

Digital Drawing Room: MFA Fine Arts featuring Ebtihal Shedid Abdelghafar

Interviewed by Selam Bekele



Starting May 10, you can view work by students in the MFA graduating class on the website 2021.CCAMFA.art and in the [Class of 2021 Showcase](#).

Works in this series were written by students in Glen Helfand and Maria Porges' respective graduate writing seminars this past fall and spring.

Ebtihal Shedid Abdelghafar is an Egyptian photographer based in San Francisco. Shedid has an MA in Translation Studies, Linguistics and Cultural Studies from Johannes Gutenberg Universität Mainz, Germany and a BA in German Studies from Cairo University, Egypt.

Selam Bekele: What's your process like in the studio?

Ebtihal Abdelghafar: My process is very improvisational, and I always pay attention to chance when I put things together and move things around. I never really question myself, I just do it. Because you see something, and maybe it informs something else. I think about failure a lot, and I just embrace it.

SB: There are many pieces in your portfolio that feel introspective and self-reflective, and there are also portraits of others. How important is portraiture to your practice?

EA: If someone is comfortable in front of the camera, which is really key, you'll have a good portrait. So a lot of the portraits that I work on are portraits of my friends. And if it's with someone I don't know, I try to replicate this feeling of intimacy.



You have no reason to go back



Portrait of Mama and Baba

SB: Right, and it seems like your practice goes far beyond photography, into various other media—installation, crochet, and fabric.

EA: I come from a family of makers so everything that I find myself interested in now is all stuff that I grew up around. My mom crocheted a lot, and I spent my childhood in my dad's carpentry shop, or watching my uncle who was a tailor cut and sew pieces of fabric together. As part of this lineage, I've been printing pictures on fabric, and I'm very drawn to what photos on fabric look like right now.



Windows of Sehnsucht

SB: Can you tell me a little about how your background in linguistics informs your practice?

EA: I think it is doing so in ways that I'm not yet certain of. I've been working in theater and translation for 10 years and it's only showing up now. I have a piece about languages, where I'm reading a short story in four languages, exploring slippage and miscommunication in that interstitial space of translation.

SB: Yes, the multimedia piece *A table is a table* (2020). Did you say four languages? I only picked up on three; German, English, and Arabic.

EA: Well, I'm doing my own little experiment. I'm speaking Standard Arabic and Egyptian Arabic. Strictly speaking, those are the same language, because in the Arab world, Standard Arabic (or the language of the Quran) is the official language. And what people speak in 28 countries are considered *dialects*. The reason is political, but I actually have my own reasons to say that Egyptian Arabic is a separate language. That's why I say four, instead of three, because both are in the work.



De construct home

SB: In your story, the character is expressing sadness, but he is also finding humor in how miscommunication makes people sound crazy. For example, he hears people call a rug a table, and a table a bed.

EA: Yes, he changes all the words and then he creates his own language and ends up being lonely. The story starts with him being lonely, and it ends with him being lonely—that's the thing with language. It's a tool for communication and community, but also the arbitrariness of it all.