

# *THEREFORE, I AM*

Sculptural Mementos to be Worn for Women:  
New Narratives from the Middle East

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## **ABSTRACT**

My creative practice-based research in wearable sculpture is a personal exploration of feminist concepts specific to the Middle East. As a Middle Eastern artist who has lived closely with the struggles and concerns of women in my region, I'm driven to explore how these feminist ideas can be expressed and reimagined in my work. This project merges Middle Eastern women's complex stories with traditional and contemporary sculptural methods, creating a body of work that speaks to our unique experiences in the 21st century.

Growing up in the Middle East, I witnessed firsthand the challenges women face, deeply rooted in our histories, social structures, and cultural perspectives. This practice-based research bridges these lived experiences with broader feminist discourse, using art to reflect these stories in non-verbal ways. Informed by feminist theory, including perspectives from Islamic feminism, my work reimagines and contributes to the ongoing dialogue about gender equality and identity in contemporary art practices.

Central to my practice is creating wearable sculptures that honour the resilience of Middle Eastern women who have faced tremendous oppression yet continue to fight for their rights. To craft these wearable pieces, I use the ancient Mesopotamian technique of lost-wax casting, an innovation of Middle Eastern artisans. This technique allows for intricate, expressive designs that connect the traditional craftsmanship of my cultural heritage with contemporary artistic expressions.

By working with bronze, a material with a warm, earthy hue that recalls the vitality and spirit of these women, I aim to create pieces that bear the tangible weight of their struggles and aspirations. The durability of bronze stands as a symbol of their strength and endurance, serving as a lasting tribute to their resilience and determination.

My work reflects a commitment to bringing the stories of Middle Eastern women to light, celebrating their legacy, and sharing their voices with the world. It is a dialogue between the past and the present, between what was and what can be, representing those whose stories have not been heard.

### **Research Keywords**

Contemporary Art, Feminism Art, Middle East Art Forms, Women Artists, Wearable Sculpture, Memorial Sculpture, Historical jewellery, and contemporary jewellery.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To understand the Feminist artist's challenges specific to the Middle East region through a contemporary art practice in making memorial and wearable sculptures.

## INTRODUCTION

Growing up in the Middle East, I was shaped by its traditions and aware of the challenges women face. Raised in an educated family, my mother, a strong and talented woman, fought for her freedom and beliefs, with my father supporting us as we navigated a world that limited our choices.

Despite a supportive family, I witnessed the harsh realities faced by women in the Middle East, where societal and family roles limit their freedom in every aspect of life. This injustice drives me to create art that amplifies their voices, especially now living in New Zealand, the first country to grant women the right to vote.

As an Iranian female artist, my work seeks to bring visibility to the silenced stories of women oppressed by political and religious systems in the Middle East. In regions like Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, extremist ideologies have worsened violence, exploitation, and degradation, leading to horrific abuses such as rape, acid attacks, and trafficking.

My creative research practice employs hybrid methods, blending traditional and non-traditional techniques, such as precise casting (lost-wax casting), originating in ancient Mesopotamia (Hunt, 1980). I incorporate mixed media, including enamel, synthetic hair, resin, and other materials. The practical aspect of my artwork is deeply influenced by traditional features, details, and forms, such as flora, fauna, and women's faces. Some of these elements are used for women's funeral advertisements, and I have chosen these as familiar and significant visual references to my home region. This creative practice begins with the creation of a collection of monumental wearable sculptures that serve as memorials, honouring the stories of Middle Eastern women who are no longer alive.

In Aotearoa, New Zealand, Māori Tangihanga honors all genders communally, while in Iran, men receive elaborate memorials like Hejleh, but women's remembrance is limited to simple public notices without including their photo, reflecting gender disparities in mourning traditions.



Figure 1. *Tangihanga* – death customs, Te Ara - The Encyclopaedia of New Zealand.

Note: : “The tangihanga is the enduring Māori ceremony to mourn the dead. The body lies on a marae, and people come to pay their respects. Tangi retains traditional practices which have changed little despite European influence.” (Te Ara, 2024)



Figure 2. *Iranian funeral ceremony*, unknown photographers, 2021.

Note: Random photos from Iranian funeral ceremonies, typically held separately for men and women, highlight a cultural norm: it is uncommon to display photographs of deceased women in the ceremony space. In contrast, as shown in the next figure, men's photos are prominently displayed as part of ornamental objects at the entrance. (Figure 3).



Figure 3. *Hejleh* for one Iranian actor in 2020. (Unknown Photograph)

Note: In Iranian funerals, Hejleh memorials honor deceased men, especially unmarried ones, symbolizing unfulfilled life and marriage. Rarely used for women, this reflects cultural gender norms.

Through my practice, I challenge the cultural limitations that have been imposed on women for generations. While my work is deeply personal, it is also informed by feminist theory and the very real experiences of the Middle Eastern women I have known. I want my sculptures to be more than just art—they are meant to be memorials, standing in remembrance of those who have lost their lives to these oppressive societal conditions. These sculptures are my way of saying that these women's stories matter and that their struggles and sacrifices will be remembered.

I draw inspiration from influential feminist figures such as Shirin Neshat, who captures the essence of Middle Eastern women's experiences, and Nawal El Saadawi, whose activism advocates for women's rights in the Middle East.

Forough Farrokhzad (Figure 4), an Iranian poet and filmmaker, symbolizes freedom and defiance, exploring taboo themes with autonomy. Her legacy inspires my work, celebrating art as a powerful resistance against societal constraints and a tribute to women's liberation.



Figure 4. *Feroz Farrokhzad*, *Alchetron*, 2017

Similarly, Ghamarolmoluk Vaziri (Figure 5), Iran's first female singer, defied patriarchal norms to make her voice heard. Her courage inspires the spirit of defiance and empowerment in my sculptures. Vaziri reminds me of my mother, whose singing was stifled by societal restrictions. Her quiet resistance inspires my art to challenge limitations imposed on women.



Figure 5. *Ghamarolmoluk Vaziri*, Iranian singer, nd.

More, Marzieh Ebrahimi (Figure 6), an acid attack survivor, embodies the resilience and strength of Middle Eastern women. Her story inspires my research, honoring women's enduring courage.

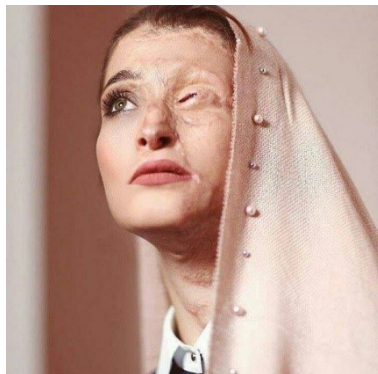


Figure 6. *Marzieh Ebrahimi*, *One of the famous Iranian Acid Attack Survivors*, Sara Bahreinian, 2018.

