

Stephanie Gervais

Gulalhi گلالی



EXHIBITION—

November 15 to
December 16, 2018,
*and by appointment
until Dec. 21.* HOURS:
12:00 to 5:00 pm,
Tuesday – Sunday.

ARTIST TALK—

November 20, 2018
6:30 pm, Reed
Chapel, Eliot hall,
followed by an
opening reception
at the Cooley.

FILM SCREENING—

November 28, 2018
6:00 pm, PSYCH 105.
The films of Afghan
performance artist
LIDA ABDUL, with
remarks by Gervais.

IMAGE: S. Gervais, *Phone and powerbank burnt by the police*, 2018

@stephmgervais

COOLEY

Lida Abdul

Afghan artist film screening

Wednesday, Nov. 28, 6:00 pm, Psych 105

Join Cooley Gallery exhibiting artist **Stephanie Gervais** for a 35-minute screening of Lida Abdul's short performance films.

Abdul's films, videos, and installations address cultural identity, migration, and the destruction and displacement that have marked the history of Afghanistan.

Douglas F. Cooley
Memorial Art
Gallery, Reed College
3203 SE Woodstock
Portland, OR 97202
cooley@reed.edu
503-517-7851

Stephanie Gervais
Gulalhi is on view
at the Cooley through
December 16, 2018
Tuesday – Sunday,
noon to 5:00 pm



Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College

Stephanie Gervais

Gulalhi

November 15 – December 16, 2018

Open by appointment through December 21

Artist talk and reception:

November 20, 6:30 p.m. Reed College chapel, Eliot hall,
followed by a reception at the Cooley

Film screening:

Works by Afghan performance artist Lida Abdul

November 28, 6:00 pm, Psychology 105

Organized and with remarks by Stephanie Gervais

The Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College is proud to present **Gulalhi**—the first one-person U.S. exhibition of UK-based artist and Reed alumna Stephanie Gervais. The title of the exhibition is a Pashto name—meaning flowers—that appears as a tattoo in the artist's photograph *Aziz*, 2018.

Gervais created the works in **Gulalhi** while living outside of the United States from 2010–2018. First residing and making art in the hillside favelas above Rio de Janeiro for four years, Gervais then moved to England to earn her MFA at Goldsmiths University. It was there that she discovered a network of people supporting the rapidly expanding camp of Sudanese, Afghan, and Syrian refugees in Calais, France. Aided by her knowledge of French, Gervais began spending long stretches of time in Calais, living in the camp and getting to know the residents. Struck by their self-organization, endurance, and translation of social customs—and invited to share in this aesthetic of

hospitality and conviviality—Gervais slowly began recording the stories of residents over tea and meals.

The works in **Gulalhi** were created during and after this time as Gervais' relationships deepened. Some of the works in the exhibition have continued to evolve in response to Gervais' lasting friendships with people who left the camp—smuggled into England in trucks, or onto trains departing from Calais.

Over the last decade, Gervais has developed an aesthetic that privileges presence, openness, and transference, whether through the sound and touch of the body, or the translation of words and gestures through different materials and contexts. The exhibition also includes a small group of experimental sculptures that adorn the body. “Aesthetics is a way of communicating—without words—aspects of one’s sublime unconscious with that of others. It is sensing the way others identify and relate to one’s own experience” (Frank J. Ninivaggi M.D., F.A.P.A., “Aesthetics and Envy,” *Psychology Today*, June 30, 2012).

While the works in **Gulalhi** seek to embody, or relate to, the experiences of others, their position is neither documentary nor objective. Gervais believes in the realness of artistic acts to engender communication, understanding, and emotional release, creating within and alongside her surroundings. Over time, these encounters are recounted and symbolized through material events—patterns, clothing, and non-sequential photographs that belong together but do not ask to be understood as the material evidence of anything other than the needs and aspirations of people.

While the Cooley is something of an artificial hothouse for these peripatetic, sensory objects, Gervais is using the opportunity to continue her outreach from the United States. During the exhibition, Gervais will introduce different forms of communication into the space, including: web-based conversations with refugees living in the UK; group work sessions with students and the public; and the first regional screening of the films of Afghan performance artist Lida Abdul.

Stephanie Gervais is currently Instructor-in-Residence in the MFA in Craft at the Oregon College of Art and Craft. She has shown her work at galleries, cultural centers and museums in France, the UK, Brazil, and the US. She has completed residencies and exhibited her work in the context of the Independent Program of São Paulo (São Paulo), A Gentil Carioca's Abre Alas 10 (Rio de Janeiro) and Jeune Création (Paris). She regularly works with community organizations in ways that inform, generate and contribute to her artistic practice.

Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery

Reed College

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Portland, OR 97202

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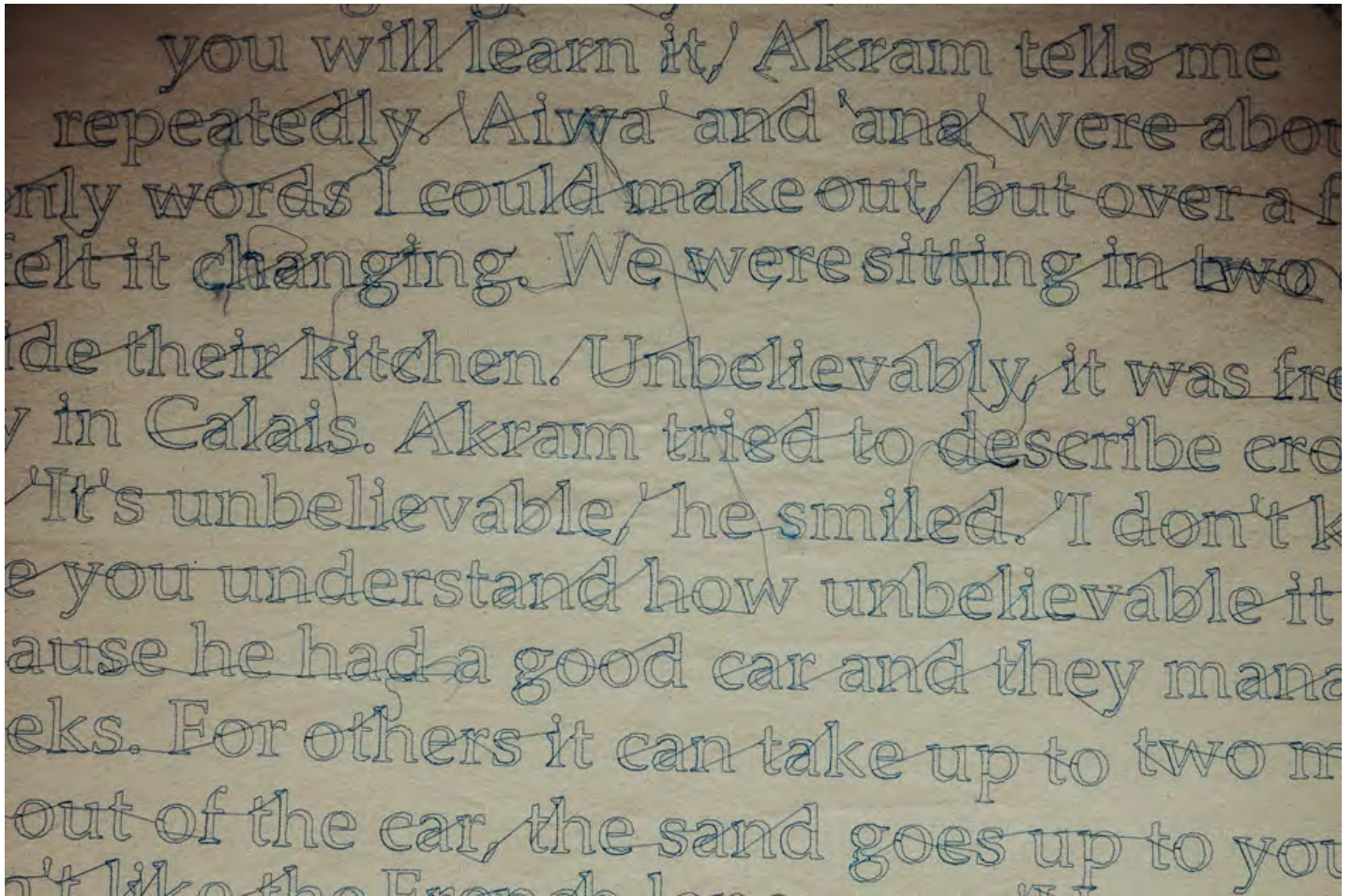


PHOTO BY ANNA CAITLIN

ARTS & HUMANITIES

Art Show Focuses on Refugee Crisis

Gulalhi, a solo exhibition by Stephanie Gervais '09, opens at the Cooley Gallery.

By Randall S. Barton | November 15, 2018

Artist Stephanie Gervais '09 has returned to campus for *Gulalhi*, a solo exhibition at the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery. Works in the exhibition evolved in response to friendships she formed with people living in a French refugee camp and includes photography, language-based works on blankets and on paper, and sound. *Gulalhi*, a Pashto name meaning flowers, appears as a tattoo in her photograph *Aziz* [2018].

“Gervais’ works are created in response to personal experiences and relationships over long periods of time,” says Stephanie Sakellaris Snyder ’91, the John and Anne Hauberg Curator & Director of the gallery. “They come into being through receptivity—the sharing of stories, food, and environment. The process requires openness, absorption, and respect for one’s collaborators. This is not work made at a distance; the people, places and situations represented in the exhibition were first experienced over time.”

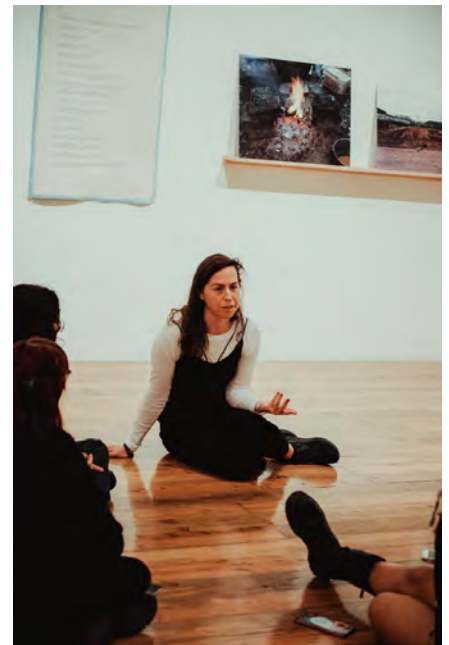
Born in Hong Kong, Gervais moved with her family to Portland when she was two. When it came time to choose a college, she wanted a rigorous education in an intellectual environment and felt strongly attracted to Reed.

“I also really wanted a strong sense of community, or the ability to meet and work with people to create connections,” she says. “Reed felt like a place I could do that.”

At Reed, she explored wearable sculpture and wrote her thesis about the transformation that occurs in the hero’s journey with Prof. Nicole Russell [art 2008–09] advising. After earning her bachelor’s degree in art, she worked for a time in a studio in Kauai before moving to Brazil

“I wanted to be somewhere where the body and sensorial learning were just as important, prevalent, and valid as everything else,” she says.

