

THESIS

EMBRACE YOUR BROKENNESS: A NARRATIVE JOURNEY OF AN IMMIGRANT

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ABSTRACT

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“Embrace Your Brokenness” unfolds the symbolic narrative of my immigrant journey through a collection of works, capturing the intricate complexities of identity and resilience. The artworks delve into themes of connection, border blending, and the interplay between external presentation and internal reality within the context of my own life. This thesis explores the unity and dissonance inherent in my personal experience, delving into the transient nature of memories and the emotional intricacies they hold. The signature of this collection are the delicate rose pattern porcelain pieces which serve as reflections of my roots and connections to my homeland, evoking a profound sense of belonging and contributing to my self-portrait within this collection. Utilizing visual narratives, each piece becomes a nuanced story, framing my daily struggles with adapting to a new life in the United States. Aligned with a broader theme of unity, “Embrace Your Brokenness” unveils the complexities of the immigrant experience, offering a tangible representation of the often-unseen challenges I have faced as both an immigrant and an artist. Through this body of work, viewers are invited to contemplate the concealed stories and connections that contribute to the collective human experience.

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1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, the experiences of immigrants have become a significant part of the socio-cultural landscape. As an immigrant artist from Iran, my thesis aims to explore the intricate connections between my lived experience as an immigrant in the United States and how it has influenced both my personal and artistic journey. Drawing upon my own experiences, I intend to study the complex nature of immigration not only through the perspective of my art but also through research into the psychological and sociological dimensions of the immigrant experience, by examining its definition, the challenges it presents, and the impact it has on individuals, communities, and society as a whole. Additionally, my body of work delves into the struggles with identity that immigrants often face, navigating between their cultural heritage and the expectations of their adopted society. Furthermore, I feel that the concepts of belonging, home, and memory are key aspects in the journey of an immigrant and exploring how these notions can be shaped and transformed through the lens of immigration build another part of this research. As an integral part of this exploration, the concepts of memory and nostalgia play a pivotal role. Memory, with its inherent capability to shape our perception of ourselves and our past, has been examined in relation to the immigrant experience. In this term, it is important to know how our brain processes and retains memories, and the ways in which this impacts an immigrant's longing for their home country and the yearning for a sense of familiarity and connection. Drawing upon the body of work I have created with the medium of jewelry and film photography, I have brought these themes to life, using my art as a tool to reflect the pressures and struggles that I have endured in this journey. By using my artistic expression as a common language to express my emotions and experiences, I have tried to address issues such as identity, culture, discrimination, and displacement, through which I aim to spark conversations and inspire empathy, understanding, and

acceptance in our communities. Throughout my thesis, I have intertwined these personal narratives with scholarly research, aiming to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of immigration experience.

2. Defining Immigration: Exploring the Multifaceted Nature of Migration

The definition of immigration goes beyond the physical act of moving from one country to another. It encompasses the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of individuals seeking a better life, as well as the challenges and complexities they encounter in their journey. The essence of immigration penetrates the profound psychological and sociological dimensions of the human experience.

The psychological impact of immigration is a multifaceted process that deeply influences an individual's sense of identity and belonging. For immigrants, the journey begins with the reorientation of their self-identity as they navigate the complexities of embracing their cultural heritage while simultaneously adapting to the norms and expectations of the adopted society. This often leads to a profound internal struggle, as immigrants grapple with the tension between preserving their authentic cultural roots and assimilating into a new cultural framework. Moreover, the psychological toll of immigration extends to the formation of a new sense of belonging. Immigrants are inherently drawn into a state of liminality, inhabiting a space between the familiarity of their homeland and the promises of their adopted country. This in-betweenness can evoke feelings of dislocation, detachment, and an ongoing quest to establish a meaningful connection to a place that is simultaneously home and foreign. Furthermore, the psychological impact encompasses the emotional labor of constructing a coherent narrative of the self within the context of migration. Immigrants often face the challenge of reconciling their past experiences with the present reality, which may involve confronting feelings of nostalgia, longing, and a

persistent yearning for a place that holds the memories of their formative years. In addition, from the sociological perspective, immigration unravels the intricate web of human interconnectedness, challenging notions of national identity and community. The adaptation to a new society demands a renegotiation of cultural norms and social roles, often leading to feelings of marginalization and the rupture of social ties. Immigrants confront barriers to inclusion and participation, significantly impacting their social integration and sense of community.

As an immigrant artist, I have personally navigated through these intricate psychological and sociological landscapes, and it has become a central theme in my artistic expression. Through introspective visual narratives in my artworks, I seek to capture the emotional nuances of this tough journey, reflecting the complexities and contradictions that define my experience while they are generally unseen and unspoken. In my opinion, it is vital to bring them to the forefront of discussions on immigration. As many of these multifaceted experiences remain unspoken and concealed, there is a pressing need to talk more about them to educate people with deeper knowledge. The significance of sharing and discussing these experiences goes beyond the immigrant community; it is essential for non-immigrants as well.

By illuminating the challenges and changes experienced by immigrants, we can promote increased empathy, comprehension, and solidarity within society. From a sociological perspective, the consequences of immigration are not limited to the immigrant alone; they reverberate throughout the entire social fabric. The integration of immigrants can bring about shifts in cultural dynamics, augmenting the diversity and richness of a society. However, the challenges of assimilation and inclusion also manifest in social tensions and disparities. By understanding and acknowledging these sociological impacts, we can work towards creating more inclusive and supportive communities. The unseen struggles and complexities of the immigrant experience

underscore the necessity of open dialogue, education, and advocacy, not only for the well-being of immigrants but for the overall social cohesion and progress of society.

