photo Rag, all 50X50 cm, Courtesy of the artist

Figure 3:8. Parastou Forouhar, Ewin Prison, 2010-15, Digital drawings, digital print on Glossy or Turner paper, 100X100 cm or 35X35 cm, Courtesy of the artist

Figure 3:9. Parastou Forouhar, Kahrizak Prison, 2010-15, Digital drawings, digital print on Glossy or Turner paper, 100X100 cm or 35X35 cm, Courtesy of the artist

3:10. Mohsen Meysami, Studio experimentations with patterns, 2017-18, Hand drawing and Digital illustration

3:11. Mohsen Meysami, Green, Blue, Yellow, Red..., 2017, Detail, Beads, and threads. Hand embroidery and bead-work on found Persian Kilim, 98x148 cm

Figure 3:12. Mohsen Meysami, Tear signs on the kilim used for the artwork Green, Blue, Yellow, Red...

Figure 3:13. The Rothschild Small Silk Medallion Carpet, Mid-16th century, Museum of Islamic Art, Doha, Lachak Toranj Design

Figure 3:14. Bakhtiyari Rug, Date Unknown, Ghabi Design

Figure 3:15. Kerman Rug, Mid 17th century, Afshan Design
CHAPTER 4: INTIMACY AND DISTANCE; A SPECTATOR’S RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE SUFFERER

Figure 4:1. Mohsen Meysami, 2017, A comparison between the first sketches and final digital drawings

Figure 4:2. Wafaa Bilal, and Counting…, 2010

Figure 4:3. Notice given by locals to Afghan refugees to leave soon. It reads: This is the last notice given to Afghans to vacate Khalfkhnaali suburb (in Yazd, Iran).

Figure 4:4. Peter Drew, REAL AUSTRALIANS SAY WELCOME, 2015, Screen Printed Posters, Courtesy of the artist

Figure 4:5. Mohsen Meysami, Yellow, Red, Blue, Black, 2017, Detail, Cotton thread, Hand embroidery on found Persian Kilim, Dimensions variable, Installation view First Site Gallery

Figure 4:6. Mohsen Meysami, WELCOME, 2017, Billboard, Digital Print, 5.96 x 3.06 m

Figure 4:7. Mohsen Meysami, ROAD CLOSED, 2017, Found traffic sign, yarn, fabric strips, armature wire, ribbon, nail, cable ties

Figure 4:8. Mohsen Meysami and Mehdi Meysami, 2016, Far away, that’s where my home is!, Used Persian Rug, wool, Installation view, Victoria University

Figure 4:9. Wafaa Bilal, Domestic Tension, 2007

Figure 4:10. Mohsen Meysami, Pattern test 1, 2017, Digital illustration

Figure 4:11. Mohsen Meysami, Pattern test 2, 2017, Digital illustration

Figure 4:12. Mohsen Meysami, The first idea: threads attached to the walls and left on the floor randomly

Figure 4:13. Mohsen Meysami, Thread installation test 1, 2017

Figure 4:14. Mohsen Meysami, Thread installation test 2, 2017

Figure 4:15. Mohsen Meysami, Yellow, Red, Blue, Black, Cotton thread, 2017, Hand embroidery on found Persian Kilim, Dimensions variable, Installation view First Site Gallery

Figure 4:16. Mohsen Meysami, Yellow, Red, Blue, Black, Detail, Cotton thread, 2017, Hand embroidery on found Persian Kilim, Dimensions variable, Installation view First Site Gallery

Figure 4:17. Mohsen Meysami, Yellow, Red, Blue, Black, Detail, Cotton thread, 2017, Hand embroidery on found Persian Kilim, Dimensions variable, Installation view First Site Gallery

Figure 4:18. Mohsen Meysami, Yellow, Red, Blue, Black, Detail, Cotton thread, 2017, Hand embroidery on found Persian Kilim, Dimensions variable, Installation view First Site Gallery
CHAPTER 5: TOWARDS ENGAGING AND EXPERIENTIAL ARTWORKS

Figure 5:1. Mohsen Meysami, Looking-Looking away, 2018, Detail, Wool yarn, cotton thread, cotton fabric. Hand embroidery on cotton fabric, Dimensions variable, Installation view First Site Gallery

Figure 5:2. Chiharu Shiota, A LONG DAY, 2014, desk, chair, papers, black wool, Exhibition at La Tenuta dello Scompiglio, Lucca, Italy, Courtesy Associazione Culturale Dello Scompiglio, Photos courtesy of Guido Mencari and the artist

Figure 5:3. Mohsen Meysami, Pattern test 1, Digital illustration, 2018

Figure 5:4. Mohsen Meysami, Final Pattern Design, Digital illustration, 2018

Figure 5:5. Lachak Toranj Design: The Ardabil Carpet, Iran, mid-16th century, © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Figure 5:6. Mohsen Meysami, Pre-installation tests, Digital illustrations and photomontage, 2018


Figure 5:14. Mohsen Meysami, Looking-Looking away, coloured thread distribution, Islamic Museum of Australia

Figure 5:15. Mohsen Meysami, Looking-Looking away, Installation comparison, Above: First Site Gallery, Below: Islamic Museum of Australia

Figure 5:17. Mohsen Meysami, Do I Know You?, 2018, View from the gallery entrance, Wool yarn, cotton thread, cotton fabric. Hand embroidery on cotton fabric, Dimensions variable, Installation view Victoria University

Figure 5:18. Mohsen Meysami, Do I Know You?, 2018, View from the left side, Wool yarn, cotton thread, cotton fabric. Hand embroidery on cotton fabric, Dimensions variable, Installation view Victoria University

Figure 5:19. Mohsen Meysami, Do I Know You?, 2018, View from the left side, Wool yarn, cotton thread, cotton fabric. Hand embroidery on cotton fabric, Dimensions variable, Installation view Victoria University

Figure 5:20. Mohsen Meysami, Do I Know You?, 2018, View from the back, Wool yarn, cotton thread, cotton fabric. Hand embroidery on cotton fabric, Dimensions variable, Installation view Victoria University

Figure 5:21. Mohsen Meysami, Do I Know You?, Pattern Design, Digital illustration, 2018. Coloured for better visibility

Figure 5:22. Mohsen Meysami, Do I Know You?, Pattern Design, Digital illustration

Figure 5:23. Mohsen Meysami, Sit; See, Don’t See! Detail, 2018, Wood, acrylic colour and mirror sheets, velvet, embroidery thread, foam. Digital print and laser cut, hand embroidery. Hand embroidered by Zahra N. (An Afghan refugee currently living in Iran). Photos courtesy of Matin Rokn

Figure 5:24. Mona Hatoum, Remains of the Day, 2016–18, wire mesh and wood, dimensions variable, White Cube Hong Kong, 2018. Photo by Kitmin Lee

Figure 5:25. Daniel Berset, Broken Chair on the Place des Nations, Geneva, 1997

Figure 5:26. Yazd Art and Architecture University’s Iwan, Photo Mohsen Meysami

Figure 5:27. Mohsen Meysami, Sit; See, Don’t See! 2018, Outer-side view, Photos courtesy of Matin Rokn

Figure 5:28. Mohsen Meysami, Sit; See, Don’t See! 2018, Inside view, Patterns on the cushion, Hand embroidered by Zahra N. (An Afghan refugee currently living in Iran). Photos courtesy of Matin Rokn

Figure 5:29. Mohsen Meysami, Sit; See, Don’t See!, 2018, Inside view, Patterns on the right panel, Digital print and laser cut. Photos courtesy of Matin Rokn

Figure 5:30. Mohsen Meysami, Sit; See, Don’t See! 2018, inside view, Patterns on the left panel, Digital print and laser cut. Photos courtesy of Matin Rokn

Figure 5:31. Mohsen Meysami, Sit; See, Don’t See!, Pattern Design, Digital illustration

Figure 5:32. Mohsen Meysami, Sit; See, Don’t See!, Pattern Design, Digital illustration

Figure 5:33. Mohsen Meysami, Sit; See, Don’t See!, 2018, Installation view Yazd Art and Architecture University Painting Courtyard. Photos courtesy of Matin Rokn
Figure 5:34. Renée Green. Commemorative Toile, 1992, Installation view Mobilien/Movables. Galerie im Taxispalais, Innsbruck, 2004, Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media


ABSTRACT

Nearness and Distance: Exploring the Notion of Indifference Through the Lens of Middle Eastern Traditional Arts is a practice-led research project that investigates and explores the notion of indifference, specifically a perceived growing global indifference towards the suffering of people dealing with issues related to and ramifications of recent wars and conflicts in the Middle East. The issue of indifference needs to be understood as a social phenomenon, embodied in complex social and psychological factors that influence individuals’ helping behaviours. Considering the political climate in which wars are waged and the information about them is broadcast, this project also investigates the impact of political dynamics on conditioning people’s responses to the plight of the war-affected in the Middle East.

Through studio explorations, this project examines how Middle Eastern traditional arts could be used for making new artworks that address the complex issues of wars and the suffering they inflict on people’s lives. Informed by practical and theoretical explorations, I will argue that the misrepresentation of the Middle East and its people as violent and barbaric can be considered as a notable reason for the perceived global indifference to the outcome of wars and conflicts in this region. Opposing this misrepresentation, this project investigates the use of an alternative style of representation that does not reproduce negative perceptions of Middle Eastern people. Employing an alternative style of imagery drawing on the elegance and intricacy of Middle Eastern traditional arts, I hope to create new artworks that could go beyond the conventional representations of the wars and conflicts in the region which often portray violence involved in war explicitly and focus on the immediate, though significant, consequences of war, such as death and bloodshed. Instead, I endeavour to create artworks which offer insight into the longer-term and broader ramifications of war beyond the battlefield along with global indifference with which these ramifications are approached.

As indifference involves a lack of attention to, or looking away from, the suffering of others, the challenging task in this project was to discover a way of depicting suffering and not-seeing the suffering simultaneously. Through new artworks this project incorporates elements such as colourful materials and abstract patterns into repetitive patterns that speak of suffering to reveal distinct solutions for addressing the binary notions of suffering and indifference.
INTRODUCTION

Wars impact lives of countless numbers of people, including children and the elderly, and how we respond to the impact is critical. According to UNHCR (2017), the UN Refugee Agency website, 37,000 people are forcibly displaced every day as a result of conflicts or persecutions. On the other hand, we are living in a world where the influence of mainstream media on the public opinion cannot be overlooked. It is through media controlled by state powers that most of the information about war is broadcasted. This status quo, in fact, reinforces the significance of the role art can play in driving awareness through stimulating people’s imagination and by drawing attention towards humanitarian crises in the Middle East.

In 2014, with the rise of ISIS and the consequent massacre of innocent people, I became emotionally affected by the news of terror attacks globally along with the ongoing and increasing unrest in the Middle East. For a long time, I had nightmares of ISIS attacking my hometown in Iran and people that were running and being killed on the street. I still suffer, though to a lesser degree, from these agonizing nightmares. Most disturbing is that in some of those nightmares, I see myself in the position of an observer who is witnessing the struggles of people he knows including his family and is not doing anything beyond witnessing.

Furthermore, I was born in Iran in 1982 in the middle of Iran-Iraq war, which started in 1980 and lasted for 8 years. Although I was born and raised in a city that was never attacked and bore no obvious signs of war, the situation was inevitably unstable and intense, and my life was not left unaffected. My father and my uncles went to war, and my cousin, as young as 15, was killed on a battlefield. My younger brother and I played together based on the stories we heard from our mother, one being about a friend’s father who fought hard before he was killed in the war. We would make protest signs which we would hold in our hands while marching and singing national songs in the backyard. Well immersed in what was constantly shown on national television, we would shout: Down With USA!

A combination of my childhood memories and my recent observations and encounters has led me to embark on a journey to better understand the relationship between the unfortunate sufferer and the distant spectator. My project is a practice-led research project that aims to investigate different aspects of indifference towards the suffering of war-affected people. Here, I want to clarify that this project is not trying to dichotomise individuals as indifferent or non-indifferent. Considering suffering and indifference towards it as universal human conditions, this project investigates different aspects of the phenomenon of indifference and examines how Middle Eastern traditional arts and crafts could be employed to address this multifaceted issue.

Central to the project are two research questions: How can Middle Eastern art traditions be employed to activate a dialogue on the destructive impacts of war and bringing indifference to light as a relevant and significant phenomenon? And, How can the notions of ‘nearness’ and ‘distance’ inform the production of new artworks that explore indifference towards the war-affected?

Informed by theoretical investigations and studio experiments, this project examines various approaches in utilising Middle Eastern traditional arts and crafts. With no previous experience of working with textile, early in this project I became interested in working with traditional materials and methods such
as Persian kilims and embroidery. Despite the difficulties such as the laborious process of making, I continued to use these methods throughout this project. An average of six weeks was spent on embroidering the patterns for each artwork. The use of materials such as Persian kilims along with the time-consuming method of embroidery, I thought, could not only signify the Middle East but also allow contemplation and reflection that facilitated and enriched future artworks and studio experiments.

Drawing on Judith Butler’s notion of recognisability norms, I argue that the misrepresentation of the Middle East and its people as violent and barbaric can be considered as a notable reason for the perceived global indifference to the suffering of people dealing with issues of wars and conflicts in the Middle East. Opposing this misrepresentation, this project investigates the use of an alternative style of representation that does not reproduce negative perceptions of the Middle Eastern people. Employing an alternative style of imagery drawing on the elegance and intricacy of Middle Eastern traditional arts, I hope to create new artworks that could go beyond the conventional representations of the wars and conflicts in the region which often portray violence involved in war explicitly and focus on the immediate, though significant, consequences of war, such as death and bloodshed. Instead, I endeavour to create artworks which offer insight into the longer-term and broader ramifications of war beyond the battlefield along with global indifference with which these ramifications are approached.

One of the challenges this project sought to overcome was addressing the notions of suffering and indifference as two binary yet interconnected facets of this project. My aim was to discover innovative ways of employing traditional Middle Eastern arts for making artworks that could depict both suffering and indifference—or not seeing the suffering. This project explored three solutions to this challenge:

- The combination of colourful and shiny materials such as beads and sequins with the repeated patterns that represent the sufferer
- The combination of realistic patterns that speak of suffering with abstract patterns reminiscent of uninformed and skewed perceptions of war-affected communities
- The incorporation of patterns representing suffering into an object of comfort

I have also explored my own unique position, as an Iranian artist residing in Australia, being a spectator of the wars in the Middle East from afar, and a communicator of the suffering wars inflict on people’s lives. To develop a more in-depth understanding of my position in relation to the distant sufferer, I studied the works of influential thinkers such as Edward Said, Sara Ahmed, and Luc Boltansci. My earlier understanding of the notion of indifference was centred around the role of geographical distance, based on which I worked with materials such as Persian kilims to highlight my Iranian identity, thus underlining a nearness in identity that I thought was working against distance. Further deepening my understanding of these concepts, I came to take into account the political factors that condition individuals’ perceptions and their responses to the suffering from a distance. Therefore, I moved to exploring the Middle Eastern traditional arts beyond highlighting my own identity. Through new thread installation artworks, I experimented with how the traditional methods of embroidery and more contemporary methods such as current installation practices could be utilised to reflect the notions of nearness and distance to allow viewers to engage more closely with the artwork.
This accompanying dissertation is comprised of five chapters contextualising practical, theoretical and philosophical explorations followed by the conclusion aligned with the examination exhibition. The first chapter, *Indifference and Suffering*, focuses on outlining different aspects of the perceived indifference towards the plight of war-affected Middle Eastern communities. Following on from a brief introduction, I review Judith Butler’s work on politics of whose lives we value and whose we do not to contextualise indifference especially within the context of contemporary politics. I discuss how and why the state powers tend to construct and define what Butler calls *frames of recognisability* that perpetuates stereotypes against those who are identified as Others (Butler, 2009, p. 36). Additionally, I draw on Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978) in the next section to contextualise the traditions of degrading and demonising Orientals and how these traditions continue to perpetuate regressive norms about Middle Eastern communities. These philosophical and theoretical perspectives contribute to understanding the reasons behind the perceived global neglect of humanitarian crises caused by recent conflicts in the Middle East.

Drawing on Susan Sontag’s critique of photography, the second chapter, *Contemporary Issues, Traditional Arts*, begins by describing the importance of aesthetic representation of wars compared to photographic and journalistic representations. This chapter explores the works of early and contemporary visual artists to demonstrate two distinct approaches in addressing issues of wars. In this part of the chapter, I discuss three of my early artworks for this project. I begin with outlining the reasons for developing an interest in working on Persian kilims and utilising the craft of embroidery. Additionally, I discuss how with my second artwork on a kilim *There for you* (2016), I explored the limitations and possibilities of utilising embroidery on Persian kilims using various thread sizes in combination with stitching methods for embroidering details. Finally, in the artwork *Their Pain, Our Gain* (2017), I examine the use of colourful and shiny materials such as beads along with the repeated patterns that represent suffering to address the binary aspects of this project: suffering and indifference.

Chapter 3, *The Suffering of the Abstract Other*, discusses my approach to exploring an alternative style of representing the outcome of wars in the Middle East; thus, it does not follow the conventional styles that often tend to depict the people of this region as violent and barbaric. I will outline the use of Middle Eastern traditional arts for their delicacy and complexity as opposed to the mainstream representations of the region which perpetuate negative stereotypes on war-affected people. Furthermore, this chapter highlights how I combined realistic and abstract patterns to address the contradictory notions of suffering and indifference.

