Duke Hall
Gallery of
Fine Art

Olivia Luke

Behnaz Ghasempour

Ver Ikeseh

2026

MFA Thesis Catalog

the ARTS at JMU®

SADAH
School of Art, Design, and Art History

JMU JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY®

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The Graduate School
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School of Art, Design, and Art History
MiKyoung Lee, Director

Duke Hall Gallery of Fine Art
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SADAH Graduate Program
Corinne Diop, Director

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Letter from the Director of the School of Art, Design, and Art History: MiKyoung Lee

The Duke Hall Gallery of Fine Arts and the School of Art, Design, and Art History at James Madison University proudly present the 2026 MFA Thesis Exhibition featuring the work of Behnaz Ghasempour, Olivia Luke, and Ver Ikeseh. This exhibition reflects the depth of artistic inquiry and experimentation fostered within our MFA program. Through distinct approaches to material, process, and audience engagement, each artist demonstrates the power of contemporary art to create reflection, dialogue, and connection.

Behnaz Ghasempour's layered drawings and stitched surfaces explore memory and personal experience through thoughtful material investigation. Olivia Luke expands drawing into immersive experiences of time, movement, and space, creating poetic moments of contemplation. Ver Ikeseh's interactive engagement with painting and process invites audiences into conversations centered on belonging and community.

I extend my sincere gratitude to Corinne Diop, Director of the MFA Program, the graduate faculty, Beth Hinderliter and the Duke Hall Gallery team, the dedicated SADAH staff, and Dean Ruben Graciani for their continued support and commitment to our students and programs. Congratulations to Behnaz Ghasempour, Olivia Luke, and Ver Ikeseh on this outstanding achievement and exhibition.

Letter from the Graduate Program Director: Corinne Diop

Congratulations to Behnaz Ghasempour, Olivia Luke, and Ver Ikeseh on this compelling thesis exhibition that marks the culmination of a rigorous three-year journey in our MFA program. While their practices take distinct material and conceptual forms, all three artists share a commitment to investigating the connections between individuals, systems, forces, and communities.

Behnaz Ghasempour works inward and outward simultaneously, using drawing, stitching, copper, and sound to examine vulnerability, memory, and the unseen bonds that shape human presence. Her layered self-portraits transform personal experience into a collective resonance that extends beyond national borders.

Olivia Luke approaches connection through movement and emergence, giving form to imperceptible forces such as gravity, time, and choice. Through drawing, sculpture, performance, and video, she invites viewers to give attention to processes of formation and dissolution that are continually unfolding.

Ver Ikeseh extends connection into the public realm through participatory murals grounded in spatial justice, pluralism, and lived experience. His work insists on visibility, access, and shared authorship as fundamental to belonging.

Together, these artists demonstrate how contemporary art can move between the intimate and the expansive, charting invisible, embodied, and shared connections. I extend special thanks to the thesis chairs and committee members whose thoughtful challenges and guidance shaped the final exhibitions and writings, and to the entire graduate faculty for their enduring mentorship and support. This exhibition marks not an endpoint but a moment of clarity within the ongoing practices of these three artists, and we look forward to seeing how their journeys continue to unfold!