As an immigrant in the USA, I understand the importance of the issue of immigration in the country. According to the latest data in 2022, immigrants make up about 13.9% of the total U.S. population, which amounts to approximately 46.2 million people. This percentage has steadily increased over the past few decades, with the immigrant population nearly quadrupling since 1970.¹ Projections indicate that by 2065, immigrants and their descendants will account for 78.2 million people, making up 36% of the U.S. population.² These statistics highlight the significant and growing impact of immigration on the demographic composition of the United States. The implications of immigration extend beyond simple demographic changes. Immigrants contribute to the U.S. economy, with research showing that they are more likely to be of working age and participate in the labor force compared to native-born citizens. They also play a crucial role in driving innovation and entrepreneurship, with immigrant entrepreneurs starting about 25% of new businesses in the U.S.³ Furthermore, immigrants contribute to the cultural diversity and enrich the social fabric of American society, bringing with them a wealth of experiences, traditions, and perspectives. The current discourse on immigration often centers around issues of border security, legal status, and political debates. However, it is essential to recognize the broader impacts of

¹ Jeanne Batalove, “Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States,” Migration Policy Institute, Washington, DC, March 13, 2024, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states>.

² “Modern Immigration Wave Brings 59 Million to U.S., Driving Population Growth and Change Through 2065: Views of Immigration’s Impact on U.S. Society Mixed,” Pew Research Center, Washington, DC, September 28, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2015/09/28/modern-immigration-wave-brings-59-million-to-u-s-driving-population-growth-and-change-through-2065>.

³ Kyung Min Lee, Mee Jung Kim, J. David Brown, John S. Earle, and Zhen Liu, “Are Immigrants More Innovative? Evidence from Entrepreneurs,” Working Paper Number CES-23-56, The United States Census Bureau, Washington, DC, November, 2023, <https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2023/adrm/CES-WP-23-56>.

immigration on society. As the immigrant population continues to grow, understanding and addressing the challenges and opportunities associated with immigration will be crucial for shaping the future of the United States. By acknowledging the contributions of immigrants and creating policies that support their integration, the U.S. can harness the full potential of immigration for economic, social, and cultural advancement.

3. The Psychological Journey of Immigration: Identity, Belonging, and Memory

As mentioned earlier, the psychological impact of immigration deeply affects the human mind and emotions in different ways. As individuals navigate the duality of identity, they are confronted with the challenge of reconciling their authentic cultural roots with the need to assimilate into a new cultural framework and this inner conflict can lead to a state of psychological tension. The cognitive dissonance that arises from this struggle with duality can be harmful to an individual's well-being. Psychologists Lee and Robbins have identified that maintaining a coherent sense of self while adapting to a new cultural context can result in emotional stress, anxiety, and a sense of fragmentation.⁴ Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the immigrant's experience involves a period of transition, where individuals navigate a state of ambiguity and transformation in their quest for a new cultural identity. This experience of liminality, being in a state between two worlds, can cause intense emotions of isolation. As anthropologist Victor Turner noted in his book "The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure", liminality is characterized by "betwixt and between" states, where individuals feel neither here nor there and are challenged to establish a meaningful connection between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and

⁴ Richard M. Lee, and Steven B. Robbins, "The relationship between social connectedness and anxiety, self-esteem, and social identity," *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 45(3), (1998): 338, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.45.3.338>.

ceremonial.⁵ In this respect, I would describe what I experienced as a suspension of familiar social structures. In reflecting on my immigration journey, it becomes apparent that my decision to embark on this path was deeply intertwined with my passion for artistic exploration and growth. The longing for a freer and wider space to expand my artistic practice served as the catalyst for my journey, shaping the very foundation of my immigrant experience. Therefore, it is essential to understand when I was just at the beginning of my immigration journey, how these concepts of experiencing two worlds, suspension, and a constant struggle to find a balance point among the liminality, influenced my first-year body of work.

As an artist immersed in cultural-oriented expression for many years, my immigration journey from the Middle East to the United States can be seen as a picture of a transformative transmission between worlds, a transition laden with the liminality described by Turner—a suspension of the familiar, a feeling of being betwixt and between. Therefore, the collection of five jewelry pieces, called “*Abeyance*,” represents my very first artistic endeavor, which explores these feelings visually and tactilely. In this collection, each piece acts as a symbolic bridge between the two contrasting worlds that define my experience. For instance, the “*Home*” ring in this collection exemplifies this juxtaposition by featuring a smooth, shiny silver bird perched upon a rough-cut bronze nest with a matte surface (Fig. 1). This deliberate design choice seeks to convey the duality inherent in my immigration experience: the new home, represented by the bronze nest, characterized by its rugged and uneven surface against the smooth but familiar roots, pictures my unfamiliarity and lack of smooth connection to this new home. Through the use of different materials, colors, textures, and design contrasts, each piece becomes a visual narrative of the complex emotional landscape I traversed during this transitional phase. Through meticulous

⁵ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 95.

attention to these contrasts, my intention is to provide viewers with a tangible insight into the dualities of my experience. By consistently juxtaposing elements within each piece, I aim to prompt viewers to ponder the enduring contrast evident throughout. Ultimately, this exploration invites viewers to deeply engage with and empathize with the emotions arising from this initial challenge encountered in my immigrant journey.