The primary focus of Chapter 4, *Intimacy and Distance; A Spectator’s Relationships with the Sufferer*, is on addressing different aspects of the notions of nearness and distance. In the first half of this chapter, I draw on Luc Boltanski’s and Sara Ahmed’s works to discuss my position as a communicator of suffering in distance. In the section *Here, There, Close to There*, I discuss various positions I could take in responding to the plight of people from war-torn countries in the Middle East. I then proceed to describe the influences several public art and collaborative art projects had in developing an interest in utilising more contemporary practices such as installation. Through my first thread installation artwork *Yellow, Red, Blue, Black* (2017), I explored the use of...
threads and repetitive patterns to address the notions of nearness and distance and to encourage viewers to experience the artwork from different positions, angles and distances.

Chapter 5: Towards Engaging and Experiential Artworks, contextualises the process of making and the philosophical and theoretical views that informed three new artworks. Examining different approaches to installing thread installation artworks in various gallery spaces, this chapter discusses how each version allowed distinct readings and interpretations. This includes the installation of the artwork Looking-Looking Away (2018) in three different galleries, where each iteration considered a distinct installation method and thus created unique experiences for the viewers. This chapter also presented the third solution for addressing the binary notions of suffering and indifference. In Sit, See, Don’t See (2018), I explored making a new architectural/sculptural artwork that could allow the viewers to literally sit and reflect on the issues presented within the artwork. The incorporation of patterns that speak of the suffering of war-affected communities with the unique structure of the artwork that could also function as a chair allowed the artwork to be at once comfortable and uncomfortable or disturbing.

Finally, the concluding chapter contextualises how this project addressed the research questions and discusses the following project findings:

- The use of Middle Eastern traditional arts towards developing an alternative style of representing the Middle East and the repercussions of recent wars in this region

- Three solutions in addressing binary notions of suffering and indifference
CHAPTER 1: INDIFFERENCE AND SUFFERING
INTRODUCTION

Adam’s sons are body limbs, to say;
For they are created of the same clay.
Should one organ be troubled by pain,
Others would suffer severe strain.
Thou, careless of people’s suffering,
Deserve not the name, ‘human being’

Saadi Shirazi, 13th-century Persian poet
Translated by: H. Vahid Dastjerdi (Dastjerdi, 2006)

At the centre of this project is the notion of indifference, which, in the context of this project, refers to global indifference towards the suffering of people dealing with issues of recent wars and conflicts in the Middle East. An issue that needs to be understood as a social phenomenon, embodied in complex psychological and social factors that influence individuals’ helping behaviours. Considering the political climate in which wars are waged and the information about them is broadcast, this project also investigates the impact of political dynamics on conditioning people’s responses to the plight of the war-affected in the Middle East.

Throughout this project, I came to realise there is a possibility of confusion about and misreading of what indifference means in the context of this study. In this chapter, thus, I will attempt to address the likely misunderstandings by explaining different aspects of the notion of indifference. I will begin by looking at the dictionary definition of the word and what indifference is in general. In the section 1.2 Indifference; ‘Ally’ Or ‘Alien’?, I will draw on the works of the contemporary thinker, Judith Butler, on politics of whose lives we value and whose we do not to describe the notion of indifference especially within the context of contemporary politics. I will then explain why the issue of indifference towards the suffering of war-affected Middle Eastern communities is a global issue. To do so, I will draw on Edward Said’s analysis of Orientalism, of the historical examples of the Western representations of the East (the Orient), to explore how these misrepresentations condition people’s responses to the suffering inflicted on communities in the Middle East.

Drawing on the works of such contemporary influential thinkers as Judith Butler and Edward Said, I will examine how stereotypical and often politically charged views on Middle Easterners, which are based on misrepresentations of Middle Eastern communities as Others, whose lives have less, if any, value, condition people’s responses to violence and its resultant suffering in the region. Investigating the misrepresentations of the Otherised Middle Easterners...
not only will help outline various aspects of the phenomenon of indifference but also will assist in developing new ways of representing the suffering in the region that do not follow a conventional path and can offer new insights into this phenomenon.
WHAT IS INDIFFERENCE?

Before discussing indifference in regard to recent wars and conflicts in the Middle East, it is important to define indifference in general, as this preliminary step will later serve to help with understanding various aspects of this phenomenon in relation to my project.

The Oxford English Dictionary (2011) defines the term indifference in several ways:

1. Lack of interest, concern, or sympathy
   1.1. Unimportance
2. Mediocrity

Some of the synonyms of the term are: lack of concern about, apathy about/towards, lack of interest in, disregard for, obliviousness to, carelessness of, coldness, and distance.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2011), the word indifference, in the sense of ‘being neither good nor bad’, originated from the late Middle English: from Latin indifferentia, from in-not’ + different- ‘differing, deferring’ (from the verb differre). Situating this concept within the current project may lead us to consider indifference to mean finding no importance in what (here suffering) one is informed about, or seeing no difference between the existence and non-existence of the issue or phenomenon in question.

On various occasions in this project, I identified the possibility of misreading indifference as, for example, a natural response on the part of human beings to, in this case, a suffering they are informed about. The ‘indifference as natural’ proposition would be plausible only if human beings were consistently indifferent in how they respond to all acts of violence and the resultant suffering. Yet, it does not stand the test of facts given the numerous instances of violence which have evoked distinct responses in the world.

- Paris Charlie Hebdo shooting (2015, 12 deaths)¹
- Kabul Afghanistan ambulance bombing (2018, 103 deaths)²
- Australia’s treatment of refugees (55 Deaths in onshore and offshore detention facilities since 2010)³
- Sydney Lindt Cafe siege (2014, 3 deaths including the perpetrator)⁴

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlie_Hebdo_shooting
³ https://arts.monash.edu/border-crossing-observatory/research-agenda/australian-border-deaths-database
- The September 11 attacks (2001, 2,996 deaths)\(^1\)  
- Massacres of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia (numbers as many as 500 massacres with an average of 25 Indigenous people killed in every massacre)\(^2\)

How does public response to these incidents compare? Are we consistently outraged by all acts of violence or have we proven to treat, quite systematically, some instances with apathy and indifference? Doesn’t the evident inconsistency in how we respond invalidate the ‘indifference as natural’ proposition? As my response to this question is predictably affirmative, in the following sections I will discuss why there are contradictory responses to different cases of violence.

In some parts of this dissertation I will refer to the term indifference in a general sense. In other parts, I use it to refer to a perceived global indifference to the suffering of people dealing with wars and conflicts in the Middle East\(^3\). It is worth noting that my intention is not to accuse any particular group and exculpate another group. Therefore, my use of the word indifference is to make a reference to a universal issue that is relevant to all people, faiths and nationalities. In other words, this project is not based on dividing people into groups of indifferent and non-indifferent, nor it is considering the suffering as something only associated to one specific region or location. While acknowledging the universality of suffering and indifference, this project draws on wars and the suffering they cause in the Middle East as a contemporary example to investigate different aspects of indifference.

1:2 INDIFFERENCE; ’ALLY’ OR ’ALIEN’?

When we are talking about indifference to someone or a group of people’s sufferings, how we come to perceive ourselves and others is of significant importance. In other words, I want to argue that, our responses to the suffering of an unfortunate at a distance is conditioned according to the primary identification of Us and Others. In understanding the binary of Us and Others and its relation to the problem of indifference, we are faced with questions around the origins of discriminatory norms and their impacts: How do these discriminatory norms arise in the first place? How do they operate? And perhaps more importantly, whose interest do they serve?

Examining these questions will enable me to gain a more in-depth understanding of the notions of suffering and indifference especially in global and political contexts. Additionally, considering the impact of people’s perceptions of contemporary Middle Eastern conflicts on how the world is responding to

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\(^1\) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September_11_attacks](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September_11_attacks)  
\(^3\) In the current and in the following section, I am referring to the term in a more general sense. However, in some instances, I use contemporary examples of violence and wars causing suffering to maintain a connection with the issue of the wars in the Middle East that have become the primary focus of this project.
the suffering inflicted on the people in this region, my project investigated alternative approaches to representing suffering so as to avoid reproducing the misperceptions promoted by conventional styles of representation.

**FRAMES OF RECOGNISABILITY: GRIEVABLE AND UNGRIEVABLE LIVES**

The question of discriminatory norms of recognition—that define whose lives are and whose are not grievable—is what Judith Butler (2009) explored in her book *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*. In this book, Butler discusses how political powers control what we see and know and construct how we understand issues such as wars through what she calls *frames of recognisability*. In her definition of the notion of frame, Butler asserts that:

> ... to call the frame into question is to show that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn, that something was already outside, which made the very sense of the inside possible, recognisable. The frame never quite determined precisely what it is we see, think, recognize, and apprehend (Butler, 2009, p. 9).

For a better understanding of the *frame* and its relation to the notion of indifference, it is important to be aware of two aspects of the frame. One aspect is that a frame—through its intrinsic functionality—leaves things outside in order to put something inside the frame. In other words, and as Butler explains, in this interconnected relationship between the inside and outside, the inside is understood through what is left outside of the frame. The other aspect is that, since frames are definitive, they determine definitions for what is inside and what is outside the frame. In fact, frames implicitly define our understanding of what happens around us. According to the Canadian-American psychologist Erving Goffman, they are cognitive structures that form our perception of the reality and allow us ‘to locate, perceive, identify, and label’ occurrences (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). They provide definitions that are not based on facts; rather, they are aligned with the interests of political powers constructing those frames through which inhumane and brutal acts of torture and murder by Us in the name of security and democracy are tolerated and the very existence of the Other is recognised as a threat to Us. With controlling public opinion, governments not only wage and maintain wars but also, through leaving things out of the frame, prevent what Butler calls *moral outrage* and label any opposing attempt anti national (definitive frames). ¹

With posing the question of why there are different reactions or affects in responding to the death of different groups of people in times of war, Butler asserts:

> In contemporary conditions of war and heightened nationalism, we imagine that our existence is bound up with others with whom we can find national affinity, who are recognizable to us, and who conform to certain culturally specific notions about what the culturally recognizable human

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¹ An example of this is the release of photographs of Abu Ghraib prison in 2004 and how this incident was handled by George W. Bush’s Administration. Judith Butler remarks, ‘It seems to me that those who sought to limit the power of the image in this instance also sought to limit the power of affect, of outrage, knowing full well that it could and would turn public opinion against the war in Iraq, as indeed it did’ (Butler, 2009, p. 40)
is. This interpretative framework functions by tacitly differentiating between those populations on whom my life and existence depend, and those populations who represent a direct threat to my life and existence (Butler, 2009, p. 42).

Opposing these discriminatory norms that divide populations into lives and threats to life, Butler talks about ‘precariousness’ that needs to be recognised as a ‘generalised condition’ of all human life. Cutting across ‘identity categories as well as multicultural maps’, Butler asserts precarity forms ‘the basis for an alliance focused on opposition to state violence and its capacity to produce, exploit, and distribute precarity for the purposes of profit and territorial defence’ (Butler, 2009, p. 32). Being critical of the kind of global responsibility that ‘kill(s) in the name of democracy or security’, and that allows invasions and wars to ‘install democracy’, Butler poses the important question of which “We” do we belong to. She reminds us of thinking about the ‘fields of recognisability’ constructed and controlled by ‘political orders’ that in implicit ways define and control what We we are bound to (Butler, 2009, p. 36).

When we talk about the problem of indifference, we are talking about one’s unconcerned response to another’s suffering. Therefore, how we come to understand ourselves and others results in either compassionate or indifferent responses. In discussing the question of ‘who we are in these times of war’, Butler talks about a division of populations into ‘grievable’ and ‘ungrievable’ manifested in how we value others’ lives, whose deaths we mourn, and whose lives we do not regard as worthy of mourning when they are lost (Butler, 2009, p. 38). In her view, this evaluation of lives, grading them into worthy and worthless beings, is a culture that denies humanistic values and is grounded in politically regulated and maintained implicit frameworks and norms of recognisability.

Thinking about different contemporary examples of violence and how they are perceived among individuals can help us understand the inconsistency in responding to suffering—being compassionate to one and indifferent to another. One example is the international responses to the public execution of two teens in Mashhad, Iran, in July 2005. This incident attracted the attention of Western media and LGBTQ activists; however, the credibility of the unconfirmed claim that they were executed for homosexual acts was later questioned as the reason behind execution, some argued, was the rape of a 13-year-old boy. In an article published in GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, Mitra Rastegar analyses the responses of Western LGBTQ activism and the media globally to the Mashhad case.

‘The executions, when interpreted as homophobic persecution’, Rastegar argues ‘resonated with a secular imagination that sees an opposition between the secular and the religious’.

1 In contrast with indifference, there is empathy as a moral sentiment that not only shows one’s concern for others’ suffering, but also actively and consciously opposes the causes of such suffering. The lack of such response, especially at the global scale, in my view, is a problem. The other reason why I call this a problem is its discriminatory aspect as a result of which, as Butler argues, responses to incidents of violence and suffering they inflict on different groups of people vary from outrage to indifference.
A story of homophobic persecution casts these victims as an example not only of commonality, in the form of a universal LGBTQ experience, but also of difference, in the form of an essentialized “civilizational” (i.e., cultural and religious) divide between a violently intolerant “Islam” and a progressively more tolerant “West” (Rastegar, 2013, emphasis in original).

Rastegar exposes the contradictions and discrepancies between the responses to the Mashhad case and those to the release of shocking images of torture of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers at Abu Ghrabib prison. She describes that despite the spatial and cultural distances between the victims and observers in both cases, people responded compassionately to the execution of youths in Mashhad case, which she attributed to proximity through the identification of viewers with victims, while the criticism in the case of Abu Gharib was focused around the violent nature of torture and not the victims’ identities or the roots of the violence.

While both the Abu Ghrabib torture scandal and the Mashhad executions elicited disgust, this disgust associated differently with conceptions of the United States and Iran. Violence emerging from modern democratic states, even when condemned, is rarely seen as reflecting an essential attribute of secular state power. By contrast, the executions of Marhoni and Asgari [two executed teens in Mashhad], because they violated particular secular sensibilities, resulted in a moral disgust that requires complete rejection and separation. While responders to Abu Gharib were focused on determining responsibility and causality, the reasons for the executions in Mashhad were seen as transparent, perpetrated by a unitary Iranian government motivated simply by religious homophobia (Rastegar, 2013).

Another example is from what happened near us both geographically and temporally. On 15 March 2019 two terror attacks were carried out in Christchurch mosques in New Zealand, killing 50 people who gathered for Friday prayer. I wish to focus on some of the reactions to this incident including those I witnessed myself. I first heard the news from a friend. More shocking than the news was him commenting, obviously based on limited knowledge of the incident, ‘I do not understand why Muslims kill Muslims. They killed many Muslims in New Zealand’. Another similarly significant observation I had on that same day was a big sigh of relief from my Iranian friends when they realised that the attacker was a non-Muslim, non-Middle Eastern, Australian white man. Amidst my reflections on these reactions, I remembered the 2014 Lindt Cafe siege in Sydney and the confronting reactions some of my Iranian friends had experienced after the gunman’s Iranian identity was foregrounded.

In the aftermath of New Zealand’s Christchurch mosque shootings, the xenophobic rhetoric that was deployed for political gains became the main focus of attention. Putting the blame on Muslims, Australian senator Fraser Anning, for instance, asked, ‘does anyone still dispute the link between Muslim immigration and violence?’ His comments were widely condemned, and there was significant dispute over the accusations against Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison for promoting anti-Muslim migration rhetoric for political gains¹. New Zealand’s Christchurch mosque shootings and the various ¹ See https://www.smh.com.au/national/morrison-sees-votes-in-anti-muslim-strategy-20110216-1awmo.html
responses to it demonstrate how public’s perceptions of war and violence and the response to the resultant suffering can be influenced by misinformation and propaganda, especially anti-Muslim rhetoric, which reinforce fear and hatred and are in place to serve the states’ political interests.

Here, I am attempting to demonstrate different aspects of the global perceptions—more specifically Western perceptions—of Middle Eastern people. This, as I argued, can describe the inconsistency of moral responses in the face of suffering of people in that region. Additionally, it assisted me in my project to avoid the conventional styles of representing Middle Eastern people—the styles of representations that continue to form people’s perceptions and therefore made them indifferent toward their suffering.

**INDIFFERENCE; AN EASTERN-WESTERN MATTER**

So far, and through Butler’s political and philosophical thoughts, we know that the problem of indifference towards the suffering of people dealing with issues of war in faraway countries is a problem of recognisability norms that tend to divide people into ‘grievable’ and ‘ungrievable’. Considering factors such as the military presence of Western powers in the region, the role of mainstream media—often Western media outlets—in distributing news and controlling public opinion, the refugee crisis across the world, and the history of colonialism, it is imperative to think about the issue of conflicts in the Middle East and what appears to be the global indifference towards the plight of affected people as a universal and/or an Eastern-Western matter.

The Western representations of the East were extensively studied by the Palestinian-American intellectual Edward Said whose analysis of historically biased perceptions created of the Orientals can elucidate Judith Butler’s thoughts on the impact of recognisability norms on regulating ‘affective responsiveness’. Such analysis enables us to establish a better understanding of the politically charged and already established notions of Us and Them, the recognisability norms that condition our perceptions and therefore our responses to others’ suffering.

In his book *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said, critically analysed historical examples of how the Orient is represented by the Occident (the West) and in this, he showed how the generalised ideas continue to become stereotypical, biased and prejudicial towards the Other—the Orientals. For Said, Orientalism is ‘a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient’. In the introduction of his book, he asserts:

> Taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point Orientalism can be discussed and analysed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it (Said, 1978, p. 3).