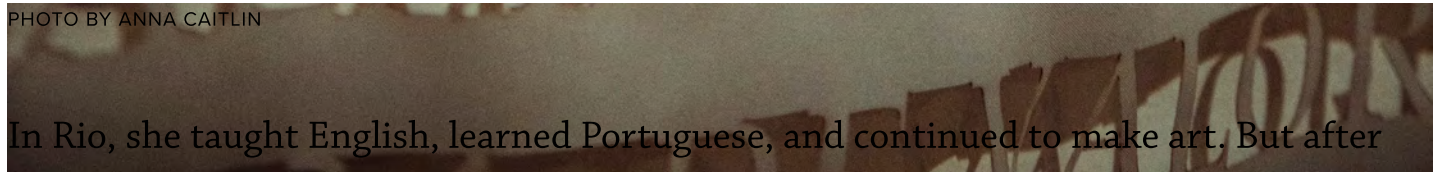
She arrived at the hillside favelas above Rio de Janeiro without a plan, a friend, or a job. “Being lost is an intense experience that forces you out of habit and to see things in a new way,” she says. “You become disoriented; the environment becomes disoriented. You make new connections and think and see differently. There’s also the possibility for a really strong sense of empathy.”



Artist Stephanie Gervais ’09 will discuss her art and her experiences at a talk at 6:30 p.m. on Tuesday, November 20, at the Reed Chapel, followed by a reception at the Cooley. PHOTO BY ANNA CAITLIN



PHOTO BY ANNA CAITLIN



In Rio, she taught English, learned Portuguese, and continued to make art. But after three years, she hungered for a more international experience that would enable her to experience the confluence of many cultures, so she decided to get an MFA at Goldsmiths University in London.

Europe was in the grip of crisis as millions of people fled war in Syria and other parts of the world and sought refuge. Between classes, she volunteered to help Syrian refugees living in London. In 2015, she made her first trip to “The Jungle,” a refugee camp on the outskirts of Calais. Roughly the size of Reed, it housed nearly 2,000 people from Afghanistan and Sudan, most of them hoping to stow away on lorries headed to the U.K. “There were tents and rudimentary wooden houses in a weird industrial area on the outskirts of town,” she explains.

After spending long stretches of time in the camp, she was struck by the people’s self-organization, endurance, and translation of social customs. Invited into their lives, she recorded their stories over tea and meals. After graduate school, she moved to Calais and began to make art based on these encounters, using patterns, clothing, and non-sequential photographs that belong together but do not ask to be understood as the material evidence of anything other than the needs and aspirations of people.

“The starting point was the relationships that started to form and the conversations I was having,” she recalls. “I began thinking about a way I could take portraits that were not photographs of people, places, and moments.”

Some of the exhibited works have evolved in response to her lasting friendships with people who left the camp—smuggled into England in trucks or trains. The exhibition also includes a small group of experimental sculptures that adorn the body.

One work in the exhibition began as a seven-page story, handwritten in Arabic, of a man telling how he came from Sudan to Europe. She digitized the pages and printed them on a moving blanket, displayed alongside recordings of his story.

“The process of translation—which happens in collaboration between Gervais and members of the refugee community—extends the works’ narratives through space and time,” Snyder explains. “Gervais’ works hold space for the stories and messages that have been entrusted to her. She works across different languages—creating textiles in Arabic as opposed to English—because it prioritizes the authors’ experiences. The textiles and photographs begin, always, not as works of art but as experiences between people.”

During the exhibition, Stephanie will introduce different forms of communication into the gallery, including web-based conversations with refugees living in the U.K., group work sessions with students and the public, and the first regional screening of the films of Afghan performance artist Lida Abdul at 6 p.m. on Wednesday, November 28, in Psychology 105.

“It is a huge privilege to be able to work with **Stephanie Sakellaris Snyder ’91** in a space where education and research can be ever-present,” the artist says. “The Cooley Gallery has the willingness to create an experience that is constantly evolving and alive, rather than displaying objects that are finished and over. It also has a high level of integrity, a commitment to making a difference, and a social perspective.”

“There’s a quote by Danish artist Addi Koepke that’s always been a guide to me,” Snyder says. “Art is what makes life more interesting than art.’ All art ultimately reveals something deeply human, usually our failings and oversights. Gervais’ work offers us the challenge of absorbing experiences that are not our own. How do we respond? How did Gervais respond?”

Currently instructor-in-residence in the MFA in craft at the Oregon College of Art and Craft, Gervais has shown her work at galleries, cultural centers, and museums in France, the U.K., Brazil, and the U.S.

Gulalhi runs from November 15 to December 16, and by appointment through December 23.

Tags: Alumni, Campus Life, International

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Conversation between Artist Stephanie Gervais and Curator Stephanie Snyder, January–May 2019, Portland, Oregon

Stephanie Gervais & Stephanie Snyder

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Conversation between
Artist Stephanie Gervais
and Curator Stephanie
Snyder, January–May
2019, Portland, Oregon

Interview

Conversation between Artist Stephanie Gervais and Curator Stephanie Snyder, January–May 2019, Portland, Oregon

This text is a conversation between artist Stephanie Gervais and curator Stephanie Snyder, on the subject of Gervais' exhibition *Gulalhi*, on view at the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery at Reed College from November 15 to December 23, 2018.