After a period of navigating the disorienting liminality of my life and struggling with a sense of loss, I started a journey to find a harmonious equilibrium between the two worlds that now defined my existence. This quest for balance permeated every facet of my life, extending from daily routines to my art practice and social life. Consequently, this made me think about a project inspired by my effort to achieve balance in my life and it became the core of my ideation for my next project. In that project, titled "*Ring a Day*," I started to create a collection of rings that represented my emotions I experienced on a daily basis. Adopting a disciplined routine, each day, I had to design a new ring, fabricate, finish, and photograph it for Instagram. Despite any obstacles I might have encountered each day, this procedure had to be repeated every day for a month without interruption. The goal of this project was not just to capture my daily existence, but also to convey the universal truth that life persists despite the tribulations and triumphs human experience entails. This collection, as a metaphorical calendar on the one-month scale of a lifetime, portrays the relentless nature of life, a continuum that cannot be paused, demanding perseverance in the face of hardships. Furthermore, it serves as a reflection on the intrinsic inability to fully articulate the spectrum of emotions encountered daily, including difficulties, joys, sorrows, and pressures, and eventually, only the final results of these endeavors are unveiled to other people while they are unaware of the challenges you overcome. In fact, I chose to transform the image of this everyday battle into a cohesive collection, since the concept of collection itself possesses distinct

characteristics that facilitated a more precise articulation of my conceptual framework. In her definition of collection, Susan Stewart asserts: “While we can ‘see’ the entire collection, we cannot possibly ‘see’ each of its elements.”⁶ And in the following she states, “To group objects in a series because they are ‘the same’ is to simultaneously signify their difference. In the collection, the more the objects are similar, the more imperative it is that we make gestures to distinguish them.”⁷ These two definitions of collection are quite close to my concept of a collection as a real-life example. You can “see” me as a manifestation of entire days that I have ever lived, but you cannot “see” the story of each day, the days which are totally different while they are somehow “the same”. The narrative encapsulated within the rings follows a similar storyline. While each ring might have its own significant tale to tell, when they come together in the collection, no single ring stands out more than the whole group. The nature of the collection ensures that each ring is seen as part of the bigger picture. However, to conclude this collection, I attempted to integrate my last ring with the concept of seeking balance. Expressing my journey as an international artist and immigrant, this final ring, called “*Balance*,” encapsulates the challenges and triumphs of my lived experience of my first year in the United States (Fig. 2). Three balanced half spheres symbolize the hurdles of assimilation, the fear of losing identity, and the quest for equilibrium in a new society. At the top, a radiant white pearl signifies the resilience forged through my personal struggle for balance. This ring is a tangible expression of the immigrant experience, a harmonious blend of two distinct worlds, and a testament to finding stability amidst life’s complexities.

In presenting the collection of rings, I employed separate suspended mobile forms, with each ring hanging individually on one side. On the opposite side, I hung small notes in Farsi, my mother

⁶ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Gigantic, the Miniature, the Souvenir and the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 155.

⁷ Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Gigantic, the Miniature, the Souvenir and the Collection*, 155.

language, accompanied by just a few words in English (Fig. 3). This visual representation aimed to highlight the inherent challenges in conveying the intricacies of my daily experiences, and on a broader scale, another crucial element that highly impacts an immigrant's journey: Language. The choice of Farsi as the language for these notes served as a deliberate commentary on the profound effect of the language barrier, a significant challenge faced by many immigrants, me included. By intertwining the visual representation of my daily experiences with the language barrier, I tried to illuminate the often-unseen struggles of my life, promoting a deeper understanding of the multifaceted challenges I was confronting. It emphasized the importance of language as a vital component of the immigrant experience, influencing how individuals navigate and express their evolving identities in a new cultural context.

Language stands as a formidable barrier for immigrants, affecting not only communication but also psychological well-being, social integration, and access to opportunities. For individuals coming from a country with a language different from that of their new home, the language barrier intensifies the sense of liminality. Language is the primary means through which individuals navigate the social, economic, and cultural dimensions of their lives. For immigrants, confronting a new linguistic landscape requires a recalibration of their sense of self and communication. The challenges in bridging linguistic gaps contribute to a sense of isolation and the difficulty of fully integrating into the new society as they internalize their hardships and navigate their journey in solitude due to the inability to communicate effectively and to convey their internal battles. In my personal experience, I avoided therapy for two years because I felt that I could never convey what I was feeling clearly and accurately, making the therapy useless and ineffective. The language barrier also intersects with the concepts of belonging and memory, rooted in the evocative power

of language to call for recollections and promote a sense of belonging.⁸ The adaptation to a new language demands a renegotiation of belonging, as individuals seek to establish meaningful connections while contending with the linguistic divide. Moreover, language serves as a vessel for the preservation of cherished memories and cultural roots. The language barrier, then, acts as more than a simple obstacle to communication; it becomes a barrier to accessing and preserving the rich tapestry of one's past. Language serves as a repository of shared histories, familial narratives, and communal traditions. The pull towards one's mother tongue, especially in the face of a language barrier, is often intertwined with a longing for the familiar, a desire to maintain a connection to the cultural roots that shape one's identity, and for me, utilizing my mother tongue in that collection was not the sole instance of seeking for a sign in the past.

Throughout the making of these collections, I felt my severe desire for the past. It was an intense tendency to recover the past and discredit the present. My inclination towards the past during the creation of my initial collections stemmed from a search for the identity, creativity, and tranquility that seemed lost in the present. This tendency reflects a desire to construct an idealized, but unrealistic, past within my mind as a means to escape from the complexities of the current reality. This desire for a somewhat fictitious past, as I perceive it, is a common human emotion which arises from dissatisfaction with the present, often accompanied by an uncertain and disconcerting outlook on the future. For instance, in line with Stewart's observations, collections and souvenirs can be a tangible manifestation of this yearning for the past, evoking voluntary memories of childhood. Stewart characterizes this nostalgic reflection as:

⁸ Didem Oral, and Anna Lund, "Mother Tongue Instruction: Between Assimilation and Multicultural Incorporation," *Education Sciences* 12, no. 11 (2022): 774, <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12110774>.

