

# Mona Saeed Kamal finds treasures in an old house

Circling Issue #37, featuring Mona Saeed Kamal



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As June comes to an end, we wanted to mention one more time that this month marks our two-year anniversary since launching *Circling*. If you have enjoyed following along consider becoming a paid subscriber — paid subscriptions allow us to offer a small honorarium to the artists we interview. Thank you for reading!





*Mona Saeed Kamal is a multi-media installation artist who creates narratives about migration, journeys, and identities. Through questioning religion, ethnicity, conflict and borders, she creates stories that directly confront her personal experiences and also the lives of people living in the many cultures and places that she has a connection to. Her origins are rooted in the Indian subcontinent and she has had a migratory upbringing—born in Algeria, raised in Canada and currently residing in New York. The materials and processes she uses are a means to build a dialogue on contemporary issues involving migration, religious interpretation, media biases, cultural practices, ethnicity and racial struggles.*

Mona and I were [studio mates](#) a few years ago, and recently reconnected at a [solo exhibition](#) of hers at the Puffin Foundation in Park Slope, Brooklyn. In the midst of wide-ranging home repairs and renovations alongside her partner, the question of



creating a home (which also doubles as a studio) is at the top of her mind. I had the opportunity recently to join Mona in her studio for a conversation about sustaining her art practice, finding inspiration in remnants of the home's former inhabitants, and navigating the challenges of caring for an old brownstone.

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## Front Stoop

The one thing that's been really instrumental in supporting my art practice is the space. This house has been in my partner's family for four generations, and we moved in recently. Because my studio is in a house I don't have to worry about paying a separate rent for the space, and rents for studios are *really* expensive.

In New York, there are so many people with a lot of money it's hard to not feel drawn into wanting to keep up with the Joneses whether it's where you live, luxury renovations, or going to lots of museum on a regular day instead of pay-what-you-wish hours. When you don't come from that, and you have to work a full time job it's a really different thing from the artists in the city who don't work and have a trust fund. We see lots of these people in our work in real estate and they can be really nice, but it's a totally different experience.



## Paint

These old houses, as we're learning, are a lot to maintain. It's a lot of work to maintain a house anywhere, but when you have an old house you're constantly replacing or fixing things. Managing contractors is hard, and it can be difficult to know if you're getting someone good, plus it's expensive. But doing things yourself is also really time consuming, and takes time away from the studio.

The first couple months of living here, I didn't have any sort of balance between my job, the studio, and working on the house. It was constantly doing the most urgent cleaning and other projects on the house. My hands were always rough and covered in paint. But now we're just going to move a little more slowly—hire people where we can, and keep doing things ourselves like painting, cleaning and finishing the floors.





## Keys

Since the home has been in the family for a long time, I've found all these old objects—like this set of keys—in the space and have been gathering them all in my studio.



## Found Objects

I've also found this ironing board, washboard, small table, and even this old sandbag sack, which I think is kind of cool. It has really helped me think of my next series, which I want to focus on displacement. I have been thinking about a personal level, but also the Palestinians—I want to layer on photos of different things that have happened in history, and then see where it goes. Putting patterns on top of the wood pieces and etching them in with a wood burning tool, and working directly onto some of these objects.

