

# ARTFORUM

DECEMBER 2019

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

THE YEAR IN FRIENDSHIP



\$15.00



7 25274 29084 0 12

so of her life, Miller's mother produced a number of quilts. *Curl Arch* centers a patch-like diamond on a light-pink square, on top of which one can make out bright-green cursive reading RED SHOULDERED / SHARP SHINNED—presumably rendered in Miller's mother's hand. The artist also incorporated her parent's sewn designs and patterns from her fabric collection into the works on view.

Indeed, Miller figures information and what holds it in place, or the contexts through which it moves, even as she withholds meaning from the captionless and decontextualized numbers, letters, graphics, and figures floating across her canvases. The largest work, the diptych *CAPRRRIUS*, took up a whole wall. The physical horizontal seam between the two stacked canvases ruptures the patterns that traverse it. A vertical orange block is confined to the lower register while a thick black squiggle that also appears to be a void moves across the divide unconcerned, as do parenthetical stripes of light and dark tan, fleshy pink, grassy green, and maroon. Reaching from the maroon stripe to the far-right edge of the work are two cobwebby lattice patterns. Caught within their threads are letters, symbols, and chalky shapes. These and other passages in the works on view move at different velocities, slowing into broad and brightly colored planes interrupted by subtle visual incidents—smudges and almost imperceptible layers—or vibrating with gestures that imply or picture energy. Like unwitting garlands, the diptych's sticky matrices struck me as especially poignant, acknowledging as they do that, despite what they have captured, so much else has been lost.

—Suzanne Hudson

## TORONTO

### Hajra Waheed THE POWER PLANT

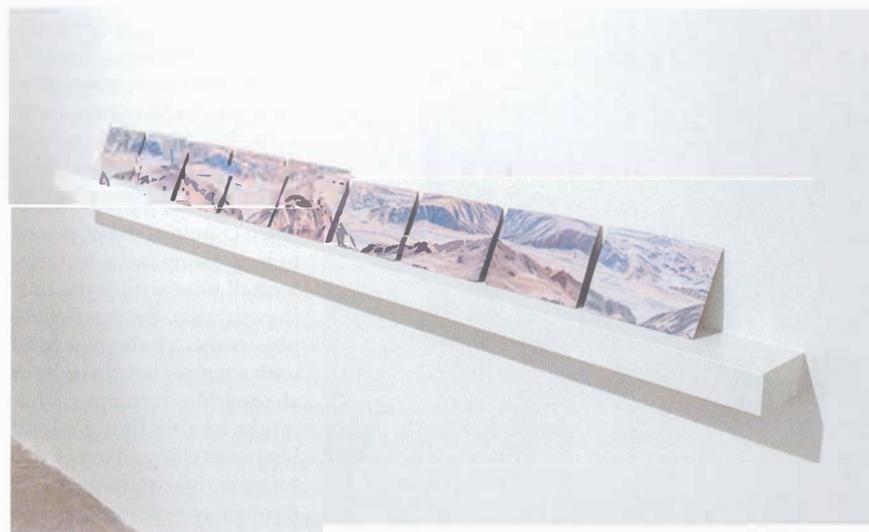
If an exhibition is a letter, to whom is it addressed? The viewer is the obvious answer, but artworks also, of course, direct themselves to others: lovers and children, mentors and colleagues, unknown future audiences who might find within the work a blueprint for radical acts of hope and defiance.

"Hold Everything Dear," Hajra Waheed's current solo show, has at its heart such an epistolary address. Titled after a 2007 collection of John Berger's essays, the show builds on a 2017 performance in which the artist manipulated a sheet of black cinefoil on a light projector, revealing a constellation of tiny pinhole stars, while an audio recording relayed a letter her sister wrote following the 2015 Paris attacks, meditating on cycles of colonial violence. Spanning dozens of new works on paper as well as recent paintings, collages, video, sculptures, and installations, Waheed's exhibition is deeply self-reflexive while reaching far beyond autobiography.

A suite of nine miniature paintings on tin, for instance, provides a photorealistic, drone-like aerial view of rocky hills reminiscent of Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, where the artist's family lived for twenty-two years (*Landscape 1-9*, 2019). The mountamous desert, rendered in rich tones of ochre, brown, and maroon, is interrupted by a pipeline that cuts across the panorama at absurdly rigid right angles and alludes to the Saudi Arabia American Oil Company (Aramco), which has its gated headquarters in the area alongside some of the earliest and most productive oil wells in the region. Heavily monitored by the state-owned company, US and Saudi airbases, and the CIA through aerial reconnaissance, the site is also restrictive in other ways. For example, civilian photography was prohibited when Waheed lived there, so the artist has few photographs of her childhood. But Dhahran has become the site of local acts of resistance, most spectacularly a drone attack this past

September, which destroyed roughly half of the country's daily oil production of nearly ten million barrels. Houthi rebels in Yemen claimed responsibility; their intention was to protest the violence enacted by their Saudi-backed government. The incident led to increased tensions between the United States and Iran over control of oil extraction.

Elsewhere, *Untitled 1-18*, 2019—a group of graph-paper notebooks into which Waheed adhered found images of single-story houses, industrial buildings, and lines of people walking between tall barbed-wire fences—suggests the more banal effects of corporate surveillance. Cut into round shapes that evoke the sight lines of a pair of binoculars or the lens of a CCTV camera, the photographs have been lightly annotated with circles, dotted lines, and Xs. Whether the marks identify spies, counterinsurgents, civilians, or CEOs is left disturbingly ambiguous.



Correspondence appears as a mode of countersurveillance in *Letters 1-8*, 2019, a sequence of detailed drawings of African oil palms accompanied by handwritten dispatches about a shadowy company's attempts to occupy a local village and the residents' acts of dissent. The work was seemingly inspired by another of Berger's books, *From A to X* (2008), told via the "discovered" love letters of two activists, one of whom writes from prison. Waheed's drawings mix botanical studies with recollections of dreams and lists of strategies deployed by corporations to secure local consent; by interweaving the personal and the political, she depicts the palm-oil industry's nefarious effects on local ecosystems and global labor conditions. Although penned to an intimate reader, the letters' sender and addressee are obscured from the viewer. Like a skilled novelist, Waheed describes everyday events and environments to map larger constellations, here pertaining to transnational extraction, colonial occupation, and forced and strategic disappearances.

The artist does suggest a desperate way out of these global networks of violence: *Walls, Ladders and Roads*, 2019, consists of miniature walls, dams, and fences made of porcelain laid across a tabletop. Recalling the architectures of borders, prison fences, and extraction zones, the tiny white structures risk being circumvented via precarious ladders and poles that have been leaned up against them by unseen actors. These scenes of darkly comic rebellion, alongside Waheed's evocative works, leave the viewer to imagine how our small and seemingly private plans for escape—outlined in notebooks, sketched in letters, and molded in the palms of our hands—might become models for resisting systemic oppression.

—Gabrielle Moser

Hajra Waheed,  
*Landscape 1-9*, 2019.  
oil on tin, each 5 x 7".