

Displaced Topologies - Cultural Dichotomy and Abstraction

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how cultural heterogeneity can be expressed in an art form through painting, drawing, collage, and fiber art. I use my practice-based research to investigate the gestures and aesthetics of literally and figuratively folding up the old life, uprooting oneself, negotiating the crossings of political and geographical borders, leaving the graves of loved ones behind, finding new pathways across foreign lands, and rebuilding a new life. Art creation is interpreted as a process for producing collective emotions tied to the socio-political and personal conditions and a method for mining history and finding connections with the present and future. The context of displacement and the resulting cultural dichotomy are discussed first as a global phenomenon. It is also the foundation for my semiotic, abstract visual language based on the ideas evocative of a displaced life, such as fragmentation, folding, patterning, personal archiving, and liminal structures affecting displaced people. The document is divided into sections about artistic context, visual language, and three bodies of artwork brought together in the Displaced Topologies exhibit, which communicates the sentiment of multicultural togetherness. Throughout the document, the sections are bridged with personal narratives that illuminate this research, inform my art practice, and lend a storytelling rhythm to my thesis presentation, which relates to the physical artwork.

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FIGURE 1. *DISPLACED TOPOLOGIES*, 2024-2025. INSTALLATION.

INTRODUCTION

A writer must have the artistry to tell his own stories as if they were other people's stories, and to tell other people's stories as if they were his own (Pamuk, 2006).

This thesis, *Displaced Topologies*¹ – *Cultural Heterogeneity and Abstraction*, explores the influence of ambiguous cultural identity on artistic expression, a topic vital to me as an artist born and raised in communist Yugoslavia, now living in Canada. I started my MFA research by questioning if an abstract visual language can be used to express my heterogeneous cultural identity, which eventually evolved into a line of inquiry around migrations. As displaced people, how do we create the sentiment of home and build community within foreign places? What is the contribution of displaced people to the future?

This document is organized into six sections that address artistic context, visual language, three series of artworks, the thesis exhibition, and post-MFA research continuation. My written narratives are placed to bridge the sections and illuminate how my experiences inform the research. For instance, *Story of Threads* introduces the motif of threads, which is significant in my cultural history and artwork (see Fig, 2).

The “Context: Displacement and Cultural Dichotomy” section elaborates on the global phenomenon of displacement and cultural dichotomy in support of my artistic inquiry. I voluntarily relocated to Canada as an economic immigrant in 1994, inheriting cultural knowledge from my Serbian family and adopting a Canadian way of life over the past three decades. I use this research to understand how my fragmented cultural identity affects my creativity and how this phenomenon manifests as a global issue caused by mass displacements resulting from political conflicts in many parts of the world, including my former country². Groups of people and non-human entities must have

¹ The word “topology” refers to a study of spaces based on the displaced point of view, where the perspective of place relates to connections as opposed to locations (Miller, 2023).

² The politics of former Yugoslavia/Serbia, steeped in a long history of conflict, have been addressed extensively in literature such as *Bridge on the Drina* (1961), *Signs by the Roadside* (1976) by Ivo Andric, and *Beyond Balkanism: The Scholarly Politics of Region Making* (2018) by Diana Mishkova. For this thesis, I am focusing on

collaborated and survived the plight of moving great distances from time immemorial, escaping ecological crises, wars, and persecution. This history is still alive today. I explore its bits and pieces and reactivate them in my work.

The “Language: Emotions Factory and Semiotics” section positions my work within the world of abstract art and discusses my methodology and the visual language I have been developing to communicate the affective experience of migration, being rootless and yet bound by place, which manifests in ways that are not easy to describe in words. Through my graduate studies, I developed a holistic approach to processing auto-ethnographical narratives while bridging my artistic practices with other areas of interest, such as writing, reading, gardening, and fiber crafts. One of the primary sources of this research is my collection of writings based on familial storytelling and personal experiences. Those narratives, some of which I share throughout this document, strongly influence my artwork’s themes and my visual language. Despite the poignancy of the written words, my artwork allows for a more nuanced exploration of the aesthetics of diasporic life through semiotic visual language. The American artist and philosopher Amy Sillman aptly paraphrases Philip Guston by saying, “There is no precise language, no pure narrative, no rhetoric, no precise pointing to a language. It’s more like an internal code for the artists within themselves” (Sillman, 2021). My visual language externalizes this ‘internal code’ through painting, drawing, sewing, collage, sculpting, weaving, and serigraphy, inspired by narratives, textiles, documents, maps, and man-made structures.

The “Artwork Series 1: Sediments of Time” explores the abstract ideas of fragmentation, folds, patterns, and portals as metaphors for a migrant life through the medium of canvas collage. The theme of “Artwork Series 2: Haphazard Structures” is tied to personal archiving, interpretation of documents, and temporality of man-made structures, expressed through drawing, embroidery, and collage. “Artwork Series 3: Remnants of Time” is an experimental series of weavings representing migrant bodies, where the warp/weft structure externalizes the intimate constructs and ruptures.

The “Thesis Exhibition: Displaced Topologies” section gathers all three bodies of artwork in one exhibition space (see Fig. 1) and positions my art in relationship with the work of other artists and

generational coping with social trauma, my own immigration experience, and imagining the future multicultural world.

theorists. The common thread that ties together this entire artistic research is the phenomenon of global migrations and the resulting cultural heterogeneity. Displacement is and probably always has been a normal state of being for humanity. The Displaced Topologies exhibition hints at the importance of broadly sharing the visual languages of displacement at this time of global intertwining of cultures. I want to contribute my multicultural artwork to the future of togetherness and minimize further conflicts that historically stem from the alienation of displaced people. My artwork establishes a worldview where migratory displacements and cultural ambiguities belong in the space of observation, recollection, contemplation, and multicultural harmony.

Despite my cultural ambiguity, I am keenly aware of my positionality in Canada as an immigrant/settler. I empathically and respectfully navigate this land while seeking the language to state that even when one does not belong to any one place, one still belongs in the world. As I interweave the known with the unknown and imagined, be it Serbian, Canadian, or multicultural, my curiosity about the aesthetics of this visual process keeps growing.



FIGURE 2. *PLEATED SKIRT*, 2025.

STORY OF THREADS

My mother grew up in rural eastern Serbia, in the post-WWII poverty and enthusiasm for rebuilding the People's Republic of Yugoslavia. Her people grappled with a complex system of beliefs, a mix of Slavic Paganism, Orthodox Christianity, and newly introduced Communism. When my mother was twelve, she was an apprentice to a healer known as the Village Witch. As a child, I pestered my mother to remember what she had learned from the healer, but all she could recall was the chant, "white thread, red thread, black thread." There is a belief in rural Serbia that a piece of red thread tied around a baby's hand is protection from evil spirits. Although my mother was a passionate communist and non-believer in superstitions, she was an avid sewer, knitter, crocheter, and embroiderer. The women from her family were known as excellent weavers. Where I come from, being a woman means having a deep understanding of thread crafts. I am grateful to my ancestors for passing on this beautiful and essential technology to me.

CONTEXT: DISPLACEMENT AND CULTURAL DICHOTOMY

The country we call home, the country we used to call home, and the country we dream to call home are all very distinct and disparate places. It is the result of a productive schizophrenia: we are in all of them at once, a ravishing sensation but one tempered by the slow, sobering devastation of never being in any one entirely (Slavs and Tatars Art Collective, 2008).

In my early days in Canada, I observed the ocean and the grand shapes of mountains, utterly foreign to my Serbian understanding of a landscape. Looking at this magnificent land through the viewfinder of my old visual references was a fascinating but disorienting experience, like looking at a mirage. I could not quite grasp what I saw, just as I could not grasp how to belong to this place. Even then, I sensed that what I saw was not all there was; there were complex issues and histories hidden behind the views. My move to Canada as a voluntary migrant brought me to a privileged environment with economic opportunities and more democratic societal values than those in Serbia, but also riddled with conflict and complicated history. The experience of displacement is core to Canadian society; both settlers and Indigenous peoples, in one way or another, have experienced psycho-social and cultural rupture (Mcfarlane 29-31).

Author Angelica Bammer wrote in 1994 that displacement³ has affected most of the people on the planet (Bammer xi-xii). As we witness the never-ending stream of news about massive migrations stemming from conflicts worldwide, it is evident that the trend described by Bammer continues in the 21st century. The world powers shift their interests and destabilize entire regions at the expense of the powerless and vulnerable, who often choose or are forced to leave their home and seek a better life elsewhere. The range of effects on the victimized people is tremendous. While displacement can be voluntary or forced, peaceful or violent, it is always disruptive. It profoundly impacts the psychology of the affected individuals and communities, which leads to my primary interest in expressing the human

³ According to the World Migration Report by the UN (IOM 4-5), 281 million international migrants (forced and voluntary) have been reported globally in 2020, or 3.6 percent of the world's population.

condition through art and conveying my own story about what it is like to grow up in Serbia and live in Canada as an adult.

The art world has found processing societal trauma a painful but fertile ground for creation⁴. To quote Lee Maracle, an Indigenous writer and academic of the Stó:lō nation, from her literary story *Goodbye Snauq* which deals with the violent displacement of indigenous peoples in Western Canada: "There is freedom to be found in the context" (Maracle 13–28). For me, as an artist, freedom is the artistic expression. Therefore, I aim my research toward processing the experience of growing up in a communist country in the Balkans, witnessing the breakup of the Eastern Bloc and the impacts of colonialism in Canada. I recognize the same perspective in the Slavs and Tatars Art Collective, a multicultural group of displaced artists known for their culturally heterogeneous exhibitions, which reframe the state of alienation as a space to produce art (Slavs and Tatars, 2008). This idea of healing societal trauma through art creation is the key strategy in my artistic methodology because I want my art to shift alienation toward mutual understanding, and this can only happen when we can empathize with what others feel, regardless of our positionality. To further support this idea, I will discuss my understanding of the Contact Zone⁵ as a concept that provides an essential framework for the theoretical analysis of multicultural artworks.

