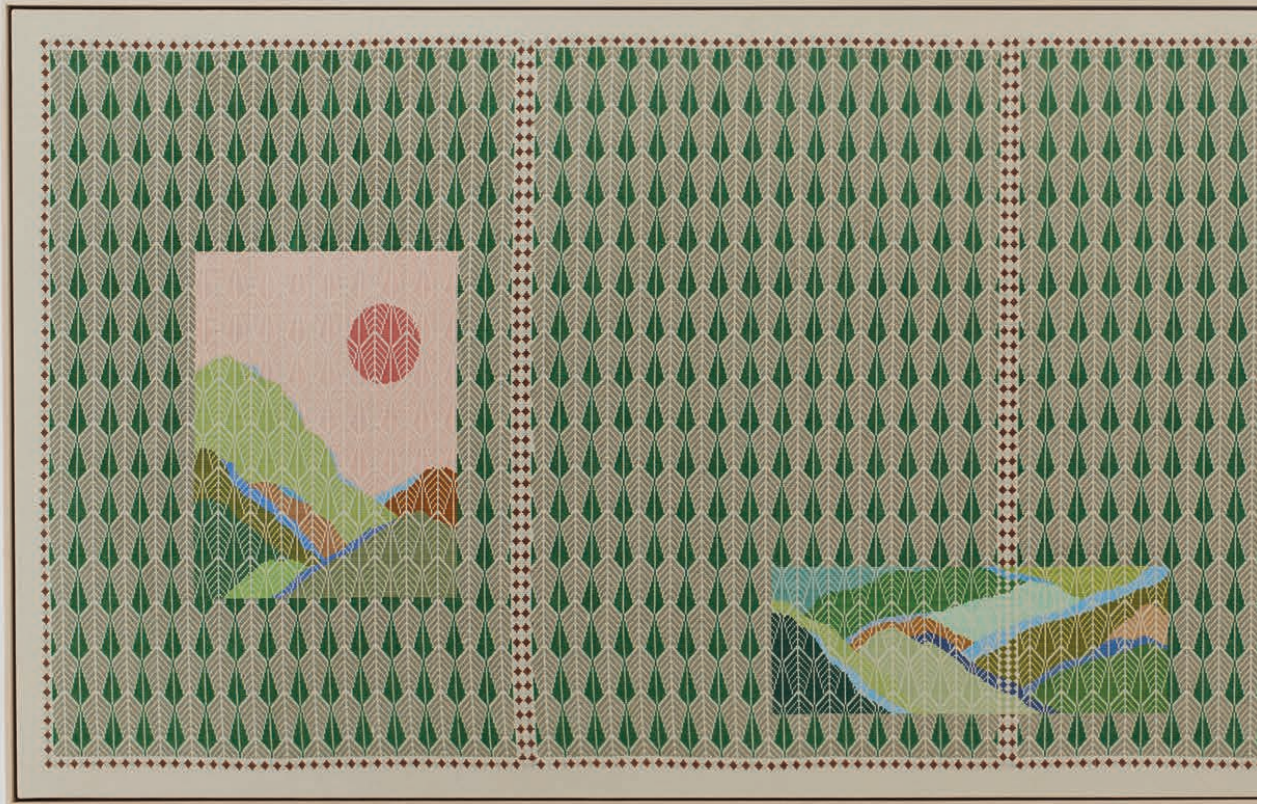


DREAMSCAPES

*New York-based artist **Jordan Nassar**'s vivid tapestries stitch together inherited nostalgia about his Palestinian heritage with his own experiences of collaborating with skilled embroiderers from the region. As he turns his hand to glassmaking, he tells **Charlotte Jansen** how his artworks transcend time and space. Portraits by **Pernille Loof***

