

# Foundation Deposits

## NADIA GOHAR



### Curator's Note

MINH NGUYEN

A foundation deposit is a votive offering, an item placed in or beneath a building upon its construction. In ancient Egypt, the items deposited—amulets, inscribed cartouches, libation vases and knives—conferred a mythical quality on the site as a blessing. Humble snippets: promises to the gods, builders' rites, ingresses to another time.

If these deposits were believed to safeguard the building and those who will live in them for years to come, Nadia Gohar's installations consider present-day Cairo's possible protection objects. We shift our focus from items deliberately buried to that which is built in the everyday: the exchanges, relations, and creations that people develop in shared circumstances.

In history museums, the graveyards erected of the many pasts, there are specious, rigid orders of importance. Objects are valorized and elected as ambassadors for periods of life. And what of the deposits unpreserved, the deposits long disintegrated, the deposits that don't take material form?

Here we propose new ambassadors of shared experience, or maybe the abolishment of ambassadors altogether.

Nadia Gohar is a multimedia artist living in Toronto, Canada. She received a BFA from the Massachusetts College of Art & Design. She has exhibited internationally at The Table, Little Sister Gallery, Artscape Youngplace, Project Gallery, Toronto, Canada; Sleep Center, New York, USA; RichMix, London, UK; Liberia Cascianelli, Rome, Italy.



### Familial Treasures

NASRIN HIMADA

When I think of you now I feel a distance. The one that just is with time.

I burned all your letters and notes in the fire. On the eve of the new moon. In April.

The psychic told me that back then I was spiritually deprived.

Was I? I know I was exhausted. I felt nothing and everything. All at once. Struggling internally, and deeply sad. So then very angry.

I am not sure about all this now. Because if we think about it, you and I, the love that was, resulted in dispossession.

The banality of it all: to think once you find love then you find home? Or hope that in this case it will just be different, and all the trite bullshit you ever hear of love will not apply to us. We really thought we were special.

Ha. The shame I feel now is that I gave into all that, which makes me wonder about my desires. To what extent they're conditioned by images, ones that are not of my making. What did I give into? And why with you? What did we hope for? What got in the way?

There's no language I can use to describe the pain, what I went through when I realized it was all over, and that it would have never worked.

I threw out every object you gave me in the garbage. After I burned all your letters and notes.

The Christmas gift felt the most offensive so that was the first to go. I remember how detached you were. Well, seemingly detached from the process of giving. It seemed so rehearsed. Like, you had to do it. Did you already know it was the end? The gift was beautiful, but the context was ugly. At this point, nothing felt right, and it was all a bit forced. I just looked at this thing in your hand with disdain. This fake ceremony of exchange culminated in the end. It was a vintage, black cigarette holder with a brown, or dark red flower etchings on the cover. Inside you had placed thin chocolates, and a linen napkin, with embroidery in silk of delicate roses. You wrote a note inside that ended with, "you're in my thoughts."

I pulled all those objects out of the back of my closet where I had hid them out of sight. In truth, I had been wanting to do this since we broke up. This purge. I didn't want to be dramatic or impetuous about it. I waited until I knew that it was the right

moment to do so. When I uncovered all those objects you gave me, my first impulse was to throw them all in a bag, quickly, without hesitation and into the bin they went. Outside on the street, they were kept overnight. Garbage pick-up was early in the morning.

It wasn't a reaction as much as—

I remember this scene in Elia Suleiman's film, *The Time That Remains*, when the Zionist army arrives in Nazareth in 1948. Some Palestinians flee, some go into hiding. In one scene, you see the soldiers ransack and loot abandoned Palestinian homes. They steal all the antiques and many family heirlooms: an ottoman, a candelabra, a phonograph player. Many things: jewelry, books, paintings, objet d'art. From the foreground of the longshot, we see the main character, Fuad, peering in from behind a wall, watching the soldiers as they fill up their truck with these stolen goods. They took everything of value, of worth, of historical significance. Through extraction and theft, they ruptured the line of connection between cultural and familial lineage, erasing legacy, destroying the relationship that binds land, home, and collectables as evidence of life. These things now become objects of representation. They're ornaments. Standing in for a place without memory, acquired through force. Maybe boxed in, behind glass, at some museum. Maybe in some home, on a mantelpiece: the immanence of colonial possession.

