

RUHEE MAKNOJIA

FABRICATING AUTHENTICITY



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

MARCH 21 - MAY 7, 2026

AUSTIN, TEXAS

FABRICATING AUTHENTICITY

"I am increasingly interested in how patterns operate beyond the visual and how they relate to cultural, social, and political systems."

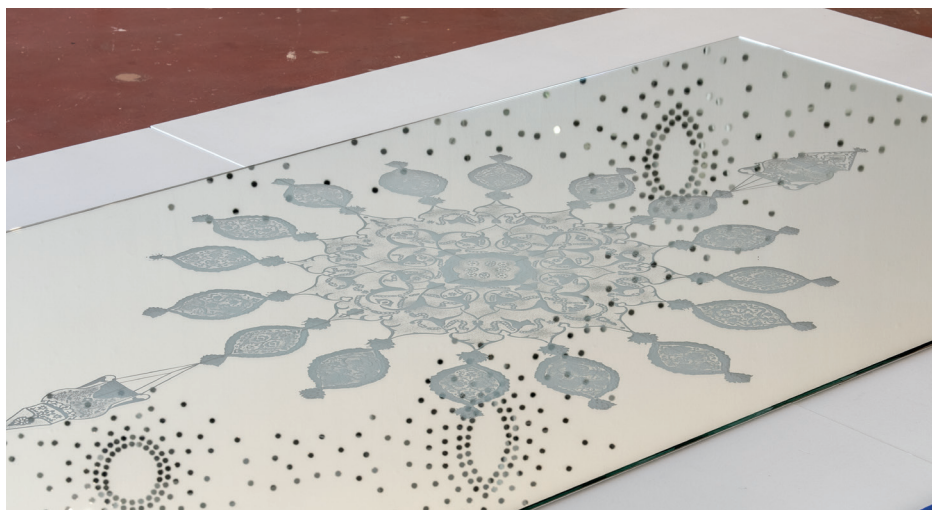
— Ruhee Maknoja

In *Fabricating Authenticity*, Ruhee Maknoja questions the authenticity of art we often view in museums following repair or manipulation and presented as "original." Drawing from the material and spiritual culture of Iran, Maknoja's installation takes as its point of departure the intertwined history of the twin Ardabil carpets, woven in 1539–1540 CE for the shrine of Sheikh Safi al-Din Khanegah – a Sufi lodge/*Khanegah* (Persian: خانگاه) in Ardabil located in northwestern Iran.

The carpets were among the most accomplished examples of textile production created during the Safavid Dynasty, with a knot count of 35 million interlocked knots (340 knots per square inch) woven with wool, weft pile yarn dyed with natural dyes with cotton warps. After sustaining damage in an earthquake, the carpets were sold in the 1890s to fund repairs to the shrine. Their subsequent separation and reconstruction introduced a different kind of rupture. Today, one carpet is held by the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) in London and the other, obtained much later, by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). In the early twentieth century, the V&A repaired its carpet using fragments from the other, to produce what could be understood as a more perfect object.

For Maknoja, this history raises fundamental questions: When an artwork has been materially altered, repaired, or reconstructed, at what point does intervention change its identity? And how does the authority of the museum shape our understanding of an object, particularly when it serves specific political narratives?

Maknoja first approached these questions



The Silent Constellation (detail), 2026
96 x 48" etched mirror on 120 x 72" platform

through a series of small textile studies which replicate the fate of the Ardabil carpets themselves. Threads extend between paired fragments, physically connecting what has been separated. Three sets of framed twin carpets hung in the exhibition explore different models of sameness, interdependence, and rupture.

The first, titled *Ship of Theseus*, invokes the philosophical thought experiment in which an object remains, or fails to remain, the same when all of its original components are replaced. The second, *TTTS*, draws on Twin-to-Twin Transfusion Syndrome, in which an imbalance in blood flow between twins disrupts their shared system. The third, *Monozygotic* references monozygotic twins and the asymmetries that can emerge even between bodies understood as genetically identical.