My creative research centres on the struggles of Middle Eastern women who face pervasive restrictions on their rights. Through wearable sculpture, I aim to amplify their voices within the larger discourse on gender equality. Art has the power to spark dialogue and inspire social change, and I hope my work can contribute meaningfully to this ongoing conversation.

## The process

Ancient Middle Eastern civilizations, including Uruk and Iran, pioneered intricate jewellery using the lost-wax casting technique. This method, central to my practice, allows for the creation of detailed bronze, gold, and silver pieces, reflecting the symbolic, religious, and cultural significance of the region (Figures 7–10).

Inspired by this legacy, I incorporate the lost-wax casting technique into my own work, using it to craft wearable sculptures that tell the stories of my people and reflect the rich artistic traditions of the region. (Lamberg-Karlovsky, C.C. & Kohl, P. L., 2024; Potts, D. T., 1997; Frankfort, Henri, 1996; Phillips, C., 1996).



Figure 7. *Queen Puabi's Headdress*, Penn Museum, ca. 2600 BCE.

Note: Queen Puabi's headdress is a 2600-2450 BCE Mesopotamian crown consisting of ornate gold leaf wreaths, strands of lapis lazuli and carnelian beads, with a gold comb, and delicate hair ribbons (Penn Museum, 2020).



Figure 8. *Pieces of horses-harness*, Luristan Bronze, West-Central Iran, Hermitage Museum, 1000-650 BC.

Note: Found primarily in burial sites, Luristan Bronze, Early Iron Age., these bronzes indicate a culture that valued art as a means of expression and identity, as well as a deep respect for the afterlife. Today, collections of Luristan bronzes are displayed in institutions like The State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, Russia, where they continue to offer insights into the artistic and cultural heritage of ancient Iran (National Museum of Ireland, 2024).



Figure 9. *Armlet, Oxus Treasure, Persia, Achaemenid Empire, British Museum, 5thC BC-4thC BC.*  
Note: This gold armlet, part of the Oxus Treasure, is one of the most important surviving collections from the Achaemenid period. Similar to items on Persepolis reliefs, it reflects Persian court gifts, with hollow spaces once inlaid with glass or semi-precious stones. The armlet is typically on loan from the British Museum. (Curtis, J., Sarikhani, S., & Stanley, T., 2021).



Figure 10. Photograph taken of lost wax casting progress, Kheirkhah, M., 2013.



Figure 11. *The lost wax casting progress, Pump\_Works Castings, 2024.*

I am drawn to this legacy of casting craftsmanship not only because of its historical roots but also because it allows a practical medium for making durable wearable sculptures. The reddish-warm colour of bronze reminds me of the feeling of Middle Eastern bodies, evoking a sense of connection to the living essence of the women whose stories I aim to tell. I believe that under the skin of these bronze sculptures, the blood of those women is still alive, representing their enduring struggles and aspirations.

In the Middle East, the female body has often been a site of contestation, where freedom and control are at odds. My wearable sculptures serve as a form of resistance, a way to reclaim the body and assert its inherent beauty and autonomy. I explore this by incorporating parts of the female body that cultural and religious norms and societal notions have concealed or controlled. For centuries in the Middle East, elements like the face, hands, and hair have been specifically targeted or attacked to suppress women's identities, using these as focal points to diminish their visibility and autonomy.

These body parts, often censored or hidden, become symbols of power and protest against injustice. By creating jewellery that can be worn, I am making a statement about the power of adornment as a tool for empowerment. Wearing these pieces is not just about decoration; it is an act of protest, a declaration of the right to express oneself fully and freely in one's own skin. Through this approach, I aim to turn the very elements of control and censorship into a language of defiance and strength. My work highlights the female body's potential as a site of resistance against restrictive cultural practices and celebrates the capacity for embodied resilience and self-expression. This approach clearly distinguishes my work from wearable fashion art while focusing on the symbolism behind my sculptures and their role in the feminist discourse.

The heaviness of the material used operates as a means to reinforce this, the weight of protest is directly felt by the wearer.

In the realm of contemporary jewellery, many artists have used their work to explore feminist themes and challenge societal norms. Frida Kahlo's design of a symbolic necklace in her painting could allude to Christ's crown of thorns and represent her pain and anguish (Figure 12). Moreover, one artist who has profoundly influenced my work is Niki de Saint Phalle, a pop feminist artist whose creations are bold, colourful, and unapologetically expressive (Figure 13). Her work celebrates the female form in an empowering and subversive way. Saint Phalle's use of bright colours and exaggerated forms speaks to a celebration of femininity that defies conventional expectations, much like my approach to wearable sculptures, which are often more exaggerated, heavy, and conceptual than traditional jewellery. Saint Phalle's ability to translate complex emotions into visual form deeply resonates with me. Like her, I aim to create pieces that reflect the struggles and strengths of women in a world that often seeks to define us.



Figure 12. Frida Kahlo, *Self-portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird*, oil on canvas, in the Harry Ransom Center, Austin, Texas. 61.25 × 47 cm.



Figure 13. *Niki de Saint Phalle*, 1974, 18k gold and enamel with 18k gold choker and original suede case.

I am also inspired by the Victorian tradition of keeping a lock of a loved one's hair, often turning it into a piece of jewellery to honour their memory and keep them close (Figure 14). This practice, known as "Victorian hair art," treated hair as a valuable material, embodying the physical and emotional connection between the wearer and the deceased (Leilashairmuseum, 2024). Similarly, in the Middle East and among some ethnic Iranians, it is customary to cut hair as an expression of mourning for the loss of a loved one or to remember the spiritual qualities of the deceased. This practice reflects deep emotional and cultural connections to those who have passed.



Figure 14. *Grape-Cluster Earrings, Incorporated hair in jewellery*, A private Mississippi collection, hnoc.org, 2018.

Hair holds deep symbolic, cultural, and historical significance, representing both identity and memory. As a personal material, it challenges norms of purity and control, symbolizing beauty, youth, and power. In the Middle East, it is particularly loaded with social taboos, where religious and cultural codes dictate how it should be displayed, hidden, or removed.

Hair in my work symbolizes both individual identity and the collective struggles of Middle Eastern women. It connects the female body with cultural narratives of control, loss, and remembrance. Used as a primary material, hair becomes a medium for exploring embodiment, memory, and resistance, reclaiming silenced identities and autonomy.

By incorporating hair into my wearable sculptures, I aim to convey both personal and collective narratives of resilience, remembrance, and defiance. My work transforms these intimate and forbidden parts of a woman's body into powerful symbols, to reframe them as acts of empowerment and protest.

Shirin Neshat's *Women of Allah* series, particularly *Rebellious Silence*, deeply informs my work. Neshat explores the complex roles of women in Iranian society, using calligraphy, firearms, and the veiled body to challenge Western perceptions and confront societal issues. Her use of Persian poetry and

the veil as symbols of resistance resonates with my own exploration of female identity within Middle Eastern society. Like Neshat, I use symbolic imagery to convey deeper narratives about autonomy and resilience, navigating the restrictive social frameworks women face. (Figure 15)



Figure 15. *Rebellious Silence, Women of Allah series*, ink and black and white print on RC paper, courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York, and Brussels, © Shirin Neshat, 1994.

