



Justine Youssef: Somewhat Eternal, UTS Gallery, Sydney, 2023. Photo: Jacquie Manning.

Justine Youssef: *Somewhat Eternal* Education Resource

This education resource has been developed for use alongside the exhibition *Justine Youssef: Somewhat Eternal* showing at the Institute of Modern Art from 20 January to 11 March 2024. Aimed at secondary-school audiences, educators can adapt the gallery and classroom activities to suit their students.

About the Exhibition

Somewhat Eternal (2023) 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 performing *R'sasa*, or molybdomancy, a traditional practice of clearing the evil eye. For generations, the artist's family have used their knowledge of the local mountains and ecology to survive famine and military occupation and to heal everyday ailments and misfortunes. From 1982 to 2000, parts of Lebanon were under Israeli occupation, and the lead 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 distillation of fresh flowers, leaves, fruits, and other plant materials using a 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 Lebanese cedar, chosen for their complex relationships to land subjugation, occupation, 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 broader 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.

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 Triennale. She was the 2019 recipient of the Copyright Agency's John Fries Award.

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 all belong to multiple cultures, think about how you bring them together in your life. What challenges 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 do they 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 sport. What kinds of rituals are practiced in your household?
- How do current world events—such as the Israel/Palestine conflict and the Voice to Parliament referendum—relate to Youssef's work? What is the distance between the personal and the political? Consider the cultural context of the artist as a Lebanese migrant settler working on unceded Darug Country/Western Sydney.

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 a friend, reflect on similarities and differences.

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