STEPHANIE GERVAIS

Stephanie Gervais is an artist whose individual works and installations incorporate photography, textiles, sculpture, and sound. She completed her BA at Reed College (2009) and her MFA at Goldsmiths University, London (2016). Her one-person exhibition, *Gulalhi*, was shown at Reed College's academic museum, the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, in 2018, while she was a teaching artist-in-residence at the Oregon College of Art and Craft. Living and working for nearly a decade in Brazil, the UK, and France, Gervais has made her recent work within and in relation to refugee camps and communities in Calais, France. The work is a conceptual portrait focused on the daily life of transitional border spaces. She has shown her work in the United States, France, the UK, and Brazil. She has published her writing in the Oregon Visual Arts Ecology Project (Ford Family Foundation), and in *Archipelago Magazine*, Goldsmiths University.
www.stephaniegervais.com

STEPHANIE SNYDER

Stephanie Snyder is the Anne and John Hauberg Director and Curator of the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College, a position she has held since 2003. A graduate of Reed College (1991) and Columbia University (1998), Snyder has been the curator of numerous exhibitions, including: *Gregg Bordowitz, I Wanna Be Well* (2018, Reed College; 2019, Art Institute of Chicago); *Wynne Greenwood, Stacy* (2014, Reed College; 2016, New Museum, New York); *Jamie Isenstein: Will Return* (2013); *Kara Walker, More & Less* (2012); *Bruce Nauman, Basements* (2012); *Terry Winters: Linking Graphics* (2010); *David Reed, Lives of Paintings* (2008); and *Sutapa Biswas: Birdsong* (2006). Snyder has received two fellowships from the Getty Foundation – for curation and museum leadership – and in 2013 she received a commission award from the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) and the CUE Foundation, New York. She is a regular contributor to *Artforum.com*
snyders@reed.edu

Stephanie Snyder: From the moment we encounter your exhibition *Gulalhi*, we are paused by the unknowing of a word and a language we do not recognize. As a title, the word *Gulalhi* is presented alone, without translation, and its pronunciation lilt in the mouth.

Stephanie Gervais: *Gulalhi* is a name in the Pashto language of Afghanistan. Aziz, my friend, whose portrait is part of a series of photographs in the exhibition, has this name tattooed on his arm. *Gulalhi* was Aziz's friend who died during their time serving in the Afghan National Army. *Gulalhi* is also the title of a work in the exhibition – a typewritten document that recounts stories from when Aziz and I were starting to get to know each other. While I was making the body of work that

went into the show, I was living and working in northern France, where refugees from Afghanistan and other countries live in temporary encampments close to the British border. Aziz, like many others, was trying to cross the border to enter the United Kingdom. While in France, Aziz told me how much he loved the name *Gulalhi*, which is unusual in Afghanistan. The literal meaning of the word is “flowers.” Later he started calling me by this name. *Gulalhi* then stands for this young man who was killed in Afghanistan, for Aziz, and for myself.

Snyder: How beautiful that *Gulalhi*, the title, weaves the three of you together – you, Aziz, and *Gulalhi* – and, through the representation of the inscription on Aziz's body, intertwines remembrance, pain, love, hope, witnessing, language, and translation, all of which touch and travel in different material and immaterial forms (including sound) throughout the exhibition. Talking about it here makes me realize how almost all of these

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Figure 1

Aziz, 2018, archival inkjet print on Dibond, 26 × 20.5 inches.

experiences and phenomena, even in their extreme, are symbolized by flowers: love; death; beauty; hope; and meaning in general (as in the Victorian language of flowers). But imagine if you had translated the name Gulalhi and the exhibition was entitled *Flowers*. Gulahli the human being would have been displaced – disappeared (Figure 1).

Gervais: Yes, as well as these shared moments in France which the name references.

Snyder: Relatedly, in your own writings – which are most visible in the framed, typewritten works

in the exhibition – you describe moments in which the translation of a conversation or phrase from one person or place to another creates awkwardness and in-betweenness in ways that bring people closer. When recounting these moments you are careful to preserve the misspellings and formatting eccentricities of the original conversations or text-message exchanges. Tell us about the role and presence of translation in your work, and give us some insight into specific works that evince this in *Gulalhi*.

Gervais: The works in *Gulalhi*, as well as my writing printed in the exhibition publication, preserve

language as it was spoken, written, or experienced, both by myself and by others. There are fabric and textile works in the exhibition that have been stitched or knitted with speech that was translated into English from other languages. There are also recorded readings of the works in Arabic or Portuguese and their translations into English (or not). These textiles, documents, and sound works materialize translation as a live, unfolding process – a dynamic back-and-forth that is a natural part of living in-between, or within, multiple languages, countries, and cultures. Translation in these works also includes the negotiations that are an inherent

part of collaborating or working with others. Switching between languages, unconventional speech, or speech altered by the knowledge and presence of other languages all reflect the multiplicity of where I have been living and working – between France, the UK, and Brazil; and within liminal, displaced spaces.

Snyder: The textile with the longest narrative – *Odai’s Story: Citizen of the Rebel City of Daraa* (2018) – includes numeric time markers interspersed throughout the text. They appear to signal the movement of the text from one medium to another, presumably from a recording device of some kind, to the textile. They imbue the work with such an interesting visual rhythm. Why did you include them? What’s their significance?

Gervais: *Odai’s Story* is a three-panel knitted textile that depicts transcriptions of three videos I recorded with Odai, a Syrian refugee who lives in the UK. The videos were recorded in Arabic and later translated into English by an Arabic speaker in Manchester who sent me transcriptions of each of the videos’ narratives. The original translation in *Odai’s Story* is that of Arabic to English. However, it is also a translation of the oral to the written, or material. From the beginning, I conceived of this project as a way of extracting and materializing subtitles. Each panel references our act of recording, but no longer relies on

those recordings. I wanted to make Odai’s stories physically large, while also pulling the language and the events described outside of the genre of the video testimonial, and thus outside of the traditions of the media and reporting. The three panels were produced with a knitting factory in Manchester that normally makes clothing. I had to negotiate their fabrication with a factory technician, who at first did not believe the project was feasible. The large knitting machines run on special software, so that each type character has to be entered into an interface manually. I went through a meticulous process of editing digital drafts made by the technician. Still, when I received the final textiles, I noticed typos and misspellings from my original transcripts, which may have been the technician’s fault, or my own. Some of these typographical errors I later chose to “fix” by sewing over the knitted letters by hand. The process of negotiation – with collaborators, technology, and machinery – is also a form of translation (Figure 2).