Weaving Eigengrau

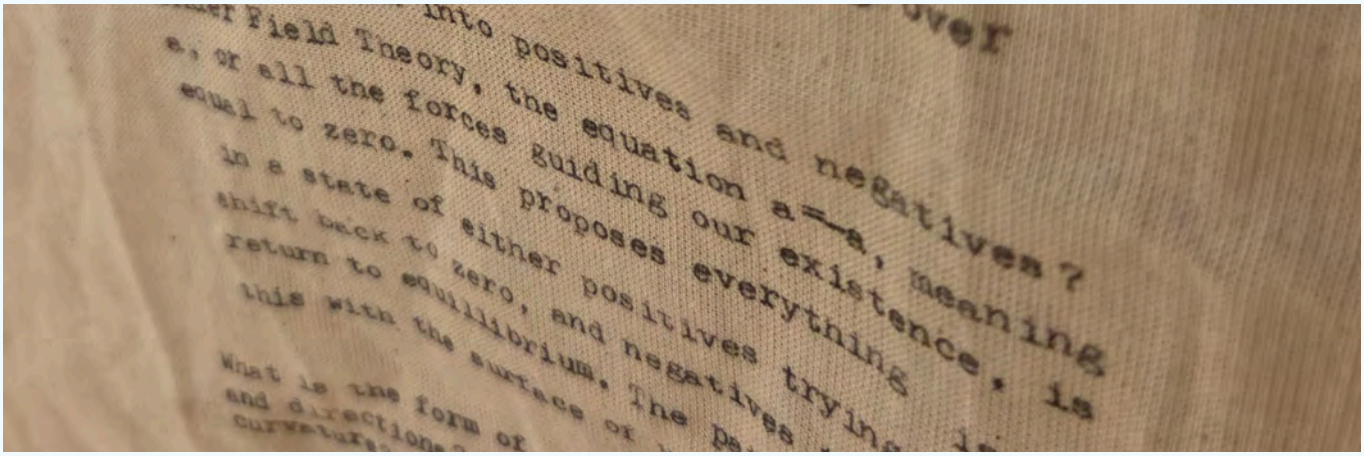
Olivia Luke

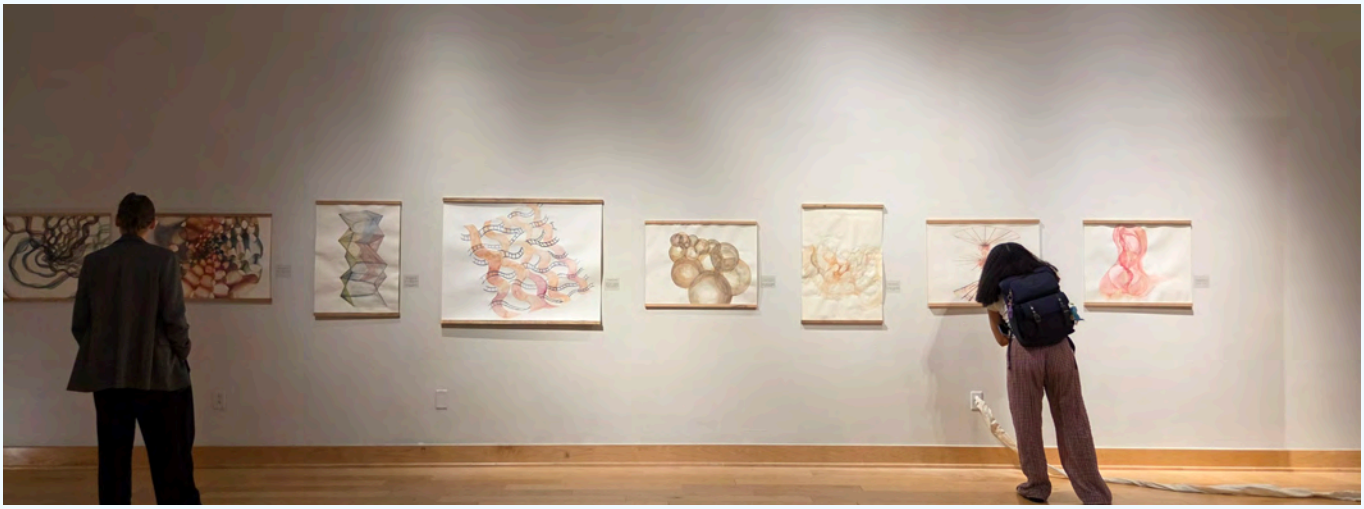
Weaving Eigengrau explores weaving as a material ritual and an inquiry about how reality is constructed and can be pulled apart. I'm driven by theories of reality: science, myth, and philosophy, and the common threads among them. Across systems of knowledge, reality is depicted in contradiction, and I seek to blur the lines between them. Within this convergence, weaving becomes a language for speculating about time and reality. At the center of this inquiry is eigengrau: the intrinsic gray perceived in the absence of light, often described as the color of shadow itself.

As a phenomenon defined by what it is not, neither illumination nor full darkness, eigengrau offers a primary conceptual framework for searching for, and speculating opportunities to tinker with eigengrau-like conditions: paths of movement, water, waves, and shadows. By bringing together the art of weaving and the intangible grey, I am trying to depict the friction between absence and presence, the ephemeral, and what cannot be articulated. In primarily watercolors, the paintings exist in a teetering state of emergence, not being fully resolved as formal objects.

The provisionality of the watercolor is a gesture of questioning the fixity of knowledge structures and reality, as well as speculating artistic reconstructions of its elements.

