



Reparation and Healing through Materiality in the Work of Aya Haidar

Dustyn Bork

About the Author

Dustyn Bork is Professor of Art at Lyon College. He earned his Master of Fine Arts from Indiana University and a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Michigan. In Arkansas, Bork won the prestigious Fellowship for Painting. His work has been exhibited extensively including at Site: Brooklyn in New York City; Manifest Gallery in Cincinnati, Ohio; the Torpedo Art Center in Alexandria, Virginia; and the Hunterdon Museum among others. Bork has participated in artist residencies in Argentina, Latvia, Belgium, Italy, and Bulgaria. His work was published in New American Paintings no. 148.

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Aya Haidar, a contemporary Lebanese artist, adds a tactile and personal response to the destruction caused by a massive explosion in Beirut. Contextually, embroidery physically repairs the fabric and has overt connotations of fixing or mending—actions inherent to the nature of fabric.

On August 4, 2020, 2,750 tons of confiscated ammonium nitrate exploded in Beirut, wreaking mass havoc. The explosion killed at least 220 people and injured over 7,000. This horrific day was further impacted by governmental failure, mismanagement, and obstruction of the resulting investigation. Compounding the tragedy was its occurrence at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Figure 1

Ouda. Embroidery on linen by Aya Haidar, 2024. 41 x 32.5 x 5 cm. From the *Shattered* series. <https://www.ayahaidar.com/portfolio/shattered-2024>.

Aya Haidar reimagines spaces damaged by the blast. The series *Shattered* offers a restorative response to a deadly event. In this series, Haidar first prints black-and-white photographs—taken after the explosion by her friends and family—on linen fabric. She then adds colorful hand embroidery to highlight the broken pieces of destroyed objects. Her prismatic line creates a cacophony of accumulation, countering the starkness of the images with a sense of hope and healing. These works use mending to unveil their emotional impact.

Haidar's work conveys urgency through her ties to Beirut amidst the larger political strife in the region. She invites the viewer to enter these spaces by painstakingly tracing every shard of glass, reiterating the cataclysmic impact. The resulting artworks reveal and obscure the blast, freeze time, and challenge us to consider the unimaginable.

Shattered presents liminal spaces; the thin, diaphanous fabric reveals and hides the image simultaneously. According to Walter Benjamin, a work of art viewed through the lens of photography is indicative of the present. Haidar's tactility and addition of color embroidery transmute the reproduction as an image, and her *Shattered* series transcends the place upon which it is founded.¹ Benjamin posits that photographic techniques are evidence of the physical object, whereas a reproduction of the image loses authenticity; a loss between the lens and the print is always at play in mechanical reproduction. Over time, that transformation further evolves, and the subject is removed or degraded as a result of chemical development. However, in *Shattered*, the blast is evident through the tactility of the thread, which adds presence. If anything is degraded from the original photograph, the subject matter is also made clearer by the foregrounding of the materials. The duality of the material is transformed by stitching, presenting an act of healing and reparation.

The alteration in *Shattered* narrows the distance between now and August 4, 2020. Haidar has modified the image, and our perspective changes with it. Haidar says of her work, "It really depends on what you try to retain, what you choose to retain, and what you choose to forget."²

In another work from the same series, *Salon* (Figure 2), commemoration after the explosion becomes palpable. Although Haidar's *Shattered* series is visually dissimilar from Edvard Munch's *Frieze of Life* series, both series share a commonality: what connects us in *Salon* pulls us out of reality, just as in a Munch painting. In this work, Haidar instills a lingering nostalgia for a Beirut that no longer exists, "the Paris of the Middle East." The symbolic and forlorn former city provides healing. However, not all memories can be returned.

¹ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility [First Version]," trans. Michael W. Jennings, *Grey Room*, no. 39 ([1935] 2010): 11–38, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2780942413-17>.

² Art Dubai, "Art Dubai Portraits: Aya Haidar," posted June 20, 2017, YouTube video, 1:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nJwABj9_Q0g.