Haraway's Contact Zone is a space of risk and an opportunity to generate positive outcomes based on the cross-pollination of knowledge (human and non-human) while preserving the original cultures. It modifies the dominant culture while giving a unique voice to the subculture through transculturation (Haraway, 2017). This concept allows my native culture to be receptive and generative where I live now. It recognizes the potential agency of my art as a contribution to the togetherness in my Contact Zone while expressing the tensions that occur in multicultural spaces. Haraway's and

⁴ I refer to the long history of the artistic critique of society, from Malevich's black rectangle as a breakup with the pre-revolutionary values in the early 20th century to the contemporary Cree artist Kent Monkman's response to colonial violence.

⁵ Donna Haraway defines the Contact Zone as a liminal space inhabited by the peoples of different cultures where knowledge has been exchanged (Haraway, 2017). Complementary to this idea, Mary Louise Pratt discusses transculturation or utilizing the dominant culture's language to express the sub-culture's interests and aspirations while maintaining the identity of both cultures (Pratt 34-36). By contrast, Homi Bhabha's Third Space in the zone of two-culture contact results in the erasure of, or significantly modifying the original cultures (Nasrullah, 2016).

Pratt's optimistic theories of multiculturalism are relevant here since they view migration as an opportunity to nurture collaborative communities as opposed to a situation of conflict and violence. Haraway says, "It matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with," which spotlights the importance of the artistic visual language and the emotions embedded in that language, as I aim to illustrate with my art informed by multicultural narratives. Although the idea of a conflict-free society is a utopia, there is a space for artistic contributions to counter the negative impact of displacement since art relies on observation, imagination, and collaboration, essential for imagining an inclusive, post-colonial world.

It has been well established that colours and shapes can symbolize ideas and emotions (Besant 1-21). The difficulty lies in finding the symbology to communicate internally and externally from this liminal state, the conundrum I have been exploring with my research, which takes me to the discussion on my abstract visual language informed by cultural objects, maps, documents, and structures (see Fig. 3 and Appendix A).

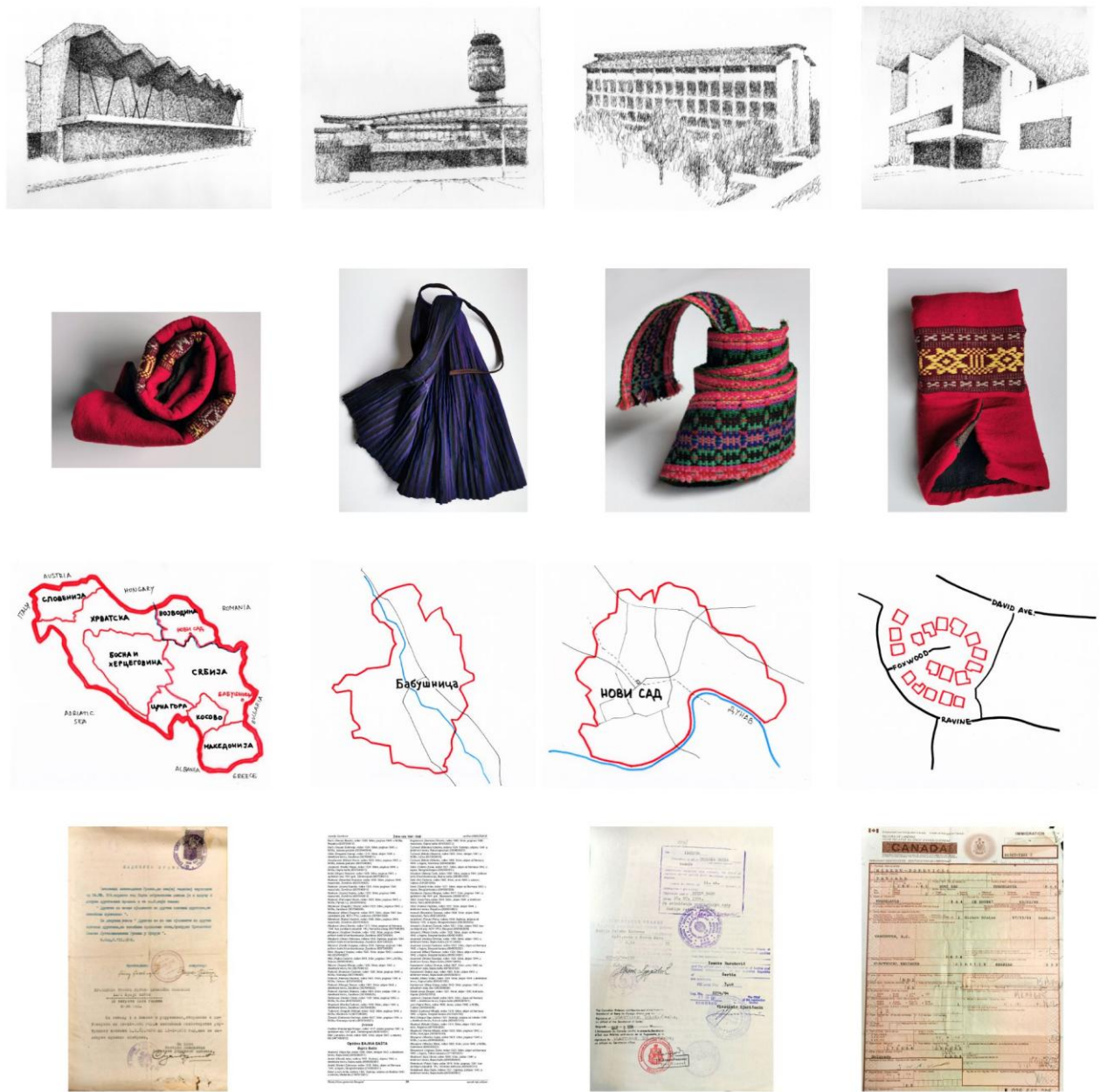


FIGURE 3. *BUILDINGS, TEXTILES, MAPS, DOCUMENTS, 2023-2025.*

STORY OF HERITAGE

The hand-woven textiles inherited from my mother's family travelled with me when I immigrated to Canada. As a child, my grandmother's blankets surrounded me; I sat and walked on them, was cocooned in them, and fell asleep under them more times than I can remember. They kept me warm and mesmerized me with their beauty. There is no apparent purpose for my heritage textiles here in Canada. They live folded in boxes, in danger of being forgotten and damaged, but they are never silent. They whisper, murmur, and sing to me in their language of colours, textures, patterns, and shapes.



FIGURE 4. *FOLDED SKIRT*, 2023.

LANGUAGE: EMOTIONS FACTORY AND SEMIOTICS

Emotions are collectively produced, they're not produced by ourselves alone. We don't own them. And art can play a great role in the production of emotions. One of the most challenging things contemporary art can do is produce a new language of emotion, a new way of understanding what we're feeling now and how it is different from before (Greg Bordowitz, 2007).

This section discusses how my abstract visual language translates my "factory of emotions" into visual art using semiotics and collaboration of methods and mediums. It is impossible to categorize and visually translate all aspects of multiculturalism, but that is not what I aim to do. I focus on teasing out a symbology, communicating my duality, and materializing my internal wrestling with cultural conflict, into artwork.

The forms that emerge through my artwork created during the MFA program are highly semiotic, inspired by cultural objects, maps, documents, and structures (see Fig. 3 and Appendix A). The emotions that flow from my auto-ethnography inform those symbolic forms and gestures, particularly fragmentation, folding, patterning, and surface disruption, which are evident in the artwork discussed in the following three sections. The strategies of organizing or composing the mentioned symbology include juxtaposition, overlapping, and interweaving by combining drawing, painting, collage, screen print, sculpted fabrics, weaving, and embroidery. The resulting work is a personal archive where the materials and methods collaborate like my dichotomous cultures. Therefore, wrestling with conflicting emotions informs my culturally dichotomous visual language and production of art.

In support of this idea, the American artist and activist Gregg Bordowitz elaborates on the connection between the potentially dissociative states and art creation with the concept of the production of emotions as a collective phenomenon (Bordowitz 7-8). While Bordowitz addresses the need for a new way of understanding HIV/AIDS patients, I address the need for a new, productive way of understanding the state of not fully belonging to a place. Riffing off Bordowitz's idea, I compare my artistic practice with a factory of emotions. Although the history of factories is associated with negative

impacts, such as extraction and exploitation (Akgöz et al. 1-11), I am using the term as an idealized, forward-looking space for producing a new visual language for the multicultural future.

My background influences my art practice in less tangible ways, too, through the need for frugality, careful observation, using what is available, repurposing materials, mining history, creating order out of chaos, and imagining creative and purposeful futures. I am inspired by artists concerned about the wastefulness of art-making processes, such as Phyllida Barlow, who is interested in the cycle of damage and repair as an integral part of life (Barlow, 2022). I apply these principles by choosing available materials, often repurposed, such as canvas off-cuts, sewing thread, fabric dye, graphite, and leftover acrylic paint.

In the formal sense, my work is interested in the conceptually conflicting theories of constructivism and abstract expressionism. Combining them within one artwork conveys how I deal with dichotomy by processing instinctive emotions while carefully considering the structures where those dichotomous emotions exist. Amy Sillman refers to the simultaneous use of expression and construction as natural and complementary aspects of art creation (Sillman, 2022). I am drawn toward symbolic, non-representational imagery, such as Lissitzky's constructivist use of geometric shapes as metaphors for political entities and Raushenberg's expressive assemblages of familiar and unfamiliar shapes that collectively tell a story of the artist's life in the chaotic urban environment. These models apply to single-culture and multicultural creation; however, making art in a heterogeneous culture is less likely bound by a singular methodology. For instance, the work of the contemporary Canadian diaspora artist Russna Kaur Somal is imitative of the conventions of abstraction, embracing Western aesthetics while referencing the colours and other elements of her Indian culture (Kaur, 2019). The resulting abstract paintings undoubtedly belong to and enrich the intersection of the two cultures.

To illustrate my application of the ideas discussed, I will describe my fabrication of the semiotic patchwork (see Fig. 5) material for my canvas collages, such as *Migrant* (2025) (see Fig. 6).



FIGURE 5. *PATCHWORK*, 2023.