Eric Nelson Newberg, a Professor of Theological and Historical Studies, presents three possible senses in which we can understand Said’s Orientalism:

1 Here, I am not suggesting that the blame for Eastern people’s suffering should be on Westerners. Quite the opposite, I believe that although the problem of indifference is tightly linked to the divisive dichotomy of ‘Us and Other’, it cannot be attributed entirely to those portrayed and serving more as Us than Other, in this case Westerners.
First, in a conventional sense Orientalism is the academic study of the Orient by Western scholars. Secondly, Orientalism is “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’”. He [Said] claims that a large mass of writers in the West have embraced this distinction as a starting point for their depiction of the Orient. Thirdly, Orientalism is “a Western style for dominating, restricting, and having authority over the Orient” (Newberg, 2012, p. 7).

In Said’s view, the ‘Oriental World’ emerged out of an ‘unchallenged centrality’ conferred on West and ‘a sovereign Western consciousness’ (Said, 1978, p. 8). In the preface he wrote in 2003 for the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of his book, questioning the origins of such terms as the Orient and the West, he remarked that with no ‘ontological stability’ these terms are ‘made up of human efforts, partly affirmation, partly identification of the Other’. Said argued that it is through such dividing terms that politicians mobilise ‘fear, hatred, disgust and resurgent self-pride and arrogance’ in order to wage and maintain wars. In this preface, he reminds us of how this tradition of divisive policies is still practiced with an increased momentum after the September 11, 2001 attacks and subsequent events such as the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq (Said, 2003).

**ORIENTED AROUND OR TOWARD**

Orientalism might also ‘involve histories of appropriation’ that ‘are violent’ according to British Australian theorist Sara Ahmed, ‘even if that appropriation speaks the language of love, curiosity, and care’ she argues (Ahmed, 2006, p. 149). A way of thinking about this is to consider the positions East and West each take in their relations. According to Sara Ahmed,

> The Orient here would be the object toward which we are directed, as an object of desire. By being directed toward the Orient, we are orientated “around” the Occident. Or, to be more precise, the Occident coheres as that which we are organized around through the very direction of our gaze toward the Orient (Ahmed, 2006, pp. 116, emphasis in original).

Considering whiteness as ‘an orientation that puts certain things within reach’, Ahmed argues that ‘the white world is a world oriented around “whiteness”’ and ‘is a world shaped by colonial histories, which affect not simply how maps are drawn, but the kind of orientations we have towards objects and others’ (Ahmed, 2006, p. 126).

Related to this idea of Western and Eastern Worlds are the geopolitical divisions of the world into the Muslim and Western World, reinforced by a tendency among pundits and journalists to ignore the linguistic, cultural, and political diversity of 1.5 billion Muslims and to classify them as a unitary ‘Muslim World’. This is a common discourse in contemporary politics that according to historian Cemil Aydin, has its roots in colonialists’ efforts to supress Muslims who were fighting for a decolonised future in the late-19th century. In his essay *What is the Muslim world?* (2018), Cemil Aydin argues that the ‘clash of civilisations’ that derives from the misconception of an eternal clash between the Christian West and Islamic World is in fact ‘a complex conflict between empires and states, not a clash of civilisations’ (Aydin, 2018, para. 16). He asserts:
The idea of an ancient clash between the Muslim World and the Christian World is a dangerous and modern myth. It relies on fabricated misrepresentations of separate Islamic and Western geopolitical and civilisational unities (Aydin, 2018, para. 7).

If we accept Aydin’s view that the ‘clash of civilisations’ is a misconception, which portrays the Muslim World as a threat to be defeated and the suffering inflicted on them as of no importance, then the solution is to reshape those established perceptions. The role art can play is to shift consciousness away from enmity into reconciliation, which is what I, as an artist, attempted to do in this project through drawing upon the region’s rich history and culture.

CONTemporary World, Inherited Orientalism

Orientalism that historically appeared more in the form of travel books and journalistic reports transformed throughout the nineteenth century to become a field of research that would analyse Orientals ‘not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined’ (Said, 1978, p. 207). Another transformation in Orientalism—as a field of study—happened after the Second World War, and through a ‘specifically American contribution to the history of Orientalism’, where it transformed ‘from a fundamentally philological discipline and a vaguely general apprehension of the Orient into a social science specialty’ (Said, 1978, p. 290). Calling ‘cultural hostility’ the common characteristic of both traditional European Orientalism and modern American Orientalism, Said remarks:

The parallel between European and American imperial designs on the Orient (Near and Far) is obvious. What is perhaps less obvious is (a) the extent to which the European tradition of Orientalist scholarship was, if not taken over, then accommodated, normalised, domesticated, and popularised and fed into the post war efflorescence of Near Eastern studies in the United States; and (b) the extent to which the European tradition has given rise in the United States to a coherent attitude among most scholars, institutions, styles of discourse, and orientations, despite the contemporary appearance of refinement, as well as the use of (again) highly sophisticated-appearing social-science techniques (Said, 1978, p. 295).

Emerging technologies such as social media and online communication tools have changed the way information is distributed and the way things are represented. On the other hand, Orientalism, as discussed, is about the Western representations of the Orient, and since Said’s book was published over thirty years ago, one might argue that his Orientalism cannot be applied to contemporary examples of wars in the Middle East. Here, Sara Ahmed’s

1 Although Orientalism was first published in 1978, on many occasions including in the preface of the book published in 2003, Said strongly argues that the Orientalism is not history, it is an inherited tradition that is practiced still today. In reflecting on contemporary examples such as 2003 invasion of Iraq and political leaders’ plan for ‘changing the map of the Middle-East’, Said remarks:

   It is surely one of the intellectual catastrophes of history that an imperialist war confected by a small group of unelected U.S. officials (they’ve been called chicken hawks, since none of them ever served in the military) was waged against a devastated Third World dictatorship on thoroughly ideological grounds having to do with world dominance, security control, and scarce resources, but disguised for its true intent, hastened, and reasoned for by Orientalists who betrayed their calling as scholars (Said, 2003).
thoughts on orientation can shed light on how the traditions of Orientalism persisted and reproduced themselves for centuries, with the legacy of Orientalism inherited in contemporary understanding of Orientals. Sara Ahmed’s metaphorical elaboration is worth quoting here:

We convert what we receive into possessions, a conversion that often “hides” the conditions of having received, as if the possession is too simply “already there”. So we receive materials, or other kinds of objects, such as a shared belief or even a shared love for the ego ideal of the family, which reproduces the family as that which we wish to reproduce. (Ahmed, 2006, p. 126)

This conversional inheritance—that ‘converts what we receive into possessions’—Ahmed asserts can also be rethought ‘in terms of orientations’. ‘We inherit the reachability of some objects, she claims, ‘those that are “given” to us or at least are made available to us within the family home.’ She follows ‘I am not suggesting here that “whiteness” is one such reachable object but rather that whiteness is an orientation that puts certain things within reach.’ (Ahmed, 2006, p. 126, emphasis in original).
CHAPTER 2: CONTEMPORARY ISSUES, TRADITIONAL ARTS
INTRODUCTION

What do you think an artist is? An imbecile who has only eyes if he’s a painter, or ears if he’s a musician, or a lyre at every level of his heart if he’s a poet, or even, if he’s a boxer, just his muscles?

“On the contrary, he’s at the same time a political being, constantly alive to heartrending, fiery, or happy events, to which he responds in every way... No, painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war for attack and defence against the enemy.

Pablo Picasso
Les Lettres Françaises, 1943

Drawing on Susan Sontag’s critique of war photography in her book Regarding the pain of others (2003), this chapter will describe the significance of aesthetic representation of wars and the plight of affected communities. This will be followed by a brief review of works by some of visual artists to explain different approaches they took in depicting their own observations and lived experiences of wars. This will then assist in describing my approach and preferred art making methods, where I will outline why and how I became interested to work with some of the traditional materials and methods such as Persian kilims and embroidery.

By citing the views of several scholars, I will discuss how lay theories of happiness and karma can impact people’s perceptions of others’ misery and therefore their responses to it. My intention of considering these theories in Between the devil and the deep blue sea (2016) was to draw viewers’ attention to the dichotomy between the suffering caused by wars and how those wars are represented and perceived. Additionally, I will explain how I used shiny materials such as sequins and beads to reference the role of mass media in forming people’s perceptions of the wars and the anguish of war-affected communities.

By considering the embroidery as a drawing medium in There for you! (2016), I explored the limitations and possibilities of embroidery on Persian kilims. This artwork examined how a range of symbolic visual elements could be used for making an artwork that communicated political messages.

Drawing on Middle Eastern traditional arts, this project examined different methods that could be used to address the notions of suffering and indifference as two binary aspects of the project. Accordingly, in Their Pain, Our Gain! (2017), I explored the possibility of combining shiny and colourful materials such as beads with the repetitive patterns of a crying woman reminiscent of the suffering recent wars inflicted on people in the Middle East.
2.1 Visual and Aesthetic Representations of Distant Suffering

Much of the information about war is communicated through the videos and images that are taken by professional and amateur photographers. Therefore, one way of thinking about the representations of war and the suffering it inflicts is by considering war photography. A photograph, however, as Susan Sontag asserts, ‘is supposed not to evoke but to show’ (Sontag, 2003, p. 47). While we may not entirely agree with this argument, it enables us to begin to establish an understanding that considers the significance of aesthetic representations in responding to and in communicating the suffering in distance.

One of the problems of war photography in Sontag’s view is with the overflow of information and the tendency in journalism towards images that can ‘arrest attention, startle, [and] surprise’. This ‘is part of the normality of a culture’ in which ‘shock has become a leading stimulus of consumption and source of value’ (Sontag, 2003, p. 22). Sontag remarks, ‘in a world in which photography is brilliantly at the service of consumerist manipulations, no effect of a photograph of a doleful scene can be taken for granted’ (Sontag, 2003, pp. 79-80). I argue that the aesthetic representation of suffering—including artistic photography—, is different from the war photography, for it is derived from the artist’s thinking and their emotions as opposed to the war photographer whose representation is often aligned with the culture of spectatorship, which is more concerned with satisfying the eyes of the consumers of the news than communicating the suffering and calling for action.

In Sontag’s view, the effectiveness of a photograph is limited as government controls and self-censorship restricts what can be seen by public. Such forces not only direct our attention to certain issues, scenes, or events, but also limit our knowledge about wars by not showing what seems to be contrary to standards of good taste.

Television news producers and newspaper and magazine photo editors make decisions every day which firm up the wavering consensus about the boundaries of public knowledge. Often their decisions are cast as judgments about “good taste”—always a repressive standard when invoked by institutions. Staying within the bounds of good taste was the primary reason given for not showing any of the horrific pictures of the dead taken at the site of the World Trade Center in the immediate aftermath of the attack on September 11, 2001. (Sontag, 2003, p. 68).

An independent unbiased artist on the other hand, is more likely to make an effective connection with their audience and to communicate the suffering. Unlike the war photography, their art can go beyond the standards and frameworks that tend to control public opinion and, by extension, public responses to violence and the suffering it causes. Contrary to media representation of the suffering that claims to be showing the evidence of what is/was happening there, the reality, by not making such a claim, an unprejudiced artist expresses what they genuinely feel and think about the subject matter. This independency in expressing their feelings would allow the audience to more freely think about what they are exposed to and this form their own personal interpretations.

1 In chapter 2, I draw on Sontag’s critique of shocking images to explain why I am not interested in using horrific images in my artworks. See: 2:6 Their Pain, Our Gain! p.43
The condition and location in which one comes to know about an unfortunate’s suffering is also an important factor in how they perceive and respond to the suffering. When talking about media representation, it is often in between other tasks (e.g., in the middle of dinner) that we accidentally, and even sometimes unwillingly, come to know about certain news, in this case, of others’ suffering, whereas the viewer of an aesthetic representation often voluntarily and willingly chooses to be exposed to it.

Besides, it is also important to think about the scarcity of contemplative space in the contemporary era. Such space, Sontag believes, ‘is hard to come by in a modern society’ including art galleries and museum settings with strongly commercial motivations (Sontag, 2003, p. 119). Yet, the role of arts in general, and especially those more concerned with human values than exchange value, as an alternative in communicating the suffering and hence providing the opportunity to educate and to raise awareness cannot be overlooked.

A way of appreciating the importance of aesthetic representation of suffering is in thinking about the role it plays in cultural development which, according to Austrian psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), ‘works against war’. An exchange of letters between Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud in 1932 may shed light on the importance of aesthetic responses to suffering. At the beginning of his letter to Sigmund Freud, Einstein invites him to exchange ideas about politics and peace and he does that by asking a question about what in his mind is ‘the most insistent of all the problems civilization has to face’:

> Is there any way of delivering mankind from the menace of war? It is common knowledge that, with the advance of modern science, this issue has come to mean a matter of life and death for Civilization as we know it; nevertheless, for all the zeal displayed, every attempt at its solution has ended in a lamentable breakdown (Einstein & Freud, 1932, p. 2).

In response, Freud talks about the history of wars and the role of the man’s conflicts of interests in causing violence. He remarks ‘conflicts of interest between man and man are resolved, in principle, by the recourse to violence’. Freud argues that the instinct for destruction and the instinct for love are two kinds of human instincts that are linked and cannot operate in isolation. ‘All the phenomena of life derive from their activity, whether they work in concert or in opposition’ he says. From this, he concludes that the instinct of destruction cannot be eliminated.

Freud stresses the importance of ‘strengthening of the intellect’ as one of the most important phenomena of culture and it is toward the end of his letter that despite being sceptical about ending wars, he states that: ‘... whatever makes for cultural development is working also against war’ (Einstein & Freud, 1932, p. 12).
2.2 REPRESENTATIONS OF SUFFERING

So far, we discussed the importance and significance of the aesthetic representation of the war and the suffering it inflicts on the lives of affected people. I will now attempt to explore various approaches different artists take in their art practice for communicating the issues of wars, which will serve to establish a better understanding of the artistic style of representation I employed for making my artworks.

As The New York Times journalist Alissa J. Rubin wrote in an article about the exhibition The Disasters of War 1800-2014 at the Louvre-Lens, artists and journalists telling the stories of wars are always dealing with the question ‘are gore and blood the most important things to portray, or is it the moment of utter grief that follows? What is the truest way to show the cost of victory and the pain of defeat?’ (Rubin, 2014, para. 6).

From very early on in this project, I started to think about similarities and differences in artistic approaches employed by different artists representing the suffering caused by wars. In one approach, artists tend to represent the atrocities of wars by focusing on what happens in the frontline of the battlefields. On the other hand, many artists tend to take a relatively distinct approach by concentrating on expressing their feelings about what happens outside the battlefields. With this in mind, in the following sections, I will examine some of the artworks representing the suffering caused by wars based on a number of artists’ approaches.

THE FRONTLINE OF THE BATTLE

For centuries artists used to depict and represent the honour of war and illustrate and represent warriors’ fight and glory in a positive light (Groys, 2008). Frustrations with the monarchy and the church gave rise to revolutionary movements (e.g., The French Revolution 1789-1799), in which many artists stood along with liberal activists to rebel against unjust governments. An example of this is Francisco Goya (1746-1828), with whom ‘a new standard for responsiveness to suffering enters art’, according to Susan Sontag (Sontag, 2003, pp. 44-45). He depicted the obscenity of war with his deep and yet dark feelings in The Disasters of War (1810-20). This print series remains a source of influence to different artists until today. A hundred years after the Goya’s masterpiece, Swiss-French artist, Pierre-Georges Jeanniot, created The Horrors of War (1915). A series of 10 etchings that illustrate atrocities committed by the German army on the Belgian people in the first few months of World War One (Figure 2:2).
Figure 2:1. Francisco Goya, What more is there to do?, Disasters of War, 1810 – 1820

Figure 2:2. Pierre-Georges Jeanniot, The Massacre at Surice from The horrors of war etchings, 1915
Two centuries later, Iranian artist Farideh Lashai (1944 –2013) created a video installation work inspired by Goya’s The Disasters of War. The central figures—including the sufferer and the persecutor—are removed from the prints and the artwork is completed with the projection of a video onto the prints. As the circle light moves across the 80 (8x10) pieces of The Disasters of War, it illuminates back the removed figures and the cruel act of violence. In *When I count, there are only you...but when I look, there is only a shadow* (2013), Farideh Lashai combines an iconic anti-war masterpiece with modern technologies to reflect the theme of violence and suffering that continues to this day (Figure 2:3).

A more recent example of artists using horrifying imagery for portraying the atrocities of war is Iraqi-American painter Ahmed Alsoudani. He fled Iraq to Syria during The Gulf War (1990 –1991) when he was only a teenager, before claiming asylum in the U.S.A. Alsoudani’s paintings, are more allegorical than literal (Morgan, 2012), and despite the obvious signs of violence, his paintings are not narrating a specific story about wars. His ‘turbulent paintings depict a
disfigured tableau of war and atrocity’ says writer and curator, Jareh Das. ‘They draw on personal experiences of conflict and images of violence, particularly as they mark, maim and defile bodies but also evoke wider universal experiences of conflict and human suffering (Das, 2017).


Figure 2:4. Ahmed Alsoudani, Untitled, 2008, Hard ground etching with aquatint, spit-bite aquatint, drypoint, roulette and scraping and burnishing, 77 × 68 cm, Edition 15/30

Image redacted for copyright reasons.
See: https://www.artsy.net/artwork/ahmed-alsoudani-untitled-13
THE AFTERMATH OF THE BATTLE

The impact of wars on people’s lives has been at the centre of many artists’ practice. In the previous section, I briefly explored the works of some of the artists which were centred around depicting the atrocities of wars in battlefields. On the other hand, there are many artists who focus on illustrating what happens outside the battlefields. Their art is often about what they think unjustly happened to their home country and their own experiences of living in diaspora and the grief of loss.

The notion of a home country is a recurring theme in the works of many artists who are forced to live away from home. For example, Syrian painter, Tammam Azzam, uses different mediums including painting and digital mediums to express his own feelings about what is taking place in his country. Criticising the world’s neglect of people struggling in Syria, Azzam thinks ‘empathy should not be limited to the first world’ (Azzam, 2015).