Decorative.

I kept a stainless steel teapot that my mom bought at a Bi-Way in 1989, when we landed in London, Ontario. We didn't bring anything with us that reminded us of home. Our subsidized housing unit was sparse, filled with necessities bought at discount stores. The teapot is not a classic antique,

or a family heirloom in how we come to imagine these things, but then it is. An invaluable object. It's an old, rusted thing, mass produced for rapid consumer satisfaction, but that reminds me of a time that changed so much for us. A time worthy of remembrance, of memorialization. The teapot: an inherited Palestinian treasure.

So too is our love.

It wasn't a reaction as much as -

I didn't want to hold on to the things that felt detached from the moment we knew it all felt right. The objects I keep sustain the archival possibility of a moment, of a feeling, of a place. They draw in and orient my body toward a depth outside the confines of proprietary space. Outside the confines of colonial time.

I wanted our love to survive all that, to survive the separation.

In praise of memory,

and the present,

and the way we feel liberation in our bodies when in relation,

the love that resides in objects are of a secret kind.

I keep ours somewhere safe. So too to remember the moment we felt the joy of being together, to let that live somewhere else, and not in association of what eventually became a performance, what became ordinary in the end. The objects I keep remind me of who I was, what I have experienced, and how that is inextricable from the lineage I carry forward. The memory I have of us survives here. In words, in secret, and in an undeclared object. The inherited treasures that become familial.



this space in the middle of the Met where these objects definitely don't belong.

Anyway, I was reading one of the plaques describing domestic objects that were scattered and organized, about these ceremonies that [the Ancient Egyptians] put on any time they erected any sort of major monument or religious temple before the structure went up. They would bury objects in important points in the ground under the building hoping that when the building went up these objects would protect it and it would never fall. They were time capsules that were never meant to be unearthed.

With the vessels I'm making, I'm repeating this ceremony, but above ground.

**MG** Terracotta for me is an immediate signifier of makeshift Egyptian domestic objects, especially by *fala7een*. Using terracotta is centuries-old; it doesn't need much resources, and it's a low-maintenance way to make objects for daily use, especially in the kitchen.

**NG** I'm definitely thinking about that. But I also wanted to use concrete in a way that masks itself as terracotta. My dad always talks about how concrete ruined Egypt. He hates new buildings; he's always criticizing the concrete slabs and concrete structures you see everywhere in Egypt. He thinks that everything was beautiful before concrete was introduced to us, when people built out of simple materials and simple forms. So making concrete look like terracotta is just like a funny little secret thing for myself where I'm like, oh you think these are terracotta? They're actually like the worst material of all time: concrete.

**MG** This gets me to think about a place like Khan el Khalili and how historical objects are simulated to appeal to tourists with contemporary materials, then multiplied via mass-production, then you see the exact same thing at every stall. That's similar to what these plaster fixtures are doing, right?

**NG** Mhmm.

**MG** You moved to Toronto in 2014 after you finished undergrad in the states, and you've returned to Egypt several times since you left. What's your process of working through material and immaterial recollection between your visits like? I'm already working through that. I've been back for two weeks and I don't smell like *basterma* anymore, for starters.

**NG** You miss it.

**MG** Yeah. At first I was like, ugh, my body odor is ruining my clothes, but now I'm like, fuck I miss that my body still held traces of the food that I ate there. As soon as I got there my aunt and her daughters asked me what I missed the most, and I said *basterma*, so they made it for breakfast every single day.

**NG** I'm still trying to remember that one ingredient that makes it sink like that because—

**MG** It's not garlic.

**NG** It's not garlic. Before we moved to Canada when my mom made pancakes with maple syrup—the fake stuff—she would say that it smelled like this one thing in *basterma*.