In 2011, I worked on wearable art featuring flexible spiral forms of silver wires, flowers, and branches inspired by Islamic architecture (Figure 16). The delicate pieces, crafted using refined jewellery techniques, symbolized the female body as a sacred site. By using Islamic forms, I aimed to adorn women's bodies with reverence, reinforcing the idea of the body as a holy space. This collection was showcased at the Dar Al Funoon Gallery in Kuwait in 2012.



Figure 16. *Mahsa Kheirkhah's Jewellery, Silver Gilt*, 2011.

Moreover, this practice work (*Therefore, I am*) has a history for me. I began with this concept in 2013, and one of my exhibitions included this notion in 2016, which was published in a book named *100 Years Flower and Nightingale* (Figure 17).



Figure 17. *Flower and Nightingale*, Mixed media, 2015.

The concept of this practice stems from the observation that while men's funeral advertisements typically feature the deceased's face (Figure 3), women's ads often exclude their image (Figure 18). Instead, birds and flowers are commonly used, with women's faces rarely shown. This practice isn't driven by religious rules but reflects a cultural mindset shaped by religious context, where women's identities are often obscured even in death.



Figure 18. A sample of funeral advertisement for women in Iran

In addition, there is a similarity with *memento mori*, which is a Latin phrase meaning 'remember you must die'. A basic *memento mori* painting would be a portrait with a skull, but other symbols commonly found are hourglasses or clocks, extinguished or guttering candles, fruit, and flowers (Tate, 2017).



Figure 19. *Demolished women's Grave's stones, Habib Moazami, Iran, 2020.*

My practice is informed by feminist theories, particularly Islamic feminism, which challenges patriarchal interpretations of religious texts while embracing the cultural and spiritual aspects of the faith. This approach influences my art, which is deeply rooted in cultural heritage yet pushes against societal boundaries. Through my work, I aim to reflect the beauty and complexity of Middle Eastern culture while advocating for gender equality and women's rights to express themselves freely.

In summary, my work sits at the intersection of historical and contemporary jewellery, blending historical craftsmanship, feminist thought, and personal expression. Using the lost-wax casting technique and materials like bronze, hair, and fabric, each piece embodies the strength and resilience of Middle Eastern women, serving as both memorials and symbols of resistance. This research explores how wearable sculptures can address gender, identity, and cultural memory, creating a space for reflection and dialogue about the ongoing fight for equality and autonomy in Middle Eastern women's lives within contemporary art.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In the Middle East, the female body has often been a site of contestation, balancing freedom and control in a landscape of religious, cultural, and societal expectations. My wearable sculptures serve as forms of resistance, reclaiming the body's inherent beauty and autonomy. By focusing on parts of the female body that cultural and religious norms often conceal—such as the face, hands, and hair—I aim to challenge the ways these body parts have been suppressed to diminish visibility and autonomy.

This approach aligns with the work of Shirin Neshat, whose exploration of religious, cultural, and political themes demonstrates the power of art to confront societal issues. Her *Rebellious Silence* from the *Women of Allah* series uses Persian poetry and the veil as symbols of resistance, sparking a dialogue on autonomy and resilience within restrictive social frameworks. Inspired by Neshat, I incorporate symbolic elements, such as hair and censored body parts, into my wearable art, transforming adornment into acts of empowerment and protest.

Hair, deeply rooted in cultural and historical practices, holds personal significance in both Middle Eastern mourning traditions and Victorian hair art. In the Victorian era, hair was made into jewellery to honour loved ones, while in the Middle East, cutting hair signifies grief and respect. By using hair in my sculptures, I connect the female body with broader narratives of control, loss, and remembrance, challenging societal restrictions on femininity and individual identity.

In contrast to conventional jewellery, my work aligns more closely with sculptural forms, inspired by artists like Frida Kahlo and Niki de Saint Phalle. Kahlo's *Self-portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird* uses adornment to symbolize suffering, strength, and endurance. Similarly, Saint Phalle's bold, colorful sculptures defy traditional expectations of femininity, celebrating the female form with unapologetic expression. Informed by these feminist artists, I aim to create wearable art that evokes the struggles, resilience, and defiance of women who navigate a complex socio-cultural landscape.

Through my use of censored body parts and materials like hair, I aim to elevate these elements beyond mere decoration, allowing them to represent the collective struggle of Middle Eastern women for autonomy and visibility. My work reclaims the body as a site of resistance, asserting women's right to express themselves fully and freely within and beyond cultural limitations.

Mesopotamian artisans, known for their unmatched precision and creativity, pioneered jewellery-making, contributing to the innovation of the lost-wax casting technique. This method allowed for the creation of detailed and unique jewellery pieces in metals like bronze. The mastery of this technique and the cultural significance of their work have profoundly influenced my artistic practice.

Some of the main concepts seen in contemporary Middle Eastern art focus on identity, political and social commentary, hybridity, experimentation, use of symbolism, and emphasis on storytelling. Islamic feminists use religious symbols to challenge patriarchal interpretations and artists in the region employ subversive depictions to critique traditional gender roles (June, N., 2006). For example, Shirin Neshat's series *Women of Allah* is a powerful example. She uses traditional religious symbols, such as Persian calligraphy drawn from poetry and religious texts, combined with images of veiled women, some bearing rifles (Figure 20). Through this, Neshat juxtaposes religious and cultural symbols to challenge and reimagine the role of women, bringing a nuanced perspective to traditional views on gender within an Islamic context. This series highlights the complexities of being a woman in Islamic societies, where outward symbols, like the veil, carry diverse interpretations related to power, control, and self-expression. Neshat's concept work comes through her use of specific visual language that incorporates elements that are traditionally censored or silenced in her cultural context. For instance, the calligraphy she uses is often drawn from Persian poetry or religious texts, juxtaposed with images of women who challenge the conventional, submissive roles assigned to them in patriarchal society.

By presenting these women with both defiance and vulnerability, she subverts the narrative around women's bodies and their presence in the public sphere, (Figure 20). Kelly Grovier (2019), in his BBC article, explores Shirin Neshat's artwork, particularly her photographs *Women of Allah* and *Rebellious Silence*. Neshat remarks on the continued relevance of these images, considering them iconic and symbolic in the Islamic world. The photographs encapsulate a range of themes and emotions, including courage, fear, vulnerability, aggression, feminism, and fundamentalism, within a single portrait (Figure 21). Neshat's emphasis on the power of human expression and the juxtaposition of a woman's armed appearance with vulnerable eyes speaks to the influence of external forces on individuals, revealing the prevalence of brainwashing and control. This enduring

impact and imaginative vision are at the core of Neshat's work, illuminating deeper truths about the human experience.