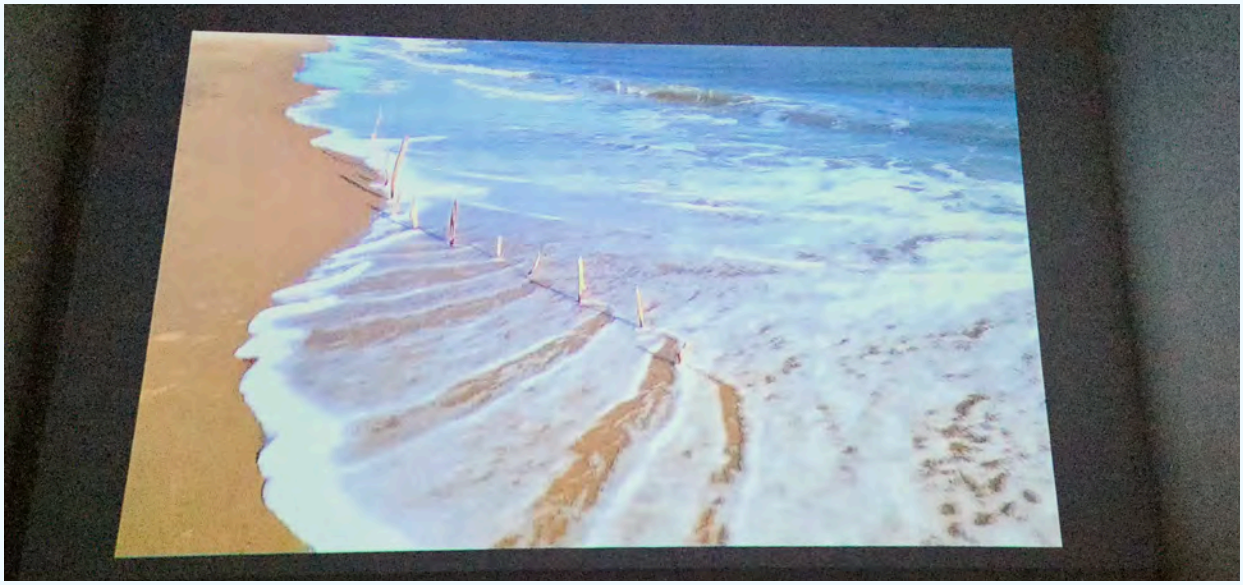
Thesis Committee:
Gregory Stewart, Chair
William Wightman
Robert Mertens