“This childhood is not a childhood as lived, it is a childhood voluntarily remembered, a childhood manufactured from its material survivals. Thus, it is a collage made of presents rather than a reawaking of a past. And it is in this gap between resemblance and identity that nostalgic desire arises.”⁹

During the process of crafting this body of work, my intense desire to recapture the past influenced even my choice of materials. As a jeweler accustomed to working with precious metals for years, it was an inconvenience to start working with brass and copper that I could not even afford when I first came to the US. As a result, in my collection, I was drawn to work mostly with brass since I was more familiar with its color. As my desire for the past had penetrated every aspect of my practice, leading me to ask myself: What exactly drives this profound inclination toward the past rather than just escaping the present?

From the psychological perspective, we may argue that nostalgia and the longing for the past are rooted in a need for belonging. The past serves as a repository of experiences, a narrative thread that weaves together a sense of personal and cultural identity. This innate need for a sense of belonging is a fundamental aspect of human existence within our socio-cultural lives, as individuals seek connection and coherence in their lives. The importance of belonging lies in its role as a stabilizing force, providing individuals with a sense of purpose, continuity, and a framework for understanding their place in the world. Baumeister and Leary elaborate on this intrinsic need in their seminal work, highlighting that “belongingness is a fundamental human motivation” that drives individuals to form and maintain interpersonal relationships.¹⁰ This desire for connection is rooted in the evolutionary advantages of social bonds, contributing to survival, reproduction, and overall well-being. The significance of belonging lies in its profound impact on

⁹ Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Gigantic, the Miniature, the Souvenir and the Collection*, 145.

¹⁰ Roy F. Baumeister, and Mark R Leary, “The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation,” *Psychological bulletin* 117, no. 3 (1995): 497.

identity formation. Belonging to a place, a community, or even a particular cultural heritage fulfills a human instinct for connection, fostering a sense of shared identity and purpose. Social identity theory, as articulated by Tajfel and Turner, posits that individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups to enhance their self-esteem and establish a positive social identity.¹¹ Belonging to a group provides a framework for understanding one's place in the world, influencing attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions. Erikson's psychosocial theory further underscores the role of social relationships in identity development, emphasizing that a sense of belonging is crucial during the adolescent stage.¹² Memory, as a cognitive process, becomes a crucial tool in the construction and maintenance of a sense of belonging. Shared memories within social groups create a collective identity, fostering a shared narrative that binds individuals together. According to Halbwachs' theory of collective memory, memory is not an individual, isolated process but a social one, shaped by interactions within a community. The collective memory of a group reinforces a shared history and cultural heritage, contributing to a cohesive sense of belonging.¹³ In exploring the interconnectedness of memory, belonging, and identity, the work of Daniel Schacter on constructive memory is remarkable. Same as the Stewarts's opinion about memory that mentioned earlier, Schacter also discusses how memory is not a faithful recording of the past, but a reconstructive process influenced by current knowledge and beliefs.¹⁴ This reconstruction allows

¹¹ Henri Tajfel, and John C. Turner, "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior," in *Political psychology* (Psychology Press, 2004), 276-293, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203505984-16>.

¹² Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1993), 19-43.

¹³ Sarah Gensburger, "Halbwachs' Studies in Collective Memory: A Founding Text for Contemporary 'Memory Studies'?", *Journal of classical sociology : JCS* 16, no. 4 (2016): 396-413.

¹⁴ Daniel L. Schacter, "Adaptive constructive processes and the future of memory," *American Psychologist* 67, no. 8 (2012): 603-613, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029869>.

individuals to weave their personal experiences into a broader narrative that aligns with their sense of identity and belonging. The intersection of memory, belonging, and identity becomes evident in the way individuals utilize memories to reinforce their connections to social groups. The recollection of shared experiences, traditions, and cultural practices fosters a collective identity that transcends individual memories. Specifically in my lived experience, in the context of my artistic exploration, my attraction to the past and the creation of a collection rooted in nostalgic sentiments can be seen as my endeavor to reclaim my lost sense of belonging, using tangible artifacts as bridges to my past that resonates with my personal and cultural significance.

The exploration of belonging and identity in my artistic practice led me to a profound realization about the persistent undercurrent of fear I experienced post-immigration. This fear, rooted in the apprehension of losing my cultural identity and roots in the new country, compelled me to investigate its origins more closely. It became evident that this fear was intricately linked to my comfort zone, a realm of familiarity and routine that I had been forced to abandon upon entering the unknown territories of a new cultural landscape. This shift, marked by the immigration experience, pushed me into what I now recognize as the fear zone. The fear of losing a sense of belonging and identity was, in essence, an emotional response to the disruption of my established comfort zone. As a result of this introspection, I gained a deeper insight into the emotional complexity of my immigrant journey and how comfort zones become intricately woven into the fabric of cultures and identities. Realizing the source of my fear, I began exploring different psychological zones: comfort, fear, learning, and growth.¹⁵ The psychological phenomenon of these four zones offers valuable insights into the complex interplay of emotions experienced by

¹⁵ Oliver Page, "How to Leave Your Comfort Zone and Enter Your 'Growth Zone'," last modified February 20, 2024, <https://positivepsychology.com/comfort-zone>.

immigrants, particularly in the context of identity and belonging. As mentioned earlier, departing from the comfort zone, marked by familiar routines and surroundings, triggers a fear zone, amplifying anxiety tied to the potential loss of identity and cultural roots. Stepping into this fear zone is an essential phase in transformative learning, promoting personal and cultural evolution. The fear experienced by immigrants in stepping out of their comfort zones also aligns with the broader psychological concept of neophobia, the fear of the new or unfamiliar. This fear is deeply rooted in the evolutionary need for caution in novel environments. For immigrants, the fear of losing identity and belongings intensify the anxiety associated with the unfamiliar, reinforcing the reluctance to venture into the learning and growth zones. However, if the fear zone is successfully stepped out of, learning and growth occur afterwards, where challenges slightly exceed current capabilities. This zone, known as the learning zone, represents an optimal balance between challenge and competence. The growth zone, lying beyond the learning zone, becomes the crucible for acquiring new skills and experiencing transformative personal development. Immigrants who overcome the fear of leaving their comfort zones often discover enhanced resilience and a deeper understanding of themselves. This progression beyond the fear zone is crucial for immigrants; it not only facilitates integration into the new society and culture but also allows for the establishment of new belongings and a sense of personal and cultural growth. Embracing the discomfort of the unknown becomes a pathway to forging connections, building a richer tapestry of identity, and ultimately flourishing in the growth zone.