Snyder: And what about the textile *Dunkirk*, which appears to contain a list or tally?

Gervais: *Dunkirk* (2018) presents a list of names, item requests, and shoe sizes written down hastily on my phone while I was running a targeted distribution of clothing for refugees. The names are mostly Arabic, Pashto, or Kurdish, and the spellings are mostly

incorrect – due to the urgency of the moment, my phone’s spellcheck mechanism, and my own limited understanding.

Snyder: It’s clear you’ve spent considerable time working between languages, and working around the dominance of English. When did this process begin in your life and work?

Gervais: I have worked artistically with language and translation since I moved to Brazil in 2010, where I learned Portuguese; and I have studied French since 2006. The process of learning languages, and moving in-between them, including their personalities and worldviews, has had a huge effect on me personally. Translation is an opportunity for understanding as well as a space of invention and discovery. It is the natural territory of relationships. In regard to translation I always think about a quote by the British Indian writer Salman Rushdie (1991, 17) that compares translation to travel, displacement, and the human body. Rushdie references the etymology of the word “translation,” which is derived from the Latin for “bearing across.” Speaking from the context of emigration and exile, he writes, “Having been borne across the world, we are translated men.” Visualizing translation, including its efforts and imperfections, points to this process of expansion, including cross-cultural and displaced experience, while reserving space for languages and cultures of origin.



Figure 2

Oda's Story: Citizen of the Rebel City of Daraa, 2018, knitting yarn and sewing thread, 168 × 161 inches. Supported by Rethink Rebuild Society, Manchester, UK.

Snyder: And you brought Rushdie's texts and those of other writers into the space of the exhibition ...

Gervais: Yes, I wanted visitors to have access to the larger conversation. I created a library area with couches and reading lamps. It included a selection of books and articles about the refugee experience, border cultures, and the relationship between photography and violence. I wanted to make some of my research available to visitors, as well as give them additional means for understanding the exhibition.

Snyder: Rushdie's notion of translation makes me wonder whether every language is a refugee language. Certainly every language adapts as it survives forces such as trade, war, and love. Your installations do not separate, or attempt to euphemize, our understanding of different languages, materials, and symbolic traditions. In other words, you want the visitor to encounter the presumed unfamiliarity of Arabic and Pashto. You want the visitor to listen and "read" in Pashto and Arabic – to encounter your works' narratives in their original form. This destabilizes conventional hierarchies in which English is the normative language of authority – agent of the first world and colonialist oppression.

This linguistic power shift is very palpable in *Gulalhi*, in part because of the soundtracks

playing in specific areas of the space. The soundtracks are recited stories. They are based primarily on writings by refugees whom you know and have worked with (there's also one moving protest song); these are people you continue to know as they move around the world. Some of the recordings also exist in textile form, and sometimes you translate a story into English for its inscription onto a textile. I'd like to know more about the different types of textiles you make (Figure 3) ...

Gervais: There are four sewn works on canvas that were made between 2015 and 2016, when I first started traveling to Calais and staying in the large "Jungle" camp that existed during those years. The text in *Akram* (2016) is one that I wrote in response to one of the first people I met when I started going to the camp. The other works on canvas contain transcriptions of text-message conversations between me and residents of the camp who became friends, snippets of our conversations that I wanted to highlight, and translations of accounts of their journeys which had been written originally in Pashto or Arabic, as pen-on-paper recordings.

There is digital embroidery and hand-stitching on canvas and on moving blankets. The moving blankets are objects that I appropriated from the Cooley myself, then cut and reconfigured to become canvasses for writing. *Badr* is a seven-page story, handwritten in Arabic by Badr, a

man from South Sudan, and embroidered onto a moving blanket. I met Badr for the first time at a campsite in Dunkirk, where we quickly connected. He later decided to make his way to another port city – Caen, in Normandy – where he might have a better chance at crossing the border. I visited him in Caen, where he wrote this story, and where we also took his portrait. Although Badr speaks English well, he chose to write his story in his native language so that he could best express himself. In Portland, I recorded a translator reading Badr's story in English, and this audio recording was playing in the Cooley alongside the blanket.

Odai's Story, which we described above, began from three separate panels, made of knitted yarn, that I later sewed together. Stephanie, you mentioned that the panels reminded you of cartography, and the vernacular ...

Snyder: Governments portray borders and their boundaries in a linear, conceptual manner; they're everything but that. The curling and curved edges of the three textiles sewn together into *Odai's Story* seem far more like real terrain – organic and alive. They stretch and shift under their own weight. They vary greatly in height (the middle panel being much shorter) and this creates the appearance of an arch, which is itself a threshold form. *Odai's Story* describes first-hand experiences of atrocities committed by the Assad regime in



Figure 3

Gulathi, installation view, Cooley Gallery, Reed College, 2018. Works on view from center, and from left to right: *Shield*, 2014, Brazilian beads and nylon, 52 × 100 × 0.5 inches; *Fire and Smoke Is Brother*, 2018, archival inkjet print on Dibond, 26 × 20.5 inches; *Badr*, 2018, thread on cotton moving blanket, 68 × 65 inches; *Badr*, 2018, archival inkjet print on Dibond, 26 × 20.5 inches.

Syria. On the one hand, the work's stitched "plots" resemble an aerial map. On the other hand (when imagined as a vertical form), they become a monumental portal, inscribed with texts of remembrance that also bear witness.