The process begins by gathering and painting remnants of raw canvas I have accumulated over many years of my painting practice. I dye it in boiling water, wring it, and splash it with paint in the colours of the Serbian heritage textiles before cutting it into stripes and sewing them together in random order. I repeat the cutting and sewing steps in several iterations, ending up with a patchwork symbolic of how it feels to live a repeatedly disrupted and repaired life. While doing this work, destructive and reparative forces reenact the experiences inherent in the lives of displaced people. Even stitching, an agent of repair, is often erroneous and temporary, requiring rework. This manner of meditative making allows for imagined conversations with my ancestors, who created beautiful textiles through wars, poverty, and the loss of loved ones. This process generates an esthetic of survival and resilience, fragmented, often dissonant, but collaboratively holding together (see Fig. 5). To embody this narrative further, the sewn seams are ironed with care, yet the stitching can still be seen during closer inspection.

To leave one's home means severing connections with people and culture, taking a few possessions and putting them together in the new place, and supplementing the missing pieces with what can be found there. This process is anxious and imperfect, to say the least. Some of the losses cannot be replaced. The newly discovered parts of life don't always fit with the old ones, and the solutions are often temporary, falling apart and having to be redone. This state of incompleteness becomes the only permanency. No matter how hard one tries to settle down and imitate an undisturbed life, the fault lines are a reminder of the lost home and a motivation to keep building the new one. There is a sense of familial dynamics between all these fragments, somewhat conflicting and haphazardly put together but managing to collaborate.

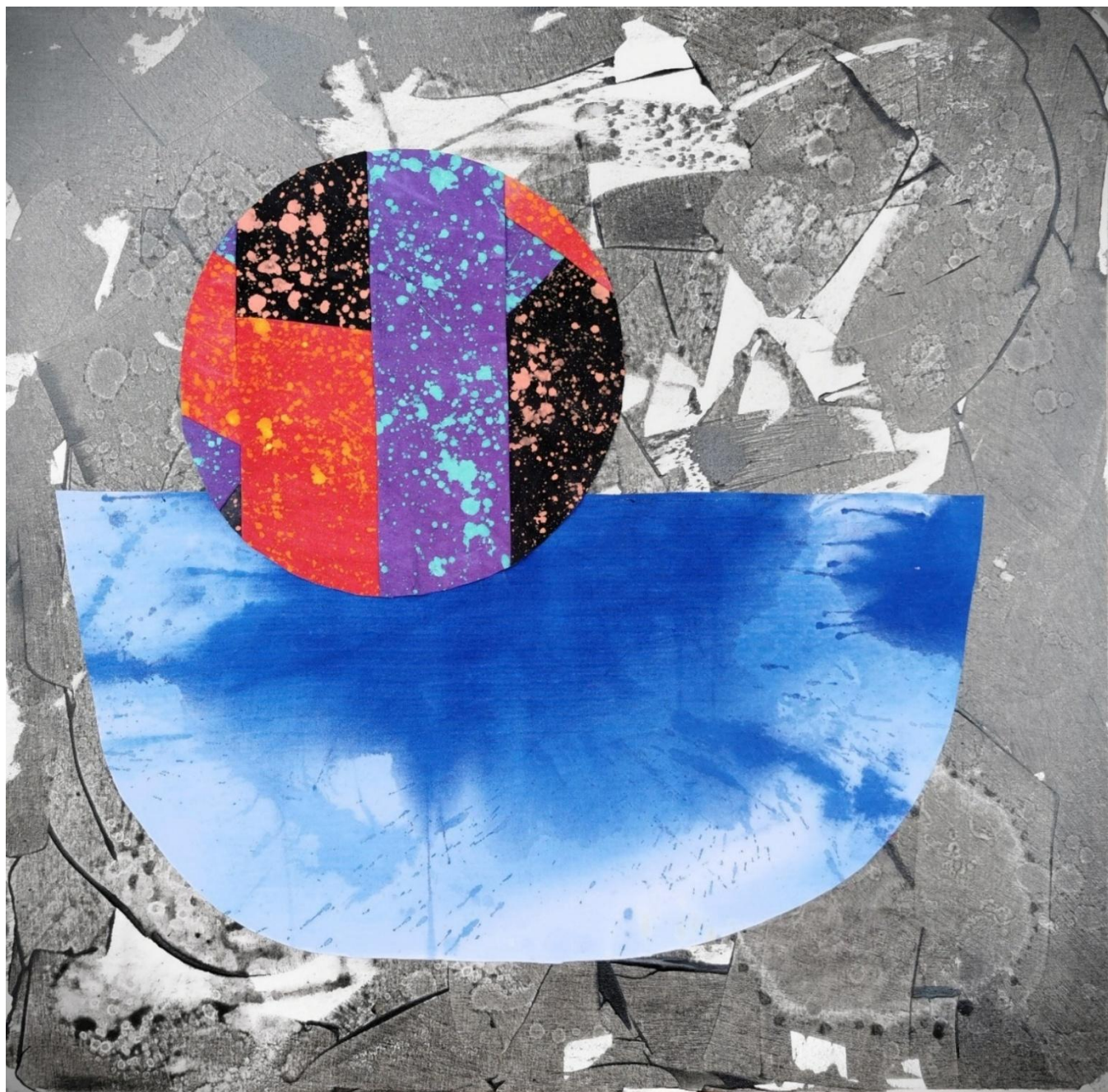


FIGURE 6. *MIGRANT*, 2025.

The collage medium evokes a relocated kind of life where the parts may originate from different cultural worldviews, forming something new. My collage *Migrant* (2025) (see Fig 6) is arranged into a minimalist composition, contrasting with the chaotic, galactic-looking pattern in each element, which is meaningful to my process of working as it signifies making order out of chaos, akin to making a home in the pandemonium of a displaced life. The gray background with pockmarked, splattered texture is a recurring symbol in my canvas collages, relating to spatial and temporal topologies, the earth's agency, broken-up grids, blasts and spillages, slow sedimentations, and the aftermaths of cataclysms. On the human scale, this texture evokes man-made concrete structures and the surface of rocks formed by the forces of nature. The circular, patchworked form floats on a vessel-like shape with a watery pattern, perhaps symbolizing a journey across the waters toward a new homeland.

This canvas collage illustrates my use of fragmentation as a symbol in my abstract visual vocabulary, communicating the internal conflict stemming from my immigration experience. In my study of contemporary artists interested in depicting emotions with a fragmented visual language, I am drawn to Beatriz Milhazes, a Brazilian visual artist inspired by the colours and motifs found in her hometown, Rio de Janeiro, with its juxtaposition of urban architecture and natural environments, two spaces invoking contrasting feelings (see Fig. 7). Her paintings combine the grid of the metropolis with the organic shapes of tropical flora through collage, layering, and expressive colour combinations⁶. Like mine, her work is a visual narrative of life influenced by dichotomous forces. However, the defining characteristics of these places go beyond geometry. I take clues from Milhazes by considering the quality of shapes, colours, and textures of my two cultural experiences. Our approaches to abstraction are similar in concept and materiality. While Milhazes's work addresses the present time and place she lives in, my work reaches back into history and forward into imagining the future.

⁶ Beatriz Milhazes's *Paisagem em Desfile* (2023) series harmoniously combines the artificial and natural, hard and soft, static and dynamic, geometrical and organic: <https://www.maxhetzler.com/exhibitions/beatriz-milhazes-paisagem-em-desfile-2023>.



FIGURE 7. *CHILDHOOD MEMORIES II*, BEATRIZ MILHAZES, 2023. FIGURE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS. THE IMAGE REMOVED IS A SNAPSHOT OF ARTWORK FROM THE INTERNET⁶.

The following sections discuss my creation methods and symbology applied to specific artworks. The methods cover painting, sewing, fabric stiffening, collage, screen printing, drawing, embroidery, and weaving. The metaphors and symbols applied in the visual language include fragments, folds, patterns, portals, structures, and disruptions.



FIGURE 8. *FOLDED PILLOWCASE*, 2023.

STORY OF FOLDS

Folding fabrics is something I have done repeatedly as a part of travelling between my two homelands. The folding gesture captures the traces of the endless, repetitive packing, unpacking, and caring for the objects passed down from generation to generation. It marks the passing of time in the lives of the women in my family. While doing this so many times, I have registered an emotional spark in this small but poignant moment, which is a regular occurrence in the lives of many displaced people. The act of folding clothes and linens is accompanied by angst, yearning, loss, and sorrow but also hope, optimism, and love.

ARTWORK SERIES 1: SEDIMENTS OF TIME



FIGURE 9. *NEW HERITAGE*, 2025.



FIGURE 10. *MORNING STAR TRANSFIGURATION*, 2025.



FIGURE 11. *PORTAL*, 2025.



FIGURE 12. *SEDIMENTS OF TIME*, 2024.

While the previous section characterizes my cultural identity as fragmented using the patchwork metaphor, the works in this section interpret the internal displacement as dynamic, constantly folding and unfolding. I think of this work as psychological, archeological, and historical, referencing specific records such as the Serbian nineteenth-century Skull Tower cenotaph (Stankovic, 2010), remembered by the human-skull-sized protrusion in *Sediments of Time* (2024) (see Fig. 12-13), where the surface of the canvas is interrupted by tearing, fraying, and layering, evoking trauma but also breakthroughs and new perspectives.

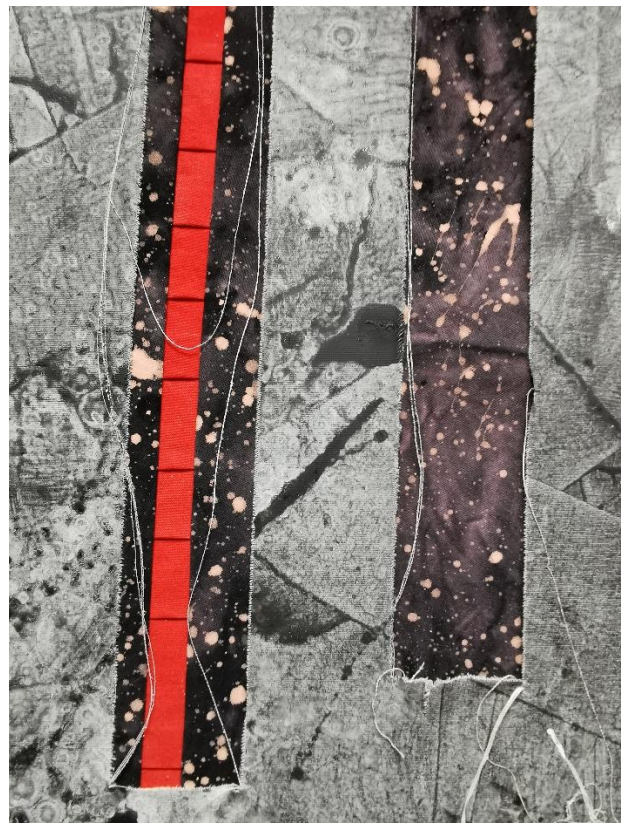


FIGURE 13. *SEDIMENTS OF TIME*, 2024. DETAILS.