Figure 20. *Moon song*, *Women of Allah series*, Shirin Neshat, Photography, Black and white print and ink, 107.6 x 157.5 (cm), 1995.



Figure 21. *Faceless*, *Women of Allah series*, Shirin Neshat, 1994

To illustrate the use of visual elements and layered meanings in my work and that of other artists addressing similar themes, Julia Kristeva's theories provide a valuable perspective. Her exploration of subjectivity beyond the boundaries of language highlights how we come to understand meaning through materiality, form, and the body itself (Smith, 1998). Kristeva's positioning brings the subject together with a visual language that transcends spoken words.

Moreover, *The Relational Function of Jewellery*, Jennifer Lee Hallsey explores how jewellery transcends its physical form to act as a medium fostering interactions among individuals. She posits that jewellery should not be evaluated solely as an object but as a catalyst for relationships and encounters it facilitates. Hallsey emphasizes that the significance of jewellery emerges through the dynamic connections between the creator, the wearer, and the observer, suggesting that these relational moments constitute the primary function of jewellery. (Hallsey, 2015)

In Vanessa de Gruijter's article, *Decolonise Contemporary Jewellery*, she problematizes her role as curator and the way institutions collect, present, and value cultural artifacts. D. Gruijter emphasizes the importance of decolonizing contemporary jewellery by addressing Eurocentric and hierarchical classifications that have historically marginalized non-white and non-male creators. As a curator, she advocates for a more inclusive and equitable representation within the field, urging professionals to engage in self-reflection and actively challenge existing power structures. (Gruijter, 2020)

In this creative research I am looking to artists that span contemporary jewellery and sculpture, and who work with feminist themes and who challenges social conditions. Özpınar & Kelly's (2020) book *Under the Skin*, mention that feminist art could be evidenced in the Middle East by several key artists, such as an Iranian artist, Katayoun Karami, who has used new and sophisticated ways to explore deconstruction concepts. This might involve using unconventional materials or techniques to create her artwork or finding ways to subvert traditional artistic forms and challenge dominant narratives through her work (Figure 23). This is also seen in Hayv Kahraman's works, who moved to the US in 2006 from her homeland Iraq. With specific characteristics that relate to Baghdad miniatures and Japanese paintings – the figures, she creates result from her experience with the war and immigration. "As an immigrant, I have always felt on the periphery of society" (Kahraman, 2021). The Guardian 2022 mentions her: "The Kurdish artist draws on Baghdad's miniature tradition, self-portraiture, plant bacteria, and neuro-sculpting for artworks that provoke a gut reaction" (Sherwin, 2022). The figures in her paintings have become contortionists. The ambiguity that permeates Kahraman's work goes far beyond its mix of the gorgeous and grotesque (Figure 24). Are these female prisoners or nest-builders, nurtured or force-fed? "It is not about erasing the pain and entanglement" (The Guardian News, 2022).



Figure 23. *Resurrection*, Katayoun Karami, 2009.



Figure 23. *The Other Side*, Katayoun Karami, Silk Road Gallery, Tehran, 2007.



Figure 24. Kahraman's *'Neurobust no 1*, Pilar Corrias Gallery, 2021.

Mona Hatoum, born in Beirut to Palestinian parents and a renowned contemporary artist, has also explored themes of identity, displacement, and the body using unconventional materials like human hair. In her work *Hair Necklace* (1995), Hatoum created a piece of jewellery made from human hair and silver, which evokes both intimacy and discomfort. The use of hair—a material intrinsically linked to personal identity and often censored or concealed in many cultures—transforms the piece into a powerful statement about the fragility and vulnerability of the human condition. By incorporating hair into her work, Hatoum challenges traditional notions of beauty and adornment, turning a typically private and often discarded material into a focal point of artistic expression. Hatoum's use of hair resonates with my own practice, where I incorporate hair to evoke embodied narratives, merging personal histories with broader social and cultural commentaries (Figure 25). Diana Al-Hadid's sculptures show how she explores feminist concepts specific to Islamic culture and history in her country, the Middle East. Her sculptures incorporate traditional Islamic motifs and architecture, but she also subverts these forms to challenge patriarchal norms and celebrate female strength and endurance. She uses a range of materials, including plaster, steel, bronze, and fiberglass, to create large-scale installations that often appear to be in a state of decay or transformation, reflecting the complex and evolving nature of identity and culture (Figure 26). My approach to using bronze as a stable, long-lasting medium reflects my belief in creating memorial sculptures that endure as tributes

to the resilience of Middle Eastern women. In contrast to Diana Al-Hadid's exploration of cultural identity through materials that express decay and transformation, I use bronze for its permanence, symbolizing an unyielding strength. By crafting small, trophy-like sculptures to honour brave women, I elevate their stories in ways that subvert traditional symbols and celebrate enduring courage.



Figure 25. Mona Hatoum, *Hair Necklace*, 1995



Figure 26. Diana Al-Hadid's sculpture (*Bomb*, 2016, Art Curio: Invisible Cities, n.d.)

Niki de Saint Phalle, a feminist pop artist, has profoundly influenced my work with her bold, colourful, and unapologetically expressive creations. Her celebration of the female form both empowers and subverts societal expectations. Like Saint Phalle, I use exaggerated, heavy forms in my wearable sculptures, challenging conventional ideas of beauty and functionality. Her ability to translate complex emotions into visual form resonates deeply with me, as her work boldly confronts the cultural confines of being a woman, particularly in the Middle Eastern context.

Saint Phalle's 'Nanas,' exaggerated, colourful female figures, challenge and make visible the perception of women, embodying empowerment and resilience. Similarly, my wearable sculptures use their weight and exaggerated size to communicate the emotional burden women carry, while asserting their right to occupy space within restrictive societal frameworks.

Kerry Howley is a contemporary jewellery artist, who has worked with hair, seen in her piece, form 2011, *Neckpiece*. In this example she crafts hair into a delicate lace-like adornment for the neck. Unlike my own work, her work is diaphanous and fragile, yet also an example of an innovative approach to materiality and its relationship to the body in jewellery practice that relates to my own exploration- (Figure 27).



Figure 27. Kerry Howley, *Neckpiece*, Hair, 2011, London.

Jewellery is often perceived as a ubiquitous form for ornamenting the body, but it can be much more than that. One of the inspirations of jewellery for me in this journey was Alexander Calder's wearable sculptures, which transcend mere decoration (Figure 28). His pieces, like the cuff bracelet spelling 'MEDUSA' crafted for his wife, Louisa James, are imbued with personal meaning, becoming intimate expressions of emotion and identity. Similarly, my wearable sculptures aim to go beyond adornment; they are artifacts of resistance and symbols of resilience, speaking to the struggles and aspirations of Middle Eastern women- (Anna McDonald, 2022).



Figure 28. Anjelica Huston models a Calder necklace (1976).

In Braxton Armstrong's exhibition, "*I AM SHE*" she examines issues related to feminism, exploring the causes of gender-based violence and inequality from both a personal and global perspective (Figure 29).