Azzam left his painting studio and homeland Syria to flee war in 2011. With no studio to work in, he started working with digital mediums to express his critical views about the conflicts in his country. Among the most popular of his digital artworks is the Freedom Graffiti, which is a reference to Gustav Klimt’s well-known painting The Kiss (1907-1908) (Figure: 2:5). The painting is superimposed onto a bombed Syrian building. He decided to use this iconic painting to symbolise love and placed it on the wall as ‘a way of looking for the stories of love behind this wall that was completely obliterated by the machinery of war’ (Azzam, 2015).

![Figure 2:5. Tammam Azzam, Freedom Graffiti, 2013, Digital Art. Courtesy of the artist](image1)

![Figure 2:6. Tammam Azzam, Untitled, From the series Stories, 2014, Acrylic on canvas, 152×203 cm. Courtesy of the artist](image2)
Destructed buildings are a recurring element in the artworks of Azzam including his digital works and paintings. In the Storeys series, he painted abandoned war-torn buildings in monochromatic hues from photographs of several Syrian cities (Figure: 2:6).

Similarly concerned about the ongoing disastrous wars in their homeland is Kareem Risan who was born in Iraq in 1960 and left the country after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. He currently lives and works in Canada. Risan’s artworks which show the grief of the artist for the unknown future of his country dealing with one war after another are influenced by the poems of the Iraqi poet Dunya Mikhail:

This is all that remains:
a handful of meaningless words
engraved on the walls.
We read so absent-mindedly,
eventually we forget
how, in the short lull
between two wars,
we became so old.

Dunya Mikhail, Between two wars (Mikhail, 2006)

Risan’s painting style and colour pallet significantly changed after his migration to Canada in 2008. His recent paintings shifted away from painting abstract and towards expressionist figurative, and his colour palette changed from dark and warm to light colours (Figure: 2:7 and 2:8). Risan uses blue and white colours that match the Canadian winter, something he is not clearly happy with. In his painting *Man is Not Made to Live Below Zero* (2013), similar to other works from the ‘Steps in Migration’ series, Risan appears in the middle of the painting as a wooden mannequin losing his limbs.

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1 In his interview with The National (UAE), Risan talks about his migration experience and how the climate difference between his homeland Iraq and his new home in Canada has affected him. ‘The snow and the freezing ice broke me’ says Risan.

https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/kareem-risan-s-art-of-emigration-1.648143
Finally, I want to conclude this section by reviewing the works of contemporary Iraqi artist, Dia Azzawi. He was born and educated in Iraq and has been living and working in London since 1976. Despite living far from home, he has always been interested in making artworks that respond to issues around his home country, Iraq. He is mainly known for his paintings but has been very active working with different mediums such as print, ceramics, and sculpture. Azzawi studied European painting and archaeology, through which he developed a unique visual language that combines the past and the present and speaks about today’s Arab world.
The other influential factor evident in his artworks is politics. The experience of living far from his home country gave him the opportunity to look at his ‘culture from abroad’ he says¹. He also became interested in making artworks in response to political issues of the broader Arab world. A prime example of this is his artwork, *Sabra and Shatila Massacre* (1982–3), which was created in response to the 1982 massacre of mostly Palestinians and Lebanese Shiites, by Christian Lebanese Phalangists². The painting *Sabra and Shatila Massacre* (1982–3), which has been compared to Pablo Picasso’s Guernica, is the artist’s attempt to document a tragedy ³. Observing the conflicts and violence in the region, he feels he is ‘a witness’ and as an artist cannot be neutral. ‘If I can give a voice to somebody who has no voice, that is what I should do’ he states (Smith, 2016).

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¹ Tate interview with Dia Al-Azzawi, 1 November 2012
² The Kataeb party was formed in 1936 as a Maronite paramilitary youth organization by Pierre Gemayel who modeled the party after Spanish Falange and Italian Fascist parties. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kataeb_Party](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kataeb_Party)
³ Tate interview with Dia Al-Azzawi, 1 November 2012
In section 4:1 Morally Acceptable Responses (p.72), I discuss different responses to a suffering in distance, including the response of a communicator of suffering, an artist. Here, however, my aim was to outline different artists’ approaches to responding to outcome of wars and to underline the key difference between my artworks and those I studied in this project. Despite differences in artists’ approaches and styles of representation, artworks studied in this project reflect the artists’ lived experiences of war and/or being forced to live far from home in exile. My artworks, however, do not narrate the stories of war in my home country nor do they reflect the challenges of being forcibly displaced. I began this project with an interest in discovering more about the notion of indifference which came from my own position as an observer living in Australia. On the one hand, I am living in Australia with a great distance from the Middle East in both geographical and socio-political terms, and aware of the potential of such distance to make people indifferent to the suffering of the war-affected Middle Easterners. On the other hand, being an Iranian, I felt closer to those who are currently dealing with issues of war in the Middle East. This combination of simultaneous proximity and distance formed my early understanding of the notion of indifference and continued to inform my positioning as the researcher.

2.3 HIGHLIGHTING MY CULTURAL HERITAGE
Throughout this project I explored traditional materials and methods such as Persian kilims and embroidery that I had no previous experience of working with. This interest was first sparked when I was looking for a solution to a challenge I was faced with:

In what ways can I highlight my Iranian identity through my artworks while exploring the notion of indifference?

Highlighting my Iranian identity, I thought, will imply a personal connection I have with the region I was making artworks about. In fact, I wanted to underline a nearness in identity that I thought was working against distance which I considered as the main reason for people becoming indifferent toward Middle Easterners’ suffering (see 4:2 Here, There, Close to There, p.74).

My idea was to find a solution to this challenge through reflecting on my Iranian cultural heritage and identity. Through personal reflections and studio investigations, I became interested to work with Persian traditional arts and crafts as a method in my project. Before elaborating on the ideas behind the first artwork I created with this method, it is necessary to talk about some of the materials and methods I used in this and several other artworks.

PERSIAN KILIM / SOFREH ARDI
Using Persian kilims as a canvas, my aim was to experiment with how to transform a traditional artefact into a contemporary artwork that explores political and social issues. I used a unique type of kilim called Sofreh Ardi, from Persian, meaning a cloth for flour. These kilims are made of sheep or camel wool by
Iranian nomads of various regions including Qashqai and Bakhtiaris in Southwest and Bluch people in Southeast\(^1\). Unlike the other known types of kilims and rugs that are normally used for flooring and decorating or as pray mats, Sofreh Ardis are made for both making the bread dough and storing fresh bread (Figure 2:10). Interested in the simplicity of their form, material and motifs, I used them because:

- The rudimentary design held generous negative space allowing the space to be used for other purposes
- The fact that these kilims were made by ordinary people could speak to my interest in focusing more on vulnerable and voiceless individuals such as asylum seekers. These kilims were used particularly for making bread which, being a simple but essential survival staple, could be a symbolic reminder of the poor in need of immediate and substantial assistance.

### THE APPLICATION OF EMBROIDERY AND BEADWORK

Despite having no previous experience of working with textile, embroidery became my preferred method for this component of my project. Beside my lack of experience in working with textiles, the fact that I was intending to embroider my patterns on a relatively thick and tightly-woven fabric—kilim—made the process more challenging and time consuming. However, these issues were overcome through reflection, patience and experimentation resulting in finding solutions such as modifying my working table setup and using various techniques for tracing the design on the fabric (Figure 2:11).

Another aspect of the method of embroidery and beadwork is that, although it is a time-consuming process, engagement in this practice facilitated my reflection process allowing me to make meaningful connections between what I was researching and what I was making. Regarding the interconnectedness of thought and action, Carole Gray and Julian Malins remark in their book *Visualising Research*:

> Reflective practice ... attempts to unite research and practice, thought and action into a framework for inquiry which involves practice, and which acknowledges the particular and special knowledge of the practitioner (Gray & Malins, 2004).

Contrary to conventional research methods used in many scientific fields, art practitioners tend to employ different and sometimes unusual methods of research in their projects. Walking for example is considered by art practitioner and researcher, Lesley Duxbury as a means of research:

> Over the six years that I undertook my research project, I made several extended walking trips in remote places of the world that I considered an essential part of not only information gathering for my project, but also a space for reflection (Duxbury, Grierson, & Waite, 2008, p. 19).

She considers the [slow] speed of walking an influential factor that ‘allows for contemplation affording a unique experience of time’. She remarks:

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\(^1\) All the kilims (Sofreh Ardis) that I used for my artworks were made by nomads in Southwest Iran. While different designs and patterns are used in their weaving, they are all called Sofreh Ardis and are used for the purpose of making and storing breads.
My thoughts when I am walking connect me to what I know, to what I have experienced and to what I have seen. Back in the mundane world, I pursue my ideas through my art practice, another activity that garners both mental and physical resources, through reflecting and making, reading and imagining. (Duxbury, Grierson, & Waite, 2008, p. 19)

Similarly, I found the rather laborious process of embroidering and beading, of conveying a deeply emotional message, beneficial to my project as it offered me an opportunity for contemplation and reflection that set up for future artworks and studio experiments. Additionally, I used reflective journaling for noting my observations and readings, as well as documenting the process of making, the challenges, and the solutions I applied.
Figure 2:12. Mohsen Meysami, *Between the devil and the deep blue sea*, 2016, Detail, Sequins, yarn, and thread. Hand embroidery on found Persian Kilim, 90x140 cm. Courtesy of Wangaratta Art Gallery.
As the title suggests, this artwork attempts to depict the dilemma many asylum seekers are faced with; on the one hand, staying in their home countries where they may risk losing their lives or leaving for an unknown future, on the other. My intention was to investigate a different perspective that attempted to challenge a point of view that refuses to see asylum seekers’ and refugees’ pain believing they are economic refugees who decided to leave their countries for a better financial situation in other countries.

It is argued by various social scientists and psychologists that how people respond to others’ suffering is linked to how they think about the suffering itself. Jarrett (2018), who is a cognitive neuroscientist, describes our tendency to blame the unfortunate for their suffering as reflecting a negative aspect of human nature. ‘We believe in karma—assuming that the downtrodden of the world deserve their fate’, he remarks. Having its origins in ‘an inbuilt tendency to perceive the vulnerable and suffering as to some extent deserving their fate’, such willingness to blame, Jarrett argues, is ‘an unfortunate flip-side to the Karmic idea, propagated by most religions, that the cosmos rewards those who do good’ (Jarrett, 2018).

In another example, social psychologists Alexa Tullett and Jason E. Plaks investigated the link between empathy and lay theories of happiness. In their studies, they examined if individuals’ responses to others’ suffering are dependent on how they think about happiness. Focusing on the level of control one has in their state of happiness, they found that if one believes that people have control over happiness, and it is something internal, then they will be less sympathetic towards others’ suffering. On the contrary, if one thinks that people in pain (e.g., homeless, or asylum seekers) have had no control over their misfortune—no power to change anything regarding their happiness, and that happiness is something dependent on external causes, then they will be more sympathetic towards people’s suffering (Tullett & Plaks, 2016).

Considering the link between people’s beliefs about happiness and misfortune, we can begin to think that with more conversations on the realities of living powerless in a situation people have not chosen, there would be more sympathy and support from people in the world. A work of art, for instance, can be enlightening as it could raise awareness and challenge preconceptions about the suffering of the misfortunate. In responding to war-related issues in the Middle East, my conceptual premise has been to use materials and methods inspired by traditional Middle Eastern arts and crafts that are in stark contrast to the violent and vicious imagery often employed by mainstream media in representing the region.

To express my thoughts on the problem of indifference, in *Between the devil and the deep blue sea!* (2016) my intention was to draw the viewers’ attention to the dichotomy between the suffering caused by wars and how those wars are represented through mainstream media. To reference the controlled media representation of the war, the kind of representation that tends to, borrowing Butler’s words, ‘limit the power of affect’, I used sequins of various bright colours to create a colourful pop art-like explosion that is in contrast to the black outlined embroidery of a sad and tearful young man (Butler, 2009, p. 40). Within this artwork, sequins and beads could reflect two different aspects of the media representation of the wars in the Middle East. Their luminous
quality and the brightness of the chosen colours, on the one hand, can indicate the deceptiveness and the misleading elements of media representation while their multiplicity could suggest a different reading reflecting the link between information overload\(^1\) and indifferent responses (Figure 2:12 and 2:13).

While this was not my intention, the embroidery of the male character, especially if not seen as the repetition of one, allows a queer/Camp reading of the artwork. This would also be the case, if one’s attention is only directed at the artwork’s appealing and shining look, seeing it as decorative, deluxe and/or effeminate, as according to Susan Sontag, ‘Camp art is often decorative art, emphasizing texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content’ (Sontag, 1964).

\(^1\) The term information overload was first used by social scientists like Georg Simmel and Stanley Milgram. American social psychologist, Stanley Milgram was interested in discovering the urbanism and its role in causing callous behaviour. In a documentary titled The City and the Self, Milgram describes the notion of Overload as ‘a situation in which there are too many inputs for a person to deal with adequately’ for which people have to ‘make an adjustment in order to survive’ (Form, 1973). Neuroimaging studies and behavioural research show the resultant confusion to be because of limited capacity of human brain (Marois & Ivanoff, 2005).
Figure 2:1. Mohsen Meysami, Between the devil and the deep blue sea!, 2016, Sequins, yarn, and thread. Hand embroidery on found Persian Kilim, 90x140 cm. Courtesy of Wangaratta Art Gallery
Figure 2.14. Mohsen Meysami, There for you, Detail, 2016, Yarn, and embroidery thread. Hand embroidery on found Persian Kilim, 103x148 cm
2.5 THERE FOR YOU!

Reflecting on the experience of working with textile, in the artwork *There for you* (2016), I examined the limitations and possibilities of embroidery on Persian kilims. I experimented with how far I can go with executing details. My idea was to consider the embroidery as a drawing medium for expressing views and concerns regarding the socio-political situation of the Middle East. For this, I used various thread types and sizes in combination with stitching methods for embroidering details (e.g., of Superman face) (See Figure 2:14).

In *There for you!* (2016), I employed symbolic images such as Superman and kangaroos combining a critical commentary of the U.S. military policies in the Middle East and Australia’s treatment of asylum seekers¹. Australian kangaroos holding spears represent Australia’s recent policies against refugees and asylum seekers (Figure 2:15). According to The Refugee Council of Australia (2018):

Of the 3.5 million refugees who had their status recognised or were successfully resettled in 2017, a mere 23,111 were assisted by Australia (0.65% of total people). On this measure, compared to other countries, Australia was ranked 20th overall, 25th per capita, and 45th relative to total national Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

1 Since 2010, a total of 55 deaths in Australia’s onshore and offshore detention facilities have been reported of which suicide is recognised as the most common cause. (Numbers valid as on 26 May 2019).
See more: [https://arts.monash.edu:border-crossing-observatory/research-agenda/australian-border-deaths-database](https://arts.monash.edu:border-crossing-observatory/research-agenda/australian-border-deaths-database)
The addition of patterns of running figures in the background indicates the ongoing refugee crisis around the world. These patterns are embroidered with a colour only one shade darker than the colour of kilim’s background reflecting the global neglect of displaced people (Figure 2:16).

The most notable element among all is Superman, an American cultural icon that is embroidered in a significantly larger scale than the other elements. Having emerged from American popular culture and the White Saviour complex and aligned with the more traditional masculine values, Superman could be a symbol of the American exceptionalism and superiority myth that has been sustained through comics, movies and television to the present day. Representing a human ideal, though he is an alien from planet Krypton, Superman comes to rescue and save people from disasters and fights for “truth, justice, and the American way”. However, in There for you! (2016), the depicted dominating position of Superman, his self-righteous pride together with the writing ‘THERE FOR YOU!’ could suggest a commentary on the military presence of the U.S. in the Middle East in the name of human rights (Figure 2:17). The aim was to challenge the policies that tend to justify the military interventions as attempts to defend human rights and bring peace and justice to the people in the Middle East, as well as Australia’s participation in military actions in the region as an ally of the USA.

Figure 2:16. Mohsen Meysami, There for you, 2016, Detail, Yarn, and embroidery thread. Hand embroidery on found Persian Kilim, 103x148 cm

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1 The phrase was used to introduce the Superman radio and television programs. ‘According to Mark Waid, a former DC Comics editor, it first turned up on the innovative “Adventures of Superman” radio series, which ran, off and on, from 1940 to 1951’ (Lundegaard, 2006).
Figure 2.17. Mohsen Meysami, There for you, 2016, Yarn, and embroidery thread. Hand embroidery on found Persian Kilim, 103x148 cm
Figure 2.18. Mohsen Meysami, *Their pain, our gain!* 2017, Detail. Beads, bugle beads, and thread. Bead-work on found Persian Kilim, 115x136 cm.
2.6 THEIR PAIN, OUR GAIN!

In my attempt to visualise the interdependency between a group of peoples’ privileges and another’s misery, in Their pain, our gain (2017) I used a repeated patterns of a weeping woman which created a golden flower motif in the centre of the artwork symbolising the continuity of the wars and the profit system that maintains it (Figure 2:18).

While wars bring misery to some by taking lives or displacing them, they are proven advantageous to many others. Here, I am not merely referring to politicians’ political gains and the corporate interests, but to the ordinary spectators in distance whose privileges are, according to Sontag (2003), gained at the cost of others.

... our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may—in ways we might prefer not to imagine—be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others ... (Sontag, 2003, pp. 102-103)

This project’s goal was to create artworks that could evoke a sense of curiosity and questioning in the viewers about the world’s callous disregard for the suffering of Middle Eastern refugees and asylum seekers. As we know from Susan Sontag shocking images of a sufferer could not solely be capable of evoking moral sentiments as ‘the gruesome invites us to be either spectators or cowards, unable to look’ (Sontag, 2003, p. 42). Therefore, employing imagery of dead bodies or of suffering in severe agony would not satisfy this project’s objective. I searched for a creative solution that would enable me to create artworks that referenced suffering of people and to provoke thoughts of not only what this suffering is about but also why the world seems indifferent towards it.