In *New Heritage* (2025) (see Fig. 9), the three-dimensional forms of folded textiles are flattened into patterns through line drawing, repetition, collaging, and removing the shapes, which are positioned into a lineup of alphabet-like symbols that articulate dynamic gestures evocative of pictorial writing (see Fig. 14). In this composition, the symbols appear to perform a linked dance or a ceremony. This process represents migrations as a motif rather than a singular event.



FIGURE 14. *NEW HERITAGE*, 2025. DETAIL.

To further explore how dynamic gestures could be incorporated into the medium of canvas collage, I introduce three-dimensionality through sculpted inserts, some sunken, others distended (see Fig. 15), bringing up metaphorical questions of what should remain flat, what should protrude or recede in my visual narratives. More broadly, thinking about the history of migrations, three-dimensionality metaphorizes the agency of past worlds folded within the future ones, examined from the perspective of deep history and microscopically, looking at what is here now.



FIGURE 15. *THREE-DIMENSIONAL CANVAS COLLAGE*, 2025. DETAILS.

From this rumination and the processes of painting, folding, sewing, and moulding emerge three-dimensional paintings like *Morning Star Transfiguration*, 2025 (see Fig. 10) and *Portal*, 2025 (see Fig. 11), the first one meditating on the connections between the celestial and cultural patterns, the second breaking through the hypothetical walls or layers of old matter and finding openings that lead toward new learnings and experiences.

The ancient eight-pointed star pattern⁷ referenced in *Morning Star Transfiguration* (2025) (see Fig. 10), found on my Serbian heritage pillowcase (see Fig. 3 and Appendix A), is represented using serigraphy and interpreted abstractly with drips of paint, appearing to simultaneously emerge and dissolve between the two-dimensional plane and the three-dimensional form which folds on itself, evoking cosmology and perpetuality.

⁷ The eight-pointed star pattern represents the Morning Star (planet Venus), a significant technological resource for ancient celestial navigation (Orchiston, 2000). Given the broad reach of the Morning/Evening Star motif through the many cultures where this symbol can still be found and the beauty of its depictions (Fuad 75-76), I speculate that this knowledge was revered, considered sacred, and collaboratively shared between ancient cultures.

My use of folds and ancient ethnic patterns is in conversation with the work of Mexican-American artist Marela Zacarias, whose textile-like sculptures installed in public spaces are rooted in the motifs of Mexican native fabrics⁸. In her words, “it is not until we integrate where we have come from that we are complete” (Marella Zacarias, 2016).

My *Morning Star Transfiguration* (2024) (see Fig. 10) relates to Zacharias's work in how we handle our materials with plasticity by observing the forms of textiles within our paintings (see Fig. 16). While I work on the human scale and shift between three-dimensionality and flat form, Zacarias expresses her ideas through the massive scale of her installations in spaces tied to migrations, such as airports and embassy buildings



FIGURE 16. *UNTITLED*, MARELA ZACARIAS, 2016. FIGURE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS. THE IMAGE REMOVED IS A SNAPSHOT OF ARTWORK FROM THE INTERNET⁸.

⁸ The gestures of Zacarias’s sculptures, politically and ideologically charged in their sentiment, are blanket-like, warm, accepting, and ceremonially welcoming like her Warp and Weft series: <https://marelazacarias.com/warp-and-weft>.

Like mine, Zacarias's work is transcultural, embedding the artist's original culture within the adopted one. While this could be interpreted as a provocative act, especially for Zacarias, given the politically charged perception of Mexican migrants in the US, the aesthetics of the work transcend politics. They project respect for cultural heritage and the contemporary aesthetic of their functional place. The work expresses hope and care for the people affected by migration. To paraphrase Zacarias, the work is a generous opening to others and their history (Zacarias, 2019).

While this series of my artwork deals with conceptual gestures of migrations expressed in an abstract language using the symbolism of folds, patterns, portals, and protrusions, the artwork in the next section references specific objects and events tied to the broad theme of haphazard structures significant for the transient perspective.

STORY OF STRUCTURES

As an engineer by trade, I often ponder how things are made, what gives them integrity, and how they might fall apart. I grew up doodling on my father's mechanical engineering textbooks, and sewing clothes using patterns from my mother's fashion magazines. As an artist, I favour compositions where the whole consists of tailored parts, forming a structure akin to a blueprint, reflecting my need to make things work and create order out of chaos. My worldview lends to structural symbols reminiscent of maps, archives, borders, and walls. Walls often come up in my narratives. I remember the walls torn down, the walls I have repaired, and the walls of monuments crumbling under the sediments of history. I remember the belief in building a new world for a better future. Much happens in the world while the walls go up and down haphazardly, with their unanticipated agency.

ARTWORK SERIES 2: HAPHAZARD STRUCTURES

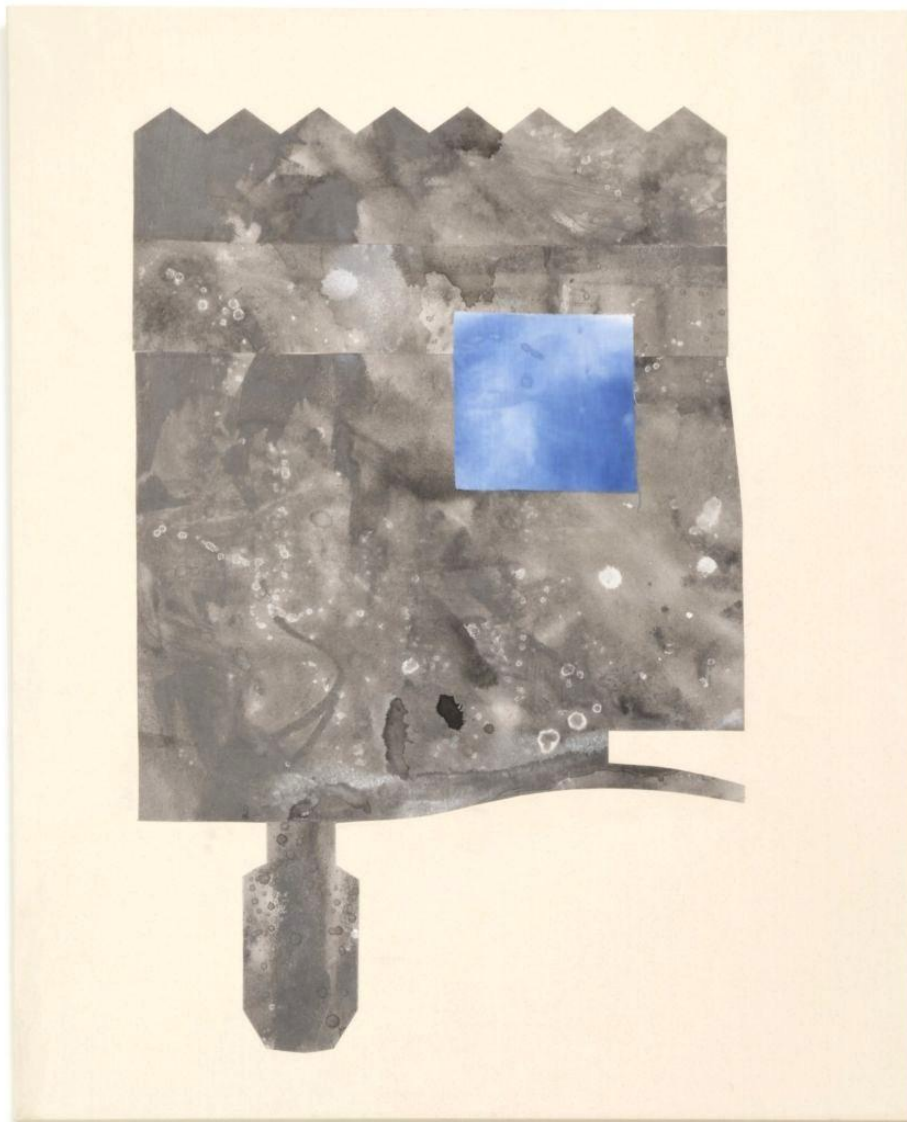


FIGURE 17. *FOUR BUILDINGS I*, 2025.



FIGURE 18. *FOUR BUILDINGS II*, 2025.