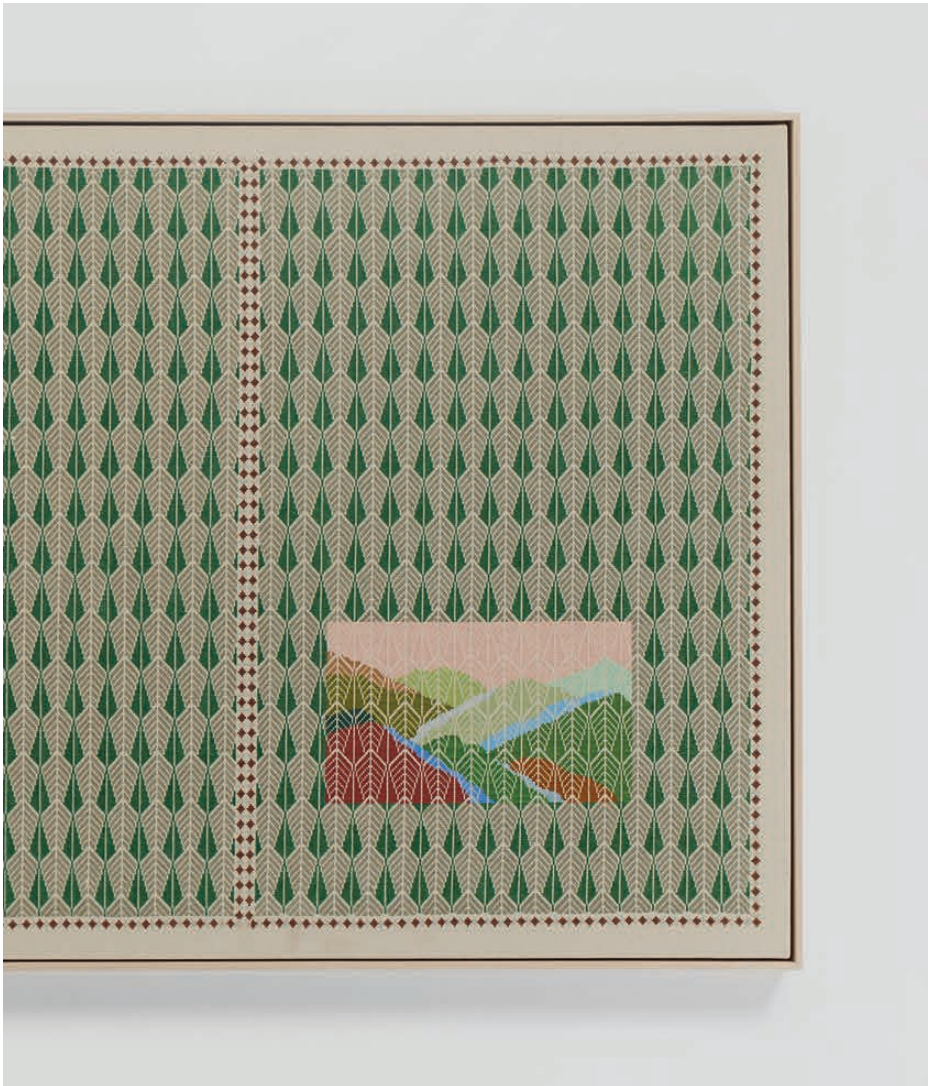




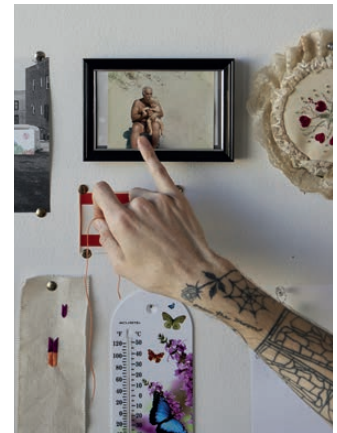
It is only a few minutes into my conversation with Jordan Nassar and the atmosphere is tense: it's inevitable when the subject is as contentious as Palestine. He is speaking over Zoom from his studio in Gowanus, Brooklyn, his English bulldog Kasha dozing on a sofa in the background, a wheat straw basket he's experimenting with on the floor beside him. On the walls are numerous *hamsas*, wall-hangings and ceramic objects collected from across Palestine. Nassar, who was raised in Manhattan by a US-born, Palestinian father and a Polish mother, is exasperated with the polarising politics he's witnessing between those who adhere to the

hardline tactics of the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement and others who, like him, prefer what he calls 'soft activism'. 'For some people, even just the word Palestine is political,' he says.