Returning to the first research question of this project, my aim was to discover new ways of utilising Middle Eastern traditional arts in addressing different aspect of the wars in the region, more specifically the global indifference towards the suffering in the Middle East. One challenge, however, was how I could incorporate two binary yet interconnected facets of the project, suffering and indifference. If my art is about the suffering of people, that is a dark and sad narrative, how I will then incorporate the other aspect of my project, the notion of indifference, so it is not sad when someone first look at it?

We can think of the contradiction between the suffering and indifference as a mismatch between what we see—others’ suffering—and how we perceive it. With accepting the existence of a global indifference towards the Middle Eastern people’s suffering, we are implicitly asserting the world’s failure to recognise that very suffering while seeing it. My argument is that while the majority of people in the world are informed—even through controlled and

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1 The title of a series of paintings by Pablo Picasso responding to the pain inflicted on his people in bombed Basque city of Guernica during WWI (1937).
2 How can Middle Eastern art traditions be employed to activate a dialogue on the destructive impacts of war and bringing indifference to light as a relevant and significant phenomenon?
manipulating news—about the suffering of Middle Eastern communities, they seem to fail to understand that suffering and therefore are unable to respond morally towards it.

To highlight the contrast between what we see—others suffering—and how we perceive it that does not evoke our moral responsiveness, I used conflicting materials and imagery. In my studio experiments, I examined how the combination of shining and attractive materials with the repeated patterns of sufferers could depict this contradiction. My idea was to create a visually pleasing and sumptuous spectacle that was in contrast with the repeated intertwined patterns of people in pain which could be discovered via a closer observation.

The aged condition of the kilim together with patterns representing a suffering could symbolically reflect the history of the Middle East as well as the impacts of wars on the region and its people. In the followings, I will discuss how used objects and their symbolic meanings can be utilised for making artworks that reflect the historical accounts.
USED OBJECTS, EMBEDDED MEANINGS

Used objects such as furniture and decorative items carry symbolic meanings that can reflect historical and cultural ethnic diversity and tell the stories of often forgotten histories. They are the medium of choice for many artists as they can embody feelings and concepts that they may be otherwise hard to express and represent. Megan Evans, for example, is an Australian contemporary artist who is interested to work with objects—often from Victorian times—responding to the colonial invasion of Australia.

My work examines the traces of early colonial history in the identity of the artist and the impact of that history as it unfolds today. My family history goes back to the early 1800’s. Originally from Scotland and Ireland, my ancestors were early colonisers. In 1983 I met and later married Indigenous artist and activist the late Les Griggs. Les was one of the Stolen Generation, a government policy of forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families that was conducted until the early 1970’s. Through my relationship with him, I began to understand the full impact of colonisation in Australia. My recent work explores the common issues related to colonisation across the globe. (Evans, Artist statement)

Evans works with Victorian furniture ‘to tell the story of where the wealth of colonisation came from and who it was stolen from’ (Evans). In an interview on This Wild Song podcast, she expands on the ideas behind the use of Victorian antiques in her artworks:

Much of my imagery combines original 19th century heritage objects including photographs, furniture and decorative arts with craft processes such as beading and needlepoint. These objects and processes, symbolic of both personal and universal histories, are combined to unsettle traditional understandings of ownership, memory and identity (Evans, This Wild Song podcast)

The beauty of Victorian objects and the methods used in depicting violence are combined in her artworks to challenge systems of racial privilege and oppression. Employing delicate methods and materials such as beading and needlepoint enables Evans to ‘depict the violence behind the beauty’ (Evans, This Wild Song podcast). This ironic combination is confronting and thought-provoking, yet visually appealing and therefore can encourage people to rethink the violent histories and racial practices that brought wealth and privilege to some and destitution and misery to others, in this case indigenous people of Australia.
Figure 2:20. Megan Evans, From Keloid Project in Squatters and Savages exhibition, Patrick John and Isabella Kelly, 2017, Found Victorian chairs, velvet, glass beads, thread, photograph by Mathew Stanton, Courtesy of the artist
Figure 2:21. Megan Evans, Bleeding Chandelier, 2017, Squatters and Savages exhibition installation at the Art Gallery of Ballarat, photograph by Mathew Stanton, Courtesy of the artist

Figure 2:22. Megan Evans, Curious Cabinet 2, 2017, Found Victorian objects collection, Bourke and Wills maquette, Queen Victoria maquette, (courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ballarat collection) Photograph by Mathew Stanton, Courtesy of the artist
CHAPTER 3: THE SUFFERING OF THE ABSTRACT OTHER
INTRODUCTION

Of course, indifference can be tempting—more than that, seductive. It is so much easier to look away from victims. It is so much easier to avoid such rude interruptions to our work, our dreams, our hopes. It is, after all, awkward, troublesome, to be involved in another person's pain and despair. Yet, for the person who is indifferent, his or her neighbour are of no consequence. And, therefore, their lives are meaningless. Their hidden or even visible anguish is of no interest. Indifference reduces the Other to an abstraction (Wiesel, 1999).

The Perils of Indifference

Speech delivered at the White House, 12 April 1999

In this chapter and by describing the impact of misperceptions of the Middle East and its people, I will discuss the alternative style of representation this project employed in depicting the issues of recent wars and conflicts in the region. Drawing on the traditional and delicate art and crafts that emerged from some of the world’s earliest civilisations, such as Mesopotamia and ancient Iran (Persia), this project explored different ways to create new artworks that could offer new insights that did not reproduce misperceptions about Middle Eastern communities.

Through studio experiments with patterns and with the artwork Green, Blue, Yellow, Red... (2017), the project explored how the combination of realistic and abstract patterns could address the binary notions of suffering and indifference.
3:1 DOOMED TO FAILURE OR WORTHY OF COMPASSION?

If how we come to know Others is linked to how we respond to their suffering, and if Oriental lives, especially Arabs’ and Muslims’, are perceived as ‘not quite lives, not quite valuable, recognizable’ (Butler, 2009, p. 42), then we should seek new insights that do not reproduce negative perceptions.

These negative perceptions towards Middle Easterners are generally produced by mainstream media and entertainment industry that tend to represent these people ‘as terrorists, their society as violent, and their religion, Islam, as radical’ (Shaheen, 1985, p. 162). To counter these misrepresentations, I aimed at focusing on the positive aspects of the Middle East, such as its rich history and its traditional and delicate art. I drew on traditional art and crafts that emerged from the world’s earliest civilisations, such as Mesopotamia and ancient Iran (Persia), and continued to evolve after the Arab conquest of the region during the Islamic golden age¹.

If we Google the word Syria for example, the most common results include the images of dead bodies, bombarded cities and destructed buildings. My idea, however, is to employ a style of imagery that borrows from Middle Eastern traditional arts known for their elegance and intricacy that can be read as the opposite of chaos and violence (Figure 3:1). This way, I could avoid the superficial and stereotypical styles of representation that tend to reproduce the negative insights and perceptions about Middle Eastern people. However, the challenge I was faced with was how to represent the outcome of suffering caused by wars and conflicts while avoiding portraying graphic and grotesque violence. To summarise my points thus far, this practice-led research project draws on Middle Eastern traditional arts to:

- represent a more dignified and peaceful image of the Middle East than the image portrayed through narratives of death and failure, and
- represent suffering but not violence

¹ Traditionally dated from the 8th century to the 14th century
I mentioned utilising the elegance and intricacy of Middle Eastern traditional arts as an alternative to the mainstream representation that continues to perpetuate stereotypes against people of this region. It is important to note that although, I am aware of the problems with using general terms such as Eastern or Western art, to avoid using multiple terminologies, in this project I use the term Middle Eastern traditional arts as an umbrella term that encompasses traditional arts practiced across the region such as Islamic art and architecture and Persian traditional arts and crafts.

Art has always been influenced by cultural and ideological factors in any given era. What artists depict in their art can represent how they see the world; therefore, an understanding of Islamic art without considering the Islamic worldview is bound to lack depth. According to Islamic mysticism, God created humans as His representatives on earth, His ‘vicegerent’ (Quran 2:30). This is based on a fundamental belief that ‘life and existence came into being as a result of the will, desire and design of the One and Only Creator’ (Hassan, 1994).

Central to Islamic belief is the concept of Wahdat al-Wujud, the Unity of Being or Monotheism of Existence. Wahdat al-Wujud doctrine was formulated by Ibn Al-Arabi (1165-1240), one of the most significant Islamic scholars, Sufi, poet, and philosopher. According to this belief, ‘there is only one real being and
everything else is just the manifestation of that one being’ (Zolghadr, 2017), and the ‘ultimate reality of everything in the whole of existence is Divine’ (Akbar, 2016).

Islamic beliefs are reflected through the art of Muslim artists. Madden describes the themes of Islamic art in his writing titled Some Characteristics of Islamic Art:

God is One, God is Indivisible, God is Infinite and Transcendent, and God is Omnipresent and not Historically Manifest. These are the themes which are reflected in the mainstream of Islamic Art and which must be well understood to make sense of the concept of Islamic art itself (Madden, 1975).

The focus on floral or geometric patterns in Islamic art is sometimes considered to be due to the fact that depiction of human figures is forbidden in Islam (aniconism). Another way of understanding this style is that, unlike in Western culture, in Islamic theology ‘the emphasis was on the presence and attributes of the divine Creator rather than on His creatures, including man’ (Saoud, 2004).

Although historically these traditions were used for religious purposes such as in Islamic architecture, they continue to be an influential source for new generations of artists in creating artworks that respond to social and political contexts. Below are several examples from prominent contemporary artists who employ Middle Eastern art traditions as a methodology in their art practice (Figure 3:2, 3:3 and 3:4).
Figure 3:2. Faig Ahmed, Singularity, 2016, Handmade woollen carpet, 130 × 305 cm, Courtesy of the artist
Figure 3:3. Khadim Ali, Untitled 3 from the Transitions / Evacuation series, 2014, Watercolour, gouache, ink and gold leaf on wasli paper, 137 x 159 cm, Courtesy of the artist.
Figure 3: Monir Farmanfarmaian, Mirror Ball, 2014, Mirror, reverse painted glass, and plaster on wood, 10 x 10 x 10 inches

Image redacted for copyright reasons.
See: http://hainesgallery.com/monir-farmanfarmaian-work
I want to use this introduction to describe one of the methods that I have employed in my art practice inspired by Islamic arts. Repetitive patterns have appeared in almost all my recent artworks. Considering the significance of repetitive patterns in the art of the region, the use of this method in my art project can indicate the relation between what my artworks focus on and the Middle East.

‘If repetition is subjected to symmetry’ Palestinian-American philosopher, Ismaīl Al-Faruqi remarks, ‘it extends equidistantly in all directions, then the work of art becomes in essence an infinite field-of-vision’ (Al-Faruqi, 1973). Returning to what was discussed about the notion of Wahdat al-Wujud in Islamic Sufism, it is also important to note that an equal emphasis is given to all compartments of various patterns, so, ‘every part is subordinated to the pattern which exhibits unity in multiplicity’ (Madden, 1975).

The use of repetition in my art practice, however, is to symbolically underline some of the aspects that my project is centred around. This could denote the continuous unrest in the region, especially during the last century, including the Middle Eastern theatre of World War I, Iran-Iraq war, and the recent conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. More importantly, the repeated patterns of sufferers could reflect the great number of people including civilians being
impacted by these wars. In Syria alone, ‘11.5% of the country’s population have been killed or injured’ according to a report by Syrian Centre for Policy Research published in 2016. Considering the political context of such conflicts and therefore its impact on the representation of the region and the suffering of its people, the multiplicity and the intricacy of patterns could cast light on the complexity of the issue.

**PATTERNS AS POLITICAL**

Repetition and patterning are used for different purposes by various artists. Human rights activist and contemporary Iranian artist, Parastou Forouhar’s traumatic experience of losing her parents, Dariush and Parvaneh Forouhar, were stabbed to death in their home in Iran on 22 November 1998 following their criticism of the Iranian regime, ‘ignited her passionate engagement with Iranian politics and human rights’ issue’ (Inglot, 2013) and sustained focus on the issues of violence, torture and political oppression in much of her artworks. Forouhar’s artworks combine contradictory elements depicting ‘figures trapped inside the borders of Persian ornamental designs—a metaphor for her Iranian homeland and the violence it has witnessed’ (Forouhar, Artist Biography). In *Red Is My Name, Green Is My Name II* (2009), Forouhar works with intricate patterns to illustrate the violent acts of torture in an ironic manner (Figure 3:6 and 3:7).

Filled with intricate detail and brilliantly coloured patterns, the drawings look obsessively meticulous in their regularity and multiplication of form. Printed tightly within a grid, the rhythmic designs mingle like a kaleidoscope, captivating with their dazzling design and the implied harmonious order. Yet, the harmless beauty of the ornament is disrupted once we recognize that these patterns are composed of instruments of torture—whips, knives, scissors, pliers, and pistols. Inspired by the postmodern revival of interest in ornament, Parastou Forouhar re-engages with this concept in an entirely new way, using it as a potent signifier of contemporary culture. Employing the aesthetic paradigms of Islamic art—geometry, calligraphy, and miniature—her work undermines the superficial beauty of these forms and reveals in their very structure the existence of deeply embedded social and political mechanisms of violence, abuse, and power (Inglot, 2013).

A recurring symbolic pattern in Forouhar’s artworks is the butterfly¹ which despite its embedded symbolic meaning, beauty, is in fact harmonically filled with patterns of human bodies in a state of suffering. Combining ‘beauty and harm’, Forouhar asserts, is her ‘way of tempting and irritating the viewers to bring them to ... bear up the very contradicting inputs and contrasting emotions’ (Forouhar, 2012).

At a first glance, very often I offer the viewer an image of an ornamentally beautiful and harmonized order; but at a closer look, it is precisely these salving and clichéd images which are undermined. It is about the simultaneity of beauty and harm and the ambivalent of their co-existence (Forouhar, 2012).

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¹ Butterfly is the English equivalent of the artist’s mother name in Farsi (Parvaneh). ‘Every time I produce one, it’s as if I’m producing an image of my mother’ (Forouhar, 2017).
Parastou Forouhar’s creative use of repeated patterns in creating highly political and thought-provoking artworks has been a great source of inspiration for my work. An interesting aspect of Forouhar’s works is her ability to transform traditional methods of art making and crafts into creating artworks that not only reflect her home country but talk to the audience about the issues of violence and torture globally. Similarly, I wanted to discover new ways in which I could utilise repetition and patterning for conveying political ideas while reflecting the Middle East. I explored how to harmonically arranging and incorporating the images of suffering into my artworks in a way that appears attractive. My aim was to invite viewers to discover and contemplate on the contradiction between suffering and indifferent responses to it.
Below are two examples of Forouhar’s artworks followed by some of my digital experimentation with patterns and repetition which have enabled the development of new artworks. In the next section, I will discuss the details of my artwork *Green, Blue, Yellow, Red...* (2017) and explain the significance of the patterns in my project.

![Figure 3:8. Parastou Forouhar, Ewin Prison, 2010-15, Digital drawings, digital print on Glossy or Turner paper, 100X100 cm or 35X35 cm, Courtesy of the artist.](image1)

![Figure 3:9. Parastou Forouhar, Kahrizak Prison, 2010-15, Digital drawings, digital print on Glossy or Turner paper, 100X100 cm or 35X35 cm, Courtesy of the artist.](image2)
Figure 3:10. Mohsen Meysami, Studio experimentations with patterns, 2017-18, Hand drawing and Digital illustration
3.11. Mohsen Meysami, Green, Blue, Yellow, Red..., 2017, Detail, Beads, and threads. Hand embroidery and bead-work on found Persian Kilim, 98x148 cm
3:3  GREEN, BLUE, YELLOW, RED...

As in previous artworks, I employed a found Persian kilim as the basis for my embroidery and beadwork to create the artwork Green, Blue, Yellow, Red... (2017). As it is pictured below, tear signs were eminent here and there on the kilim (Figure 3:12). Unlike in the artwork Between the devil and the deep blue sea! (2016) where I used sequins to cover the damages on the kilim, in this artwork I modified and arranged my patterns so they were not hidden. Shading of colour, ripples and rips are common and almost unpreventable damages that may appear on kilims and other flooring materials impacting the areas most used (walked on) or exposed to sun. Therefore, the signs of damage on kilim, could not only signify the impacts of wars and other external factors, but also reflect the innocence of the victims and the visibility and invisibility of the impacts unevenly inflicted on the affected populations and their countries (see Used Objects, Embedded Meanings p.45).

Figure 3:12. Mohsen Meysami, Tear signs on the kilim used for the artwork Green, Blue, Yellow, Red...
In creating the patterns of victims/sufferers, I attempted to depict suffering without using literal or brutal imagery that could make the viewers look away, or, else entertain them by its very style of representation. Susan Sontag wrote:

As everyone has observed, there is a mounting level of acceptable violence and sadism in mass culture: films, television, comics, computer games. Imagery that would have had an audience cringing and recoiling in disgust forty years ago is watched without so much as a blink by every teenager in the multiplex. Indeed, mayhem is entertaining rather than shocking to many people in most modern cultures (Sontag, 2003).

This is not to suggest that avoiding such images guarantees the moral responses from viewers. My intention has been to provide a different narrative which could allow the emergence of new insights and perceptions about the people in the region (see 3:1 Doomed to Failure or Worthy of Compassion? p.51).

