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Profile: Mona Kamal

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Artist: Mona Kamal

Piece: "Homecoming"

Medium: Installation

"The internet." Mona is telling me how she picked up the carpentry skills necessary to construct the eight-by-eight room of her piece "Homecoming." "Building is actually really easy," she says. "It just takes time and strength." Mona, slight

and about five feet standing, assembled the space using four-by-eight slabs of sheetrock, spackle, pale pink paint, molding, and her two hands. The finished product reminds her of the playrooms in the suburban basements recalled from her youth. She shares with me an important lesson: "Don't use a saw to cut sheetrock."

Carpet lines the "Homecoming" floor; there is no ceiling. Three walls are bare. But on one wall, just above eyelevel and dressed in drawn blinds, is a small rectangle window—the reason for Mona's attempts at sheetrock carving. Instead of glass, nestled within the frame is a small screen that plays a short video called "Seeking Belonging" (embedded here). In an even narration, Mona describes a complicated relationship with culture and belonging while video mixed with still family photographs flicker. "Visitors have to stand to peer into it. You look up and see the landscape, but it's not real," says Mona of the unexpected view visible only by mock voyeurism.

Real, though—very real—are the places in the video. In the summer of 2011, Mona accepted a ten-day residency at the [Banff Centre](#) in Alberta, Canada. She knew the area having grown up in Calgary, only 130 kilometers away (or 80 miles to us Americans). Visiting familiar places, Mona tugged at the knotty thread that ties her to the region and the region to her family.

In 1970, Mona's family immigrated to Alberta from Pakistan. They moved a couple of times, to Algeria (where Mona was born) and Brazil, before settling in Calgary when Mona was six. Her family kept its culture and traditions, but Mona had little direct exposure. She visited Pakistan only once as a child, at age 11, with her mother. As an adult, Mona has made several trips to the region, mostly to Karachi and Delhi in India, many thanks to artist grants and teaching engagements. She is recognized there, but in a friendly way, as a foreigner. She says a common refrain, from taxi drivers to family members, is "I'm sure you'll love it here."

The reverse, however, has not always been the case. Mona felt this first as a South Asian in Canada and then as a Canadian in America. (She moved to New York to earn an MFA in fine arts at Parsons after seven years in Toronto where she worked at a nonprofit afterschool arts program and searched for spare time and energy to create her own art.) "The stereotypes in America about Canadians—people make fun of how

Suguna Lorenzo
Melissa Murray
Kathryn Van Steenhuyse

we say certain words,” Mona says of what she calls the “American problem of Canadian-ness.” “The conversation becomes irrelevant.”

PERFORMANCE

Ezra Dickinson
Paris Hurley

But, to Mona, the conversation is what truly matters. “I don’t think art should be aesthetically pleasing,” she says. “That’s design. Art is about concepts and ideas.” In her art, Mona opens dialogues about family and culture, belonging and otherness. “I feel close to the culture but not my family,” she says, unpacking some of the themes she explores and her interest in them. “Maybe I’m searching for what I didn’t have.”

PHOTOGRAPHY

Tara Donne
Nicole Mabry

While in Banff, Mona went on short walks and wrote in a diary; those words turned into the voiceover. Video post-production happened in New York and construction in an artists’ space in New Jersey. This project involved many steps, which Mona approached in a process-based way that expects the unexpected. “You cannot expect to have an exact final result when you start a piece,” she says. “It’s really important to allow for failure. Learn from experience. The unexpected.”

SCULPTURAL PAINTING

Lisha Bai

Mona is an adjunct professor at Parsons, BMCC/CUNY, and Adelphi University. Visit MonaKamal.com to see more of her work.

SCULPTURE

Dina Romanko
Claudia Trombin

Posted 20 hours ago

THEATER

Daniel Levin