Figure 29. Braxton Armstrong's exhibition, "*I AM SHE*," 2010.

Armstrong's deep interest in women's issues informs the title of my collection, *THEREFORE I AM*. While inspired by Armstrong's work, I also draw on and challenge Descartes' famous principle, 'I think, therefore I am,' by turning it on its head. My work reinterprets this idea through a feminist lens, emphasizing an embodied, whole self rather than a separation of mind and body. Braidotti also brings a focus to the embodied, 'in a feminist framework, the primary site of location is the body' (Braidotti, 1991). This title reflects my belief in the interconnected, lived experiences of women—the entanglement of thought, body, and identity—asserting a presence that resists historical patriarchal silencing and control of the 'other'.

Islamic feminist artworks challenge patriarchal interpretations while embracing cultural and spiritual dimensions by subverting and critiquing traditional symbols and materials. Notable examples include Shirin Neshat's *Women of Allah*, which reclaims Islamic symbols for feminist purposes, and Lalla Essaydi's *Les Femmes du Maroc*, which critiques gender expectations through henna calligraphy.

Ghada Amer's *Barbed Wire and Veil* uses embroidery to explore desire and repression, while Ayesha Durrani addresses issues of female bondage and arranged marriages with a blend of beauty and controversy. Al-Hadid's work confronts the challenge of figuration in Islamic art (Department of Islamic Art., 2001). 'Islamic belief forbids figuration, and it's something I want to address. Hatoum's pieces, such as *Hair Necklace*, employ materials that come from the body like human hair to evoke powerful narratives about physical displacement, identity, and the human condition, challenging the boundaries between private and public spheres. (Jones, A., 2012). Katayoun Karami employs deconstruction techniques and innovative materials to challenge traditional artistic forms in Middle Eastern art, exploring feminist themes through her unique approach. These artists collectively engage with Islamic feminism, discussing gender equality and self-expression through their work (Shanneik, Y., 2023).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This practice-based research generates approaches towards a new collection of wearable sculptures that respond to the cultural and social concerns of the Middle East. Through integrating contemporary art with traditional methods, I have developed a practice-based and autoethnographic research approach that bridges personal experience with broader social issues in the Middle Eastern feminist art field. In practice-based research, new knowledge emerges directly from the practice itself and its outcomes, while practice-led research incorporates creative practice, methods, and outputs into the research design to foster deeper understanding of the practice (Candy et al., 2006). My project aligns with the interpretivist approach, which assumes that reality is accessed through social constructs like language, shared meanings, and personal perspectives. As an Iranian citizen, my own cultural stance influences how I understand and portray the experiences of Middle Eastern women through art (Myers, 2008 & Dudovskiy, 2009).

Through practice I navigate the relationship between dominant and minor discourses, with feminist discourse, as a guiding position. Embracing a non-binary approach that resists dichotomous categorizations I draw on Rosi Braidotti's concept of the nomadic subject, which advocates for fluid and dynamic identities which in nature rupture the power or hierarchies in 'other' (Braidotti, 2011). Braidotti's "nomadic subject," advocates for fluid and dynamic identities that resist fixed categories and hierarchical power structures. This concept plays a key role in feminist thought by challenging traditional notions of identity, offering a vision of subjectivity that is in constant movement and transformation, effectively disrupting established power dynamics (Braidotti, 1991).

Julia Kristeva's rethinking of the thresholds of language, embodiment, and the semiotic, helps in the discussion of the poetic and the visual language of the arts. Kristeva's discussion on the maternal ways we interpret and understand artistic and cultural narratives take us beyond what is sayable. In discussing the space between the symbolic and semiotic dimensions of subjectivity, Kristeva emphasizes an "unsettling heterogeneity" within the subject, highlighting an internal tension and multiplicity that defies a singular, stable identity (Schippers, 2001). This thinking helps me in the discussion of women's identity in my own arts practice art, where the complexity of subjectivity becomes a narrative tool to reveal the often-suppressed voices of Middle Eastern women. Kristeva's critique of the symbolic order supports my artistic efforts to challenge cultural hegemonies and create visual expressions that speak beyond the symbolic order of language. Kristeva recognises the power of the pre-verbal – the unspeakable to offer an expression of ourselves – where form is expressed beyond what we can say. That which cannot be said, is felt, and seen in the line of a brush stroke, or a guttural sound from the body, or as the warmth and weight of an object held in the hand (Smith, A., 1998 & Schippers, 2001).

Braidotti's stance on feminist thought is not limited to differentiation by sexual lines, but as also constructed by other configurations; of most importance 'race and ethnicity' (Braidotti, 1991). —

Braidotti brings a sense of hope to the challenges in my practice, where I navigate the intersections of Western feminist thought and the unique cultural contexts of Middle Eastern women. Braidotti's longstanding advocacy for a civilisation that accepts differences, where the recognition of 'multiplicity, complexity and diversity' helps to create the strength to participate in the broader feminist discourses that account for race, culture, and specific geopolitical histories (Braidotti, 2013 & Braidotti, 2011).

The works developed in the practice are deeply personal and cultural. As such, and an autoethnographic approach offers a distinct Middle Eastern perspective within feminist art discourse (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Through this lens, the work seeks to create a conversation that both honours and challenges traditional narratives around Middle Eastern femininity and resilience.

## **PRACTICAL METHOD**

As a Middle Eastern woman, I have witnessed the deep inequalities in rights and social customs that define the lives—and even the deaths—of women compared to men in my homeland. From marriage laws that restrict women's choices to the customs around burial rites that limit even the way women are memorialized; these disparities pervade every aspect of life. This stark imbalance compelled me to create works that address these inequalities head-on.

Accordingly, I have developed a practice of creating memorial and wearable sculptures, for the women who lived bravely and lost their life for freedom, made with bronze, a material historically tied to the commemoration of men and acts of valour. By adopting bronze for my work, I intentionally call into question its deeply patriarchal heritage, repurposing it as a medium to communicate resilience, autonomy, and a socio-feminist voice for Middle Eastern women. This subversion transforms bronze from a symbol of masculine glorification into a material of tribute for the courage and strength of women. The space between historical and contemporary jewellery is central to my work. The former, being conventionally used as a beautification item. In my practice these wearable artefacts go beyond adornment, becoming powerful in their role for storytelling, positioning the body—and particularly the woman's body as a site for bearing the weight of these artefacts and their stories. While intimate in scale, my wearable sculptures serve as heavy symbols of resilience. The warm, earthy tones of bronze resonate with the vitality of the human body and, through its durability, echo the enduring strength of these women's stories. By creating pieces meant to be worn, I invite the wearer to embody these stories, physically carrying, feeling the weight of pain that women felt, and honouring the histories of women who have fought for control over their bodies and destinies. As a way of navigating the space between sculpture and jewellery, I use the term 'wearable art' to describe pieces that are situated on the body—up close and intimate, held in the hands or resting over the heart and chest. My wearable sculptures engage with body parts like the face, hands, and hair—symbols of femininity often targeted for suppression—through small bronze castings that evoke both vulnerability and strength. These miniature forms confront cultural taboos and restrictions, appearing dismembered and objectified, yet resonating with deeper meanings of resilience.