To fully understand the benefits of leaving the comfort zone, I stepped into a personal journey of self-discovery, consciously confronting fear and embracing discomfort to reach the growth zone. This exploration became a significant chapter in my immigrant narrative, highlighting the positive outcomes that arise from navigating challenges and stepping into the realm of personal

development. In my comfort zone, when it comes to art, material plays an important role. I worked with metals for a long time as a bench jeweler and it was an exciting time to deal with new materials and tools, although the prospect of stepping into the unknown left me a bit uneasy. As a new practice, I decided to switch my material to step out of my comfort zone. My goal was to explore accessible options that did not demand specific tools and also to take a look at my language of forms. In the second year of my studio practice, I used materials such as tin foil, plastic straws, soda cans and ceramic, and I also replaced my usual format of wearable jewelry with large-scale installation as a means to present my concepts (Fig. 4). These installations were inspired by the political climate in Iran and the personal pressures I faced at that moment. One of these installations ultimately had a greater influence on my point of view and mentality, which made it easier for me to adjust to my new life. This installation, called “*Crush*,” offered audiences a chance to physically crush an aluminum beverage can using a dead-blow hammer and anvil as a representation of whatever pressure they may have encountered in their lives (Fig. 5). They also could write down their suffering experience on the wall in words or sentences so that, just as hardships are permanently recorded in the layers of our soul, they are imprinted on the whiteness of the wall as well. In this manner, the installation helped to honor the fact that even though the impact of these bitter experiences leaves a lasting impression on our souls, we can also choose to give them wings to fly higher.

Being alone with all my struggles, experiencing that interactive installation was an emotionally powerful turning point for me. It helped me realize how many people carry a burden of pressure on their shoulders in silence. Additionally, the last days of this installation were marked by the political tension in Iran due to the Woman-Life-Freedom uprising, which caused me to experience a wide range of difficult emotions. At this time, I received an email notifying me of the acceptance

of my ring, aptly named “*Hope*,” into a juried exhibition taking place at New York City Jewelry Week (Fig. 6). This symbolic occurrence coincided with my installation, adding a layer of emotional resonance to the turning point in my artistry. The theme of hope echoed loudly as my piece found its place in the “*Hope is Resiliency*” show and suddenly, I felt I could fly higher. The acceptance of my work during this challenging period intertwined with my personal narrative, introducing layers of metaphor and significance to my artistic journey. Securing a spot in a renowned show in the USA with a ring named “*Hope*” resonated perfectly with the core concept I aimed to convey through my “*Crush*” installation. This marked my first participation in New York Jewelry Week with an experience that offered me a sense of connection with the broader artistic community and a flourishing feeling of belonging. It was a transformative moment, signifying a connection with a new community and a validation of my place within it. The resonance of my work and the connections forged during this event became a testament to the power of art, highlighting its ability to reflect, respond, and resonate amid times of struggle and resilience.

This newfound sense of connection paved the way for further engagement within the artistic realm. Harnessing the power of jewelry as a medium to connect people and convey narratives, I decided to craft a brooch, titled “*Wing of Freedom*,” to raise awareness among non-Iranians about the political situation in Iran at that moment (Fig. 7). The brooch, made from my own hair that I cut during a significant Iranian rally in Denver on October 1st, 2022, carried profound symbolism. In Iran, women’s hair represents honor and dignity, and cutting it serves as a symbolic act of mourning rooted in local history. This act of defiance in response to Mahsa Amini’s tragic murder fueled a global movement where women across the world cut their hair in solidarity. My “*Wing of Freedom*” brooch served as a tribute to the courageous women fighting for their rights, and how,

in the near future, each of their individual actions will become a feather on the freedom bird's wing. The collective efforts and shared concerns within this artistic community provided a platform for dialogue and expression. The impact of my act extended beyond New York City Jewelry Week, as these connections culminated in another significant exhibition titled "*Revolution.*" Bringing together the works of 48 artists worldwide, this exhibition was also inspired by Woman-Life-Freedom uprising in Iran. It showcased art as a potent political and educational tool, amplifying the voices of those fighting for freedom. Feeling less isolated with my challenges and learning how to properly express them, while also validating the hardships of others, these experiences helped me cultivate empathy. The newfound connections and understanding that emerged from these interactions led to a profound sense of belonging within my evolving circumstances. This journey through exhibitions and collaborations underscored the transformative power of art for me, demonstrating its ability to foster empathy, forge connections, and contribute to a sense of community in the face of adversity.

This journey of exploring new materials and pushing the boundaries of my artistic comfort, ultimately leading to a more profound understanding of my practice. I began to recognize the potential of my struggles and hardships as a central theme. Initially feeling lost and uncertain about how to resume my art practice, finally I realized that the shared experiences and challenges of immigration could become the core of the narrative I wished to convey. I decided to focus once again on the realm of wearable jewelry, since the desire to adorn oneself with jewelry transcends age, class, culture, gender, geography, religion, and time. Jewelry, with its polymorphism of symbolism, has historically represented various facets of human experience, such as birth, commitment, death, friendship, marriage, mourning, scholarship, sex, success, virginity, and much else. What drew me to jewelry was not just its inherent beauty but its strength as a storytelling and

narrative medium. The capacity of jewelry to communicate social issues through a familiar, comprehensible, and tangible medium resonates across diverse ages, genders, and cultures. This potential steered me back towards a medium that encapsulates not only aesthetic value but also the power to engage and narrate meaningful stories.