REALISTIC AND ABSTRACT PATTERNS

Another aspect of this artwork is the use of abstract patterns in combination of realistic patterns. In the previous chapter, I discussed the use of shining materials such as beads that assisted me in exploring different ways of representing suffering and indifference as two binary aspects of my project. Reflecting on Parastou Forouhar’s works together with my studio experimentations with patterns, I discovered that the combination of realistic and abstract pattern can also be used as another way of covering these two aspects. Through my studio experiments, I explored and examined various forms of repetition drawing on distinct Persian rugs’ designs including Lachak Toranj (the medallion and corner design) and Ghabi design (squares filled with floral motifs) (See Figure 3:13, 3:14 and 3:15).

In my studio practices, I attempted to explore various forms of repeating one image—often a sufferer’s head. For this, I worked with computer drawing programs that allowed me to rotate, cross and interlace one image in various angles and directions for creating harmonic designs that could be used in my artworks. During these studio investigations, I noticed new abstract shapes that were in fact the negative space between repeated realistic patterns, and I experimented with them in conjunction with my ideas and thoughts regarding the notion of indifference.
The media representation of wars in the Middle East is unable to offer a fair and realistic demonstration of what is happening in the region. Reflecting on this aspect of the media representation, I utilised abstract patterns to metaphorically symbolise the biased, uninformed or misinformed perceptions about others which impact on our moral responses to their suffering, and thus, deepen our understanding of how we may respond to war and atrocities.
Figure 3:1. Mohsen Meysami, Green, Blue, Yellow, Red..., 2017, Beads, and threads. Hand embroidery and bead-work on found Persian Kilim, 98x148 cm
CHAPTER 4: INTIMACY AND DISTANCE; A SPECTATOR’S RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE SUFFERER
INTRODUCTION

In the first part of this chapter, I will draw on the work of the French sociologist, Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering* (1999) to discuss the significance of the aesthetic communication of suffering and how it is different to other possible responses of a spectator to a suffering in distance. Following this in the section *Here, There, Close to There*, I will discuss various geographical and psychological positions I could take in responding to the plight of war-affected communities in the Middle East. This will also outline how my understanding of the notion of indifference has transformed since the beginning of the project.

This chapter will explain how I became interested in exploring three-dimensional spaces and more contemporary art methods such as installation to create more engaging and experiential experiences for viewers. Through public art experiments, collaborative artworks and working with digital patterns, I utilised threads and fabric to create site-specific thread installations inviting viewers to experience the artwork from different angles and distances.
4:1  MORALLY ACCEPTABLE RESPONSES

Boltanski’s thoughts on morally acceptable responses to a suffering in distance informed my response to the suffering of war-affected communities in the Middle East. In his book *Distant Suffering*, Boltanski ‘examines three rhetorical “topics” available for the expression of the spectator’s response to suffering’. These three topics are: ‘the topics of denunciation and of sentiment and the aesthetic topic.’

The focus of *denunciation* is on the spectator’s outrage or indignation from which pity is derived. The pity, Boltanski argues, is transformed by the ‘weapons of anger’ (Boltanski, 1999, p. 57, emphasis in original) that result in violent action, but since it is at a distance, it remains verbal, usually taking the form of accusation.

In his criticism of denunciation, Boltanski remarks:

> Denunciation can be criticised as an empty substitute for action. At little expense, someone who makes a denunciation spares himself the costs of action. His commitment is not genuine. It is commitment only in words, which cost nothing and appease the spectator’s moral unease without reducing the unfortunate’s suffering in any way.

In his discussion of *sentiment* and how it is different from denunciation, Boltanski draws our attention to the differences in action derived from pity which ‘directs attention to the possibility of an act of charity performed by a benefactor’ and denunciation which ‘leads to the identification and accusation of a persecutor’ (Boltanski, 1999, p. 77).

Going beyond the responses of an indignant spectator and a tender-hearted benefactor, a third, aesthetic, possibility emerges which:

> consists in considering the unfortunate’s suffering as neither *unjust* (so as to become indignant about it), nor as *touching* (so as to be moved to tears by it), but as *sublime*. An initial movement of pity is contained and even repressed (in the way that indignation had to be contained to give room to proof), in such a way as to be taken up in the transformed form of sublimation (Boltanski, 1999, p. 115, emphasis in original).

The third spectator ‘confronts the truth and looks it in the face’, not ‘inclined to sympathise with the resentment of the suffering person’ or ‘with the unfortunate’s gratitude’.

But, who can be this courageous spectator who ‘dares to cast his eyes on the unfortunate and look evil in the face without immediately turning away towards imaginary benefactors or persecutors’? (Boltanski, 1999, pp. 115-116). ‘A painter or, more generally, an exhibitor’, he responds, who ‘is able to get

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1 Differentiating between the effectiveness of the denunciation in democratic societies and in the totalitarian regimes, Boltanski remarks that denunciation can be ‘recognised as a genuine commitment and thereby a respectable moral attitude if it can be shown that it represents some cost or risk to the person making it’, whereas where it ‘encounters no resistance can easily be discredited as “superficial”, “conventional” or “ritual”’ (Boltanski, 1999, p. 70).
us to see suffering in its sublime aspect’. He ‘sees the unfortunate suffer and depicts his suffering’. The agent or the exhibitor here is different from the spectator not only because he ‘makes possible the communication of that unpresentable horror’, but also because he ‘acts insofar as he paints’ whereas ‘the spectator does nothing’ (Boltanski, 1999, pp. 116-117). ‘Holding in check the emotion which rises within him to be released as indignation or tender-heartedness, rejecting the masks of denunciation and sentiment’, this spectator, Boltanski argues, can take a different route:

   to pass on the spectacle, to communicate it to others. But his description cannot be realistic or factual. For reasons of symmetry he must depict in a single operation both the unfortunate’s suffering and what he himself feels at the sight of it, how he is affected by it (Boltanski, 1999, pp. 114, 115).

My position in this project and as an artist is not entirely aligned with what Boltanski demonstrates of the painter representing the suffering. Yet, I believe his thoughts can outline some aspects of my relationship with the distant sufferer, especially those whose images I used for my artworks.

My desire to know more about the Middle Eastern wars has exposed me to various kinds of images and videos often from mainstream media outlets reporting the conflicts in the region. These images not only allowed a rather indirect and imaginative connection between me and the sufferer but were also my main source of influence for creating the patterns of sufferers that are used in my artworks.

In creating suffering characters in my artworks, my intention was not to replicate what I was exposed to. The new characters were created from my hand drawings of the original images that were later digitalised. Since they were a stylised and simplified version of a photograph of the sufferer that were reworked and modified, especially during the process of digitalisation, they often seemed different from the original photographs. In Green, Blue, Yellow, Red... (2017), for example, by reworking and emphasising the sufferer’s gaze direction, I attempted to underline the feeling of despair and hopelessness that I felt in the original photo.

In describing the dilemma of distance, Boltanski puts forward the idea that distance between the spectator and the sufferer ‘can be overcome by means of [...] the imagination’ (Boltanski, 1999, p. 38). In describing the role of imagination in overcoming the distance, he remarks:

   The spectator represents to himself the sentiments and sensations of the sufferer. He does not identify with him and does not imagine himself to be in the same situation (Boltanski, 1999, p. 38).

It is especially important to consider the impact of distance since it is a major factor in conditioning spectators’ responses to the suffering of those faraway. As I will discuss later in this chapter, my position in responding to and representing the suffering was never based on imagining myself in the position of the sufferer. In creating the suffering characters, while I was motivated to respond to the suffering demonstrated via the means of a photograph, my intention was to focus on what I felt, not what I saw. In fact, I am drawn to respond to the feelings of sadness and despair that I discover in the faces of different people dealing with issues such as forced displacement and the aftermath of wars.
Additionally, to be a more impartial and less biased representor, I never used popular photographs of the suffering displayed in the media, like the photographs of the 3-year-old Kurdish boy Alan Kurdi¹. Instead of narrating a specific story, I attempted to create suffering characters that could represent my feelings about the suffering I was exposed to. Finally, being drawn to respond to specific images of suffering, I use my creative practice to express my feelings about them through new artworks that allow the communication of that very suffering.

¹ Alan Kurdi was a three-year-old Syrian boy of Kurdish ethnic background whose image made global headlines after he drowned on 2 September 2015 in the Mediterranean Sea. He and his family were Syrian refugees trying to reach Europe amid the European refugee crisis. 
4.2 HERE, THERE, CLOSE TO THERE

To talk about the aesthetic representation of war and the suffering it causes, it is important to consider the relationship between the artist—the communicator of suffering—and the sufferer. A considerable number of artists who respond to these issues, draw on their own lived experiences of being forced to leave their home country or losing family members. An example of this are works by Iraqi-born artist, Wafaa Bilal, whose past experiences and present mode of living—far from home in the US—have informed his recent artworks. As an Iraqi-American, Bilal now lives in the US—which he calls the comfort zone—but is still connected to his home country Iraq as he does not ‘have the luxury of disconnecting [himself] from [his] family and the reality there’ (Bilal, 2011). Bilal’s unique geographical and psychological position is reflected throughout his artworks. In a performance work entitled *and Counting...* (2010), Bilal responds to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq death tolls—of both American soldiers and Iraqi civilians—by tattooing on his body one dot point for each of the dead.

Bilal feels the pain of both American and Iraqi families who have lost loved ones in the war, but the deaths of Iraqis like his brother are largely invisible to the American public.
and Counting... addresses this double standard as Bilal turns his own body—in a 24-hour live performance—into a canvas, his back tattooed with a borderless map of Iraq covered with one dot for each Iraqi and American casualty near the cities where they fell. The 5,000 dead American soldiers are represented by red dots (permanent visible ink), and the 100,000 Iraqi casualties are represented by dots of green UV ink, seemingly invisible unless under black light. During the performance people from all walks of life read off the names of the dead ("and Counting...", from artist website).

Unlike Bilal, my relationship to the sufferers in the Middle East is not through family or national roots. While I am far from those whose suffering is the subject of my artworks—both in geographical and non-geographical terms—my Iranian identity and my geographical positioning in Australia places me in a unique position; a mixed position, within which, I find myself, not quite here in Australia nor there in countries such as Syria or Iraq, a multi-sided position in which one may “side” with one and put “aside” another. Relevant to this self-reflexive discussion is Sara Ahmed’s work on mixed orientations, where she draws on her own lived experience of walking between her white English mother and brown Pakistani father: ‘I wanted to be on the side of my mother; my desire put me on her side’ she says (Ahmed, 2006, pp. 145, emphasis in original).

Ahmed talks about her desire to be identified as white, a desire so intense that leads her to what she calls a ‘murderous fantasy’, wishing her father ‘would disappear’ so she could be on her mother’s side. Ahmed describes this as a ‘relationship between identification—wanting to be “like”—and alliance formation—who one sides with’ (Ahmed, 2006, pp. 144-145, emphasis in original).

For me, however, this state of in betweenness did not come from a mixed family background. On the one hand, I am living in Australia far from the Middle East. On the other hand, I am making artworks that respond to the wars in the region of my home country, something that activated me to reflect on my...

See: http://wafaabilal.com/and-counting/
identity and position and its relation to the sufferer. However, I am not suggesting that I am “in the same boat” as a Syrian asylum seeker or a Kurdish fighter against ISIS, only because we are all Middle Eastern. Here, I am referencing three different geographical locations; Here in Australia, There, in countries such as Syria and Iraq where the sufferers are, and Close to There, in Iran where I came from.

While we can think of these three different geographical locations influencing my position, it is also important to consider the role of my past experiences and my cultural background in understanding the suffering happening in the Middle East. In other words, my current geographical positioning in Here did not mean that I was entirely detached from There or from Close to There. It is hence possible to think about different positions I could or could not take in this range of sides; I could not be all There and not Here at all, simply because I never was There where people suffer from wars (e.g., in Syria and Iraq). Neither could I be only Here and not There at all, or simultaneously Here and There, as I never felt that I belonged Here. Thus, I was in between Here and There.

On the other hand, and despite the fact that I was no longer living in Iran and therefore was geographically far from the Middle East, I discovered a desire in myself to be identified as someone Close to There. This was both because of the commonalities my Iranian identity shared with others from the Middle East as well as my lived experiences growing up during Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). Using Ahmed’s ideas of identification and alliance formation, we can think about a desired identification as leading me to side with There—in countries such as Syria and Iraq—even if I did not entirely put aside Here—Australia. This desire inspired me to think about different ways to highlight my Iranian identity within the artworks—for instance by utilising Persian kilims. This was based on my earlier understanding of the issue at the early stages of this project, I considered geographical distance between the sufferer and spectator as the main—if not the only—influencing factor for people becoming indifferent towards others’ suffering.

My thinking transformed as I researched and reflected more on different aspects of the notion of indifference and considered various kinds of distance which will be discussed in more detail in the section To Break the Manufactured Distances (p. 83). Although my position was still neither Here nor There, I moved beyond perceiving geographical distance as the main reason for people’s indifference and towards an outlook where I did not consider the questions of indifference towards the suffering of people in the Middle East as merely associable to non-Middle Easterners, for there may well be many Muslims and Middle Eastern people who are apathetic about the misery of their fellow compatriots or neighbours. At this stage of my reflections, while recalling Iranians who I found compassionate towards Iraqi and Afghan refugees residing in Iran, I remembered others who did not welcome refugees, at best, or publicly asked them to leave, at worst. An example of the latter was putting up posters and banners nearby the refugees’ homes in my hometown, Yazd, giving Afghan refugees notice to leave certain suburbs (Figure 4:3). Similarly, while opposed to Australia’s refugee policies, I recalled many Australians who not only welcome migrants and asylum seekers but actively oppose their government’s so-called border policies in different ways and forms, like Peter Drew’s REAL AUSTRALIANS SAY WELCOME posters (Figure 4:4). These eminent instances informed my reflections and refined my thinking, creating the moment where I redrew my perceived boundaries of Here and There and desired to go beyond the limitations of either side.
Informed by Edward Said’s notions of ‘intimacy and distance’, my intention was to move beyond the boundaries of the East and the West, to travel—psychologically—between Here and There, and attempt to detach myself from biases and prejudices and to resist arrogance. Drawing on the work of German philologist Erich Auerbach, Edward Said argues that a better understanding of the world is achieved through a combination of ‘intimacy and distance’, or, in other words, ‘the spiritual detachment [from one’s cultural home] and generosity necessary for true vision’ (Said, 1978, p. 259).

Understanding the notions of ‘nearness’ and ‘distance’ from this perspective, I began exploring beyond the use of traditional materials and methodologies to highlight my Iranian identity. As discussed in the next section and the following chapter, through new artworks I explored how I could utilise threads along with repetitive patterns and more contemporary methods such as current installation practices to reflect the notions of nearness and distance and to allow the viewers to interact and engage more with the artwork.
Figure 4.5. Mohsen Meysami, Yellow, Red, Blue, Black, 2017, Detail, Cotton thread, Hand embroidery on found Persian Kilim, Dimensions variable, Installation view First Site Gallery
Embroidering my designs on Persian kilims was a meaningful method for conveying some of my ideas and thoughts. However, it became challenging to use the same methods and materials for communicating new ideas and thoughts especially in the light of new readings. The studio research became more informed by various aspects of the notion of indifference and I began to explore how three-dimensional spaces and contemporary art methods such as installation could assist my concept delivery. Additionally, by observing viewers’ interactions with my artworks at the RMIT Artland (2017)¹, I became interested in experimenting with alternative possibilities of working at various sites to convey different aspects of my ideas and creating more engaging experiences for the viewers (Figure 4:6 and 4:7). Responding to the theme of the Artland exhibition, Thresholds, I created artworks that not only considered different aspects of the site in which they were exhibited, but also use them to draw people’s attention to Australia’s border policies alongside the plight of refugees and asylum seekers. In WELCOME (2017), the considerably large scale of the text as the main element in the design could at first indicate positive views about refugees and asylum seekers, its faded colour and its being confined under the chain-link fence could underline the growth of hatred and fear against minorities (Figure 4:6). In my other artwork ROAD CLOSED (2017), by using a found broken traffic sign that could symbolise the Australian restrictive refugee policies that prolong the suffering of asylum seekers including those who fled war and persecution. The sign is used for warning people to not enter or cross a point. However, its being broken could suggest its fragility and impermanence (Figure 4:7).

The question, however, was how utilising traditional Persian methods and materials could address the need for finding alternative ways of communicating contemporary political ideas. Reflecting on various aspects of Middle Eastern traditional arts, especially Islamic art, I recognised the potential of using the expandability and flexibility of patterns towards developing site-specific artworks. Recurring abstract and floral motifs allowed Muslim artists and artisans to use patterns across different objects and locations, for both religious and secular purposes such as decorating mosques or illustrating poetry books.

Deliberating on various aspects of my project, I extended the exploration to investigate these features through my later artworks including Yellow, Red, Blue, Black (2017) and Looking-Looking Away (2018).

In making the artwork Far away, that’s where my home is! (2017), the project activated a collaborative application of practice, where Mehdi Meysami and I explored how Persian rugs could be used for making experiential and site-specific installation works. Exploring the ideas of identity and belonging, for this artwork we used a found Persian rug, from which various rectangular pieces were randomly cut-out and attached to the surrounding walls. Red yarns then were added to make possible the connection between the separated pieces and the original rug mounted on the gallery wall² (Figure 4:8).