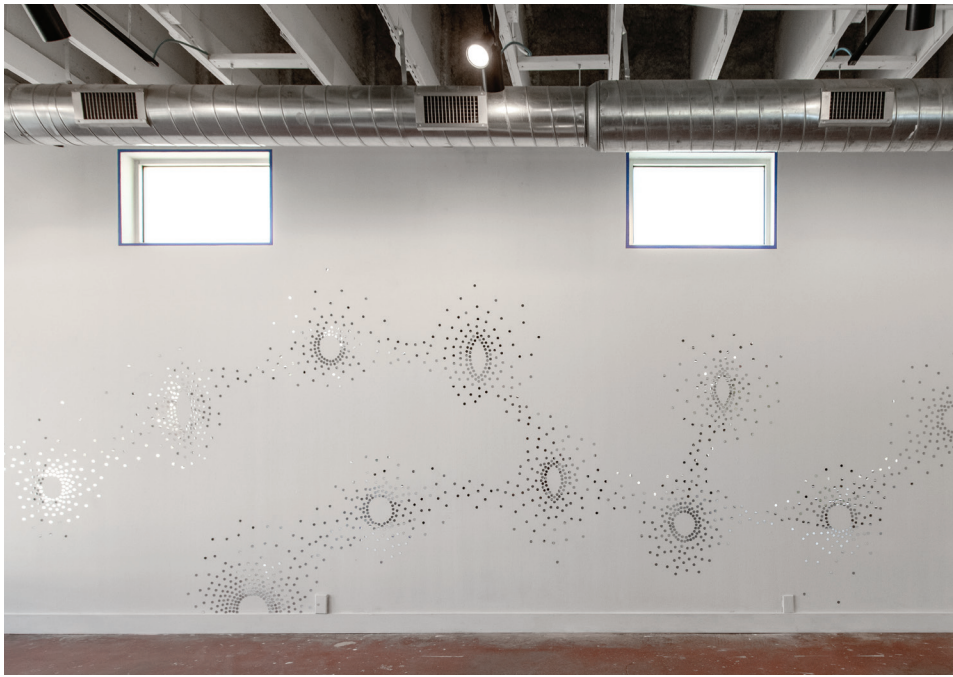
From these works, Maknoja's project evolved to focus on mirrorwork or *Ayeneh-kari* (Persian: آینه کاری) the traditional Iranian art form, dating back to the Safavid era. Two eight-by-four-foot hand-etched mirrors form the central elements of the installation, positioned on platforms and surrounded by thousands of small circular mirrors arranged across the gallery walls.

The patterning present in the exhibition draws directly from the central medallion of the Ardabil Carpet, a radiant sun motif. This illuminating light occupies a significant place within Iranian architecture and Islamic spiritual thought, where divine light serves as a metaphor for knowledge, revelation, and guidance. Maknoja's use of reflection transforms this historical motif into an active encounter: light is fractured, multiplied, and returned to the viewer.

The eight-foot twin mirrors' design in the exhibition was created through a meticulous hand process. Each shape was cut using an X-Acto knife and then sandblasted to produce the etched surface. Maintaining the presence of the hand was essential to Maknoja because it resists the perfection of mechanical reproduction and introduces subtle irregularities. Irregularities are also common in handwoven Iranian carpets; deliberate imperfections woven into them because only Allah is believed to be perfect, thus a perfect carpet would be an insult to Him. The irregularities suggest that handmade objects are unique as they carry the signature of the labor and skill of the artist's work.



From top to bottom: *Fabricating Authenticity* (installation view), 2026;
Fabricating Authenticity (installation view), 2026;
 Cover Panel: *The Silent Constellation* (detail), 2026, 96 x 48" etched mirror on 120 x 72" platform



Fragmented Reflections (detail), 2026
Approximately 8000 circular mirrors, dimensions variable

There are also quieter, more subtle elements embedded in the installation. The platforms where the mirrors rest are divided into four sections, referencing the *charbagh* [*chahar bagh*], a Persian garden layout structured into quadrants by pathways or water channels. A faint line runs through each mirror where the divisions of the platform align beneath it, becoming visible only through careful observation. The exhibition is intentionally layered with these small mysteries, encouraging viewers to slow down and engage more deeply with what they see.