4. A Personal Narrative: My Experience as an Iranian Immigrant

As I reflect on my struggles as an immigrant, I am compelled to discuss the unique challenges that have defined my experience as an Iranian. Coming from Iran, a country marked by complex political, social, and economical situations, I found myself confronted with multiple obstacles that intricately shaped my immigrant narrative. These experiences have greatly influenced my perspective and my lived experience as an immigrant in a new country. The political landscape in Iran has cast a profound shadow over my immigrant experience, infusing it with a sense of uncertainty and impermanence. Iranian students in the United States typically obtain single-entry visas, requiring them to undergo the entire visa application process anew if they exit the country. There is no assurance of obtaining the visa again, often resulting in an extended stay in the US without a predetermined duration. This visa issue perpetuates a profound sense of disconnection from my homeland, rendering the prospect of returning a distant and intimidating dream for me. This reality has anchored me in the United States for an indefinite period, provoking a complex combination of gratitude for the opportunities here and intense longing for the familiarity and comfort of my native land.

The intertwining emotions have woven together to shape every aspect of my daily life as I navigate this profound journey into unfamiliar territory. Moreover, the constant lack of stability, exacerbated by critical political, economic, and social conditions, shapes a journey characterized by enduring stress and anxiety. My connection to family and loved ones residing in Iran intensifies

these emotions, fostering an enduring commitment to the unfolding events in my homeland. For instance, the Mahsa Amini uprising from the previous year stands as a testimony to the profound impact of political and social crises, magnifying the complexities faced by Iranian immigrants. The economic dimension adds complexity to the challenges, as each regional conflict leaves a palpable imprint on the value of the Iranian Rial. This ongoing fluctuation not only raises concerns about the welfare of my family and friends but is further intensified by the absence of international financial transactions in Iran. This situation not only restricts the flow of financial aid, heightening our collective sense of powerlessness in addressing the struggles faced by our loved ones but also poses challenges for us residing outside Iran in receiving the financial support we might need.

The constant worry within the Iranian diaspora is deeply entwined with a desire to maintain a connection with our roots. The turbulent political landscape, coupled with economic uncertainties, clouds any optimistic outlook for the future in Iran. Personally, this complex interplay of factors makes the idea of returning to Iran a formidable consideration. It evokes a profound sense of failure, as the prevailing circumstances, encompassing social, political, and economic challenges, render the notion of going back to live there a near impossibility. This predicament is distinct from the typical pattern observed in other nationalities where individuals, having studied or worked abroad, often return to their home countries. For many Iranian diasporas, the prevailing situation casts the idea of returning as a significant personal failure. The societal pressure and the weight of expectations associated with such a decision make it mentally and socially burdensome.

While there are instances of Iranians choosing to repatriate, the social stigma and psychological strain attached to this choice create considerable obstacles, making it an option fraught with challenges and societal disapproval. Collectively, these complex socio-political and economic circumstances redefine the very essence of immigration for Iranians. Unlike the conventional

understanding, the Iranian experience of immigration is closely associated with the concept of escape. This renders the aftermath of this escape divergent from the general perception of immigration. Post-escape, the narrative carries a nuanced layer where expressions of homesickness or longing for Iran become a sensitive issue. The prevailing societal norms, especially in the social media, dictate a constrained discourse. Any manifestation of missing Iran or expressing interest in it may elicit resentment from those who still have not been or will not be able to escape. There exists a peculiar tension where sentiments of homesickness are viewed as provocative, as they seemingly miss the hardships that some are still grappling with or enduring within the metaphorical 'prison.' This intricate dynamic adds a layer of complexity to the immigrant experience.

The conflicts between personal emotions and societal expectations in the immigrant experience create a psychological burden that often compels individuals to bear their struggles in silence. The decision to leave Iran in pursuit of a better life seemingly establishes an unspoken contract of silence, discouraging the expression of discontent about the newfound freedom in the adopted country. Complaining about the host nation is viewed as a contradiction to the perceived motivation for immigration, the search for improved circumstances, freedom and a better life. Simultaneously, there is a reluctance to share the hardships faced in the host country with native inhabitants. The warmth of the welcome and the hospitality extended by the host nation raise hesitations about bringing forth the challenges and obstacles encountered. Expressing grievances about one's situation in a country that has generously welcomed the immigrant becomes a complex ethical consideration. This dual challenge leaves immigrants in a silent struggle, suppressing their daily hardships and refraining from sharing their true experiences. In my own journey, this daily struggle in silence and the necessity to conceal hardships became the foundation of my inspiration for the final collection. The internal conflict with identity, the unspoken pact to maintain silence,

and the struggle to reconcile personal experiences with societal expectations were pivotal elements that shaped the artistic narrative. This collection became a medium through which I could articulate the unspoken, a visual representation of the internal turmoil faced by many immigrants specifically Iranians who navigate through these challenges in a daily basis.

5. Embrace Your Brokenness

Informed by the nuanced reflections on immigration, personal struggles, and the interplay of societal expectations explored in earlier discussions, the genesis of my thesis work, titled *“Embrace Your Brokenness,”* emerges as a symbolic narrative of my immigrant journey. This body of work endeavors to encapsulate all those intricate layers of a quest for identity and resilience, delving into the themes of connection and belonging, the dissolution of borders, and the dichotomy between external presentation and internal reality. This narrative offers viewers an intimate understanding of the layers which are concealed beneath the apparent beauty of the artworks.