Nassar's work has often been interpreted according to the complex situation in Palestine, but that perhaps has more to do with the constant politicisation of place rather than his intent to comment on it. 'My day-to-day activism for Palestine is separate from my art,' emphasises the artist, whose first institutional solo show, *The Field is Infinite*, is currently at KMAC Museum in Louisville, Kentucky. 'I can only make work from my own perspective and speak about the experience of my Palestinian culture and



Main image photo Phebe d'Haute. Courtesy the artist, James Cohan, New York, and Anat Elbigi, Los Angeles



Left: *A Stream is Singing Under the Youthful Grass, 2020*, hand-embroidered cotton on cotton, first shown at Nassar's solo show at James Cohan in New York, October 2020. Above: ephemera in his studio

heritage. It would be inappropriate for me to speak for other Palestinians.' Similarly, his use of craft techniques traditionally practised by women and in a contemporary art context isn't about commenting on the female experience and what art means today: 'I like doing these crafts – I didn't set out to make a statement.'

Growing up, Nassar's idea of Palestine and his identity evolved, as it does for many people born in a diaspora, through layers of 'inherited nostalgia'. His paternal grandfather was originally from Gaza, and left Palestine voluntarily before the creation of Israel, travelling from Haifa to the US by boat in 1921. Nassar's early encounters with Palestine, before he visited for the first time aged 15,

were through his family's stories – a rich, wistful tapestry of subjectivity, half-imagined, half-real. It inspired vivid images of Palestine, and imbued the treasured pieces from the fatherland in his home – woven wall hangings, pillowcases and other domestic items – with a quasi-magical quality. 'My relationship with Palestine is through objects, trinkets, crafts and food: material things that I can access anywhere, and that could be considered superficial but are things I cherish,' Nassar explains. These relics transcend geographical boundaries and keep histories that have been ruptured and displaced intact – particularly meaningful in the diasporic context.

It was only natural that when Nassar began to create



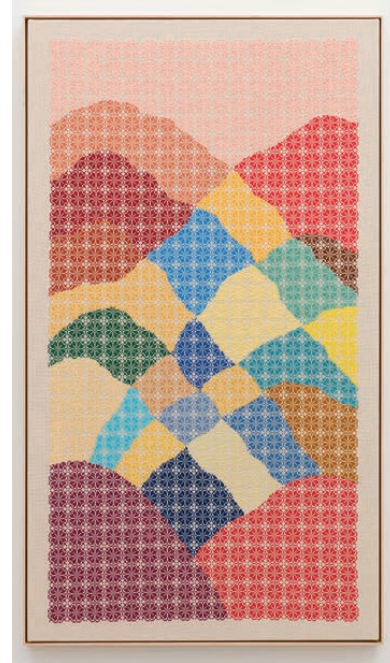
canvases he would employ the traditional Palestinian techniques he had grown up around. His love of craft started with origami aged seven, evolving to crocheting and weaving – passions that have remained steadfast ever since. In 2015, Nassar presented his first geometric, cross-stitch cotton embroidery pieces based on traditional tateez patterns – a centuries-old matrilineal technique used to create clothing and domestic objects, steeped in secret meanings and once highly localised, until the Palestinian population was torn apart by the demarcations that still separate them today.

Later, Nassar shifted away from this technical, mathematical language towards something more confident and painterly. He also began to collaborate with women weavers in the West Bank that he met through The Parents Circle-Families Forum. These collaborative exchanges remain central to his practice. Using a modular grid, Nassar sends sketches of compositions to the women who begin the piece, sending it back to Brooklyn where he completes them, stitching cotton onto cotton or jobelan. ‘When I showed them what I do, they were shy and embarrassed – “a man doing this is weird”, they said – but now they admire my work and are inspired by my use of colour. We have an exchange of ideas, and they respect that I’m also a Palestinian embroiderer.’

The resulting works don’t try to trick the viewer. The women’s patterns are clearly interrupted with Nassar’s landscapes: they literally represent co-existence, the meeting of Nassar’s two worlds, one often visibly bordered by the other. In *A Stream is Singing Under the Youthful Grass* – an impressive new work stretching 2.5 metres long and first shown in Nassar’s solo exhibition, *I Cut the Sky in Two* at James Cohan in New York in October 2020 – the characteristic geometric patterns of Palestinian tateez encase three mountain landscapes. It is riveting in detail and sublime in colour, the two parts making a whole that shouldn’t work together but do. Such works become a kind of reconciliation of the self and the other, the real and the imagined, the abstract and the landscape, the masculine and feminine, the inherited and the innovated. In these pieces, all of the disparate threads of Nassar’s being come cohesively together. Nicola Trezzi, director of Israel’s Centre for Contemporary Art, reflects: ‘When it comes to contemporary art, we tend to draw a line and see conceptualism opposite to craftsmanship; beauty opposite to activism; studio practice opposite to collaboration. Jordan Nassar blurs this line, honouring both sides with integrity and dedication.’

