

NUHA SAAD

An Archeology of the Suburbs



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100 NUHA SAAD HAS BUILT AN IMPRESSIVE FORTY-YEAR PRACTICE DEFENDING COLOUR. HER DEFENCE IS ONE THAT HAS NURTURED A FASCINATION WITH THE ORNAMENTAL AND THE ARCHITECTURAL, ONE REALISED IN LUMINOUS DOMESTIC-SCALE FORMS AND MONUMENT-SIZED INSTALLATION ART, OFFERING THE VIEWER A UNIQUE AND CELEBRATORY JOURNEY INTO THE "ARCHEOLOGY OF THE SUBURBS."

In 2007, I was living on Macleay Street in Potts Point, East Sydney. The vibe was cool, well-heeled with an edge of roughness as the precinct segued into Kings Cross. It was at this juncture in a stylish art deco apartment block that the James Dorahy Project Space was exhibiting talented, rising stars. The show: *Colouring the Landscape*. I'd wandered into the opening, had been trying to give up smoking and was anxiously looking for a fellow addict who would comply with a gold-coin offer of a cigarette swap. It was at this point that my eye caught a huge pixelated "canvas" of cuisine-coloured wooden blocks. The work, *Model Scape*, 2006, by Nuha Saad, stole the show. A playful adventure with the boundaries of abstraction, a sculptural painting embedded with the theories of colour field painting, an architectural model for a new kind of city that wasn't grey, it hinted at the potential ahead for this talented artist. The work was later bought by Artbank for its national collection.

Fifteen years on, I've given up smoking, and am standing in Saad's studio, still fascinated by her work – this time more painted sculpture than sculptural painting. It is surprising to see that her constructions can be made in such a small space: a very ordered, disciplined one. Neat piles of takeaway containers hold different pigments and line up alongside tins of Permaplastik theatre paints and a stack of timber cornices, turned wooden posts, and skirting boards – the raw wood that takes on her colour and becomes the grist for her enigmatic creations. On a bulletin board are pinned three postcards: a black-and-white photo of Greta Garbo, because, says Saad, "I'm reminded of her confidence and attitude," a picture of American sculptor Louise Nevelson with her monumental outdoor sculptures that Saad admires, and a coloured picture of Botticelli's *Primavera* (Spring), 1477–1482. "I'm attracted to the three graces, their diaphanous flowing dresses, and the textural effects of the tempera on panel – an effect I am trying to achieve in my current work," she says.



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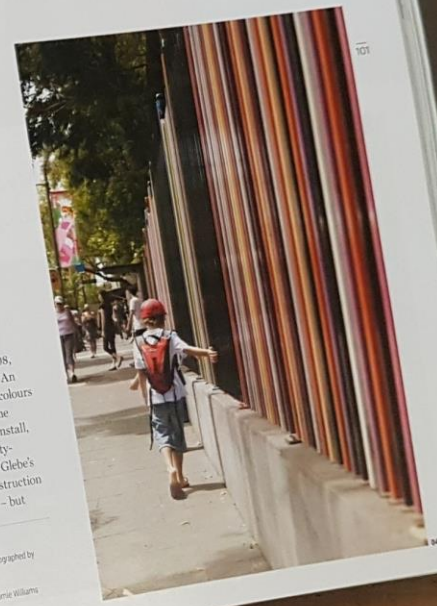


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Outside the studio, Saad's skill in creating those textural effects and her dynamic play with colour has led to more than twenty solo exhibitions, countless group shows, and a number of awards and public commissions which have earned her a slew of impressive nominations. In 2021, she was named a finalist in the Ravenswood Australian Women's Art Prize and in 2020 was a finalist in the Tom Bass Prize. Later this year she'll feature in Beechworth's arts festival, located north-east of Melbourne.

In 2020, Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and Arts Centre Curator Carrie Kibbler selected Saad's work for *The Home*, an exhibition showcasing resonant art and architecture. "As someone who comes from a family of builders and literally grew up in a hardware store," Kibbler says, "I feel deeply attracted to the way Saad works, taking the often-overlooked elements of suburban, civic, and industrial architecture and completely transforming them. The results are instantly uplifting while providing a poignant critique on our evolving urban environments."

