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Golnar Adili by Dina A. Ramadan

Fragmenting language to extend the individual and family body.

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<https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/hiresolution/Golnar-Adili-To-Measure-the-Emotions-of-Others-1.jpg>

Installation view of *Golnar Adili: To Measure the Emotions of Others*, 2026. Smack Mellon, New York City. Photo by Etienne Frossard. Courtesy of Smack Mellon.

Golnar Adili's multidisciplinary practice has centered on a physical and conceptual excavation of language that creates what she refers to as "a lexicon of displacement." Through the abstraction of language—the isolation of individual letters as repeated shapes or sounds—the Iranian American artist reveals its fragile instability and by extension the precarity of memory as she attempts to (re)construct a lost history and homeland. The body and the archive become the forms through which the ephemeral quality of language is given material weight, even while what they capture simultaneously is a continued absence. The reproduction and reanimation of her father's personal papers, like the repetition and accumulation of casts of missing limbs, become an insistence on endurance and presence.

Dina Ramadan

You've often spoken about being interested in an architecture of language, both literally and metaphorically.

Golnar Adili

I find language—this invented set of symbols and sounds that we communicate in and mould the world through—very interesting, and as a member of the Iranian diaspora, language is my precious access to home and culture. The question of giving language material form is very exciting to me, and I have been working broadly with language in two ways. One is a constructed form that reduces text to its essence using a modular language of connected cubes through which I mostly explore medieval poetry with the aim of bringing forth a contemporary vision of its content. The second is an investigative one in which I isolate my parents' handwritten material to deconstruct, reconstruct, and process my late father's archive and make my mother and her hardship seen. These two approaches are formally different, as the first one is pixelated while the second is fluid, reflective, and an extension of my parents' bodies.



(<https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/hiresolution/Golnar-Adili-To-Measure-the-Emotions-of-Others-2.jpg>).

Installation view of *Golnar Adili: To Measure the Emotions of Others*, 2026. Smack Mellon, New York City. Photo by Etienne Frossard. Courtesy of Smack Mellon.

DR

I see your interest in script, specifically your isolation and abstraction of certain letters in search of their essence, as part of the tradition of *Hurufiyya*, a modern artistic movement that emerged in Iran and the Arab world in the mid-twentieth century.

GA

My love for letters resonates with the *Hurufiyya* movement. I feel a close affinity to their obsession with the word, with letters, and bringing the script into the modern age. I came across their history about fifteen years ago through a Persian book in which the world, the afterworld, and apocalypse were explained through letters. One specific scene at the end of this surrealist fiction etched itself into my mind: the narrator describes how letters were raining down on the world during the apocalypse.

“Deconstruction and reconstruction are processes of cutting and reorganizing that by their nature lead to hiding and revealing different aspects of the archive, continuing its fluid and imperfect life, much like memory.”

— Golnar Adili

DR

You have been working with your father’s personal archive for a number of years now by layering, reproducing, revealing, and withholding different parts of it in ways that speak to the fluidity of memory and the relationship between image and text.

GA

My work with my father’s archive is intuitive, intermittent, and ongoing rather than systematic. I don’t draw a cohesive pattern out of it; rather, I get lost in its different aspects that feel urgent for me to process at any given moment. This is why some parts of the archive have been left alone for now—for example, my father’s exchanges with his comrades—while other parts feel more urgent, like my mother’s communication with him. For the [current exhibition \(https://www.smackmellon.org/exhibition/golnar-adili-to-measure-the-emotions-of-others/\)](https://www.smackmellon.org/exhibition/golnar-adili-to-measure-the-emotions-of-others/), however, I felt the need to include more of the archive as a reflection on the cyclical nature of Iran’s political turmoil and the current massacre of tens of thousands of protesters.

For me, working with this archive was urgent, even though I could not look at the material for years, as I was too emotional. After ten years had passed, I woke up in the middle of the night knowing it was time to start and knew exactly where to start: my mother’s letter written on a pink airmail letter paper, which is an emotional and tender account of difficult days spent with a child who misses their father deeply. The large reproduction of this piece is part of the current exhibition, which borrows its title from this letter.

