Justine Youssef: *Somewhat Eternal*, UTS Gallery, Sydney, 2023. Photography by Jacquie Mnning.

Justine Youssef: *Somewhat Eternal*

Exhibition Kit

This exhibition kit has been developed by ACE Education to support student learning and engagement with the ACE exhibition *Somewhat Eternal*. Inside, you'll find a curatorial overview, background information on the artists, and insights into selected artworks.

The kit includes discussion prompts to encourage critical thinking, along with a flexible activity designed for use in the classroom or gallery setting. Educators can adapt the content to suit primary or secondary students, integrating it into broader visual arts, history, or cultural studies learning.

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About the Exhibition

Somewhat Eternal is a multi-sensory installation, encompassing video and textiles, text and scent. The central work—a three-channel video shot in Lebanon—shows the artist's aunt performin R'sasa, or molybdomancy, a traditionl practice of clearing the 'evil eye'. For generations, the artist's family have used their knowledge of the nearby mountins and local ecology to survive famine and military occupation and to heal everyday ailments and misfortunes. From 1982 to 2000, parts of Lebanon were under Isreli occupation, and the led used in R'sasa is often extracted from bullets still found in the region.

Throughout the installation, embroidered textiles are scented with hydrosols—water-based products made from the steam distilltion of fresh flowers, leaves, fruits, and other plant materials using process the artist inherited from her mother's side of the family. Here, Youssef has substituted commonly used plants with blessed milk thistle, burnet rose, damask rose, and Lebnese cedar, chosen for their complex relationships to land subjugation, occuption, and renewal. Through the use of these materials, Youssef asks us to consider colonisation as a curse that inhabits and influences social and cultural life.

Somewhat Eternal expands from family narratives to consider broder social and political currents, revealing the connections between human displacement and ecology. For Youssef, traditional rituals such as these—though now fragmented and altered across geographies—offer us alternatives for the future.

Justine Youssef, *Somewhat Eternal*, 2024, installation view, Adelaide Contemporary Experimental. Photography by Sam Roberts.

About the artist

Justine Youssef explores the impacts of displacement and prompts us to consider our involvement in creating it. Relationships to land and the endurance of rituals and beliefs are key ideas for the Darug/Sydney–based artist. Youssef's work was shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, in 2021, and the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, in 2022, and in the 2022 Hawai'i Triennle. She was the 2019 recipient of the Copyright Agency's John Fries Award.

Justine Youssef.

Selected Artworks

Somewhat Eternal unfolds as an exploration of ritual, inheritance, and transformation, where personal memory becomes inseparable from broader histories of displacement and resilience. At its core, the installation reveals how ordinary gestures, such as acts of healing, caring, or scenting fabric, can carry within them entire worlds of knowledge and survival.

Rather than presenting ritual as static tradition, Youssef frames practices like R'sasa and scent distillation as evolving, adaptive responses to the conditions of exile, colonisation, and migration. The materials themselves, lead, textiles, hydrosols, and video, become carriers of these layered meanings, shifting between violence and care, rupture and repair.

The blankets infused with distilled botanicals bring the sensory into focus: roses, cedar, and milk thistle mark not only cultural lineages but also geographies scarred by occupation or displacement. Their aromas permeate the installation, offering visitors a direct, embodied encounter with histories that are often silenced or unseen.

In this way, *Somewhat Eternal* resists being confined to autobiography. It acts as both archive and proposition, holding fragments of familial ritual while opening toward collective futures. Youssef's work asks how practices altered by diaspora might remain fertile sites of continuity, and how they might provide tools for reimagining life beyond inherited wounds.

Justine Youssef, *Somewhat Eternal*, 2024, installation view, Adelaide Contemporary Experimental. Photography by Sam Roberts.

Discussion

- How can everyday gestures, like healing practices or scenting fabric, carry cultural memory across generations?
- What do the use of lead, textiles, and plant distillations reveal about the links between violence, care, and survival?
- How does engaging with scent, sound, and touch change the way we understand history, culture, or displacement?

Gallery Discussion

- Youssef grew up in Western Sydney and draws on her lived experience as a second-generation migrant of Lebanese descent. Cultural identity and inherited rituals are important in her work. Consider your own cultural heritage. How do you stay connected to your culture and family traditions? We'll belong to multiple cultures; think about how you bring them together in your life. Which challenges and opportunities do people face in connecting with their heritage in Australia?

- Youssef uses textiles such as blankets and flower motifs such as the rose. What feelings and associations evoke in you? What do you think are the artist's intentions behind this choice of materials?

- In Youssef's film, her aunt performs a ritual to ward off the evil eye. Rituals are not always associated with religions or belief systems. They can be everyday actions or behaviours that aim to influence our relationships or outlook on the world, like sharing tea every morning or gathering in a huddle before playing sports. What kinds of rituals are practiced in your household?

- How do current world events—such as the Israel/Palestine conflict relate to Youssef's work? What is the distance between the personal and the politicial?

Classroom Activity

- Youssef's work is grounded in family stories, and particularly in her close connections to her female relatives. Brainstorm a collection of words that come to mind when you think about your own family stories and relationships.

- Then, create a work that combines text and textiles by choosing one or two words and hand stitching them onto secondhand fabric. You may like to repurpose childhood blankets, tea towels, or tablecloths. Embellish your design with charms, buttons, shells, and other found objects. Experiment with different hand-embroidery techniques such as back stitch or chain stitch. What unique story does this combination of text, textile, and design convey?

- Building on this activity, combine class responses into a collaborative artwork by sewing them together as a quilt. How does bringing these individual works together shift the stories the overall artwork tells?

- Are there any images or motifs that reoccur throughout the class? With friends, reflect on similarities and differences.

Curriculum Links

Australian Curriculum / Visual Art /
Years 11–12 SACE Objectives

- Implement ideas and representations
- Apply literacy skills
- Analyse and interpret visual language, expression and meaning in art
- Evaluate art practices, traditions, cultures, and theories
- Experiment in response to stimulus
- Create meaning through the knowledge and understanding of art materials, techniques, technologies, and processes
- Realise responses to communicate meaning

Australian Curriculum / Visual Arts /
Years F-10

- Use materials, techniques and processes to explore visual conventions when making artworks (AC9AVAFD01 - AC9AVA10D01) (AC9AVAFC02 - AC9AVA10C02)
- Explore ideas and artworks from different cultures and times, including works by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, to use as inspiration for their own representations (AC9AVAFE01 - AC9AVA10E01) (AC9AVAFE02 - AC9AVA10E02)
- Respond to art works and consider where and why people make them, including visual art works of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (AC9AVAFE01 - AC9AVA10E01) (AC9AVAFE02 - AC9AVA10E02)
- Develop ways to enhance their intentions as artists through exploration of how they use materials, techniques, technologies, and processes (AC9AVA10D01) (AC9AVA10D02)
- Practice techniques and processes to enhance representation of ideas in their art making (AC9AVAFD01 - AC9AVA10D01) (AC9AVAFC02 - AC9AVA10C02)

Visit Us

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Tours

We welcome visits from education groups, primary through to tertiary, and encourage self-guided visits to our exhibitions. For more information about how to book, visit our website or email us.

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Curators: Stella Rosa McDonald, Tulleah Pearce, Patrice Sharkey

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