The meeting of body and these *wearable sculptures* is an act of resistance in itself. When worn, these sculptures transcend fashion, becoming embodiments of protest and defiance. The wearer and the piece form a dialogue, where the physicality of the body and the weight of the bronze merge as acts of resilience, autonomy, and the struggle for self-determination. Each piece asserts the right to be seen, felt, and acknowledged. Through this interaction, my work highlights the intimate relationship between the body and the material, transforming both into living symbols of feminist discourse and personal liberation.

## The Progress of Practice

In response to the pressing issues surrounding violence and discrimination against women, I began sketching ideas for jewellery and small sculptures intended as memorial pieces. My inspiration draws from the poignant poetry of Forough Farokhzad, particularly her work "Rebirth," alongside influential figures such as Ghamarolmolouk Vaziri and Marzieh Ebrahimi.

The first work in this Master's research began as a series of miniature memorial sculptures inspired by the poems of Forough Farokhzad, particularly *Rebirth*, and powerful figures such as Ghamarolmolouk Vaziri and Marzieh Ebrahimi. These small trophy-sized works confront offensive, sexist crimes against women, including acts of murder and the disfigurement of their faces. Drawing on elements commonly found in women's funeral announcements—flowers, birds, and representations of concealed body parts, like faces, hands, and strands of hair—these sculptures reflect both personal loss and broader cultural suppression.

Supported by Kristeva's notion of the abject, the elements of the women's body that in my own culture are repressed are brought to the fore in these works. Reclaiming the face and the hair. By foregrounding dismembered faces, hands, and hair, the sculptures confront societal attempts to erase or control women's physicality and identity. Kristeva's thinking on the maternal, the messy unruly nature of desire and drives are a part of these works, inviting heterogeneous meanings and interpretations. In this way, the wearable sculptures become sites for the poetic, for emotional responses, sites for the feelings that come from enforced repression and loss of identity.

My wearable sculptures transcend traditional boundaries, transforming bronze—a historically masculine medium—into a material of feminist resilience. Occupying the space between sculpture and jewellery, these pieces reject binary constraints in multiple ways. Through this fluid approach, each sculpture becomes a site of resistance and solidarity, inviting an expansive, inclusive feminist dialogue that celebrates the resilience of the human spirit beyond fixed categories. In alignment with Braidotti's non-binary feminism, my focus is not on the limits of the women's body itself, but rather on transcending restrictive binaries.

My pieces reclaim traditional materials as a feminist statement of defiance and remembrance. These pieces embody a feminist resistance, celebrating strength not as an adornment but as a lived legacy carried on the body as a powerful reclamation.

The first designs below (Figures 30, 31 & 32) show the start of brainstorming on this practice work.-

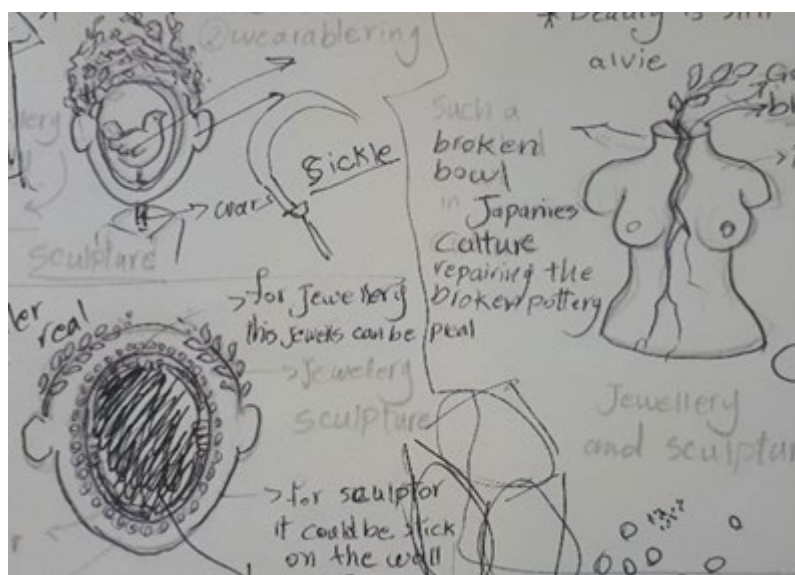


Figure 30. Sculptures: sketching ideas 1. September 2022



Figure 31. Sculpture: sketching ideas 2. September 2022

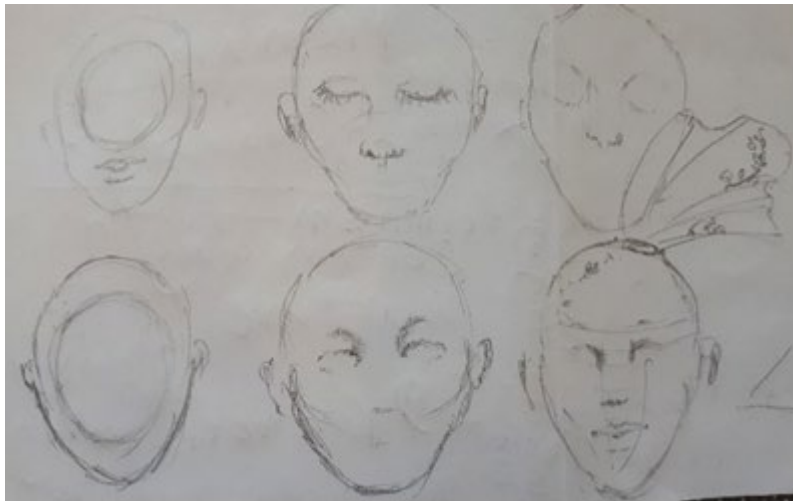


Figure 32. Sculpture: sketching ideas 3. September 2022

The next step, which is below (Image 33 & 34), shows the start of making some remodels on this practice work.



Figure 33. Trying to make a pre-model of the sculpture from the first idea, September 2022



Figure 34. Trying to make a pre-model of the sculpture from the first idea, since 2024

After exploring the idea and the relevant media for remodelling, I decided to start with a form of a woman's face, with choosing the blue wax for directly making models for casting bronze.