Sufism provides another conceptual and spiritual framework to investigate the work. The shrine for which the rugs were created honored the Sufi saint whose followers eventually established Shia Islam as the official religion of Iran and founded the Safavid dynasty (CE 1501-1736). This dynasty, well

known for its patronage of the arts, is one of the most important periods for Islamic art, especially for textiles and for manuscripts. Safavid rulers commissioned exquisite objects including ceramics, tile, mirrorwork, textiles, illustrated manuscripts with miniature paintings, and religious and secular architectural buildings.

Islamic mysticism (Sufism) has been a significant, albeit often complex, part of the cultural and spiritual landscape of Shia Islam in Iran for centuries. While traditional Shia scholars often criticize Sufi practices, many Iranians historically incorporated Sufi mysticism (known as *Irfan* in Shia contexts) with Shia devotion, fostering a rich tradition of poetry, art, and spiritual philosophy. It is this spiritual element in Iranian Sufi mysticism that informs Maknoja's inspiration for this exhibition.

By calling attention to and metaphorically recreating these histories in her installation, *Fabricating Authenticity*, Maknoja asks us to consider how authenticity and cultural history is constructed, how it is remembered – and by whom. Through beautiful and painstakingly created objects, the artist lays bare the power structures that often shape how cultural objects are understood, valued, and redefined over time.

Faegheh Shirazi Ph.D., Professor Emeritus,
Department of Middle Eastern Studies, The
University of Texas at Austin.

Ruhee Maknojia CV

EDUCATION

- 2024 Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Madison, ME
2019 MFA, Visual Arts, Columbia University, New York, NY
2016 BA, Studio Art, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX
BA, Middle Eastern Studies, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS & SCREENINGS

- 2026 *Ornamental Drift*, 839 Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
2024 *Project Wall*, Moody Center for the Arts, Rice University, Houston, TX, curated by Frauke Josenhans
Circle, Frieson Black Cultural Center, University of Tennessee Knoxville, TN, curated by LaKeesha Lee
2023 *Pattern and Power*, Anya Tish Gallery, Houston, TX

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS, SCREENINGS, & BOOK RELEASES

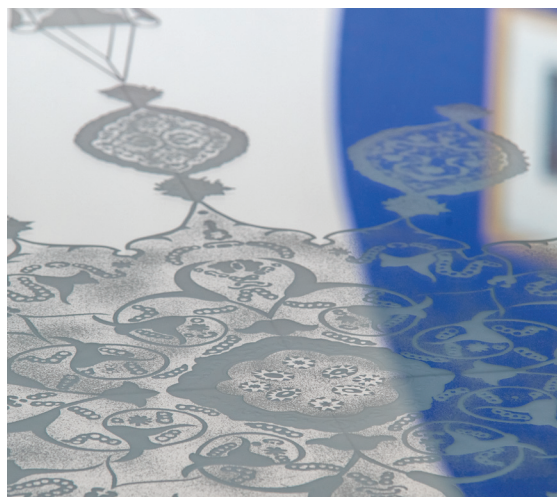
- 2025 *Visual Language: Vistas*, Subliminal Projects, Los Angeles, CA, curated by Coates & Scarry and Sara Lois
Fables and Labels, Haggerty Gallery, University of Dallas, Dallas, TX
2024 *Space City: Art in the Age of Artemis*, Asia Society Texas, Houston, TX, curated by Owen Duffy
2022 *One Flower | One Life*, Box 13 ArtSpace, Houston, TX
Syncretic: Religion and Ritual in Diaspora, Project Gallery, New York, NY, curated by Dante Migone-Ojeda
2021 *The Big Show*, Lawndale Art Center, Houston, Texas
Time Won't Tell, Project Gallery, New York, NY, curated by Farah Mohammad
2020 *Racism: The Other American Pandemic*, Eastern Connecticut State University, Windham, CT, curated by Yulia Wintner
2019 *Aesthetically Functional Only*, 1675 Broadway, New York, NY
Harlem Perspectives II, Faction Art Projects, New York, NY, curated by Leanne Stella and Richard Scarry
M.F.A. Thesis Exhibition, Wallach Gallery, New York, NY
The Happiness Curriculum, Eastern Connecticut State University, Windham, CT, curated by Yulia Wintner
2018 *42/18*, LeRoy Neiman Gallery, New York, NY, curated by Dante Migone-Ojeda
Feel That Other Day Running, Time Square Space, New York, NY
TEASE, Prentis Hall, New York, NY, curated by Asif Mian