**MG** How do you memorize or memorialize the day-to-day things, the mundanities of being there?

**NG** I almost want those mundanities to feel mundane again. When you place so much importance on them, they're not as mundane anymore. It's a great feeling when you've gone back enough times that you're bored, when you reach a point where you're just wasting time, slowing down. When I was in high school there, I was going to see my grandma, sitting around the house a lot. It's important to keep it mundane.

**MG** The only way to get over this craving for the mundane is to return.

**NG** And live. But I always think: how much time has to pass until you can say you live somewhere?

**MG** Do you see your work as gestures towards bringing elements of living there to here? To make it easier to be here?

**NG** Totally, and a lot of the stuff is domestic too, like bringing food, bringing artifacts I find around the house.

**MG** How does food figure into it? Not just eating, but moving through the process of cooking?

**NG** When I go back that's one of the primary things that I pay attention to. When I'm around my grandma, I record her making stuff. Also, it's inevitable. You can't go back and not have food be so in your face. In the last two years I really started to think more about how to process any of that. I wasn't doing that before. I wasn't remembering. I wasn't recording.

**MG** Do you remember what shifted to compel you to begin to record and to take note?

**NG** No. It was a natural progression. But it also has to do with what you're looking at, what attracts you, what your eyes notice. It feels more like a thought or a train of thought. It's not just like, here's this fully formed thing that I made. It's more like, here's a million photos of my mom that I've been working on for 10 years.

**MG** You're approaching this body of work with that mindset.

**NG** Yeah. I'm trying to be like, here's everything I've been doing and here's this pile of libb I've chewed through.



## Nadia Gohar & Merray Gerges

IN CONVERSATION

**MERRAY GERGES** I wonder how the work that we do becomes a way to work through past memory.

**NADIA GOHAR** Whatever work we do is a reprocessing or reclaiming of these memories, whether they're partially made up or that I'm trying to reconjure everything that was lost in my move or in my family's move here. In a way, I'm bringing back habits that don't exist for me anymore: while I've been working on this show I've been trying to go through this bag of libb as a marker of the passage of time, of how fast I've been going through it, after having forgotten how to chew libb like it's your fucking job. Food memories and object memories—like that *kanaka* I gave you—stuff like that is really to me a memory marker, like making coffee, chewing libb.

**MG** And every time you go back you notice different things, things you might not have noticed when you lived there that stand out to you now?

**NG** Yeah. For example, I'm obsessed with the *3ashwa2eyat* right now. Their structures, their colours, what they represent, how people make them their own.

**MG** When you think back on those things later it

becomes difficult not to romanticize them.

**NG** With those buildings, especially. I feel like if anyone else saw them they might just say, what junk or what an eyesore, but I find them endearing.

**MG** Last time I came to your studio you said they were the starting point for this body of work.

**NG** The setup of the show is based on two different landscapes: this map-out of Islamic gardens—how there's always a focal point with flowing water, usually a fountain—and this more modern urban landscape based on recent memories of going back. You'll move around the space through different elements of concrete, clay, building materials that I've used to make time capsule objects.

**MG** What about these vases you're making?

**NG** I was recently in the Egyptian wing of the Met and the two security guards were Egyptian. They weren't talking about the work or anything; the woman was just passing through the space and she said something to the guy in Arabic. I was like, oh my God, did they put them here on purpose? I was like, wow, thank you so much for being in

Merray Gerges is a Toronto-based art critic, editor and investigative journalist. She studied art history at NSCAD and journalism at King's University in Halifax, where she co-founded and co-edited CRIT paper, NSCAD's first student newspaper. Her reporting and criticism have appeared in *Canadian Art*, where she is assistant editor, *C Magazine*, *MOMUS*, the *Walker Reader*, *Hyperallergic* and more, discussing topics ranging from the radical potential (and shortcomings) of intersectional feminist memes to art-world race politics.

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