The next step was making several models for sculptures and several pieces of jewellery (wearable sculptures), with traditional hand carving technique by blue wax. (Figure 35)

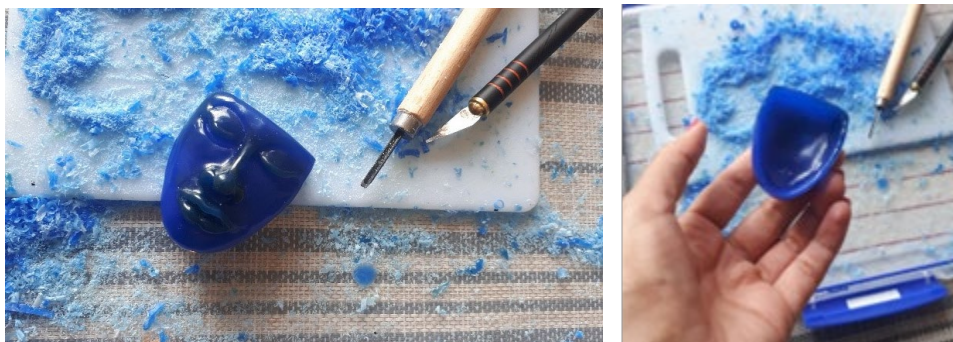


Figure 35. The first models with blue wax and hollow models with jewellery technique, October 2022

### **The Freedom Emblem**

As a result of the explorations during the first steps, I decided to design a memorial sculpture (Figure 36) working with three-dimensional forms.

Creating a memorial sculpture involved addressing contemporary issues faced by women in the Middle East, particularly in the context of the Iranian protests against mandatory hijab and the severe oppression women endure for advocating their rights. The key symbols I developed include the flowing hair of slain women, representing unity and solidarity, with strands coming together to symbolize people standing side by side. I also used branches of a tree to represent nature's rebirth and incorporated Islamic forms, such as arches and pulpit bases, alongside the face of a woman, doves, and flowers to symbolize peace. These elements echo the memorial notices seen in Iran and other parts of the Middle East, where women are often depicted with birds and flowers. Additionally, some pieces include hands, symbolizing the powerlessness and suspended state of these women, akin to prayers that cannot actively engage.



Figure 36. The first certain sculpture design, October 2022

The next images (Figures 37, 38 & 39) show the first process of making a small sculpture, which is becomes a medal and trophy for those women who have lost their lives. However, I should mention that the concept of the model below is built around women who fought for freedom, including many brave women in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other countries whose names cannot be mentioned for various political reasons.



Figure 37. The second models using blue wax, November 2022



Figure 38. The second models using blue wax, November 2022



Figure 39. The final model for a sculpture, blue wax, November 2022

The next images (Figures 40, 41 & 42) show the first casted and polished bronze sculpture.



Figure 40. First cast bronze sculpture, December 2022

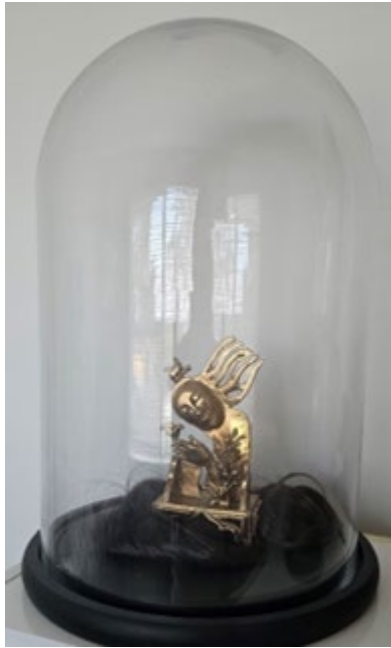


Figure 41. *The Freedom Emblem* (Finali the trophy that is the first cast bronze sculpture), October 2024



Figure 42. *The Freedom Emblem* (detail), October 2024

### **Living Memorials**

The next images (Figures 43, 44, 45, 46 & 47), show the dismembered body parts in these wearable sculptures, speaking to both the violence and vulnerability faced by the women they represent. In separating these body parts, I aim to highlight the objectification that women have experienced, particularly in the context of patriarchal violence, where their bodies are reduced to mere objects of control or punishment. I specifically chose the parts of their bodies that religious and dogmatic societies have targeted—those that have historically been ignored or controlled. These are the most significant and identifiable aspects of the female form, chosen to emphasize the woman's identity and to shed light on how society attempts to dominate these very expressions of her being. However, rather than leaving these parts broken or incomplete, I have intentionally brought them back to the body, transforming them into wearable memorials. In doing so, I reclaim and repurpose

these pieces, allowing them to become treasures worn close to the skin. This act of wearing them—carrying them with the body—creates a personal connection to the stories of these women, turning them into intimate memorials that serve as living tributes to their lives and struggles.

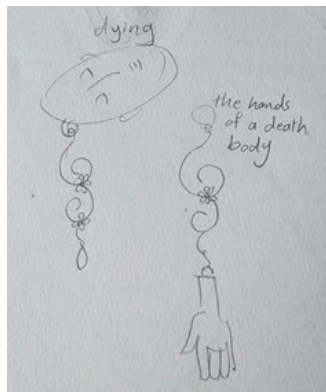


Figure 43. Sketching ideas in September 2022



Figure 44. First models of wearable sculpture using blue wax, October 2022.



Figure 45. Casting the first bronze wearable sculptures, November 2022



Figure 46. Cleaning and polishing the first bronze wearable sculptures, November 2022

This piece (Figure 46) tells the story of a Middle Eastern woman whose lifeless head rests on the chest of the wearer while her inanimate hands hang from either side while a bunch of hair hangs it. It is as though the wearer's movements breathe life back into this body, each shift reminding us of her pain. With every motion, the sculpture utters reminders to the wearer of its presence. The face is rendered as naïve and mask like reiterating the tragedy and loss embodied in the narrative itself. "Remember me, remember my story." The weight of this heavy piece is not out of tolerance, but it subtly reflects the enduring pain this woman bore in life, day after day. It carries the memory of her suffering, a reminder of what she endured.

The red enamel flower and dove (Figure 47) refers to innocence and unattainable freedom—peace that has been stained with blood and a flower that has fallen. As the sculpture moves, it touches the wearer's chest, striking near the heart, compelling them to carry this story within themselves with honesty and depth. It calls upon the wearer to share her pain with others, to give voice to the voiceless. This piece is not just jewellery, it is a testament, a silent storyteller, speaking for those who have fallen and those who remain.



Figure 47. *Living Memorials*, (finalized the first bronze wearable sculptures and remake the necklace)  
September 2024

### **Weighted Peace**

Pursuing this exploration of iconic traditional imagery with the tangible weight created in the materials, I designed more of these pieces. Working with the symbols that recur in my other works, such as the dove. This image is explored in the heavy rings because freedom is so expensive and heavy. The Dove, which symbolizes peace, freedom, and innocence, and with-it lightness and flight, is subversive as a worn piece rather, it is embodied as weighted and heavy. I used red enamel as the blood that flowed from these women and their loss of valuable lives for inhumane belief systems (Figures 48, 49 & 50).