The process of the work, passing it to and fro, exchanging ideas, forging dialogue, also reflects Nassar’s position as a person of the diaspora: ‘I feel I’m a natural-born connector – I can bring objects and information back and forth in a way many other Palestinian people can’t.’

Nassar has exhibited both collaborative embroidery works and others he makes alone widely across North America and Europe, as well as in Israel. Last year was



Memoir photo Michael Underwood. Courtesy the artist and Anit Eghi, Los Angeles

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Left: Jordan Nassar at work in his studio. Top right: *To Carry the Moon*, 2020, hand-embroidered cotton on cotton



remarkably successful for the artist, despite the pandemic: his exhibition at KMAC Museum followed solo shows at both his New York gallery James Cohan, and at Los Angeles gallery Anat Ebgi in the autumn. He has emerged as a leading figure among a group of artists who offer new ideas about ancestral and age-old textile crafts in contemporary art, including the likes of Billie Zangewa, Alexandra Kehayoglou, Pia Camil and Faig Ahmed.

It is Nassar's 'vivid landscapes and intricate patterns, rendered in embroidery and flame-worked glass', using the labour of 'venerable craft processes from his familial homeland', that make him such an exciting artist, according to Joey Yates, curatorial director at KMAC Museum. 'As an institution, we engage with the interchange between contemporary art, material culture and craft production in the 21st century. Within this context, Jordan stands out for his remarkable handling of native customs and traditional crafts as a means to transmit cultural connections to a disconnected Palestinian diaspora.'

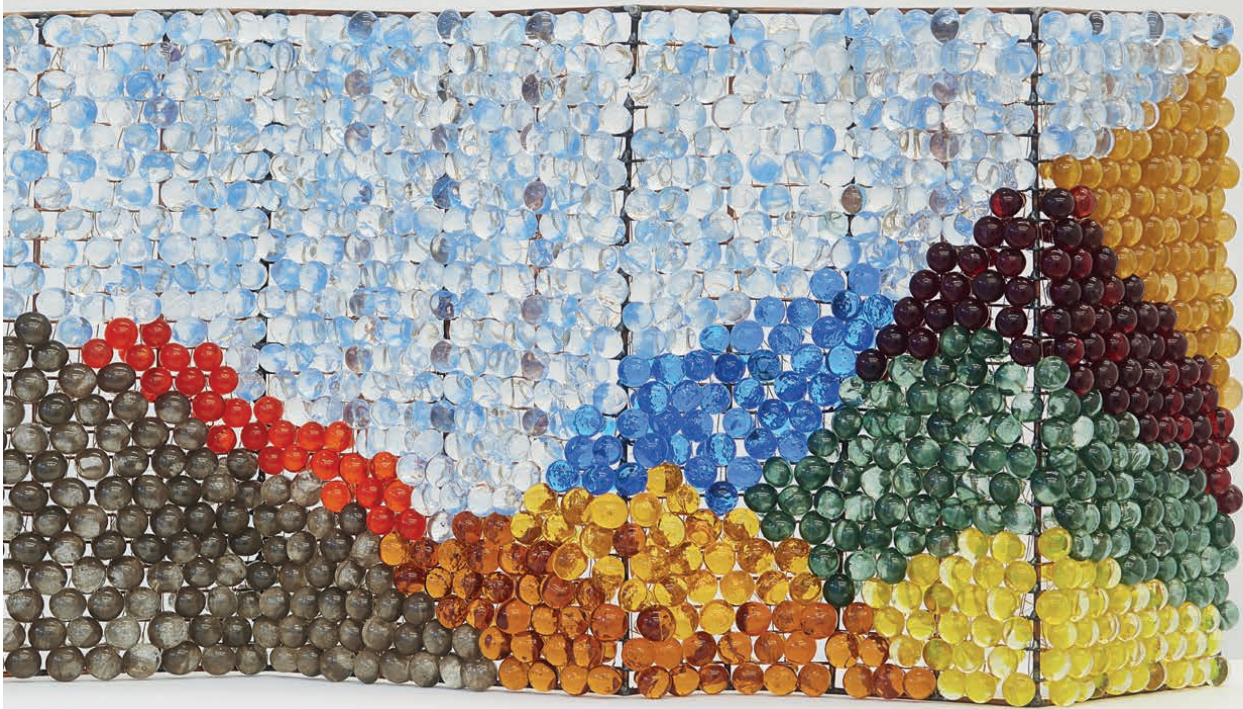
Nassar has also been likened to Etel Adnan, the fêted 95-year-old Lebanese-American painter and poet. While making remains central to his ambitions - 'I want to be the craft guy,' he says - Nassar, like Adnan, is profoundly interested in the spiritual and subliminal possibilities of colour, which he explores according to intuition, like a painter. 'That's what makes a work successful for me,' he says, 'when people feel moved by things that are communicated by the subconscious practice.'