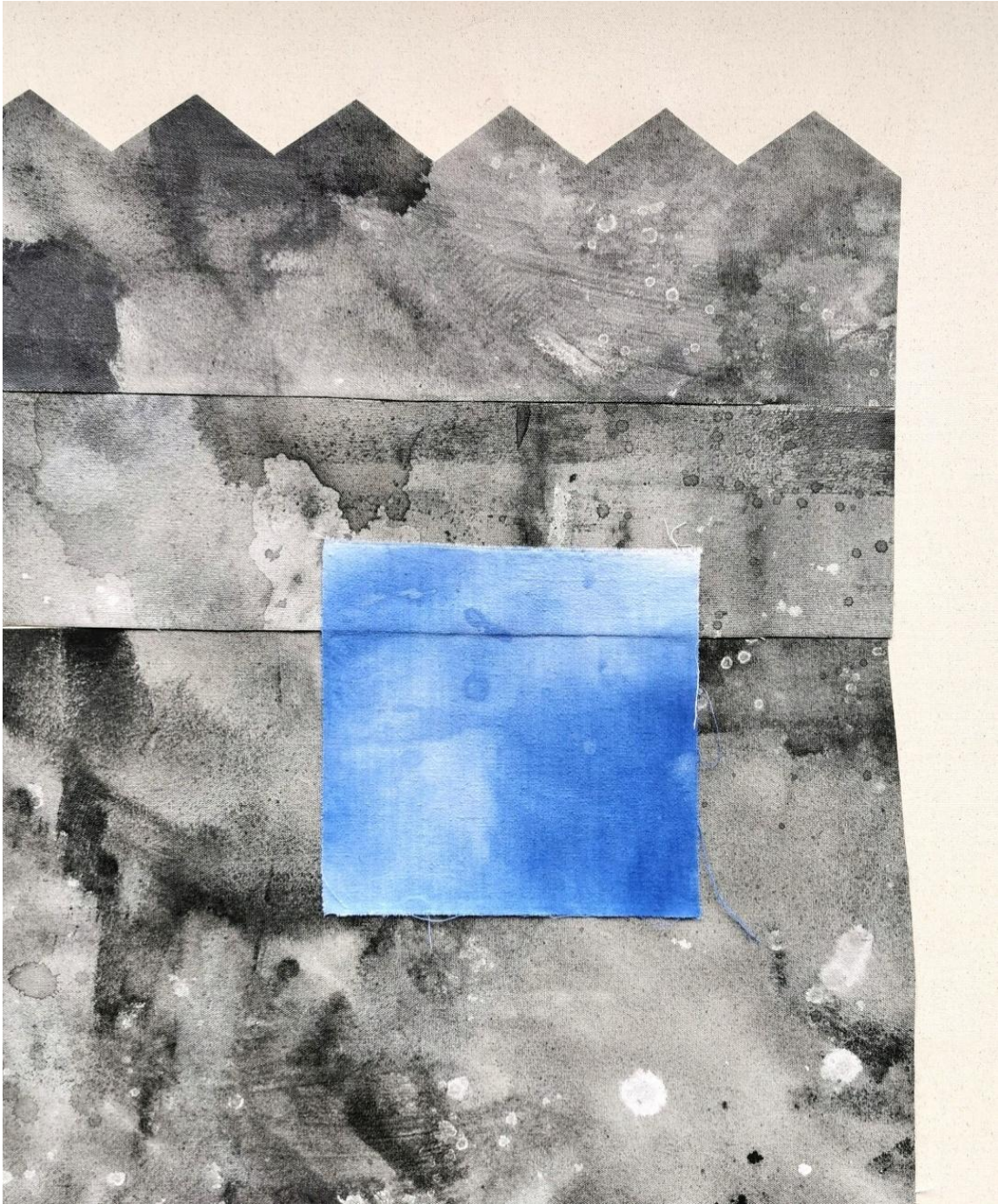


FIGURE 19. *FOUR BUILDINGS I*, 2025. DETAIL.



FIGURE 20. *FOUR BUILDINGS II*, 2025. DETAIL.

"Only if we take the parts of the structure together can we comprehend a world full of connections where everything takes time to build and nothing lasts" (Tim Ingold).

The *Haphazard Structures* (2024-2025) body of work examines the complexities of processing heterogeneous cultural identity by exploring the physical structures, such as buildings, and conceptual ones, such as bureaucratic structures, related to migrations. I am particularly interested in how these constructs carry marks of disruptive events, slow decay, and sediments deposited over time. Specifically, I search for aspects of haphazardness as a marker of impermanency that symbolizes the never-ending chain of destruction and rebuilding of a displaced life.

The *Four Buildings* (2025) diptych (see Fig. 17-20) references the roof shapes of four specific utilitarian buildings from my two homelands, suturing the distant cultures within a unified context. One pair of rooflines represents the travelling hubs I have frequented, both having the power to facilitate and disrupt migrations (see Appendix A). The other pair represents the universities I have attended in the two countries, homes of enlightenment, disillusion, and activism. Each pair of buildings connects geographies and power structures of travel and education in Serbia and Canada in an upside-down way, as one may think of them being on opposite sides of the globe, world politics, and positions of power.

Visual language is rooted in history, geology, ethnology, and knowledge, such as one's understanding of power structures. I do not know if complete unlearning, re-learning, and overwriting old knowledge is possible. In my experience, knowledge constantly piles up, organizes, and reorganizes itself, but the duality of thinking and feeling is always there. It can cause psychological suffering from the permanent need to question and doubt one's comprehension of the world. However, it can also produce creative brilliance, like the tube-stacks⁹ made of golf bags by Brian Jungen, an artist of Danezaa ancestry. Like Jungen's sculptures, my work is a dialogue between dichotomous concepts. In Jungen's case, the golf bags material is a product of the colonial power structures while the form of the stack is reminiscent of the indigenous pole which is a traditional structure of Jungen's culture, the juxtaposition hinting at the issues around the land lease agreements between the indigenous nations

⁹ In Jungen's sculptures, the Indigenous pole is the protagonist of his own culture, complicated by the colonial golf bag material. The opposing forces collide productively in his artwork, evoking a mix of emotions impossible to summarize in words. <https://ago.ca/agoinsider/reimagining-totem>

and golf courses (Jungen, 2019). My *Four Buildings*, (2025) diptych (see Fig. 17-20) is a dialogue in an abstract visual language, between Serbian and Canadian utilitarian power structures, the public buildings of travel and education meant to facilitate but also impose power of the State upon the citizens. The similarity is in juxtaposing dissonant cultural and socio-political structures within the contemporary artwork, thus opening up a culturally heterogeneous discourse.

Aesthetically, this work is influenced by the topological photographs of Bernd and Hilla Becher¹⁰ (Becher, 2008). While our medium differs, the Bechers' and my work's subject matter is the once imposing buildings becoming derelict spaces over time, examined as flattened, blueprint-like compositions characterized by their pareidolic shapes that hint at the agency of those innate objects (see Fig. 21).



FIGURE 21. *COAL BUNKER, GRUBE ANNA, ALSDORF AACHEN*, BERND & HILLA BECHER, 1992. FIGURE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS. THE IMAGE REMOVED IS A SNAPSHOT OF ARTWORK FROM THE INTERNET¹⁰.

¹⁰ Like the Bechers' photo topographies, my *Four Buildings* (2025) (see Fig. 17-18) evoke layers of geographical, ethnic, and historical meanings of the architectural subject matter. <https://spruethmagers.com/artists/bernd-hilla-becher/>



FIGURE 22. *HAPHAZARD STRUCTURES*, 2024-2025.

My mixed media drawings on canvas off-cuts (see Fig. 22) translate public, bureaucratic, and personal archives into art. While the use of frayed canvas remnants and the gesture of previously sewn and torn-off elements relate to the displacement events, the line drawings and embroidery serve as a slow, reverent observation of the never-ending cycle of making and remaking. This work historicizes lived experience and lends texture and encrustation of history to the original documents that inspired the work. The materials reflect my need for frugality and repurposing, and the scarcity mentality familiar to most migrants. The pieces of canvas are placed on acid-free glassine paper, which I use to pack and store away the keepsakes inherited from my family.

The *Pleated Skirt* (2025) (see Fig. 2) represents the care taken to preserve the intimate structures of private life. It signifies the gesture of folding and packing up for the move, hoping that the garment can be preserved until the arrival in the new home. It is about packing up one's culture and wondering how its meaning will be changed in the new place.

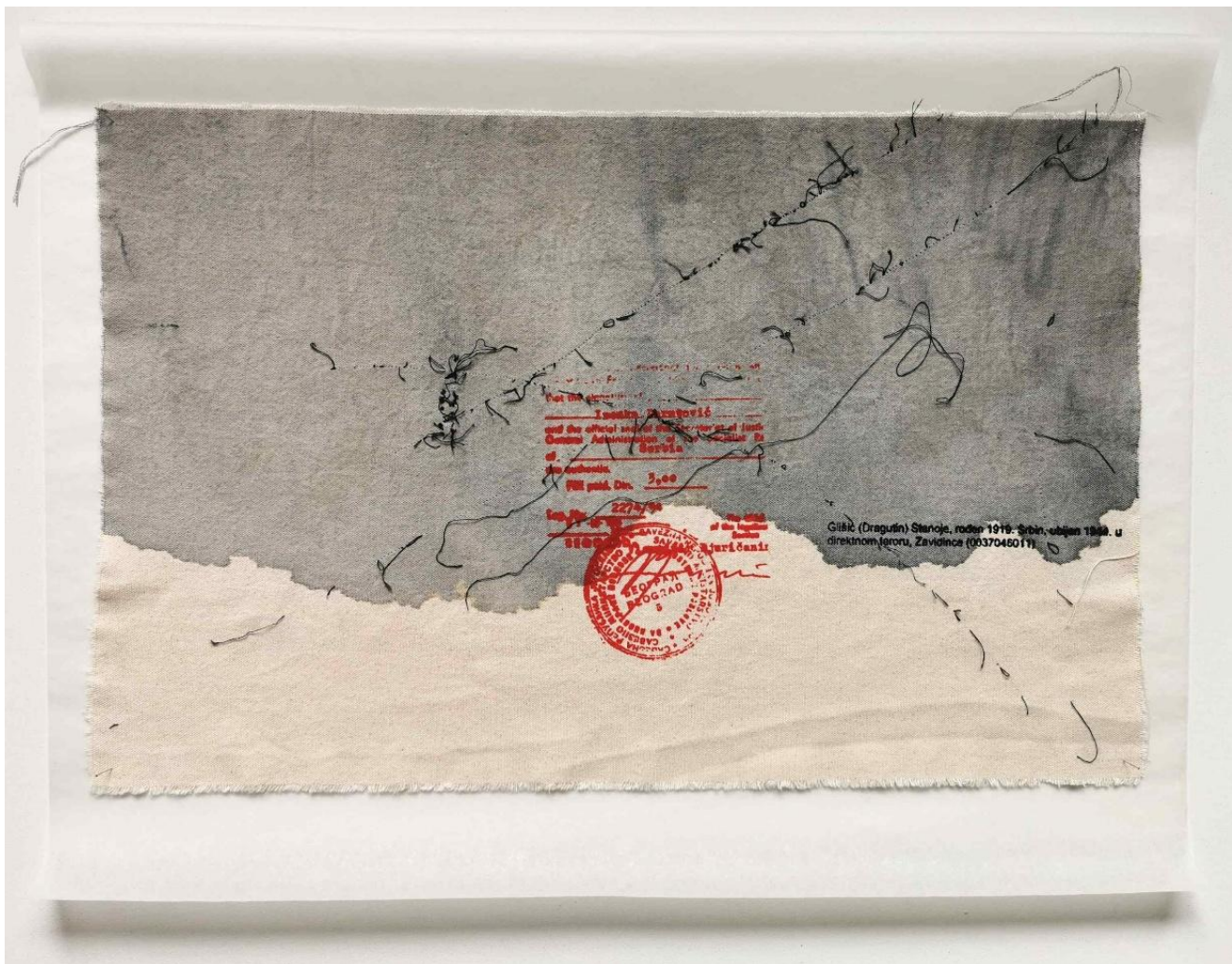


FIGURE 23. *DOCUMENT*, 2024.