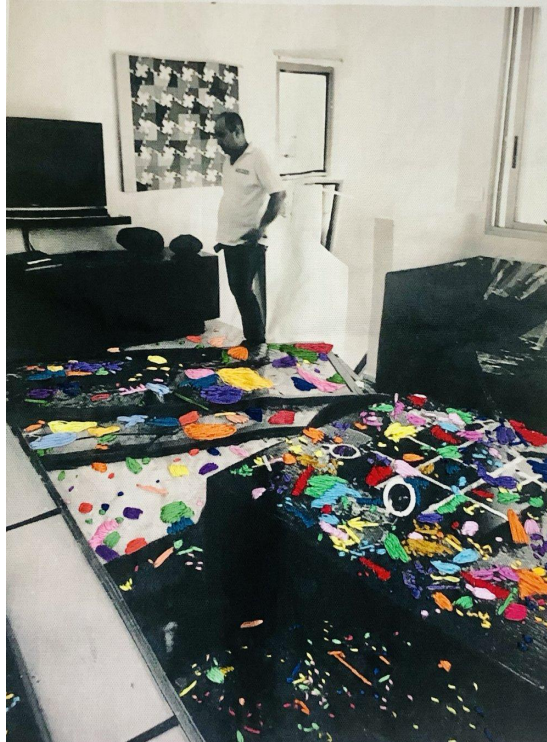


Figure 2

Salon. Embroidery on linen by Aya Haidar, 2024. 41 x 32.5 x 5 cm. From the *Shattered* series. <https://www.ayahaidar.com/portfolio/shattered-2024>.

Spaces can be restored, but lives and the places they occupy are irrevocably lost. A futile attempt to return architectural spaces to their former state is a reminder of the Beirut conflict from 1975 to 1990 and of its exponential displacement and loss, reminding us of what is at stake in Lebanon.

Manipulated images, such as reproductions or altered photographs, create ambiguity: the place is changed, resulting in a suspension of disbelief. When Haidar contrasts the monochromatic scene with punctuated color in *Salon*, the work becomes a phenomenological surface imbued with undercurrents of political and historical events.

We sense volatility when we are confronted with sublime images of destruction. This is a specific place, Beirut; at the same time, considering larger shifts in globalism—and the interconnectedness of economies, health concerns, and connections through the internet and social media—Beirut carries the zeitgeist. Haidar’s work gestures toward formlessness to harness beauty, as revealed through a theoretical reading of Immanuel Kant: “The beautiful in nature is a question of the form of the object, and this consists in limitation, whereas the sublime is to be found in an object even devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves, or else by its presence provokes, a representation of limitlessness, yet with a super-added thought of its totality.”³ Viewing the works of Haidar in this context conjures an iconic viral


³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith, Oxford University Press, [1781] 2009, 77–78.

video featuring a bride, from the exact date and location of the explosion.⁴ With both, we observe beauty in juxtaposition to the impact of the blast.

The permeability of thread and linen, both soft materials, contrasts with hard-edge industrial and domestic architecture. Haidar speaks to the symbolism in sewing. "The physical act of mending works towards an emotional repair," she says. "Because craft is slow, considered, repetitive, and thoughtful."⁵ *Shattered* reveals the aggressive rip of the explosion, yet the malleability of the thread restores. In these works, stitching serves as a metaphor for renewal and healing after upheaval, becoming an elegiac reminder of palpable tragedy and healing.

⁴ Mahmoud Nakib, "Beirut Explosion Rocks Bride's Photoshoot," August 4, 2020, Reuters, YouTube video, 0:28, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L7SlqDtRnc>.

⁵ Katie Treggiden, "Back for Good: The Fine Art of Repairing Broken Things," *The Guardian*, August 22, 2021, 3, 18, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/aug/22/back-for-good-the-fine-art-of-repairing-broken-things>.

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