Figure 48. Drawings towards the design for the first ring, November 2022



Figure 49. Polished and enameled casted bronze (first ring), November 2022



Figure 50. *Weighted Peace*, (finalised the fist bronze ring) November 2022

### **Shackled by Tradition**

The next ring I designed was inspired by the intricate patterns of Islamic architecture, with details enamelled in lapis lazuli blue, reminiscent of the traditional textiles of the Middle East. At the top of the ring, a small water pool is crafted, filled with a deep blood-red colour. A tiny hand reaches toward the surface, symbolizing the countless women in desperate need of help, as if reaching out for rescue from a swamp. (Figures 51, 52 & 53).



Figure 51. Designing second ring, November 2022

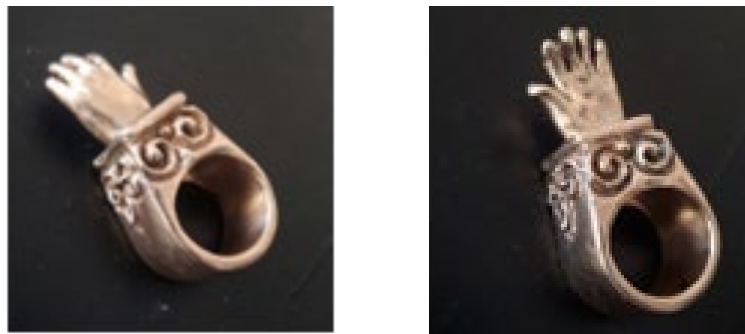


Figure 52. Casting the second ring



Figure 53. *Shackled by Tradition*, (finalizing the wearable sculptures) September 2022

### **Silent Sacrifice**

Deviating slightly from the first two ring designs, I created a ring resembling a wedding band but with the form of handcuffs, like the ones used by police after an arrest. Attached to the ring is a small hand, symbolizing the hidden hand of another woman who understands the pain, silently suggesting, 'Don't worry, I am here.' This piece can evoke the untold stories of many women who have endured forced marriages, sometimes at an illegal age, and the sacrifice of countless young girls caught in this cruel narrative.-(Figures 54 & 55).



Figure 54. *Silent Sacrifice*, (finalizing the wearable sculpture) November 2022



Figure 55. *Silent Sacrifice*, this wearable sculpture can be hugged in the palm, secured between the women's fingers to relieve the pain and remember the loneliness.

### **Rebirth**

Shifting away from the hands and the rings, I began to focus on heads and faces, upscaling slightly at the same time. At this stage, I aimed to bring attention to the hair. Unveiled hair exposed in public has been a significant concern for religious authorities. Many women lost their lives simply because certain segments of society and people in power perceived the visible display of women's hair as problematic.

The cut head refers to the natural feminine desire of many women who wanted to allow their hair to be unrestrained and visible, expressing themselves freely as women. And flower branches grow from their fertile soil instead of their hair (Figures 56, 57, 58 & 59).



Figure 56. Making other models using blue wax, in February 2023



Figure 57. *Rebirth*, (after casting the pieces of wearable sculptures) March 2023



Figure 58. Cleaning and polishing the wearable sculptures, March 2023



Figure 59. *Rebirth*, (near to finalizing the wearable sculptures) August 2024



Figure 60. *Rebirth*, (reworking on hair part and finalizing the wearable sculptures) November 2024

### **Unfading Spirit**

In the process of creating some of the pieces for this collection, I found that the wax used to craft the moulds for my jewellery, at one point dripped onto a woman's face, resembling the way a candle burns. It reminded me of the disfiguration of the women's faces who have survived acid attacks— brave warriors fighting in a cruel society's war against humanity (Figures 61 & 62). These next pieces have become medals to honour these survivors.



Figure 61. The process of making the wearable sculpture, a medal with melted wax, February 2024



Figure 62. *Unfading Spirit*, (finalized bronze wearable sculpture) medal, August 2024

### **Melting Femininity**

Building on the medal design I developed a wearable bronze ring dedicated to the acid-attack survivors. Incorporating the form of melted wax into a part of the ring, representing the maimed woman. This symbolizes all the women who have both been violently attacked and who lost their lives, burning like a candle in their quest for freedom- (Figures 63 & 64).



Figure 63. *Melting femininity*, The bronze wearable (ring) sculpture, March 2024



Figure 64. *Melting femininity*, (final bronze wearable (Ring) sculpture, August 2024

At the start of last semester, on 15th August 2024, several of my works were exhibited at Unitec in a group exhibition displayed in a glass cabinet at the center of the space. I was encouraged by the level of audience engagement, particularly from New Zealanders who were intrigued by the themes inspired by Middle Eastern women's concerns. Many viewers expressed a deep resonance with the concepts, gaining insight into the painful barriers and struggles that women face in the Middle East.

Their reactions not only validated the direction I was pursuing but also reinforced the importance of bringing these issues to light, helping me see how art can bridge cultural divides and foster empathy. (Figure 65).



*Figure 65. The Exhibition of a group of Masters of Creative Practice students at Unitec on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2024.*

### **Femineity and Fertility**

To complete this journey exploring my practice within the Master's programme, I decided to make a couple more pieces, this time focusing on the image of the flower. Wanting to complete with a direction of hope and possibilities for reimagining the future of Middle Eastern women, the flower branch brings forward the idea of new growth or new beginnings, a rebirthing of sorts and the hair as an unsolicited display of femineity. By hanging the hair from the branches, this became another medal or could also be considered as a brooch. I decided to name that "Femineity and Fertility"



**Figure 66. Making a model with wax for the last parts of my practice, September 2024.**



Figure 67. *Femineity and Fertility*, (making a piece of wearable sculpture) Brooch, bronze & synthetic hair, September 2024.

### **Forbidden Strands**

The final piece distills the focus of my practice in a piece of wearable sculpture that makes visible the strands of hair. The hair, as mentioned earlier, brings with it our DNA, our ancestral roots, but also represents traditional memorial practices in Western cultures in Victorian times, keeping a piece of a loved one's hair in a locket, and as an icon of femineity that is taboo in my own culture. These pieces complete my collection, as a final works. Those are softer and lighter than the heavier bronze works and proclaim the rights of women to express themselves in all their many identities and glorious femineity.



Figure 68. *Forbidden Strands*, necklace made with hair, October 2024.



Figure 69. *Forbidden Strands*, earring made with hair, October 2024.

## **Conclusion**

Working across the languages of historical and contemporary jewellery for this project, I bridge these worlds in the space of wearable art to tell the stories of Middle Eastern women who deserve a medal of bravery for all they have done in pursuit of freedom. These pieces are not just adornments; they are living memories, honouring the courage of these women and inspiring future generations to carry that bravery forward for decades and centuries.

All the symbols come together as my voice in this creative research, not only to memorialize the lives and stories of these brave Middle Eastern women but also to envision a future where all women, regardless of race, are seen and valued. Looking ahead, I hope to expand this work to continue advocating for women's rights globally. My own journey to New Zealand, and my decision to stay and become a domestic student, have been essential steps to finding a place where I can freely express these ideas in my creative practice. This project marks just the beginning of a lifelong commitment to using my art as a medium for social change and empowerment.

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