Document (2024) (see Fig. 23) features the screen-printed stamps from my immigration papers and an excerpt from the public record (Genocide Victims Museum 59) documenting a family trauma caused by the loss of my maternal grandfather in WWII¹¹.

¹¹ As a young man, my maternal grandfather courted my grandmother by throwing a pebble at her, accidentally hitting her on the head. Their marriage was blissful but was cut short by his murder by the Nazis. As a child, I felt his presence as if he had never left my grandmother's house. To my mother, his absence was a harbinger of mine, two displacements that marked her life.



FIGURE 24. *APPROVED*, 2025.

In *Approved* (2025) (see Fig. 24), the government seal on my immigration document is interpreted through unfinished embroidery for which I used the acrylic thread from my weaving project and the thinner thread from a big bag of embroidery floss remnants I inherited from my mother. This combination of materials is a symbolic continuation of the lines my mother and I used in our respective artistic practices, connecting the fragile family structure to the artwork.

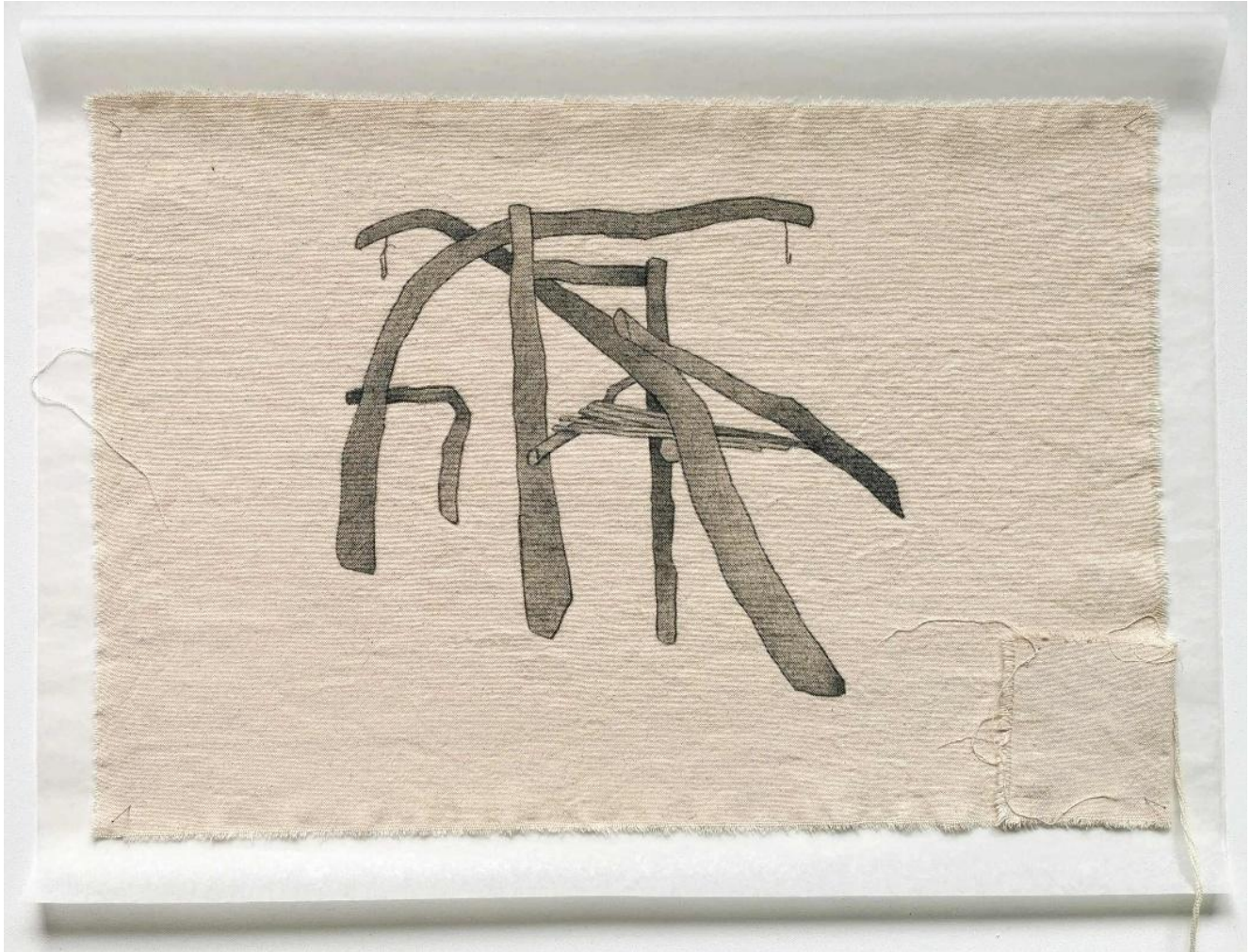


FIGURE 25. *ARBOR*, 2024.

The *Arbor* (2024) (see Fig. 25) is a graphite drawing of a makeshift garden structure made of found objects in a community garden in Coquitlam, BC, on the unceded land of Kwikwetlem First Nation¹². It records the annual spring rebuilding of what had been destroyed during winter.

¹² The Riverside Community Garden was established by the settlers on the Kwikwetlem First Nation land as a mental hospital garden in 1904. Like me, many of today's gardeners are immigrants from Eastern Europe. By working the soil with our hands and watching the plants grow, we find a connection between the land where we live now and remembering where we were born.

Overall, this series of artwork explores the complexities of processing displacement by organizing and archiving memories. The conclusion I draw from this research is that all man-made structures are temporary. They embody unforeseen agency, falling apart even while they are being made, which is reflected in the artwork metaphorically by the material treatment and representationally by referencing specific structures in their haphazard state.

In the next section, the idea of interrogating haphazard structures extends toward the maps and borders using the medium of woven fiber.

STORY OF GRAY

I am often asked about my life in Yugoslavia, if I am a Serb or Croat, if I condone war, if my family is well. A Canadian colleague told me about his memory of travelling to Eastern Europe, recalling it as a place full of sad, gray people. I remember my childhood as joyful and full of wonder, although the colours of my childhood home, the buildings, the clothes, and even my toys were subdued compared to what I see now in Canada. The people behaved differently in public, enacting a performative discipline that would translate as excessive sternness or sadness to an outsider. But there was the red of the communist banners, the women's day carnations, pioneer bandanas, and roses for birthdays and anniversaries. Red was the favourite colour of my beautiful, gray people.



FIGURE 26. *WARP AND WEFT*, 2025.

ARTWORK SERIES 3: REMNANTS OF TIME



FIGURE 27. *REMNANTS OF TIME*, 2025.

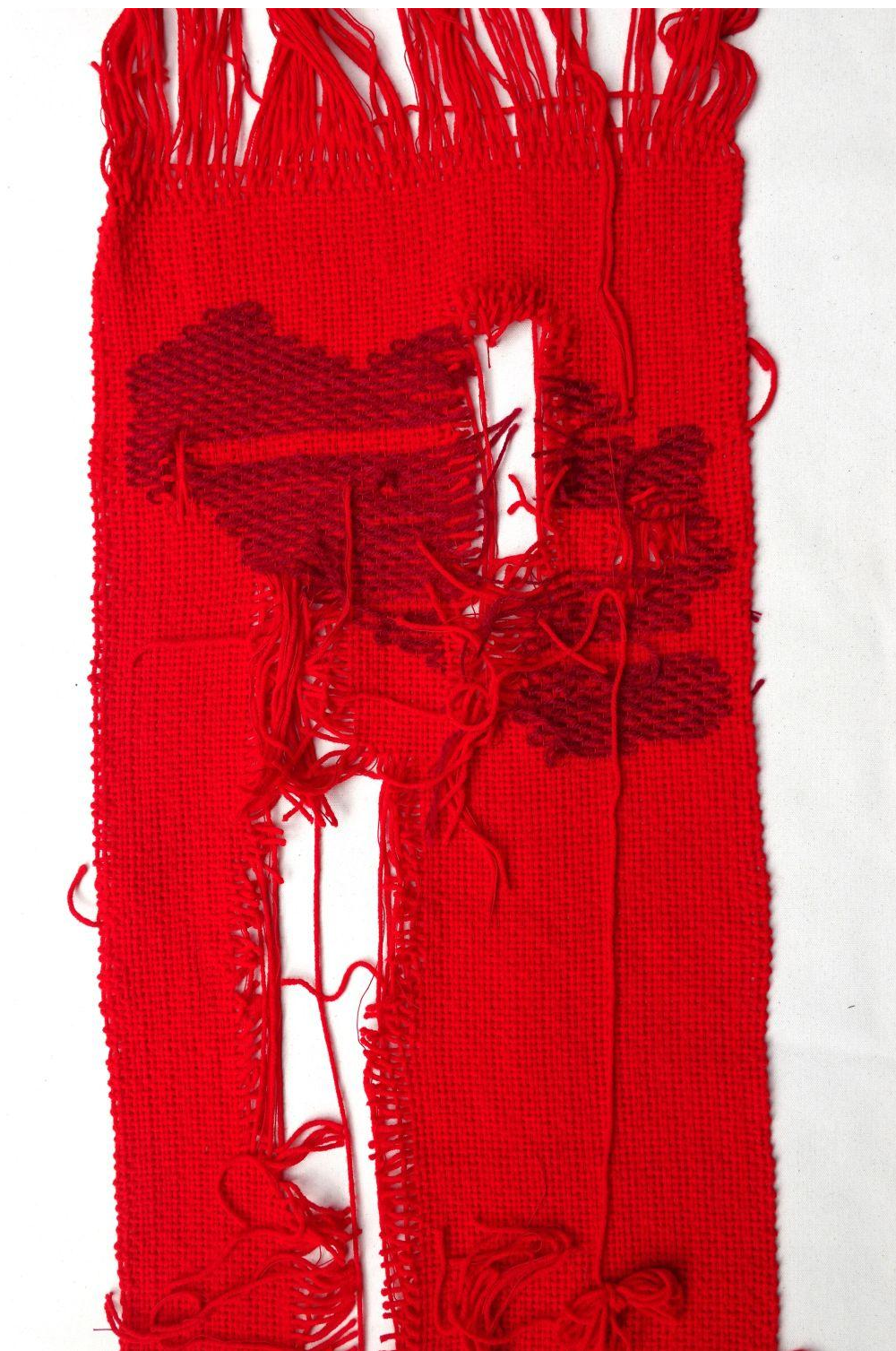


FIGURE 28. *FORMER HOMELAND*, 2025. DETAIL



FIGURE 29. *BLOODLINE LAND*, 2025. DETAIL.