Gervais: I love the way you describe the textile in relation to actual terrain, and to a threshold form. I've also been told that the timestamps on the panels resemble the way verses are written in religious texts. Odai evokes God frequently, along with

the truth of life in Syria, and the shattered dreams of his people, which adds to the stories' testimonial or confessional tone, as well as the unfathomable nature of the events he describes.

Snyder: Bearing witness is a very important part of your work. Because you offer witnessing as something layered and textured, its valence feels more poetic than forensic. I find the way you present witnessing to be highly respectful to those whose stories you're telling. In other words, you don't force the speaker into a

clinical framework; you allow their voice and their image to be as nuanced as they need to be, as life is. You allow a certain amount of abstraction, and make space for feeling and slow comprehension, for the pain and confusion of the situation.

For instance, the recording that accompanies the blanket inscribed with Badr's story (in Arabic) has two looping tracks: an Arabic speaker reading Badr's story in both English and Arabic, consecutively. As I listen to the story, read twice, I forget it's the same story. Arabic and English become the threads of an aural



Figure 4
Badr, 2018, thread on cotton moving blanket, 68 × 65 inches.

weaving – a net – and my fear and empathy snag in the net of Badr’s unimaginable journey. I see the net’s holes as the thousands of needle punctures created by the digital embroidery machine as it channels back and forth across the blanket. This reminds me of Kafka’s 1919 story “In the Penal

Colony,” in which the sentences of condemned prisoners are inscribed onto their bodies by an elaborate and barbaric machine, which of course kills them. I feel that your work also confronts us with the paradox of disclosure. Refugees must divulge their experiences to be believed and

assisted, but these same stories may condemn them to lives of alienation and trespass (Figure 4).

Gervais: Confusion is a very important point. It is all incredibly confusing – for refugees who reflect upon everything they have

gone through to reach Europe, and then find themselves sleeping on the street. It is of course confusing for myself, as well as for viewers who are in the position of encountering intimate and violent experiences from a geographical and social remove. Australian anthropologist Michael Taussig, in his book *I Swear I Saw This: Drawings in Fieldwork Notebooks, Namely My Own* (2011), writes about stories being built on sensual intimacy, rather than information. In his words, to reduce a story to information is to betray the story. The intimacy of sewing references repair and the junction of heterogeneous materials or realities – essential concepts for me. Slowness is important, as is presencing.

Snyder: The presence of heterogeneous materials and realities feels very present to me in the sculpture *Shield* (2014). You made the work in Brazil, and I find that it serves as a conduit between the beginnings of your slow and fastidious exploration of pattern (as both terrain and communication), and your subsequent extension of pattern into language and weaving (including the typewritten works in the exhibition). *Shield* consists of thousands of small plastic beads woven together with nylon filament into a large rectangle. The work resembles a tapestry more than a traditional shield. You recently authored an essay about this work for the Ford Family Foundation (2019). In discussing *Shield* you write, “American theorist Judith Butler ties

vulnerability to bodily exposure – to both other people and to power. She writes: ‘Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure’” (Butler, 2004).

When I gaze at *Shield’s* vibrating patterns – composed of thousands of small dots in candy pink and bright, primary hues – it reads like a *highly* social object – a chatty object, even, sized to the body, and capable of sheltering the body under its sloping weight. Its esthetic is bright and slightly garish, evincing the global circulation of cheap plastic goods – Brazilian Carnival meets the dollar store. *Shield* doesn’t disappear by blending in, it blends in by standing out. Studying your large-scale photographs taken in refugee camps and nearby campsites, I see the same colors in blue tarps, red and pink water bottles, white plastic bags, and other common objects made in China and distributed to refugees around the world (Figure 5).

Gervais: I love the way you describe *Shield*! In relation to *Gulalhi*, *Shield* as a tapestry and a pattern reminds me of a lateral and global network of personal connections. When I began sewing *Shield*, the cylindrical beads, or colored points, reminded me of pixels. Similarly, the yarn in *O dai’s Story* knits a pattern of angular, or digitized, letter-forms. A lot of the work in the exhibition is balanced between memorialization, or

homage – which is related to connectivity – and denouncement. There were also moments when we talked about *Shield* in relation to a blanket.

I just read the deeply emotional article “Inside Syria’s Torture Prisons,” by Anne Bernard for the *New York Times* (May 11, 2019). The author describes Syrian Fadwa Mahmoud, whose husband disappeared six years ago into one of Syria’s infamous detention facilities. Mahmoud, who has been exiled to Berlin, is crocheting blankets. The author writes, “In the corner stood a pile of blankets: lavender, yellow, baby blue. It is still growing. She imagines her husband cold in prison. She is making them for him.”

I wasn’t thinking about Syria when I made *Shield*, when I was living in the favela of Rocinha in Rio de Janeiro. I photographed the sculpture in action (I attempted to hoist it up as an actual shield) with a friend, a young man from Rocinha. I was very much thinking about celebration – not necessarily Carnival, but hope, joy, and belonging to a community. I was thinking about the favela, whose architecture is mountainous and monumental, but also intimate and connected to the human body, labor, and invention. At the same time, as I describe in the text you cite above, I witnessed my friends disproportionately exposed to both violence and power. This vulnerability also connects to the physical energy that is expended in order to survive in the sloping terrain of the favela, as well as in the liminal, trespassing space of the physical border.



Figure 5

Gulalhi, installation view, Cooley Gallery, Reed College, 2018. Works on view from center, and from left to right: *Shield*, 2014, Brazilian beads and nylon, 52 × 100 × 0.5 inches; *Wallet Burnt by the Police*, 2018, archival inkjet print on Dibond, 22.5 × 28 inches; *Badr*, 2018, archival inkjet print on Dibond, 26 × 20.5 inches; *State Distribution*, 2018, archival inkjet print on Dibond, 20.5 × 26 inches.