Self-taught, straight-talking and precise, Nassar baulks at

Top: Nassar made 2,000 glass beads last summer. **Right:** Bab Al-Zuhur (*Gate of Flowers*), 2020, hand-flamed glass beads, steel wire

Bab Al-Zuhur: photo Phoebe d'Heurle. Courtesy the artist, James Cohan, New York, and Anat Ebgi, Los Angeles







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the suggestion of any subterfuge in his work: hanging his textile pieces in frames on the wall is a deliberate choice. 'I'm not interested in questioning what visual art is. I want the things I make to be perceived as art.' Equally, it's the pace of his making, its slowness, the level of control he can achieve, the way he can learn to manipulate his materials through YouTube videos, 'no matter what language they're in', that drives his perennial curiosity in craft, and is why he is now turning his attention to other Middle Eastern crafts – from furniture design to glassblowing.

As well as wall-based pieces, Nassar's exhibition at KMAC Museum includes *The Sea Beneath Our Eyes*, an installation first shown in Tel Aviv. An evolution of his 2018 presentation *Spirits Rebellious* at Frieze New York, which featured seating reminiscent of an Arab *majlis* (sitting room), the installation marks a turning point for Nassar: it takes the form of an imagined home for the artist. It is furnished with objects representing the diversity of crafts found between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea – aiming to conceptually 'answer the question of what this place is now'. Included are Russian glass figurines, European pine-needle baskets made on a kibbutz, carved olive wood from Bethlehem, ceramics from Jerusalem and Ethiopian baskets made in Kiryat Gat – all by artisans living in the regions.

Out of this exhibit came a series of glass pieces that he showed at James Cohan, introducing a new technique to his repertoire inspired by Palestinian glassworks he found in Hebron. Nassar planned to have the glass beads made in Palestine but COVID-19 quashed that idea, so instead he spent last summer making the 2,000 or so beads he required at a workshop near his studio. He attaches these coloured, hand-flamed beads to a steel wire structure to create his sculptures, the translucency of the glass allowing

for exquisite interactions with the light. This new direction took Nassar out of his comfort zone: 'I'm glad I did it, because by doing the making myself I feel more connected to those works as a craftsperson.' His long-term plan is to learn all of the different crafts involved in his installation so that he can incorporate the techniques into a single work, evoking the feeling of the apartment but in a compressed, succinct form.

The artist's unerring dedication to craft is driven by his desire to 'surpass time and space' in his work: 'I want to communicate human experience and emotion, not specific times and places.' It is another aspect that connects him to Adnan, and manifests in his return to motifs of eternal subjects: sunrise and sunset, the mountains and the moon, cypress trees and valleys. 'Using traditional Palestinian crafts makes sense for me, but the concepts are not specific to me or Palestine,' he says. The rhythm of his practice keeps him deeply connected to his ancestry, however, with embroidery being a 'way of life' in the region. It can take six weeks to complete a work, and Nassar often sits for seven hours a day embroidering. He regularly works at home after dinner until he goes to bed. In this way his existence is intertwined with Palestinian women, 'whose pieces are made over days between other tasks'.

Nassar's works are both intimate and personal, yet expand to the universal; his crafts signal the infinite, interconnected nature of things, while the discernible presence of his hand reminds us of our humanity. As Etel Adnan once wrote: 'Your hand is autonomous but it's also part of your body, and your body is part of the world; it has boundaries, it has its shape, but it is still part of the world.' *Jordan Nassar: The Field is Infinite* is at KMAC Museum, Louisville, Kentucky, until 4 April. kmacmuseum.org jordannassar.com

Top: Nassar's installation *The Sea Beneath Our Eyes*, on show at KMAC Museum, Kentucky. Right: the artist in his studio in Brooklyn