Drawing inspiration from artists such as Bouke de Vries, particularly his captivating work *“Fragile Memory Vessel,”* where shards of broken porcelain are transformed into wondrous sculptures, I explore a poetic visualization of my feelings surrounding the concept of nostalgia and memory, especially as an immigrant (Fig. 8). Similar to de Vries’s exploration of beauty in destruction and the fusion of historical and contemporary elements, my art embraces the fragmented and shattered porcelain pieces as the central theme. Much like his *“Memory Vessels”* series, which features porcelain fragments encased in glass jars serving as urns, my collection seeks to encapsulate the essence of memory and the delicate balance between perfection and imperfection in the immigrant experience. In my collection, the broken porcelain pieces, adorned with rose patterns, transcend their physicality to become a vessel of profound symbolism. In

embracing these delicate pink roses as representatives of my identity in my artworks, my jewelry pieces are infused with a powerful story that mirrors the hidden sides of my immigrant experience.

These rose pattern porcelains, historically significant in Iran, carry a nostalgic charm that transcends time and space, evoking memories of tradition, beauty, and grace. Growing up, these rose pattern porcelains were not merely functional items; they were cherished heirlooms that adorned family tables, each piece telling a tale of shared meals and familial bonds. Even today, as these dishes have become valuable and even collectible in Iran, their presence sparks memories of a bygone era. This nostalgic essence of these dishes makes me believe that the timeless allure of the rose motifs speaks to a heritage woven with stories of love, resilience, and an unwavering appreciation for the exquisite details of nature. The fragility of the broken pieces intertwined with the soft pink hues of the rose patterns also serves as a metaphor for the essence of femininity. The interplay of fragility and resilience, delicacy and strength, resonates through the broken pieces, encapsulating a visual poetry that unfolds the nuanced aspects of my journey in building a new identity. Through its thematic exploration, the incorporation of stitching into the jewelry pieces of the collection serves as a symbolic and functional element which goes beyond a mere aesthetic choice, contributing to the overall narrative of acceptance, healing and self-love that unfolded over nearly three years.

The deliberate choice of stitches to secure the broken porcelain fragments not only holds them tightly but also aligns with a meditative healing practice. This process mirrors an everyday effort to maintain the cohesion of my fragmented identity, embodying the essence of stitching as a means of bringing elements together. Rather than attempting to conceal or mend the fractures, each stitch is a testament to the acknowledgment and celebration of the brokenness as an integral and cherished facet of the new identity. This practice, grounded in acceptance, signifies a

transformative journey toward embracing the fragmented self as a cohesive and beautiful whole. The focal point of this collection for me is a set of badges called “*Homeland*” that intricately form the contours of the Iranian map when assembled (Fig. 9). These badges capture a spectrum of emotions, embodying the complexities of identity loss, societal expectations, and the everyday struggle to harmonize these conflicting elements. This piece as a whole symbolizes the societal pressure to adhere to the intact, idealized version of my Iranian identity. The challenge in aligning these separate badges precisely and accurately parallels the challenges I face in preserving a fractured identity in accordance with societal expectations. Despite the complexity in assembling the badges to form a cohesive whole, each individual badge possesses inherent beauty and significance. This symbolizes the realization that even if the final representation differs from the ideal, the unique beauty of each component remains intact.

In my journey towards self-acceptance, I have learned to appreciate the imperfect assembly of the badges, mirroring my acceptance of the fractured nature of my new identity. The pursuit of perfection and precision in presenting the final map becomes secondary to the significance of embracing the brokenness and acknowledging the effort invested. “*Homeland*” becomes a tangible manifestation of the realization that the authenticity of my immigrant identity lies not in conforming to societal expectations but in cherishing the inherent beauty of my multifaceted self, irrespective of external perceptions. In the series “*Embrace Your Brokenness*,” each piece sheds light on my narrative from a different angle. Another part of my feelings unfolds through a significant piece, a signet ring titled “*Identity Seal*” (Fig. 10). Historically utilized for marking and sealing documents by pressing a unique mark or family crest into wax, the signet ring takes on a profound symbolism in this collection. Adorning the top with a small, broken porcelain piece crowned with a delicate rosebud, this ring stands as a testament to the acceptance and honoring of

my identity, a harmonious fusion of my past and present selves. Moreover, the inclusion of real pearls and fake ones adds further layers of meaning to this collection. Real pearls, with their shining luster, become a symbol of hope, brightness, and protection, while the row of imitation pearls serves as a poetic commentary on the artificial facades of wellness we often wear, concealing our inner truths (Fig. 11).

As part of the presentation of my collection, I have also included photography as a complement to my narrative since the inclusion of film photography in my artistic practice extends beyond visual aesthetics. With therapeutic and meditative abilities, it became a mental and emotional exercise that helped me adjust more easily to life's new challenges. As a result, in curating this visual narrative, I aim to convey the depth and complexity of my feelings, encapsulating the essence of my evolving identity in a foreign land. Choosing film over digital photography serves as a deliberate practice to slow down and immerse myself in the intricacies of the process. In the realm of film photography, attention to detail becomes paramount. With limited chances to capture a moment, each frame demands careful consideration, fostering a heightened awareness of the surrounding details. The waiting period for the development of the film and the anticipation of the final result serve as a practice of patience. This aspect of film photography becomes a symbolic representation of my evolving confidence in navigating the unknowns of life, even when the outcome may not align precisely with my initial expectations. The process of film development becomes a metaphor for embracing the unpredictable, a lesson learned through the challenges of adapting to a new culture and society. The deliberate use of black and white photography adds a layer of temporal ambiguity to the visual storytelling. As a result of the absence of color, the images transcend specific temporal contexts, inviting viewers to connect with the scenes on a more personal and universal level. This intentional choice mirrors the fluid nature of memories,

constantly shifting and evolving within the recesses of the mind. The absence of color prompts viewers to project their own experiences onto the images, fostering a more intimate engagement with the visual composition. In my opinion, even the grainy textures and subtle imperfections inherent in film photography further enhance the authenticity of the visual narrative, providing a raw and unfiltered glimpse into the multifaceted layers of my feelings.

