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**Jacqueline Reem Salloum**  
Artist and filmmaker



# Weekend

ARAB-AMERICAN HERITAGE MONTH

## Celebrating Arab-American artists’ contribution to culture

April is Arab-American Heritage Month. *Rawaa Talass* highlights some of the community’s most significant artists



**Helen Zughaib**

On April 1, US President Joe Biden published an open letter sending the Arab-American community “warmest greetings” in honor of Arab-American Heritage Month. Such a gesture was welcomed by many, including

the Lebanese-American artist Zughaib, who emigrated from Lebanon to the US during the civil war. “Finally, you feel proud and hopeful,” Zughaib told Arab News. She was commissioned by cosmetics giant Sephora to create a new artwork for its social media platforms celebrating this special

occasion. The result is this joyful, colorful image of dabké dancers and musicians. Zughaib’s work is about finding beauty and hope in stories of personal and collective trauma. “I have a very strong desire to make something palatable that can attract your attention,” she explained.

**Jacqueline Reem Salloum**

As a first-generation Arab-American, Salloum has devoted much of her adult life as a filmmaker challenging Arab stereotypes in Hollywood. But recently, the Syrian-Palestinian multidisciplinary artist has been experimenting with lively, detailed collages, juxtaposing historical black-and-white pictures with vibrant drawings. “My current work explores more of the connections between personal and collective past, heritage, and history through diasporic memory,” she told Arab News. “Remembering the Future,” Salloum’s mixed-media work shown here, combines the personal story of Sumaya Yousef, a displaced Palestinian woman, and key events that took place in the Sixties, including the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and the 1964-65 World’s Fair — based on the theme of “Peace Through



Understanding” — that was held in New York City, Yousef’s eventual home. Salloum brings out the contradiction and irony of such events: Spectators

looking into a utopian bubble of Palestinian refugee girls at school, the voice of Umm Kulthum drowning out the sound of Israeli war planes.

**Rania Matar**

The Lebanese photographer Rania Matar has lived in the US since 1984. Her intimate images explore themes related to adolescence and womanhood, capturing young women laying in the privacy of their bedrooms or immersed in the wilderness. In Matar’s ongoing series “Where Do I Go?” the audience is confronted with women photographed in abandoned spaces

in the Lebanese capital, such as this image of a theater lover named Rhea, sitting inside Beirut’s once-prestigious Piccadilly Theater. “I saw some graffiti on the wall that said — in Arabic — ‘Where do I go?’ These women are at that crossroads. Where do they go? I was their age when I left Lebanon. Some are leaving; others cannot afford to go anywhere. I want to empower them and tell their story,” Matar wrote in a statement.



**Sherin Guirguis**

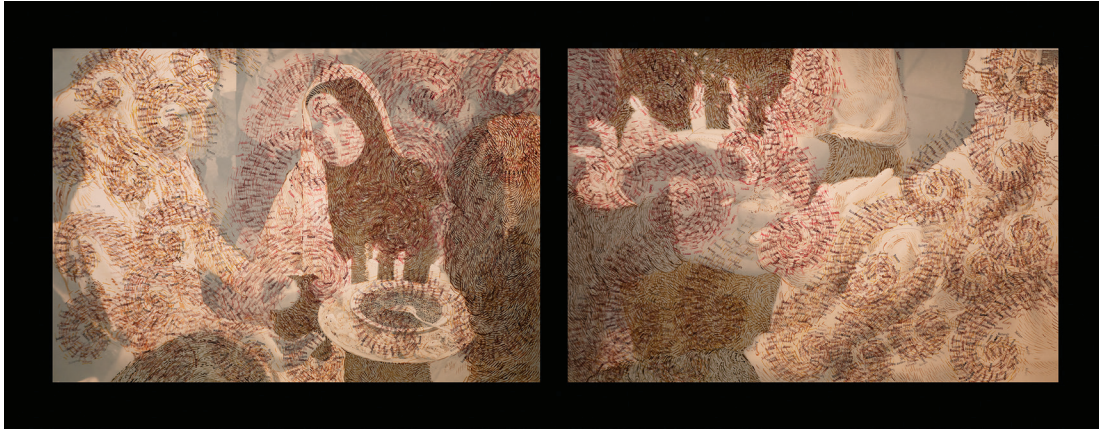
Los Angeles-based Egyptian artist Guirguis’ artwork is inspired by forgotten stories of marginalized communities, particularly women. This work, “Here Have I Returned,” was a site-specific sculpture created for an exhibition at the Pyramids Plateau in Giza, Egypt last year. It is shaped like a sacred musical instrument played by Hathor, the ancient goddess of music and dance. Embellished with pharaonic-like symbols, the sculpture also pays tribute to the groundbreaking 20th-century Egyptian feminist, Doria Shafik, whose writings are featured. “Serving as both a remembrance of history and an invitation to connect these narratives to the present, the work sets out to make the invisible work of generations of under-recognized women visible once more,” Gurguis said in a statement

**John Halaka**

Egyptian-born, California-based Halaka is the son of Palestinian and Lebanese immigrants who made their way to America in 1970. “Until the COVID-pandemic, I’ve traveled to Palestine almost every year to work on various projects,” he

told Arab News. In his evocative series, “Ghost of Presence/ Bodies of Absence,” Halaka addresses the plight of exiled Palestinian people by placing ink and rubber-stamped text, sometimes appearing in the shape of a human face, on digital photographs of destroyed villages, creating a ghostly

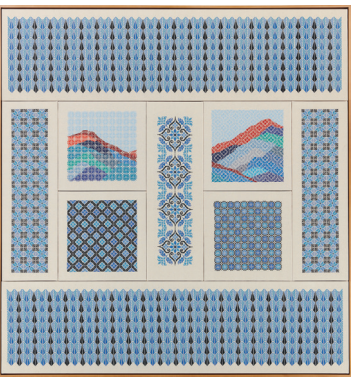
effect and mimicking, Halaka said, “the unrelenting tension between the physical absence of Palestinians who have been exiled from their homeland, and the psychological presence of millions of Palestinian refugees who continue the struggle to return to the lands that were stolen from them.”



**Jordan Nassar**

Inspired by Palestinian embroidery and working with Arab craftswomen, Nassar, an artist of Palestinian descent born in New York, is known for making patterned, vibrant pieces that reveal imagined landscapes of Palestinian areas. “I would talk to certain Palestinians who had never been (to Palestine), I noticed they would talk about

the country in a way that felt really dreamlike — imaginary; a fantasy,” the artist has previously told Arab News. “It was always this perfect, beautiful place with hills, goats and olive trees. I was really moved by this notion that Palestine is this fantasy for so many people in the diaspora.” In the work shown here, “Beyond the Boundaries,” Nassar revisits his reoccurring motif of the rolling hills.



**Jackie Milad**

“I think of my pieces as a record of my decisions over time, a document of my history. They are my story according to me,” Baltimore-based Milad, who has both Egyptian and Honduran origins, told Arab News. Works such as the one shown here, “Nada Que Decir” (Nothing to Say), created in 2021, are filled with colors, words and symbols. “This work is an



accumulation of many layers of collage and marks painted over two years,” she explained of the piece. “It includes world news, and quotes from lyrics and poetry.” She continued: “I also mix the languages in the works, reflecting my own mixed upbringing.” The title of this particular piece is ironic; the artist expresses a lot of emotion in it, but ultimately has nothing to say in the face of the complexity of identity.