

BORDER CROSSINGS

As immigration takes centre stage in American politics, **Shiva Balaghi** shows how some artists are remapping the cultural terrain.

A flow of colonial era settlers on horse and buggy stream across the canvas. The painting is enframed in a highly decorative Arabesque border. Against a background of vivid orange, the immigrants navigate a landscape filled with coded symbols of Americana. In his Los Angeles studio, Kour Pour walks me through his work in progress, part of a new series that he began last summer. In form, the paintings are a contemporary reinterpretation of medieval Islamic manuscripts. The colourful pages of the illuminated books are embellished with intricate borders surrounding two-dimensional miniature paintings. Their pictorial narratives are characterised by landscapes coloured with both real and mythical flora and fauna. In each of the three paintings, Kour reimagines the iconography associated with pressing contemporary social issues – feminism, spirituality and immigration.

It's an uncharacteristically cold and rainy LA day. Pour pulls his Peruvian poncho around him against the chill. Not far from his studio, protesters gather at the LAX airport in opposition to a travel ban issued by the US president on January 27 that would bar entry to the US for travellers from seven Muslim-majority countries. The "Muslim ban" and the president's proposal to build a wall along the border of the US and Mexico have galvanized the American public around the question of immigration.

"Emigration, forced or chosen, across national frontiers or from village to metropolis, is the quintessential experience of our time," wrote the art critic John Berger. The United Nations estimates that, in 2015, some 244 million people were living in countries other than where they were born. As of 2013, some 40 million residents of the United States were foreign born. Revolutions, wars and economic instability have led to an influx of populations crossing borders. As the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has noted, the global movement of immigrants entails "the work of the imagination." This inflects the art made by artists of Middle Eastern heritage living and working in today's America.

As Pour and I speak about his recent artworks and the myriad implications of the travel ban, airplanes taking off from LAX fly low over his studio. "Without looking," Pour tells me, "I can tell when it's the Emirates Airbus taking off." The disruption made by airplanes has become for Pour a sort of mimetic sign – a constant reminder of travel, of people coming and going, of the heady criss-cross of cultural flows. Dislocation and the fusion of cultural influences are concerns threaded throughout his art.

Across LA, I find the artist Hayv Kahraman working in a large studio with high ceilings and paint-dripped concrete floors. Along a wall, she's created something of a collage, a space for experimentation and inspiration. At the centre are two *mahafas*, the traditional handheld