I had brought my father’s archive to Smack Mellon in 2012 when Hurricane Sandy devastated my studio. After salvaging the letters with the help of my community, I digitized all of the material and have been working with different aspects of it since. I felt overwhelmed with how to move through this information. I decided to be intuitive rather than comprehensive. This led me to ultimately do with it what I do with everything else, which is to deconstruct and reconstruct each letter, song, and communication that was drawing my attention because of its emotional impact. Deconstruction and reconstruction are processes of cutting and reorganizing that by their nature lead to hiding and revealing different aspects of the archive, continuing its fluid and imperfect life, much like memory.



(<https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/hiresolution/Golnar-Adili-To-Measure-the-Emotions-of-Others-3.jpg>).

Installation view of *Golnar Adili: To Measure the Emotions of Others*, 2026. Smack Mellon, New York City. Photo by Etienne Frossard. Courtesy of Smack Mellon.

DR

In your most recent works, you continue your exploration of language through the body; here language takes physical, material form through casts of arms and hands—yours and your family’s—that form the shapes of letters. The titles of these works—*Hold your children close to your hearts* (2025), *Hold them tight* (2025), *Maa (Us) I* (2025)—intimate the need for safety and protection through closeness.

GA

Language comes out of the body, and I love the body; it is our first home. I see formal parallels between words and the Persian alphabet specifically. For example, the *alef* reminds me of the whole body standing up, with the stroke on the top of it like the head. But the straight arm is also like the *alef*, and the arm in motion is like the *ye*, the last letter of the alphabet. Just as words and language help build our world through communication, our bodies, arms, and hands are our agency and move things in the world. In playing with capturing the body, I began casting my hand with plaster gauze and then slipping out of it

and building larger shapes which became abstract forms that used the arm and hand as the module, the stroke. I believe these pieces also came out organically and intuitively as the result of watching the daily massacres in Palestine, specifically in Gaza. Parents holding their dead children, pulling them out of the rubble; children holding their dead and injured siblings. Holding, touch, care, and the embrace are what is left for communities going through erasure; and they, we, will enact those until the bitter end, even if it is holding one's dead child.

DR

The casts of isolated, disembodied limbs are fragile, hollow shells that echo the instability of language. But they are simultaneously resilient, healing, multiplying through repetition.

GA

The process dictated that part of the cast be left open so I could slip out of it, and I loved this look of the shell-like body since it speaks to an absence, but while also being lighter and more drawing-like. The hollow shapes, even though lighter and seemingly more fragile, are actually structurally sound and resilient like shells. The openness of the casts gives them a stroke-like quality, an unfinished and raw feel, a sense of being a part of a continuum, a larger whole, like language. In this way, it is a tool for mark-making or a range of sounds that make up a song.



(<https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/hiresolution/Golnar-Adili-To-Measure-the-Emotions-of-Others-4.jpg>).

Installation view of *Golnar Adili: To Measure the Emotions of Others*, 2026. Smack Mellon, New York City. Photo by Etienne Frossard. Courtesy of Smack Mellon.

DR

The destruction of the Middle East, particularly the ongoing genocide in Gaza, reverberates through your most recent work. Can you reflect on how this has been shaping the direction of your work?

GA

The live-streamed genocide in Gaza is deeply disturbing to follow, but I could not look away, as bearing witness felt like the only thing left to do, and not doing so felt like an abandonment. This plunged me into a depression and a deep questioning of everything, specifically my art. I began to think my only way forward was to weave Palestine into my practice. I still don't know exactly what this means, however; I am keeping myself open to possibilities that present themselves. There was already context for this in the fabric of my practice, which gives voice to the marginalized by investigating the effects of political shifts reflected in the everyday lives of ordinary people in their eyes, dreams, words, and so on.

The rubble was one of the last pieces conceived for this show, and the idea came to me as urgent and visceral. The experience of looking at images of rubble for over two years found expression in this piece, while also providing a fluid counterpoint to the highly constructed and controlled pieces of the ye installation, which is a central work in the exhibition. The colorful, floral blankets strewn in the rubble were especially haunting and evidence of a violent churning of the soft inside among the deadly shards and pieces of an exploded home. Composing the rubble with the blanket felt necessary as a meditation on my grief. This piece came together in the same weeks that the horrifying news about the en masse massacre of Iranian protesters was coming out of Iran. Embedding and revealing the red blanket inside the rubble gained new meaning as it referenced the blood of so many young protesters spilled by another savage regime—this time, the Islamic Republic of Iran.

[Golnar Adili: To Measure the Emotions of Others](https://www.smackmellon.org/exhibition/golnar-adili-to-measure-the-emotions-of-others/)

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is on view at Smack Mellon in New York City until March 29.

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