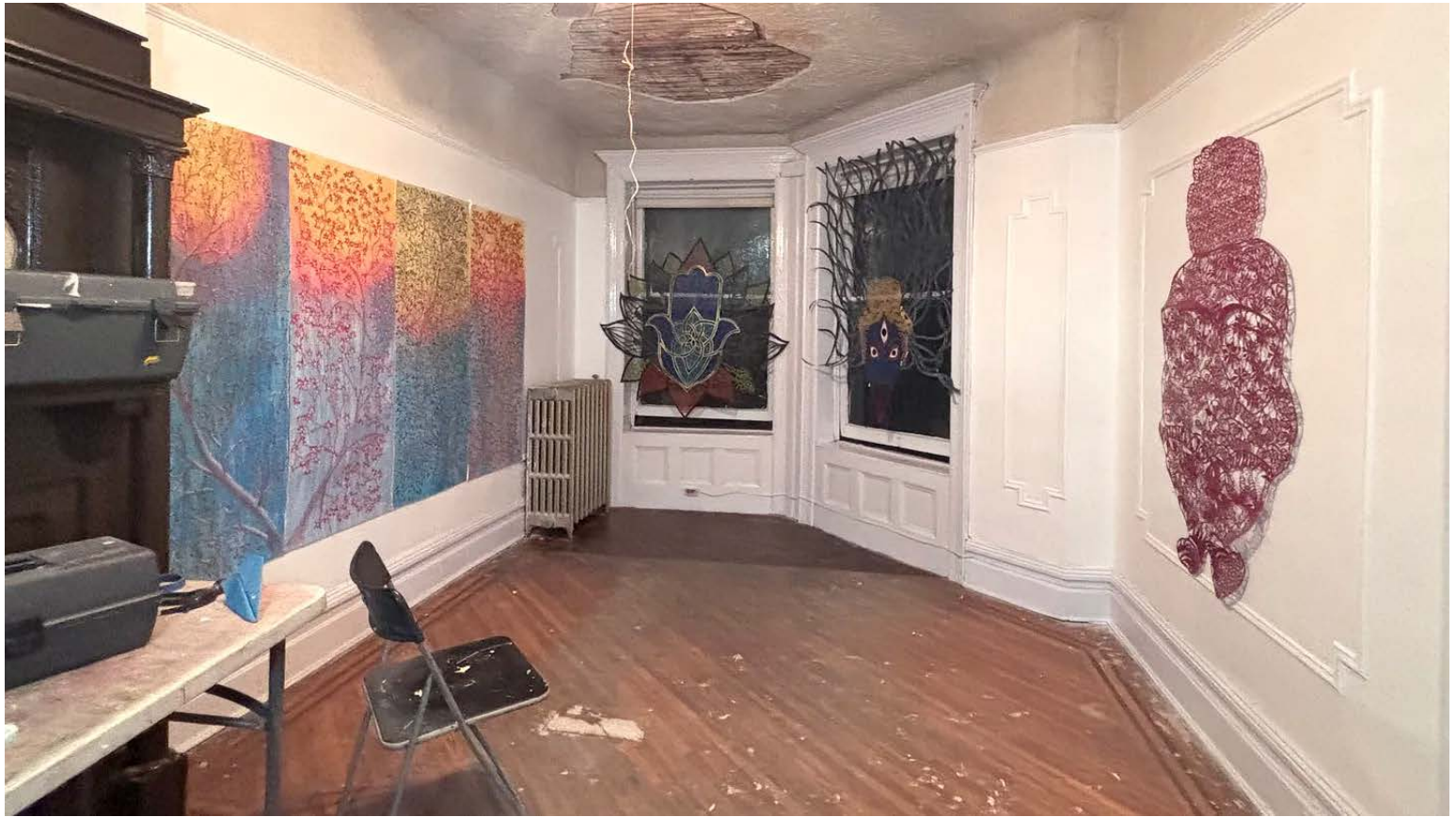




## Found Metal Sheet

I don't specifically go out to flea markets to look for "found objects" to make standalone sculptures like some artists do, but I find things in nature or on the street and use those for installations. Very random—kind of like this piece of metal I wasn't specifically seeking it out. I also found some wood pieces on the street that we carried in and I want to use alongside the other objects. I used to do work with old family photos in earlier works and want to bring that photo imagery back. I obviously need to experiment first with how I can transfer photos onto the wood and metal pieces and keep them there.





## Studio

The lower ceilings in this studio space have allowed me to hang the [planes](#) more easily than in the old warehouse building studio with super high ceilings. So there are things I can do here with my installation projects that I wouldn't have been able to in my old space. And, it has natural light! Being able to look out the window is so nice. All the neighbors have nice yards, so there's plenty of green in view and you can tell people take care of their spaces.

I am a little worried about having a studio at home, because I've done it before and it's really hard to have a routine. But there are times when it's beneficial to be able to fit just an hour of work in more easily, without a commute turning it into a longer period of time which might not be possible to fit into a busy day's schedule. Working in real estate, my day often turns out to be longer than expected and

having access to the studio at home makes it possible to still get some of my own creative work done. Even though I'm not leaving home to get to the studio, there are so many ways of getting inspired in the city. Like yesterday, we went to DanceAfrica, and they have this whole street market. It's so cool and you really feel like you're in Africa. We didn't even see a performance, just wandered around then left, but felt totally inspired.



## Fireplace



It's interesting noticing the differences between being a homeowner and a renter. You get so much more respect from your neighbors, and from what I see the problems with displacement are really experienced by renters rather than owners who sell the house when their kids move away or whatever. If you're renting and your neighborhood gets too expensive, then you have to go and there's not much you can do about it. Or if you have a landlord who you're always worried about how they will react, someone who is watching you all the time and might overreact to something normal you're doing... it negatively affects the art practice to be on high alert all the time.

Eventually we are going to renovate this space and then I'll have to find an outside studio space again, but the consistency of having this place for my work for now is really meaningful.



## Backyard Garden

We're working on our backyard, and I can see this view from the back window of my studio. Most of the plants in the backyard are new, but at my old place we had lots of plants in pots and now have been able to plant some into the ground here. Like the rose bush—it was in a pot before and is so happy here now. We just put some lights in and are still doing things slowly to clean up and improve the space, but spend a lot of time out here.



To see more of Mona's work, check out her [portfolio](#) or follow her on [Instagram](#).

*This interview took place on May 27, 2025. Mona's words have been lightly edited for clarity and conciseness. All images courtesy of the artist.*



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