¹ Artland is a group exhibition of site-specific student art installations in and around RMIT’s Brunswick campus. https://rmitlink.rmit.edu.au/Clubs/RAD/Pages/artland
² The focus of this project is only on the artworks that were created through the use of Middle Eastern traditional methods or materials and respond to the research questions this project seeks to answer. Therefore, not all the artworks created during my PhD studies are presented or discussed in detail in this dissertation. However, I mention and briefly describe some of those artworks where it helps explain some aspects of this project.
Figure 4:6, Mohsen Meysami, WELCOME¹, 2017, Billboard, Digital Print, 5.96 x 3.06 m

Figure 4:7. Mohsen Meysami, ROAD CLOSED, 2017, Found traffic sign, yarn, fabric strips, armature wire, ribbon, nail, cable ties

¹ Funded by RMIT Link Arts and Culture as part of the Artland project.
NEARNESS AND DISTANCE: EXPLORING THE NOTION OF INDIFFERENCE THROUGH THE LENS OF MIDDLE EASTERN TRADITIONAL ARTS

Figure 4: Mohsen Meysami and Mehdi Meysami, 2016, Far away, that’s where my home is!, Used Persian Rug, wool, Installation view, Victoria University
One of the questions this project explored was:

How can the notions of ‘nearness’ and ‘distance’ inform the production of new artworks that explore indifference towards the war-affected?

To understand the role of distance, we need to consider its complexities in the contemporary Internet era and in the context of recent wars. It is very important then to consider the role mass media plays in simultaneously broadcasting news of wars and acts of violence and showing, implicitly, others’ suffering. This could result in what Sontag calls ‘the imaginary proximity’ to the sufferer, and manufacturing and maintaining a distance between the observer and the sufferer (Sontag, 2003, p. 102).

I would argue that distances are built, rebuilt, magnified and utilised; to build distance requires employing strategies—such as xenophobic rhetoric and propaganda—that not only prevent public outrage but could make people feel indifferent and even self-righteous. Returning to Judith Butler here could be helpful in shedding light on this matter. Butler draws on the vulnerability of human lives and puts forward the question: ‘Whose lives are regarded as lives worth saving and defending, and whose are not?’ (Butler, 2009, p. 38). She outlines the role of ‘frames that structure the modes of recognition’, that by dividing populations into groups of worthy and worthless they evoke contradictory responses to the death and suffering of different people.

Such frames are operative (…) in the politics of immigration, according to which certain lives are perceived as lives while others, though apparently living, fail to assume perceptual form as such. Forms of racism instituted and active at the level of perception tend to produce iconic versions of populations who are eminently grievable, and others whose loss is no loss, and who remain ungrievable. The differential distribution of grievability across populations has implications for why and when we feel politically consequential affective dispositions such as horror, guilt, righteous sadism, loss, and indifference (Butler, 2009, p. 24).

If these recognisability frames are crucial to conditioning our feelings as this suggests, we need to pay more attention to how public feelings are evoked or silenced especially in times of war.

War sustains its practices through acting on the senses, crafting them to apprehend the world selectively, deadening affect in response to certain images and sounds, and enlivening affective responses to others. This is why war works to undermine a sensate democracy, restricting what we can feel, disposing us to feel shock and outrage in the face of one expression of violence and righteous coldness in the face of another (Butler, 2009, pp. 51-52).

War would not exist without an enemy and if we take this as the starting point of thinking about war and indifference towards those who suffer because of it, then the role of recognisability norms in controlling our responses could become apparent, as ‘those identified as enemies occupy a specific position … that is fashioned to evoke responses that dehumanise’. In The Psychology of War and Peace (1991), Robert W. Rieber and Robert J. Kelly assert that in
modern age war ‘civilian populations must be prepared both to suffer devastation and to tolerate having their own armies inflict equivalent devastation on their equally unarmed counterparts’ (Rieber & Kelly, 1991, p. 4). Although wars were traditionally fought close and face to face between two armies—the warriors and soldiers of normally neighbouring countries—the advent of new warfare technologies such as drones and semi-autonomous weapons provides states the ability to destroy and kill at distance. An example of this is the remote bombing of Iraq since the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, a victim of which was Haji, the brother of artist Wafaa Bilal. In describing the motivations for his poignant and provocative performance work Domestic Tension (2007), Bilal asserts:

there are specific influences to each project. For the paintball piece [Domestic Tension] they were: the dire situation in Iraq, the death of my brother by drone plane, the death of my father two months later as a consequence, and the experience of watching on TV a soldier directing a drone plane from Colorado and dropping missiles into Iraq (Bilal, 2007).

He put his body on the line, where he invited people to shoot him as an Iraqi. In Domestic Tension (2007), he literally lived in a small room in Chicago Flatfile Gallery for thirty days, where a robotic paint ball gun was connected to the Internet, and people could shoot him at any time via an interactive website. Domestic Tension (2007) interactive and game-like format not only could trigger questions about racial hatred and its role in normalising seeing others suffer, but also could draw people’s attention to the ever-increasing remote warfare weapons that simultaneously minimise the consequences for the “shooter” and their physical interaction with the victims through distance. Despite its confronting subject matter, the gun was shot 60,000 times from 128 countries over 30 days. However, factors such as shooters remaining unidentifiable, remote shooting and the game-like quality of the artwork could play a role in the high number of participants.

![Image redacted for copyright reasons.](http://wafaabilal.com/domestic-tension/)

Figure 4:9, Wafaa Bilal, Domestic Tension, 2007
Reflecting on the impact of distance—geographical and psychological—*Yellow, Red, Blue, Black* (2017) explored the possibilities of using thread for creating an artwork that resembles the ideas of nearness and distance and more importantly encourages the viewers to experience the artwork from various distances and angles. For testing various forms of repetition, similar to previous artworks, the final pattern design was developed using drawing software programs such as Adobe Illustrator (Pattern test 1 and 2 Figure 4:10 and 4:11). Reflecting on previous experiments of combining realistic and abstract patterns, for this artwork, I wanted to activate the exhibition space further by using threads to create a spatial installation. This way viewers could walk through and around while reflecting on various aspects of the artwork. My first experiment pulled threads from within the embroidered kilim and left them randomly on the floor or attached them to the side walls. This way, I displayed the artwork differently to how it was presented previously—like a painting—and activate the space around the artwork (Figure 4:12).

Drawing on the symmetrical arrangement of motifs in Middle Eastern traditional arts, I then extended the patterns beyond the surface of the kilim and onto the ceiling and floor of the gallery in a balanced and even-handed way (Figure 4:13 and 4:14). To achieve this, threads were drawn out from evenly distributed points on the kilim—from within the eyes of the embroidered patterns—and joined together in four different points of the ceiling and the floor.
These intercrossing threads then created colourful geometric patterns that bear a resemblance to repeating abstract patterns in Islamic arts. While viewing the artwork from distance due to its colourfulness and harmonic arrangement of the thread installation appear entertaining and pleasing, a closer observation reveals the almost hidden embroidered patterns of the sufferer that speak of the unrest in the Middle East and the suffering it inflicts. Besides, the flux of threads departing from multiple points—within the patterns of suffering on the kilim—that join together in four points could suggest different interpretations. One the one hand, they could be seen as the waves of migration from the Middle East that are increasingly extending across four corners of the globe due to recent conflicts. On the other hand, departing from the patterns that represent a suffering, they could also be read as the waves that carry the sufferers’ voices and cries in their search for a compassionate reply.

Figure 4.13. Mohsen Meysami, Thread installation test 1, 2017

Figure 4.14. Mohsen Meysami, Thread installation test 2, 2017
Figure 4.15. Mohsen Meysami, Yellow, Red, Blue, Black, Cotton thread, 2017, Hand embroidery on found Persian Kilim, Dimensions variable, Installation view First Site Gallery
Figure 4.16. Mohsen Meysami, Yellow, Red, Blue, Black, Detail, Cotton thread, 2017, Hand embroidery on found Persian Kilim, Dimensions variable, Installation view First Site Gallery
Figure 4:1. Mohsen Meysami, Yellow, Red, Blue, Black, Detail, Cotton thread, 2017, Hand embroidery on found Persian Kilim, Dimensions variable, Installation view First Site Gallery
CHAPTER 5: TOWARDS ENGAGING AND EXPERIENTIAL ARTWORKS
INTRODUCTION

This chapter consists of art projects that examined the possibilities of working with thread and fabric in a variety of exhibition spaces to make new artworks that could allow the viewers to encounter, engage and contemplate. Furthermore, this chapter discusses and describes how more contemporary methods such as installation assisted in creating new experiential artworks while utilising traditional materials and methodologies such as embroidery.

By working in different spaces, I experimented with how to use each site’s unique features to find practical solutions to the challenges I encountered in each site. Following my investigation into the possibilities of working with various sites, I then actively looked for new opportunities to test different ways of installing and presenting an assortment of iterations of the same artwork in various spaces. I will discuss the similarities and differences the installations made in viewers’ experiences of interacting with the artwork and how they each allowed different interpretations.

Drawing on the experiences of thread installation artworks, this project investigated making a new artwork that would allow the viewer to sit and think about the issues presented within the artwork. Finally, I will discuss how a combination of traditional and modern materials and methods were employed in making a sculptural, architectural artwork that could both signify the history of the Middle East, and the complexity and contemporaneity of the current wars in the region.
Figure 5.1. Mohsen Meysami, Looking-Looking away, 2018, Detail, Wool yarn, cotton thread, cotton fabric. Hand embroidery on cotton fabric, Dimensions variable, Installation view First Site Gallery
Textile and threads were traditionally used for creating handicrafts and artefacts—especially among the Eastern cultures such as Persian—and they seem to be gaining popularity as the method of choice for many contemporary artists. An example of this would be Chiharu Shiota. Primarily known for her large-scale monumental thread installations, this Japanese contemporary artist uses threads and yarns that often enclose everyday objects to reflect the ideas of memory and oblivion with the past and present. While different readings of thread in her artworks is possible, they are multifunctional, working as a connecting element—connecting the viewer and the artwork for example—while simultaneously acting as a barrier making access to memories of the past impossible (Figure 5:2). Similarly, in my installation works, the use of threads for both drawing viewers towards the centre of the artwork and away from it allows them to experience the artwork from various distances and vantage points.

In Looking-Looking Away (2018) as well as two other thread installations Yellow, Red, Blue, Black (2017), and Do I Know You? (2018), I used threads as a mediating means by which a proximity—though through the agency of aesthetic experience—between the patterns that represent the sufferer and the viewer was possible. Considering the importance of eye contact in social communications, the depicted eyes of figures served as starting points from which new geometric patterns were formed in the artworks. Therefore, threads here could be representative, and facilitative, of, the connection between the spectator and the subject. These new abstract geometrical patterns could obscure the viewing of Others’ suffering—embroidered on the kilim behind them—and as a result represent barriers and distances that condition people’s perceptions about Others and their suffering (see To Break the Manufactured Distances p.82). We can also think of the divisive ‘Us and Them’ dichotomy as another form of distance. I would argue that we can think of distance as the main cause of growing global indifference towards those who suffer from wars. However, we need to be aware of different kinds of distance and proximity. Othering, after all, is about creating a distance between one and another. This is a different form of distance. We are limited to geographical and cultural differences if we limit our understanding to only metric and biologic principles. Human values, on the other hand, can offer a different kind of nearness and distance. Proximity to those faraway is possible if a more humane approach is at work to understand suffering.
The influence of Middle Eastern traditional arts on designing the patterns and creating the thread installations revealed new insights into the opportunities of working with traditional arts for creating, more engaging and experiential artworks that are capable of communicating multi-faceted complex political ideas. In designing the repetitive patterns for Looking-Looking Away (2018), I drew on historic Toranj design, the medallion design used by Persian artisans for decorating a range of artefacts including Persian rugs (Figure 5:3, 5:4 and 5:5).

Additionally, while embroidering on the fabric, I came to see the potential of the knots and imperfect stitching at the back of the fabric to metaphorically demonstrate two sides of a story through sameness and difference. After exploring various display methods, I decided to flip the work and display the back...
of the embroidered images rather than the finer details on the front (Figure 5:1). This presentation style complimented and aligned to the intentional mistakes Persian weavers make while making their carpets. The so called “Persian Flaw” however shows the weaver’s acknowledgment of and respect for God as the only perfect creator.

In planning for the installation of the artwork Looking-Looking Away (2018), I tried to avoid the challenges I faced during the installation of my previous artwork Yellow, Red, Blue, Black (2017). In addition to multiple gallery visits and accurate measurements, I worked with computer programs such as Adobe Photoshop® and Adobe Illustrator® to test various installation options, which resulted in a considerably shorter and less troublesome installation process (Figure 5:6 and 5:7).
Figure 5: Mohsen Meysami, Pre-installation tests, Digital illustrations and photomontage, 2018
Figure 5.8: Mohsen Meysami, Looking-Looking away, 2018, Wool yarn, cotton thread, cotton fabric. Hand embroidery on cotton fabric, Dimensions variable, Installation view First Site Gallery
These new installation experiments led me to explore the architectural implications of the site in which the artwork was presented. Following this, I actively looked for new opportunities to test different ways of installing and presenting an assortment iteration of the same artwork in various spaces. The artwork *Looking-Looking Away* (2018) was installed in three different ways in three different gallery spaces, namely First Site Gallery, Victoria University, and Islamic Museum of Australia. Despite the similarities in form and content in all three versions, each presented different readings and interpretations.

In the first iteration at First Site Gallery, Melbourne (March 2018), the extension of threads towards the viewer operated to draw people in and out of the artwork enticing them to interact with the artwork—and therefore the depicted suffering within the artwork—from different positions (Figure 5:7 and 5:8). However, when installing the artwork at Victoria University, Melbourne (June 2018), to activate the space effectively, I utilised moveable walls expanding the threads across the wall instead of drawing them out towards the viewer (Figure 5:9 and 5:10). In this version, the two-dimensional arrangement of threads offered a new reading of the artwork while simultaneously addressing safety requirements of the gallery space due to its multipurpose as a public thoroughfare. Despite the fragility of the threads extended across the wall, their interconnectedness and compact network-like composition formed a strict and restrictive structure in front of the embroidered patterns that, according to a viewer, could serve as a symbol of border policies in Australia making the relief of sufferers almost impossible.

The third iteration of this site-specific artwork was installed at Islamic Museum of Australia in Melbourne (August 2018) (Figures 5:11, 5:12, and 5:13). In this version, threads were stretched both across the wall on which the embroidery piece was hung and towards the opposite wall. However, unlike the installation at First Site Gallery, threads coming out of the embroidered patterns joined together in one point compared to four points in the first iteration. Different from the previous iteration, the threads seemed to be departing from the central point on the opposite wall towards various points within the embroidery across the display wall (Figure 5:15). This looked as if the threads were projected onto the central wall and the images of suffering, allowing a different reading compared to the other versions. The threads’ joining point on the wall was aligned with the position of an actual video projector mounted approximately 120 cm from it, which could influence viewers’ reading of the artwork (Figure 5:15).

The arrangement of threads and their colours is such that, when viewed from a distance, they invite the viewer to walk towards the artwork, but when the viewer gets close to the threads, they serve as a barrier to the viewer’s reaching the embroidered patterns. This arrangement could be seen as confining frames of recognisability as by preventing peoples’ stories being shared, these frames limit and askew our perspective about those suffering and therefore their plight (see *Frames of Recognisability; Grievable and Ungrievable Lives* p.12).

This iteration of Looking-Looking Away (2018) installed at the Islamic Museum of Australia introduced as diverse as eight thread colours compared to the two yellow and orange threads used in the two previous installations. A more aesthetically active installation, along with recurring patterns of the sufferer, could represent the ironic contradiction between suffering and indifference (See Figures 5:9—5:15).
Figure 5: Mohsen Meysami, Looking-Looking away, 2018, Wool yarn, cotton thread, cotton fabric. Hand embroidery on cotton fabric, Dimensions variable, Installation view Victoria University
Figure 5.10. Mohsen Meysami, Looking-Looking away, 2018, Wool yarn, cotton thread, cotton fabric. Hand embroidery on cotton fabric, Dimensions variable, Installation view Victoria University
Figure 5.1. Mohsen Meysami, Looking-Looking away, coloured thread distribution, Islamic Museum of Australia
Figure 5: Mohsen Meysami, Looking-Looking away, Installation comparison, Above: First Site Gallery, Below: Islamic Museum of Australia
5:2  DO I KNOW YOU?

Similar to *Looking-Looking Away* (2018), a moveable wall was used for installing the artwork *Do I Know You?* (2018) in the exhibition at Victoria University. However, for this artwork, all four sides of the wall were used to encourage the viewer to engage with the artwork by walking around the wall to explore the ideas embedded within it. Facing the viewer entering the gallery was the white painted wall decorated with colourful threads that formed a simple geometric shape (Figure 5:17). Upon closer inspection and following the colourful lines of threads, the viewer comes upon the geometric patterns expanded onto the sides of the moveable wall which lead them to the other, main, side of the artwork (Figures 5:18, 5:19, and 5:20). This is yet the beginning of the viewer's exploratory journey in understanding more intricate and intertwined details that demand a longer and more careful observation.

Different to the immersive and spatial installation arrangement of the artwork *Looking-Looking Away* (2018), in *Do I Know You?* (2018) the layout attempted to stimulate viewers' engagement with the artwork by using all sides of a moveable wall, therefore encouraging them to explore all opposing sides of the narrative. Despite the obvious differences between them—white against a black background colour and simplicity versus complexity of patterns—all sides of the artwork are bound together via the identical geometric thread patterns on each side, that together demonstrate contradictory yet interwoven narratives. This is especially poignant when the almost masked—maybe censored—repetitive pattern of an anguished senior man is discovered by the viewer. Here, the viewer activates the artwork through the process of revelation, discovering patterns that speak to the anxiety of suffering. The viewer takes part in unmasking what was otherwise hard-to-distinguish (Figure 5:21 and 5:22).

Although the geometric and colourful patterns are identical on either side of the wall, their proximity to contradictory elements suggests different interpretations. Intertwined with the figurative patterns embroidered on a black fabric—that symbolise death and sorrow especially in Middle Eastern cultures—they could be read as chaotic and violent that is in stark contrast to their harmonic and peaceful companionship with the white painted background of the wall on the other side.