FIGURE 30. *BIRTHPLACE*, 2025. DETAIL.

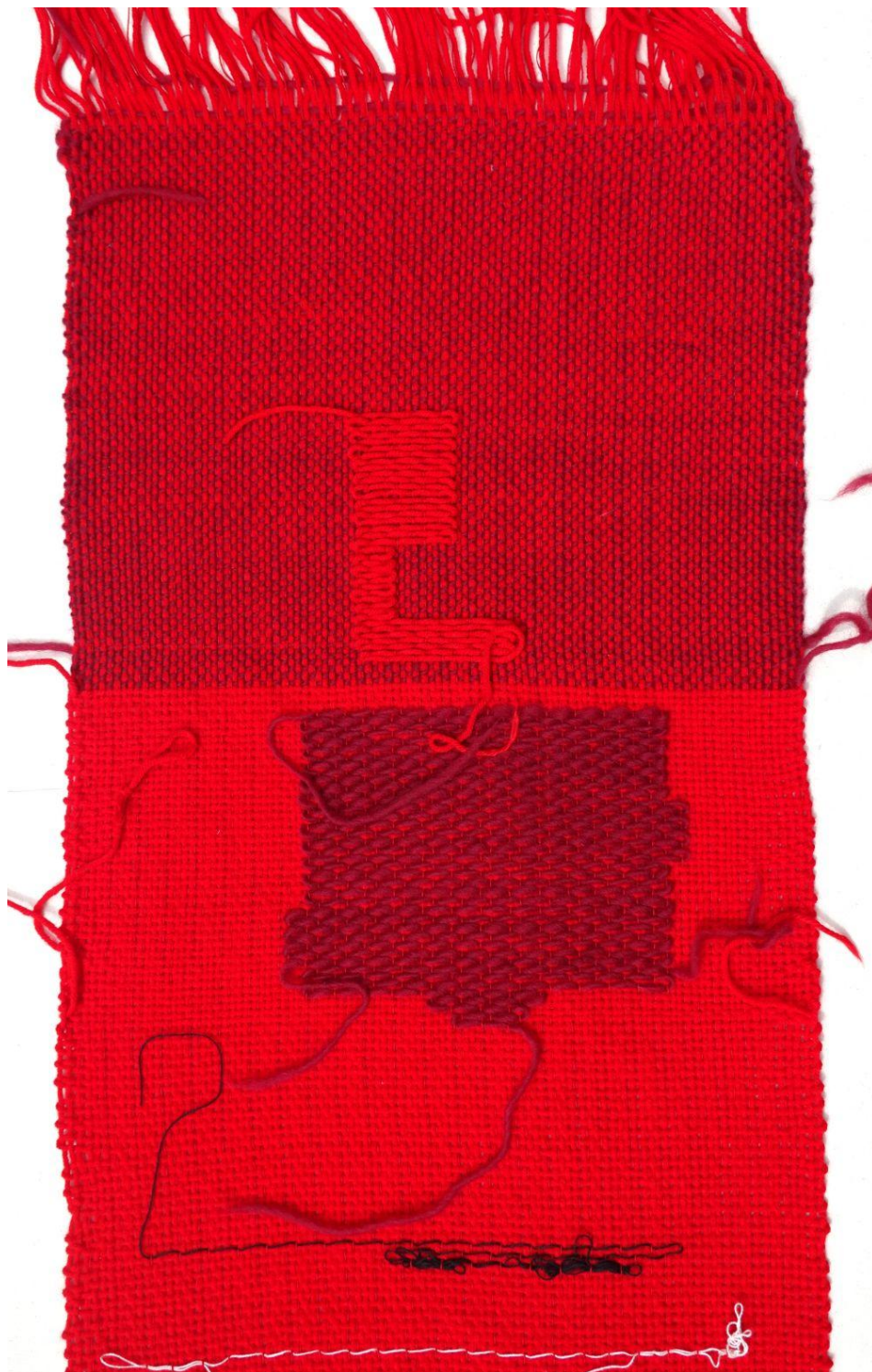


FIGURE 31. *OLD HOUSE/NEW HOUSE*, 2025. DETAIL.

In the spring of 2024, during my first year of the MFA program, my husband signed us up for table loom classes at the Place des Arts art center in Coquitlam, BC. The goal was to do a collaborative stress-relief activity together. We accumulated several table looms and a horde of fibre materials within a few months. I started experimenting with the warp/weft structure (see Fig. 26), researching this ancient technology and its connection to the modern time of computer programming¹³, which appealed to my engineering background. Weaving is now an integral part of my art practice. I am interested in activating the woven structure of warp and weft with displacement gestures, such as damage and repair.

Remnants of Time (2025) (see Fig. 27) consists of four human-sized banner-like woven pieces with warp/weft structures manipulated by tangling, unravelling, and pooling, referring to the soft structures experienced in intimate places and symbolizing the managing of adverse situations within ourselves. Each piece features a representation of a topography (see Appendix A), including my torn-apart former homeland (see Fig. 28), the dry-blood-coloured land of my mother's family (see Fig. 29), the map of my birth city on river Danube (see Fig. 30), and the blueprints of my Serbian and Canadian homes juxtaposed as a storytelling foil (see Fig. 28). Although these woven pieces are reminiscent of political banners, scrolls, and proclamations, they embody humanity through their scale, the pooling of blood-like threads, the way they accompany each other, and how they attempt to repair themselves. They anchor how one places oneself in history while showing the turmoil, shifting, and uprooting. We are all remnants of times in how we carry our locations, geologies, histories, blood and genes as our lives unfold.

The art historian Nait Banai illustrates this sentiment by stating that the very concept of borders has become an art form that "revisits moments when history seemed open-ended—those fragile junctures in which various futures were equally possible and plausible before they became concretized" (Banai, 2017). In support of Banai's words, the motifs featured on each piece in this series

¹³ Two centuries ago, Ada Lovelace pointed out the algorithmic similarity between Analytical Engine (a predecessor of machine computing) and the Jacquard loom which stores binary information for the purpose of reproduction (Elliott, 2017).

of work represent land delineations related to the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the emotions stemming from my displacement experience.

The next section brings together all three bodies of work discussed so far, into an exhibition space.

THESIS EXHIBITION: DISPLACED TOPOLOGIES



FIGURE 32. *DISPLACED TOPOLOGIES*, 2024-2025. INSTALLATION.

Through the MFA program, I have been working on formulating an abstract visual language that communicates my cultural heterogeneity (Serbian/Canadian) and opens a discourse on belonging and simultaneously not belonging to disparate cultures. I explored ancestry, displacement, borders, hard and soft man-made structures, records of fractures, falling apart and rebuilding.

The artwork included in my thesis exhibition is organized into three series: *Sediments of Time* (2024-2025), *Haphazard Structures* (2024-2025), and *Remnants of Time* (2025), as shown in the installation image (see Fig. 32). A book with didactic images, titled *Displaced Topologies* (2025), is placed on a plinth by the window. It contains the photographic reference material that informs the artwork in this exhibition (see Appendix A). I will discuss how the placement of the works illuminates their relationships and deeper meanings.



FIGURE 33. *SEDIMENTS OF TIME*, 2025. INSTALLATION.

Sediments of Time (2024-2025) (see Fig. 33) is a group of square canvas collage paintings on stretched canvasses hung in a bricolage pattern, forming a low wall, with one vertical piece mounted above the window (not shown in Fig. 33). The wall of paintings is a metaphor for walls as transient structures encrusted with history. The gray textured shapes and backgrounds in these paintings are in conversation with the concrete architecture of the exhibition space and its utilitarian function as a university building. The “Artwork Series 1: Sediments of Time” section discusses the individual pieces in more detail.



FIGURE 34. *HAPHAZARD STRUCTURES*, 2024-2025. INSTALLATION.

Haphazard Structures (2024-2025) (see Fig. 34) comprises a diptych of canvas collage paintings, *Four Buildings*¹⁴ (2025), and four mixed media drawings on unframed raw canvas off-cuts. The diptych is mounted high on the tall exhibition wall, appearing to float above the wall of paintings from the *Sediments of Time* (2024-2025) (see Fig. 1). The mixed media drawings are displayed in a vitrine as documents of my cultural history interpreted in art. They are placed on glassine paper, the packing material I use for my heritage textile keepsakes.

¹⁴ *Four Buildings* (2025) references the roofline shapes of four specific public buildings including the railway station in Novi Sad, Serbia, the Vancouver airport, University of Technical Sciences in Novi Sad, Serbia, and Emily Carr University of Art & Design in Vancouver.



FIGURE 35. *REMNANTS OF TIME*, 2025. INSTALLATION.

Remnants of Time (2025) (see Fig. 35) is a series of woven pieces placed on individual plinths, representing displaced humans standing together, claiming their space¹⁵ in the world and history. This installation adds an explicit human reference to this exhibition.