Saad says her first major commission, *Skippey Skip Fence*, 2008, for the City of Sydney has to date been by far the most difficult. An inspiring reworking of the fence at Glebe Public School (in the colours of the old workers' cottages nearby) it encompassed labyrinthine negotiations with architects and council to design, fabricate, install, and, significantly, maintain its conceptual integrity. The eighty-metre-long, multicoloured metal fence, designed to enhance Glebe's vibrant contemporary culture, is fourteen years after its construction still an inclusive and dynamic celebration of colour and life – but



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- 01 *Model Scape*, 2006, synthetic polymer paint on wood, 184 x 234 x 16 cm
- 02 *Ornamental Fancies III*, 2020, acrylic on turned posts, 5 pieces, dimensions variable, photographed by Document
- 03 *Walking the Line IV*, 2022, acrylic on wood, 56 x 79 x 8 cm, photographed by Document
- 04 *Skippey Skip Fence*, 2008, fencing at Glebe Public School, Sydney, photographed by Jamie Williams



"My intention is to engage with this debate, to offer a counterpoint to this 'phobia'"



Saad had to fight hard the architects who wanted her to "... just put some comic characters on the fence; some Bart Simpsons." It was a fight that belies Saad's unassuming presence.

The clever creatrix has now docked up an impressive trajectory of big clients such as Transport for NSW and Meriton, always investigating the ways that application of colour can be conceptually and aesthetically aligned to positively transform the psyche. Royal Melbourne Hospital has a fine example of this having acquired Saad's *In Forty Pieces*, 2004, from the 2004 Helen Lempriere National Sculpture Award and now displaying it in their children's ward.

"I use colour formally, through the exploration of the traditional artist colour wheel with its defined primary, secondary, and tertiary hierarchy and corresponding complementary, harmonious, and oppositional relationships," Saad says, while adding that she also works "intuitively, through exploration and play in the studio where such rules about colour need not apply." Saad cites the British artist and critic David Batchelor, with his book *Chromophobia*, (Reaktion Books, 2000), but not before acknowledging the Pattern and Decoration movement of the mid-1970s. It reacted against the hefty male canon of abstraction that had gone before, and worked to revive interest in pattern and other hand, investigates the aversion to colour within Western art and culture. "He argues that colour has been degraded and associated with such terms as 'femininity' and 'Orientalism,' dismissed as superficial. My intention is to engage with this debate, to offer a counterpoint to this 'phobia.'"

Engagement, via what she describes as an "archeology of the suburbs," is how the artist privileges those inexorably disappearing decorative aspects of architecture, classical Greek and Roman features: balustrades, columns, and porticoes. Beneath this is Saad's nostalgia for her family's Lebanese origins and the buildings of Beirut, where ornamental layering is an architectural principle.

That skill in layering impresses James Makin, who has been seeking out quality artists for twenty years and is staging Saad's

inaugural exhibition with James Makin Gallery. "Her ambitious use of colour, totemic references, technical competency with a drop saw," he says, "are all terrific, and I just love the ways her sculptures can be viewed from multiple angles so that every part of her work is integral to her viewer's experience of it."

The show's title, *Razzle Dazzle Chroma*, comes from the artist's recent visit to an historic submarine base in Sydney. "It was military practice during World War II to camouflage submarines with bold geometric painted patterns. It 'dazzled' the enemy's perception of the ship's size and shape, making it a harder target to hit." Saad's works in the show, for example, *Ornamental Fancies III*, 2020, *All My Colours (XXIX)*, 2022, and *Walking the Line IV*, 2022, are types of decoys aimed at obscuring forms and confusing the viewer into engaging with their spatial features and vivid, sometimes muted, palettes. And mesmerise they do, their syrupy, sensual surfaces wonderful celebrations of the folly of colour.

"I love the way Polly Apfelbaum talks about colour in her huge-scale installations, the way she doesn't simply add colour to structure - colour is structure for her. And for me," says Saad, "colour is something I want to keep discovering ... perhaps my next curiosity will be with the colours of Beirut, a place I yearn to visit, to uncover the loss of cultural history, of cultural memory, and another layer of time." ■

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EXHIBITION

Razzle Dazzle Chroma
18 June - 3 July 2022
James Makin Gallery, Melbourne

- 06 Hudaib Park, Sydney, 2016, photographed by Simon Ward
- 08 Installation view of *The Home*, Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and Arts Centre, 29 August - 8 November 2020, photographed by Silverstar
- 07 *All My Colours (XXIX)*, 2022, 80x96 cm, wood, 15 x 65 x 15 cm, photographed by Decourent

Courtesy the artist, James Makin Gallery, Melbourne, and Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and Arts Centre, New South Wales