Another possible reading of the artwork could be the opposition of the two sides in this artwork as an indication of the contrast between suffering and indifference. As previously discussed, this project sought to discover creative ways for addressing the binary notions of indifference and suffering. Here, too, I employed colourful materials which involve abstract patterns with images of sorrow which present realistic patterns to highlight the dichotomy between the Middle Easterners’ suffering and global indifference towards it (see *2:6 Their Pain, Our Gain* p.43 and *3:3 Green, Blue, Yellow, Red...* p.64).
Figure 5:1. Mohsen Meysami, Do I Know You?, 2018, View from the gallery entrance, Wool yarn, cotton thread, cotton fabric. Hand embroidery on cotton fabric, Dimensions variable, Installation view Victoria University
Figure 5.18. Mohsen Meysami, Do I Know You?, 2018, View from the left side, Wool yarn, cotton thread, cotton fabric. Hand embroidery on cotton fabric, Dimensions variable, Installation view Victoria University.
Figure 5.19. Mohsen Meysami, Do I Know You?, 2018, View from the left side, Wool yarn, cotton thread, cotton fabric. Hand embroidery on cotton fabric, Dimensions variable, Installation view Victoria University.
Figure 5.20. Mohsen Meysami, *Do I Know You?*, 2018, View from the back. Wool yarn, cotton thread, cotton fabric. Hand embroidery on cotton fabric, Dimensions variable, Installation view Victoria University
Figure 5.21. Mohsen Meysami, Do I Know You?, Pattern Design, Digital illustration, 2018. Coloured for better visibility
Figure 5.22. Mohsen Meysami, Do I Know You?, Pattern Design, Digital illustration.
Figure 5:23. Mohsen Meysami, Sit; See, Don’t See! Detail, 2018, Wood, acrylic colour and mirror sheets, velvet, embroidery thread, foam. Digital print and laser cut, hand embroidery. Hand embroidered by Zahra N. (An Afghan refugee currently living in Iran). Photos courtesy of Matin Rokn
5:3  **SIT; SEE, DON’T SEE!**

Following the experiences offered through creating, installing, and observing viewers’ interactions with the thread installation artworks, a new question presented itself: how can I create an artwork that would invite viewers to more actively reflect on what they see, an artwork that would allow the viewer to sit and think, to ponder the issues presented within the artwork?

At this stage of my reflections, I received an invitation from Yazd Art and Architecture University in Iran to present my artworks during the university’s Research Week in December 2018. The university’s unique architecture offered an opportunity to realise the next phase of research by creating the final artwork in this project. The university is located at the heart of the historical city of Yazd that is recognized as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. The university’s building consists of several historical residential houses that are also listed as National Heritage sites. Built in 1904, the university’s main building, known as Rasouilian House, is comprised of architectural elements such as Orosi windows and Iwans that are unique to Iran’s traditional residential architecture. In my reflections on the geographical position of the university and the unique architectural characteristics of the building, I considered two things:

- How can the artwork activate a more engaging experience for the viewers allowing them to sit and reflect on what is presented to them?
- How will this new work correspond to the site in which it is shown?

Mulling over the act of reflection through “sitting and thinking”, I considered making a sculptural/architectural structure that could function as a chair. Chairs are conventionally used for domestic and commercial purposes allowing individuals to rest, work, observe or contemplate. The challenging task was to design a chair-like structure that was simultaneously comfortable, therefore welcoming the viewers, and uncomfortable, communicating imagery that depicted the suffering of others. Breaking or burning a chair, taking away its very functionality, its comfortability and hospitality, are some ways contemporary artists have used to subvert the chair’s purpose and create artworks that represent discomfort, loss, and displacement. Examples are Mona Hatoum’s *Remains of the Day* (Figure 5:24) and the monumental sculpture *Broken Chair* installed across the street from the Palace of Nations in Geneva by Daniel Berset (Figure 5:25).

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1 *Sit, See, Don’t See* (2018) is the result of nearly two months of pre-production and a month of production. The artwork was created in Iran with the assistance of Mehdi Meysami and Mohammad Mozaffari. The project was financially supported by the RMIT University HDR Travel Fund and the generous support from Wangaratta Art Gallery for transporting the artwork from Iran to Australia.

2 ‘Stretching from floor to ceiling, an orosi is a thin wooden screen of complex geometric patterns filled with colourful glass, mediating between the main room inside and the courtyard garden outside’ (Koliji, 2016, p. 87, emphasis in original).

3 Iwans are most commonly associated with Islamic architecture; however, the form is Iranian in origin and was invented much earlier and fully developed in Mesopotamia around the third century CE, during the Parthian period of Persia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iwan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iwan).
While in these examples chairs lost their functionality due to their fragility or gigantic size, I investigated creating a chair that not only attracts the viewer to explore the artwork, but also functions as a chair and allows the viewer to sit on it.

Figure 5.24. Mona Hatoum, Remains of the Day, 2016–18, wire mesh and wood, dimensions variable, White Cube Hong Kong, 2018. Photo by Kitmin Lee

Image redacted for copyright reasons.

See: [http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/WebExclusives/RemainsOfTheDay](http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/WebExclusives/RemainsOfTheDay)
Figure 5:25. Daniel Berset, Broken Chair on the Place des Nations, Geneva, 1997

See: http://danielberset.com/
Figure 5:26. Yazd Art and Architecture University’s Iwan, Photo Mohsen Meysami
Considering the site which the artwork was responding to (Figure 5:26), in Sit; See, Don’t See! (2018) the art of Persian window Orosi was referenced, an example of which was present at the Yazd Art and Architecture University’s Iwan, where the artwork was exhibited. In the early stages of planning this artwork, I explored the use of steel or aluminium for the structure due to their stability and durability. Through trials and further reflections, I became interested in using wood not only for its warmth and organic appeal but more importantly for its similarity to the surrounding site and the orosi window. Additionally, to decorate the inner and outer surface of the artwork, I used coloured and mirror acrylic sheets reminiscent of the stained glass orosi windows. They, however, gave a modern look to the artwork indicating a sense of contemporaneity alongside what the artwork was responding to. Covered with mirrors, outer side panels were activated, attracting viewers and inviting them to experience the artwork in a whole new way. This created a playful and interactive experience for the viewers especially through their skewed or deformed reflectivity and angled positioning (Figure 5:27).

Despite the playfulness and simplicity of the outer panels, inside the structure viewers are surrounded with a range of intricate patterns representing suffering, ranging from patterns embroidered on the cushion they are sitting on and the various intertwined patterns that are combined with cut-out small pieces of mirrors on the side panels (Figures 5:28, 5:29, 5:30, 5:31 and 5:32). Contrary to the first interaction with the artwork where mirrors functioned as a decorating element reflecting the viewers, intertwined with the motifs of sorrow and pain, the mirrors played a completely different role inside the artwork. Reflecting the viewers’ faces and therefore placing them in-between patterns that speak to the impacts of wars on affected people’s lives, they could mediate the connection between the viewer and a sufferer. These two binary experiences of viewing the artwork form inside and outside could also be indicative of the notions of nearness and distance and how they impact people’s perceptions of others and therefore their responses to their suffering (Figure 5:33, 5:34 and 5:35).
Figure 5:27. Mohsen Meysami, Sit; See, Don’t See! 2018, Outer-side view, Photos courtesy of Matin Rokn
Figure 5:28. Mohsen Meysami, Sit; See, Don’t See! 2018, Inside view, Patterns on the cushion, Hand embroidered by Zahra N. (An Afghan refugee currently living in Iran). Photos courtesy of Matin Rokn
Figure 5.29. Mohsen Meysami, Sit; See, Don’t See!, 2018, Inside view, Patterns on the right panel, Digital print and laser cut. Photos courtesy of Matin Rokn
Figure 5:30. Mohsen Meysami, Sit; See, Don’t See! 2018, inside view, Patterns on the left panel, Digital print and laser cut. Photos courtesy of Matin Rokn.
Figure 5:31. Mohsen Meysami, Sit; See, Don’t See!, Pattern Design, Digital illustration
Figure 5:32. Mohsen Meysami, Sit; See, Don’t See!, Pattern Design, Digital illustration
While the artwork functioned as a chair, its unconventional design and unique form offered different readings. On the one hand, the presence of elements from Islamic arts such as mirrors and patterns, with the architectural form of the artwork could be seen as similar to a mosque minaret, suggesting a multiplicity of narratives. It could serve as a symbolic reference to the significance of religion of war-affected people, as well as how it is portrayed, often in the West, as the sole cause of violence in the region and internationally. On the other hand, as a senior man passing by while transporting the artwork to
the exhibition site observed, the artwork’s unique design could be perceived as a military weapon, more specifically a missile reminiscent of the wars and conflicts in the region\(^1\).

In representing the wars and the suffering they cause, many artists tend to work with familiar objects, materials and colours that could serve as symbols of violence and suffering such as images of dead bodies or by using destruction as a method in their art making. Contrary to this idea, throughout this doctoral project, I have explored alternative ways that allowed me to create artworks that look, especially from a distance, aesthetically pleasing and even entertaining yet are filled with details that represent the opposite; suffering and anguish. Similarly, in *Sit; See, Don’t See*! (2018), I experimented with designing and creating an artwork functioning as a chair that is at once comfortable and uncomfortable or disturbing. By offering this alternative style of representing the outcome of war and conflict, my aim was to encourage the viewers to think about their position in relation to wars and their response to the plight of affected people. Additionally, I wanted to emphasise the role of distance—geographical, cultural, and/or politically manufactured—in conditioning people’s perceptions of and responses to other peoples’ suffering (see *To Break the Manufactured Distances* p.82). In other words, by avoiding a direct, didactic or clichéd approach, the work attempts to challenge pre-existing perceptions and encourage dialogue on suffering in the Middle East.

Juxtaposing the images and objects of comfort and discomfort, in *Mise-en-Scène: Commemorative Toile* (1992-94) American artist Renée Green encourages the viewers to think about invisible and entangled histories (e.g., African American slavery and Haitian Revolution). In creating this artwork, ‘Renée Green deftly utilised fabric and the silkscreen printing process to make a highly-charged yet surprisingly subtle commentary on social class, race, and aestheticism (The Fabric Workshop and Museum, 1992)’. The scenes of enslavement and violence from the book, *The Image of the Black in Western Art* (Honour, 1989), are combined with highly decorative patterns from toile—17th century upholstery fabric—that can serve as camouflage, reminiscent of forgotten histories of violence.

Unlike in previous examples where the transformation of the familiar object of comfort—e.g. the chair—into discomfort would occur mainly through the transforming the chair into a dysfunctional object, Green’s chair becomes an object of discomfort by means of seemingly decorative patterns. The viewer, too, takes part in the transformation process by discovering those patterns. Similarly, in *Sit; See, Don’t See!* (2018), by communicating the suffering narrative, patterns could transform the object of comfort into a rather disturbing uncomfortable object. However, despite its unconventional look, the artwork’s title, interactive features and experiential nature could encourage the viewer to sit, see or not see the details presented inside the artwork. The title here is very direct: “Sit; See, Don’t See!” not only gives permission to the viewer to sit on the artwork but also encourages them to do so, which enables

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\(^1\) He laughed and said: ‘What are you going to do with this missile?’ (20 December 2018)

\(^2\) Toile is a fabric, from the French word meaning "linen cloth" or "canvas", particularly cloth or canvas for painting on. The word "toile" may refer to the fabric itself, a test garment (generally) sewn from the same material, or a type of repeated surface decoration (traditionally) printed on the same fabric.
them to see and grasp what is otherwise almost impossible to see. The “Don’t See” addition, however, references the growing global indifference towards those suffering in the Middle East—not seeing, perceiving, grasping, and being touched by another persons’ suffering.

Finally, *Sit; See, Don’t See!* (2018) could also be perceived as a response to institutional and conventional ways of exhibition presentation. Moving away from a mere decorative object or an elite art form, this artwork became a functional and interactive object enabling a more intimate relationship between the viewer and the artwork, thus suggesting alternative ways of representing and displaying what war involves and leads to.

Figure 5:34. Renée Green. *Commemorative Toile*, 1992, Installation view Mobilien/Movables. Galerie im Taxispalais, Innsbruck, 2004, Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media
Figure 5:35. Renée Green. Commemorative Toile, 1992, Installation view Ongoing Becomings. Retrospective, 1989-2009, Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne, 2009, Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media
CONCLUSION
This practice-led research began with a personal inquiry: what is a moral response to a suffering at a distance? This personal question formed and led this project to an investigation into examining the reasons for what appears to be a global indifference towards the plight of war-affected communities in the Middle East. To outline the findings of this project, I will discuss how the two primary research questions were addressed.

**How can Middle Eastern art traditions be employed to activate a dialogue on the destructive impacts of war and bringing indifference to light as a relevant and significant phenomenon?**

To address this question, I first needed to answer several other questions such as: Considering the decorative or religious functionality of Middle Eastern traditional arts, in what ways could I use these traditions for creating contemporary artworks that reflect complex and political ideas? And, how could I address the binary notions of suffering and indifference utilising Middle Eastern traditional arts?

Through studio investigations, this project explored various aspects of the Middle Eastern traditional arts and crafts. I investigated how I could use these traditions that not only referenced the region of the Middle East but also assisted me in developing an artistic approach to conveying political ideas. Exploring repetitive patterns as one of the main characteristics of Middle Eastern traditional arts and using digital software packages, I created a series of patterns that could reflect my ideas in a unique and distinct way. Therefore, without reproducing traditional designs and patterns and following historical methods of making and exhibiting, I was able to create new artworks that could speak to issues related to contemporary wars.

One of the challenges I sought to overcome in this project was addressing the binary notions of suffering and indifference. Indifference, by definition, is paying no attention to or looking away from the suffering of others. Thus, the challenge was to develop a way of presenting the combination of suffering and not-seeing the suffering at the same time. This project explored and examined three different solutions to this challenge.

- The combination of colourful and shiny materials such as beads and sequins with the repeated patterns that represent the sufferer.

In the artworks on Persian kilims such as *Between the devil and the deep blue sea* (2016) and *Their Pain, Our Gain* (2017), by creating a colourful and attractive spectacle and incorporating patterns that represent the outcome of wars, I was able to address the binary notions of suffering and indifference and draw people’s attention to the humanitarian crisis caused by recent conflicts in the Middle East. The multiplicity of beads and sequins reflected the role of information overload in distracting people and thus impacting their perceptions of and responses to critical issues.

- The combination of realistic patterns that speak of suffering with the abstract patterns reminiscent of uninformed and skewed perceptions of the war-affected communities

Through studio investigations on patterns, I discovered that incorporating abstract and geometric patterns into sets of realistic patterns that speak of the suffering could facilitate symbolic depiction of indifference which can be characterised with abstractness (which is) engendered by distance in its broadest
sense. With the thread installation artworks such as *Looking-Looking Away* (2018) and *Do I Know You?* (2018), I used threads to create new abstract patterns from within realistic patterns that represent suffering and anguish, reminiscent of biased, uninformed or misinformed perceptions about others’ suffering.

- The incorporation of patterns representing the suffering into an object of comfort

With *Sit; See, Don’t See!* (2018), I investigated designing and making a new artwork which functioned as a chair allowing people to sit on it and think about the issues presented within the artwork. Incorporating sets of patterns that represent suffering, the artwork was then transformed from an object of comfort into a communicator of discomfort, thus addressing both notions of suffering and indifference.

How can the notions of ‘nearness’ and ‘distance’ inform the production of new artworks that explore indifference towards the war-affected?

Using the works of some of the most influential contemporary thinkers such as Judith Butler and Edward Said, I discussed the impact of distance on people’s indifferent responses towards others’ suffering. I argued that beyond geographical distances, we need to think about the other forms of distance that influence our perceptions and responses. Drawing on Judith Butler’s work *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009), I discussed how state powers draw on differences such as racial, cultural, and religious to manufacture distances between communities through which lives of a group of people considered as Others has less, if any, value. It is through these kinds of distances that politicians are able to wage and maintain war, control the public opinion, and minimise outrage against the consequences of war.

Following these theoretical investigations, this project then explored how the Middle Eastern traditional arts can be employed for addressing the notion of distance from this perspective. Considering the impact of people’s perceptions of the Middle East on their responses towards the consequences of wars in that region, this project investigated developing an alternative to the conventional styles of representing the region which involve the images of death, destruction and grotesque violence, thus, avoiding reproducing negative misperceptions. Drawing on Middle East’s rich traditional arts and crafts, I explored how the impacts of recent conflicts in the region could be communicated which would offer new positive perceptions of the people of the region drawing upon their history and culture.

In addition, drawing on the expandability and flexibility of traditional patterns— such as across the surface of walls of Mosques in Islamic architecture— I created new site-specific installation works that encouraged the viewers to experience the artwork from different angles and distances. Moreover, through installing and presenting an assortment iteration of the artworks in various sites, this project showcased how each mode of installation could offer different interpretations of the same artwork.
Nearness and Distance: Exploring the notion of indifference through the lens of Middle Eastern traditional arts was a practice-led research project that began with an inquiry about the morality of the global responses to humanitarian crises in the Middle Eastern war-torn countries. The outcome of this project was a series of artworks, a selection of which will be exhibited for the examination exhibition at Site 8 Gallery, RMIT University. The following images demonstrate the planning of the exhibition layout and the arrangement of thread installation artworks.
Examination Exhibition, Arrangement of thread installation artworks, Installation view, Site Eight Gallery
Examination Exhibition, Arrangement of thread installation artworks, Installation view, Site Eight Gallery
Examination Exhibition, Arrangement of thread installation artworks, Installation view, Site Eight Gallery
Examination Exhibition, Arrangement of thread installation artworks, Installation view, Site Eight Gallery
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