US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (@ocasio2018, April 25, 2019) recently shared on social media, “Vulnerability is something I am proud of. In many ways I see vulnerability as a coat of arms. A shield.” Much more often than not, a refugee’s arrival in Europe – the moment dreamt of and prayed for throughout a life-threatening journey that usually last years – is never celebrated. The victories are not celebrated.

Snyder: There’s a strange and beautiful color photograph in

Gulalhi that depicts a woman standing in an unpopulated landscape wearing a brightly colored textile that covers her head and face. There is an open rectangle exposing her eyes. The relationship of the garment to the woman’s body resembles a burka – a textile that covers, shelters, hides, and removes. The title of the work is, in fact, *Burka #5*, and you’ve installed the actual textile from the photograph about six feet away, suspended from the ceiling of the Cooley. It’s so lovely to study the whole object – circling it, comparing the nuances

of its two sides. The recto, the burka’s most “public” side, is bright with saturated dots of color. The verso is raw canvas, marked by the sewn construction of the work – including untrimmed, twisted threads.

Gervais: In the Cooley, *Burka #5* is both a hanging object, or sculpture, and a photograph. I made the object as a fabric that would be worn and photographed. However, I also intended to open the seams of the fabric, and undo and reconstruct it, after it had

fulfilled its function as a garment. *Burka #5* was inspired by covering garments, including Islamic burkas, and by my earlier work with beading and weaving. In Brazil, I made garments from woven beads which were shaped to resemble draping fabric. My series of “burkas” were made to cover parts of the face or body, and were photographed being worn by men and women in public spaces. In *Burka #5*, the individual sections of canvas and vinyl are hand-drawn and painted with oil paint and glass varnish, and are meant to depict two-dimensionally, and through painting, woven beadwork. Stephanie, you observed that these different sections also reference pages: as in a text.

Snyder: Absolutely. The verso reads like a group of thick, handmade paper pages sewn together at their edges into an idiosyncratic grouping; they are not in a grid. While these “pages” are blank, they have linguistic presence. I feel there’s an invisible text hovering there, waiting to be discovered; maybe it’s written in a special ink, legible only to the right spirit. Preserving religious, cultural, and personal treasures is something every diasporic and refugee community faces (Figure 6).

Gervais: The backside of the piece – the side that touches the body – became a mosaic evidencing the material and the underside of the painting, my stitching, and the fabric’s irregular, fragile

construction. When exhibited in the Cooley as an open, arching form, it became a structure, revealing inside and outside simultaneously.

Snyder: I want to ask about the relationship between your color photographs of certain places, and how they relate to your textiles and sculptural work. I’m thinking specifically about the photographs *State Distribution* (2018) and *Old Jungle* (2018). *State Distribution* shows the site of a failed French government initiative to distribute food to refugees. *Old Jungle* depicts the site of an ad hoc refugee camp destroyed by the French government. Both images depict the landscape after it was cleared and “secured” by the authorities, leaving expansive patterns: barbed razor wire and chain-link fencing; tire tracks from bulldozers and trucks; and stretches of rippled sand from saltation. Other photographs depict the aftermath of campsites burned by the police: murky patterns of ash, twigs, and garbage swirl across the ground. Did these spaces influence your sense and use of pattern in the textiles?

Gervais: I think my experience of these spaces absolutely influenced the textiles, especially in terms of pattern, but I was not aware of this connection until you brought it up when we were planning this installation. The constant reworking and redefinition of landscape and space in the areas where I was

working – both by those who were living improvisationally, or clandestinely, and by forces that sought to contain and divert this presence – was something I was very aware of in Calais. As improvised living sites appeared in outlying parks, fields, and industrial areas, barriers (physical and symbolic) also appeared. Pathways were carved through the forest, fences were cut, and individual campsites routinely migrated between different corners of the same forest. I experienced tents and precarious dwellings as collapsible, flexible, and collective spaces that were passed from one person to another; made from blankets woven between wooden structures; or slashed (by the police) and later mended.

The group of photographs, more so than any of the other works in *Gulalhi*, was created with the Cooley and this exhibition in mind. My photographing around Calais was focused on four points: the violence of the border, the feat of journeys of trespassing, the impact of movement and securitization on the landscape, and the border as a liminal space capable of transcending conventions and limitations. I photographed sites that I walked by repeatedly, or was well acquainted with as a volunteer. My photographs are a means of remembering and recording these spaces, as well as the people I met and worked with, whose stories also entered into the textiles.

Old Jungle, one of the photographs you mention, depicts the former site of the large-scale, makeshift encampment that was



Figure 6

Burka #5, 2018, oil on canvas, glass paint on vinyl, and sewing thread, 58 × 120 inches.

established on a sandy enclave in the north of Calais. The “Jungle” grew spontaneously, and rapidly, into a bustling, elaborate settlement that included sections

of dwellings organized by nationality, refugee-run restaurants and shops, and volunteer-built communal structures, including classrooms

and health clinics. It was reputed to have held 10,000 people when it was demolished in October 2016. When I returned to Calais in 2017, the site was completely



Figure 7
Old Jungle, 2018, archival inkjet print on Dibond, 20.5 × 26 inches.

empty and was separated from the adjacent freeway by a newly built wall, the surrounding roads routinely patrolled by police cars.