SELECTED RESIDENCIES

- 2024 Artist in Residence at the University of Tennessee Knoxville, Knoxville, TN
2022 Asia Society Texas, Artist on Site Series III, Houston, TX

SELECTED PRESS

- 2024 Smith, Brandi. "We All Carry Stories with Us: New Moody Project Wall Installation Reflects Evolution Story Telling" *Rice News*, October 7, 2024.
2023 Shey, Brittain. "South Texas Meets South Asia in New Houston Art Exhibit" *Chron*, May 3, 2023.
"Artists on Site, Series 3" *Asia Society*, August 2022.
2021 "Interview with Ruhee Maknojia | Houston Asian American Archive" *Houston Asian American Archive*, Rice University, September 26, 2021.
"Ismaili Artists Featured at the New Spring Ismaili Jamatkhana in Greater Houston" *The Ismaili*, March 11, 2021.
2020 Dunne, Susan. "Racism: The Other American Pandemic" *Hartford Courant*, July 31, 2020.
Tikhonova, Yulia. "Racism: The Other American Pandemic" *Eastern Connecticut State University*, July 15, 2020.
2019 Cascone, Sarah. "Editors' Picks: 11 Things Not to Miss in New York's Art World This Week" *Artnet News*, February 4, 2019.
"Ruhee Maknojia and Elan Cadiz in Discussion" *Faction Art Projects*, February 9, 2019.
Abdel-Jelil, Anissa, and Sarah Hakani. "Light Upon Light" *Reconstructed Magazine*, May 2019.
Small, Zachary. "Columbia University MFA Students Gamble on Uncertainty in Thesis Exhibition" *Hyperallergic*, May 22, 2019.
Boucher, Molly. "Eastern Art Gallery Presents 'Happiness Curriculum'" *Eastern Connecticut State University*, October 23, 2019.
Knoblauch, Loring. "Photography Sees the Surface at Higher Pictures" *Collector Daily*, July 21, 2015.



Whispers of the Ardabil Carpet (detail), 2026
96 x 48" etched mirror on 120 x 72" platform



Ship of Theseus, 2026, Fiber, 12x16"

WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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This project is supported in part by an Elevate Grant of Austin Arts, Culture, Music, & Entertainment, the Texas Commission on the Arts, the Still Water Foundation and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

Women & Their Work is a visual and performing arts organization located in Austin that serves as a catalyst for new ideas in contemporary art. Since 1978, Women & Their Work has created significant opportunities for artists and for audiences to experience contemporary art through ambitious exhibitions, commissions of new work, performances and programs that inspire audiences of all ages.

We have actively developed the careers of more than 2,000 women artists, presenting 352 visual art exhibitions, 170 music, dance and theater events, 31 spoken word and literary performances, 16 film festivals and 968 programs & education workshops. Women & Their Work helps meet an important need in Texas providing exhibition and performance opportunities and helping to attract critical attention to the work produced here; it is the only organization of its kind in the region and one of the few organizations in the United States that dedicates itself to the work of women artists.

Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, The New York Times, ArtForum, and on National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts.

In 2020, the Smithsonian Archives of American Art acquired the archive of Women & Their Work ensuring that our entire history of the work of women artists and our website will be preserved in perpetuity. In 2024, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York acquired all 160 catalogs (digital and physical) produced by Women & Their Work to date. These publications, as well as all future catalogs, will be housed at their Thomas J. Watson Library, one of the largest art research libraries in the world.



Women & Their Work
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