¹⁵ The human-sized plinths that hold the woven pieces reference Marcel Duchamp's artwork *Three Standard Stoppages* where the artist reimagined the length of one meter: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78990>. My box-like plinths reimagine the space required by a human being.

Displaced Topologies exhibition gathers artworks that symbolize structures, documents, and humans connected by the conditions of migration, displacement, and cultural heterogeneity. In the words of Tim Ingold, "Gathering is a bundling of trajectories. A wall is the substance and all the aspects of building that wall." Ingold describes the world's matter as chunky and woven, with substance and coherence, like concrete made of aggregate and binding or bricks and mortar, including similar molecular structures in biology (Ingold, 2019). This woven in-between matter records all the processes that happened while the wall was being built, like weather, elements, chemistry, geography, and other conditions. Likewise, my work represents the complex wall I carry within myself, formed by my history, cultural identity, and hopes for the future.

CRITICAL REFLECTION AND CONTINUATION

My artwork, presented in the *Displaced Topologies* thesis exhibition, and this document, externalize my thoughts and feelings on these subjects, but my interest in them does not end here. In my future artistic research and multi-disciplinary practice, I plan to continue exploring the themes of migration by going deeper into the interrogation of artifacts of displacement, such as lines in the context of borders, maps and pathways, as well as bridging art with other disciplines, such as archeology and architecture, inspired by the teachings of Tim Ingold (Ingold, 2019).

Over the course of my MFA thesis exhibition and defense, several generative forward-looking discussions have been brought up, pertaining to my exhibition installation strategy, the metaphorical use of patterns and gestures in my artwork, and the role of community and collaboration in my artistic practice. I will respond to these discussions as I find them applicable to my future art research.

Reflecting on the installation strategies described in the previous section, I recognize the potential to modify the placement of the works, should they be displayed in a different exhibition space. These works embody gestures of migrations, including adaptability to various spaces and configurations, thus expressing the temporality of migratory conditions. For instance, the wall-mounted paintings may be hung with variable density while the *Four Buildings* diptych could occupy its own wall. In the spirit of the wall metaphor discussed earlier, the individual pieces can be broken up or new elements added to the assemblage. The same flexible strategy could be applied to the *Haphazard*

Structures mixed media drawings where the pieces on the canvas offcuts could be layered to express the idea of obscurity and piling. The woven *Remnants of Time* pieces could be placed in articulated positions to mimic humans placed in uncomfortable locations or to interact with each other as migrants might do. These strategies would expand the metaphor of displacement as the works travel between the exhibition spaces, storage spaces, and other transient places on their journey. This is an affirmation that something new can emerge from disruptions. The process of disturbance, modification, and re-creation never stops. I find this to be a hopeful point of view that I want to take into the future.

The discussion on patterns generated further ideas about expanding my visual vocabulary of displacement. Building upon my use of fragments and folds, I look forward to exploring other migratory gestures such as multiplicity and pressure, which have been mentioned as rich sources in printmaking and could be reimaged through other artistic approaches. I am especially interested in the intelligence of art making¹⁶ where materials and processes bridge disciplines such as the gesture of cutting in art, science, and language, or the concept of pressure taken symbolically such as the pressure applied to the seals which I've explored briefly in the *Haphazard Structures* series and look forward to revisiting in my future work.

I have yet to fully explore the ideas of community and collaboration artistically. I have experienced these ideas differently growing up in a communist environment and living as an adult in Canada. I am grappling with the dichotomies of communism versus community, ideology of communal values versus the need for personal freedom. This is a complex topic for me personally just as it has complicated the societies historically and politically. I have found ways of immersing myself collaboratively in community through gardening and exhibiting together with other artists. There is an enormous space for growth in this area, from collaborative research, to making studio work in a communal space, to directly co-making art with other artists. I made a small progress in this area by creating a woven piece using donated materials as a research assistant in the *Leaning Out of*

¹⁶ The American art historian, Jennifer L. Roberts discusses the many applications of printmaking, historically and in the contemporary art and science as a discipline that has a far-reaching agency, from deep history to the futuristic scientific experiments where art enriches the world as intelligently as science (L. Roberts, 2021).

*Windows*¹⁷ project in 2024-2025. This project spurred another field of interest, the futuristic thinking based on the concept of 'pluriverse' as an all-inclusive world of many worlds (de la Cadena 1-22). Thinking about the pluriverse resonates with my visual language of cultural heterogeneity as a generative way of viewing the multicultural world. Through this research, I have found new perspectives on inhabiting space as a displaced person. We take space by our very existence, which is complicated by wanting or being forced to change space, take more space, or prevent others from taking the space we perceive as ours. Through force and bureaucracy, power structures often manipulate these thoughts, shaping our futures, obscuring the knowledge of history, and envisioning of the future.

Like most artists, I feel the pull of my cultural identity, heterogeneous as it is. My choice is to express it without the limitation of any one cultural gaze because I do not consider myself a Serbian artist in the Canadian diaspora or a Canadian artist with Serbian roots. Both designations carry some intangible characteristics that I do not have. Making art this way is my statement that the in-between state I am in is not temporary nor a place of inadequacy. It is a generative space with tremendous potential for the future of multicultural harmony.

¹⁷ SSHRC funded interdisciplinary art + science project with collaborations between Emily Carr University and TRIUMF, Canada's Particle Accelerator Centre.

APPENDIX A: IMAGES INCLUDED IN DISPLACED TOPOLOGIES DIDACTIC BOOK



FIGURE A1. TEXTILES

Serbian heritage textiles passed onto me by my mother's family:

- Pillowcase.
- Overskirt.
- Weaving sampler.
- The unfolded pillowcase, showcasing the Morning Star pattern.

These wool yarn textiles were woven on a floor loom by my mother's relatives between 1945 and 1970. I reference their colours, patterns, and shapes in all three bodies of work included in this thesis.



FIGURE A2. MAPS

Maps referenced in *Remnants of Time* (2025) (see Fig. 28-31):

- Former Yugoslavia, divided into republics that became separate countries after the 1990s civil war.
- Babusnica county in eastern Serbia, where my mother was born, and Nazis murdered her father in WWII.
- Novi Sad, my birth city in northern Serbia (Vojvodina province).
- My present neighborhood, in Port Moody, BC, with the outline of my house.

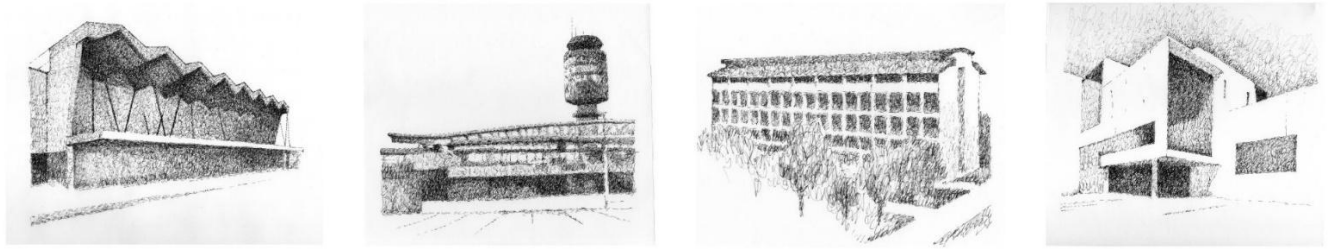


FIGURE A3. BUILDINGS

The public buildings with agency, referenced in *Four Buildings* (2025) (see Fig. 17-18):

- The Railway Station in Novi Sad, Serbia – a site of tragedy¹⁸.
- Vancouver airport - a site of police brutality¹⁹.
- University of Technical Sciences in Novi Sad, Serbia - a site of protests (Popović, 2025).
- Emily Carr University of Art & Design – a site of protests (CBC News, 2022).

¹⁸ On November 1, 2024, the canopy of the communist-era railway station in my birth city collapsed, killing fifteen people. The tragedy triggered an uprising led by students, protesting inadequate maintenance of public buildings and government corruption (Popović, 2025).

¹⁹ On October 14, 2007, Polish citizen Robert Dziekański died after a Taser was used on him by the Vancouver airport police. The four RCMP officers have been charged with perjury about the evidence submitted for trial (McLaughlin, 2018)

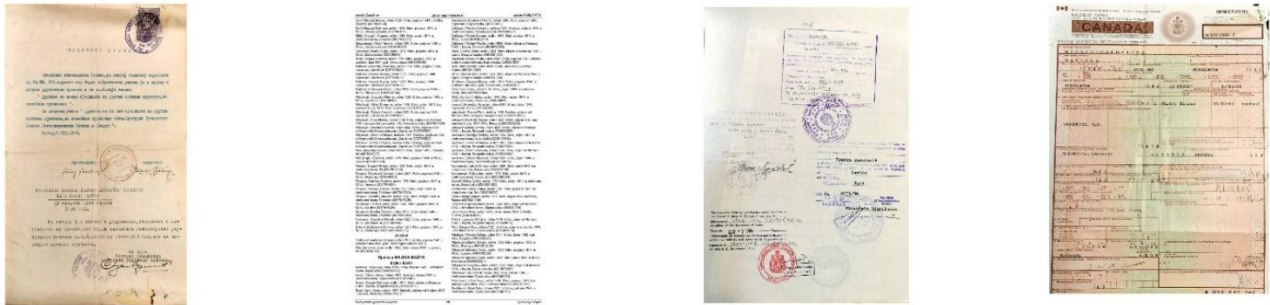


FIGURE A4. DOCUMENTS

Documents referenced in *Haphazard Structures* (2024-2025) (see Fig. 22-24):

- Legal document from my paternal grandfather's archive, stamped in 1934 in Novi Sad, Danube Banovina (today's Vojvodina province in Serbia).
- Page 59 of the incomplete list of WWII victims in Serbia. The third entry in the left column documents my maternal grandfather's murder by the Nazis in 1944 (Genocide Victims Museum, 1964).
- The back side of my graduation diploma from the University of Technical Sciences in Novi Sad, Serbia, translated to English and stamped for the purpose on my emigration to Canada in 1994.
- My immigration record of landing issued in 1994 at the Vancouver Airport.

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