Snyder: One of the things I admire greatly about the photographs is that they're "flawed" by conventional photographic standards. You're an artist, not a photojournalist, and the means of production of your photographs is inherent to the social and political

concerns of your work. You don't work digitally. You work with a time-intensive analog camera that is prone to light leaks and focusing aberrations. This results in strange moments of ghostly fogging and blurring across the images. I find these qualities vital to the significance of the photographs. They visualize the uncertainty and abnormality of life in the refugee camps, and the impossibility of truly understanding the experiences of

the residents. I equate these photographic aberrations with imperfections in the textiles – glitches and lapses (Figure 7).

Gervais: I made these photographs with a large-format film camera; essentially a box formed by a film holder on one end and a lens board on the other. In the middle is the extendable bellows, made of pleated cloth and cardboard. The

camera takes time to set up, load with film, and focus. There is no such thing as candid photography, or a quick shot. It is both bulky and indiscreet, but its presence is not obvious in the same way as a digital camera, so it provokes different reactions, and relationships. I felt strongly that this was the only type of camera that would allow me to work in this context. This cumbersome, sculptural, and unpredictable means of image-making matched the situation, which was by nature blind, in the sense of uncertain, and digressive.

Snyder: Also, in planning the exhibition, you decided to print the photographs directly onto a Dibond substrate. This negated the need for glazing, allowing the visitor to get as close as possible to the images. Instead of mounting the photographs on the walls of the museum, we created slim wood shelves where they rested, leaning against the walls. The photographs became portable entities, and you shifted their placement throughout the exhibition. Given that some of the photographs depicted camp residents (people you are close to), this felt far more honest to me than mounting the photographs in a fixed location with a fixed-point perspective. Everyone depicted in the photographs gave their permission to be included in the exhibition, and you provided your subjects with financial compensation. Thanks to cell phones, you've been able to stay in contact with everyone, and support them in various ways. And

given the continual mobility of refugee life, you have met and formed relationships with people both within and outside of the camps – you've even worked professionally to record the stories of refugees in the UK for an aid group. You give artistic credence to the stories that are imparted to you by presenting them – in full – in different sensory forms throughout your work.

Gervais: Right. *O dai's Story* came out of my collaboration with Rethink Rebuild Society, a Syrian advocacy organization based in the UK. We recorded a series of storytelling videos with Syrian refugees, with the aim to dispel public misconceptions about the origin of the war in Syria, including the root cause of civilian deaths and flight. I was inspired by the Syrians I was meeting through Rethink Rebuild Society, and by Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami's written history of the Syrian revolution, *Burning Country* (2016). These authors question the widespread use of the term "civil war" to speak about Syria; they claim it is misleading, and erases accountability for a regime that is sponsoring the destruction of entire cities. Civilian extermination, torture, and abuse have been the systematic policy of the Assad regime since even before 2011.

Snyder: There are three small works in the exhibition which we haven't discussed. They are framed typescripts – first-person

stories that recount different aspects of your experience. They are the only works in the exhibition that are literally in your voice. They have a poetic feel to me; they don't read like documentation. I find their narratives both subtle and powerful, and visually they read like another form of woven textile. Like your photographs, they're also made with analog technology. Tell me more about them.

Gervais: These works were made on a typewriter. *Gulalhi* (2018), *Try* (2018), and *Emergency* (2017) weave together fragments of stories and experiences; they are not linear narratives. They are intimate. These works describe where I was working and the people I met (who also appear elsewhere in this exhibition) between 2017 and 2018 in Calais, while I was volunteering with aid groups and making photographs. Thoughts come out differently on a typewriter than with other mechanisms. The directness of the process replicates a kind of urgency; there are always typos, or mistakes. I wanted to capture the immediacy of the experiences I was having, as well as record my own memories. *Gulalhi* describes how I met Aziz. I never imagined that *Gulalhi* would become the name of the exhibition.

Snyder: I'm trying to remember the moment we realized that *Gulalhi* was the ideal title for the exhibition. I think I had just read your story, and then we spoke at length about Aziz and his tattoo. I

am still touched that the tattoo is a living artifact of remembrance, and that the word *gulalhi* means “flowers.” Flowers embody remembrance. As we absorb experience, we remember it sensorily and emotionally. All of the works in the exhibition embrace and transmit memory without trying to force it to completion or some standard of factuality. Your beautiful and deeply meaningful works are made the same way we remember life – in tactile and emotional fragments that snare and define us. Trauma, like a stitch, is described as a return. Sometimes healing requires that we overcome the return.

As we close the interview, I would love to know what is next for you and your work ...

Gervais: In imagining memory, and how history is experienced and described, we have both been inspired by Salman Rushdie’s writings. I just read a particularly inspiring passage: “I must say first of all that description is itself a political act” (Rushdie 1991, 17).

In a recently published essay, entitled “Shields, Open Wounds, and New Landscapes,” I describe a new series of sculptures that are

based on *Shield* (Gervais forthcoming). At the moment, I am calling these new works *Shield Works*. They are beaded and woven, like my previous work, but are shaped by gaps and perforations in the weaving. My essay is about wounding, trauma, and violence, and how these forms of breakage, disconnection, and fragmentation can become the starting points for rerouting, redirection, and new forms of relationality. This project may also turn into a series of paintings.

Of course I will continue to visit, and stay in touch with, the people who have been part of *Gulalhi*, who are now transitioning into other phases of their lives. For some time, I have been thinking about creating other large-scale tapestries that would become part of *Odai’s Story*, or else accompany it – working with my archive of recordings of stories by Syrians. I will also continue to explore the use of sound in my installations, in particular in relation to translation and protest song. As a whole, *Gulalhi* brought great focus to the last decade of my practice, and I feel a great sense of clarity about my future work. All the threads that began in *Gulalhi* will be carried forward.

Supplemental material

Gulalhi installation documentation: <https://rdc.reed.edu/c/cooley/s?s=12337aeee6-c024397e88a4c84a368aa29792-e999&p=1&pp=20>

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