In the final presentation, the interplay between large photos and small jewelry pieces serves as a visual narrative, intricately weaving my story together (Fig. 12). From a distance, the audience is greeted by the composition of the large photos, momentarily eclipsing the smaller, delicate jewelry pieces. Yet, as one approaches, the hidden details of the jewelry emerge, inviting a closer inspection. This dynamic mirrors the essence of my journey, encapsulating the idea that the layers of our lived experiences often require a closer, more intimate exploration to reveal their intricacies. This intentional design reflects the notion that life stories, much like my artwork, demand a closer look to unveil their nuances. The concealed aspects of my immigrant journey, represented by the small jewelry pieces, become apparent only when observed up close. This mirrors a universal truth that understanding the depth of someone's narrative necessitates proximity and an attentive gaze. Influenced by renowned American photographer and artist Carrie Mae Weems, particularly her iconic "*The Kitchen Table*" series, where she skillfully employs photography, text, and installation to explore the dynamics of family, love, and relationships, I sought to emulate her approach (Fig. 13). Weems' ability to capture the profound in the ordinary, offering an intimate glimpse into the lives of Black women and their daily struggles, became a guiding light in my exploration of storytelling through photography. In much the same way, I aim to create a space for empathy and understanding by narrating the nuances of my immigrant experience through the seemingly mundane moments of my life. This approach, inspired by Weems' impactful body of work,

underscores the transformative potential of art in fostering connections and dialogue. The large photos, capturing fragments of my ordinary everyday life, carry an emotional undertone that subtly encourages the audience to draw near and discover the finer details of my story. Through these carefully crafted visuals, I offer small windows into my life, providing glimpses that are real yet incomplete (Fig. 14). This intentional duality invites viewers to contemplate the layers beneath the surface, recognizing that the full story unfolds when one takes the time to approach and engage more intimately.

In conclusion, the intentional integration of black and white film photography alongside the jewelry pieces within the “*Embrace Your Brokenness*” series, stands as a thoughtful and deliberate choice. This visual language communicates the amalgamation of old and new, past and present, weaving together the evolving layers of my identity as an immigrant grappling with the intricacies of a foreign land. In the broader context of my exploration, understanding the concepts of identity and belonging through the lens of an immigrant plays an integral role. The curated interplay of tangible jewelry and visual narratives invites viewers to embark on a contemplative journey, delving into universal themes and explorations of these concepts. Through this work, I make an effort to demonstrate how the journey of an immigrant is multifaceted, encompassing challenges that reverberate across personal, social, and cultural dimensions. Drawing inspiration from my Iranian heritage, I have researched the political, economic, and social intricacies that shape my immigrant experience, highlighting the unique challenges faced by Iranian immigrants amidst the backdrop of political unrest and economic instability in my homeland. The comprehensive exploration undertaken in this thesis, from the challenges of identity to the complexities of memory, reflects the profound resilience that defines my immigrant narrative. The journey of “*Embrace Your Brokenness*” extends beyond the confines of personal narrative; it transforms into

a shared exploration of the human condition, fostering understanding and empathy among those who may not share the same immigrant experience. As my thesis comes full circle, echoing the sentiments articulated in the introduction, it stands as a testament to the power of art to articulate, provoke, and inspire. I hope my art can transcend geographical boundaries and cultural divides and serve as a reminder of the strength inherent in embracing fragility and transforming it into an enduring beauty.

FIGURES



Figure1, Nikoo Monem, *Home*, 2021. Bronze, sterling silver , 1x1x1', Colorado



Figure 2, Nikoo Monem, *Balance*, 2022. Bronze, freshwater pearl , 2x1x1', Colorado.



Figure 3, Nikoo Monem, *Ring a Day*, 2022. Brass, copper, pearl, steel wool, wax, fabric, dried flower, various sizes, Colorado.



Figure 4, Nikoo Monem, *The Void* (on the left) and *So Far-So Close* (on the right), 2023. Electroformed straw, balloon, tin foil, various sizes, Colorado.



Figure 5, Nikoo Monem, *Crush*, 2022. Soda can, feather, 10x4x0.5', Colorado.



Figure 6, Nikoo Monem, *Hope*, 2022. Bronze, freshwater pearl, steel wool, 2x1x1', Colorado.



Figure 7, Nikoo Monem, *Wing of Freedom*, 2022. Brass, human hair, brass bullet, 6x2x1', Colorado.



Figure 8, Bouke de Vries, *Fragile memory vessel*, 2022. 18th century Chinese porcelain vase, glass and FRAGILE tape, 35x57 cm.



Figure 9, Nikoo Monem, *Homeland*, 2023. Brass, porcelain, mirror, thread, each badge 1x1x1', Colorado.



Figure 10, Nikoo Monem, *Identity Seal*, 2023. Brass, porcelain, thread, 1x1x1', Colorado.



Figure 11, Nikoo Monem, *Dichotomy*, 2023. Brass, porcelain, thread, imitation pearl, 16x1x0.5', Colorado.



Figure 12, Nikoo Monem, *Embrace Your Brokenness Collection*, 2024. Brass, porcelain, thread, imitation pearl, digital print, paper, Colorado.



Figure 13, Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled*, from the *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990. Gelatin silver print, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.



Figure 14, Nikoo Monem, *Untitled*, from the *Embrace Your Brokenness Collection*, 2024. Film photography, digital print, 24x18', Colorado.

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