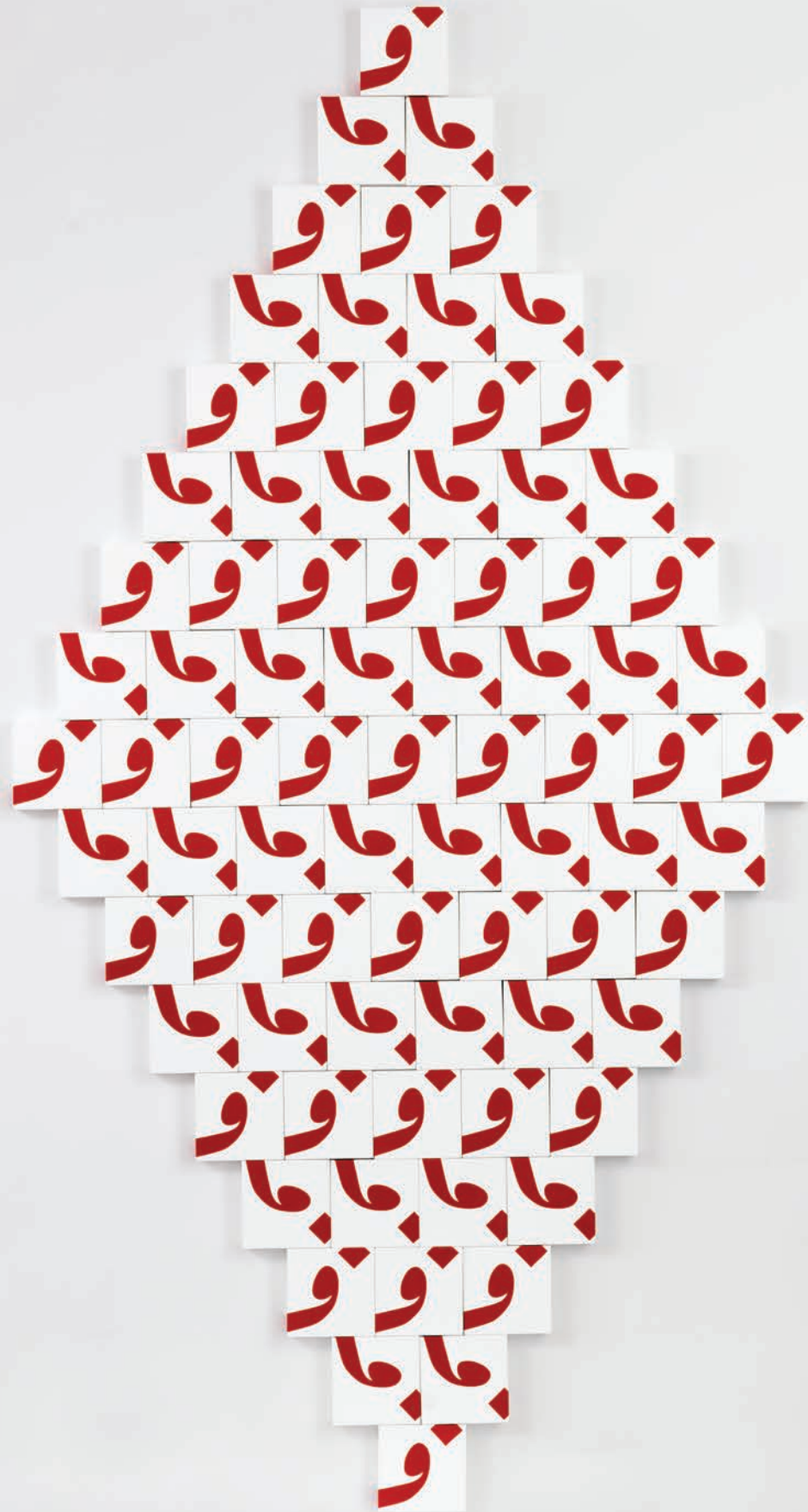


Kour Pour. *Immigrant Painting* (in progress) 2016–2017. Acrylic on canvas over panel. 165 x 134 cm.

fans Iraqi women weave from palm fronds. There's a picture of an ancient Sumerian relief showing a woman being fanned, alongside patches of woven linen and palm fronds, each flowing with a different pattern. And two small studies – delicately painted portraits of women whose flesh becomes a woven tapestry. The motif carries through to a series of large-scale paintings Kahraman is making for an upcoming exhibition.

I ask her why the *mahafa* has become so central to her new body of work. After years of war in Saddam's Iraq, Kahraman and her family became refugees in 1992. The *qachaqchi* – or smuggler – who helped them leave Iraq said they could each take one suitcase with them.

"Can you imagine leaving your home and only being able to pack one suitcase?" Kahraman tells me. They took the bare essentials, what they needed for daily life. But packed away in their bags was one item – the *mahafa*. "It's an emblematic symbol of Iraq. That object followed us throughout our journey across the border. It stays in our home, a relic of our lost past." There is a palpable sense of angst as Kahraman speaks to me about the travel ban. But like most artists I've spoken to recently, she spends her days in her studio, making art. With her hands, she weaves the linen of the canvases she's painting. "I feel like I'm mending something," she says softly.



**“Art is that space that creates
global citizenship.”**

Pouran Jinchi



Facing page: Pouran Jinchi.
Foxtrot 2016
 81 enamel on wood panels
 260 x 137cm
 Image courtesy of the artist.

This page: Hayv Kahraman.
 Untitled 2017 oil on linen.
 202 x 150 x 10 cm.

As I leave Kahraman's studio, my Lyft driver greets me with an accented English. I ask him where he's from. "I came here to America from Kurdistan," he replies. "Do you know where that is?" Yes, I nod. It's a long drive home, so I ring up the artist Pouran Jinchi in her New York studio. "My hands are in paint," she tells me. She's making a new body of work for an upcoming exhibition at Dubai's Third Line Gallery. The new series explores the rise of militarism, the ways armies and navies use codes to communicate, creating an internationally understood language. She's using brass and copper to make sculptures; embroidering Morse Code onto the canvas, and using the colours of naval flags, military medals and camouflage in her artworks.

We discuss the travel ban. "There's always so much talk of globalisation," she tells me. "Art is that space that creates global citizenship."

In their own inimitable way, each of these artists is responding to the shifting debates on security and immigration signalled by the proposed travel ban. With their art, they dismantle the coded imagery of this discourse, reassembling it as something entirely different, something beautifully evocative on the canvas. There is the work of imagination, a remapping of the cultural flows of migration that shape our time. Art has no borders. One cannot ban creativity or build walls around the imagination. 🇺🇸