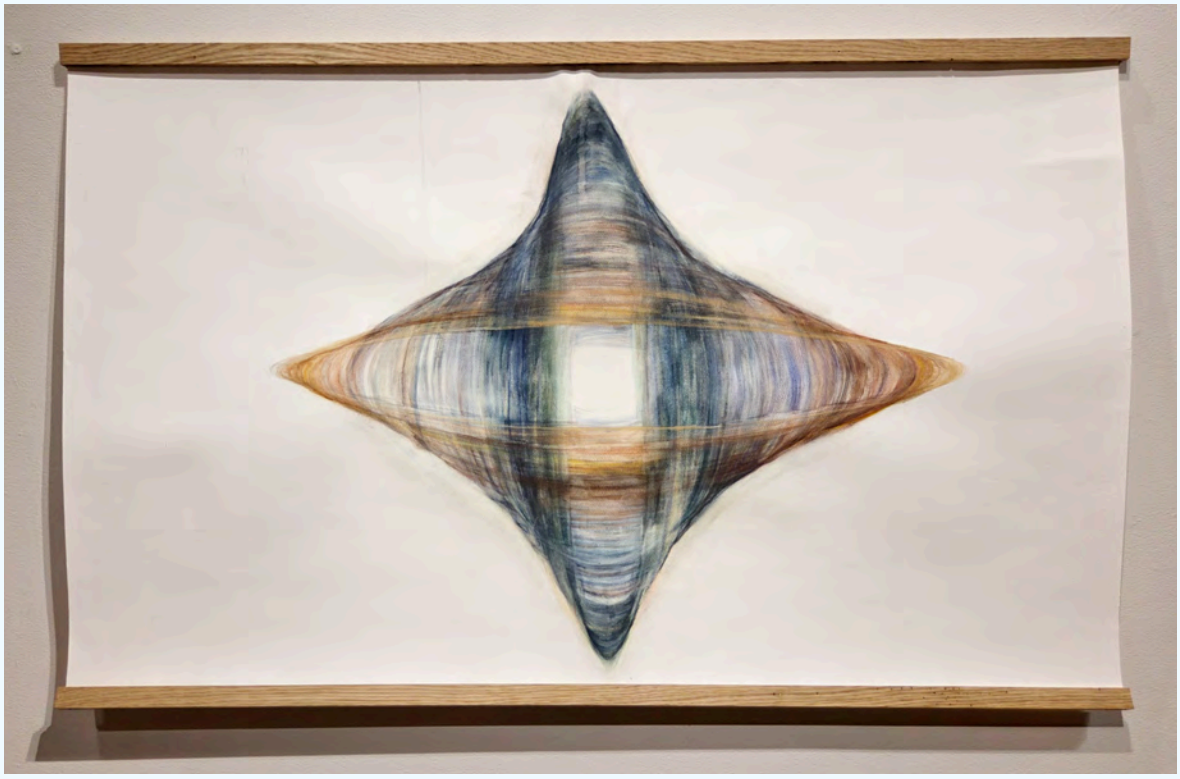


Olivia Luke 2026, Weaving Eigengrau 120×100×100 in, Installation, Mixed Media

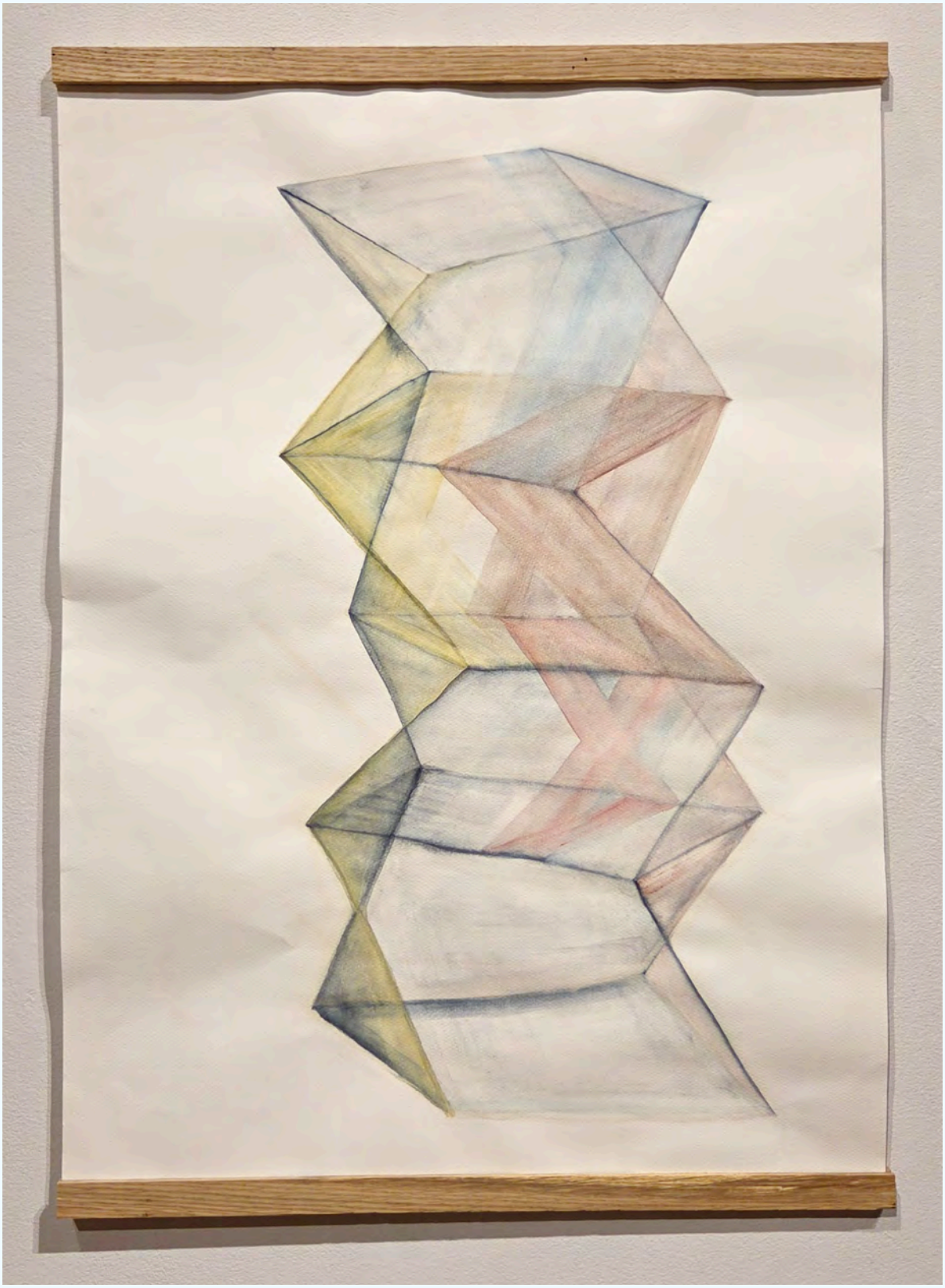
How can we embody waves?



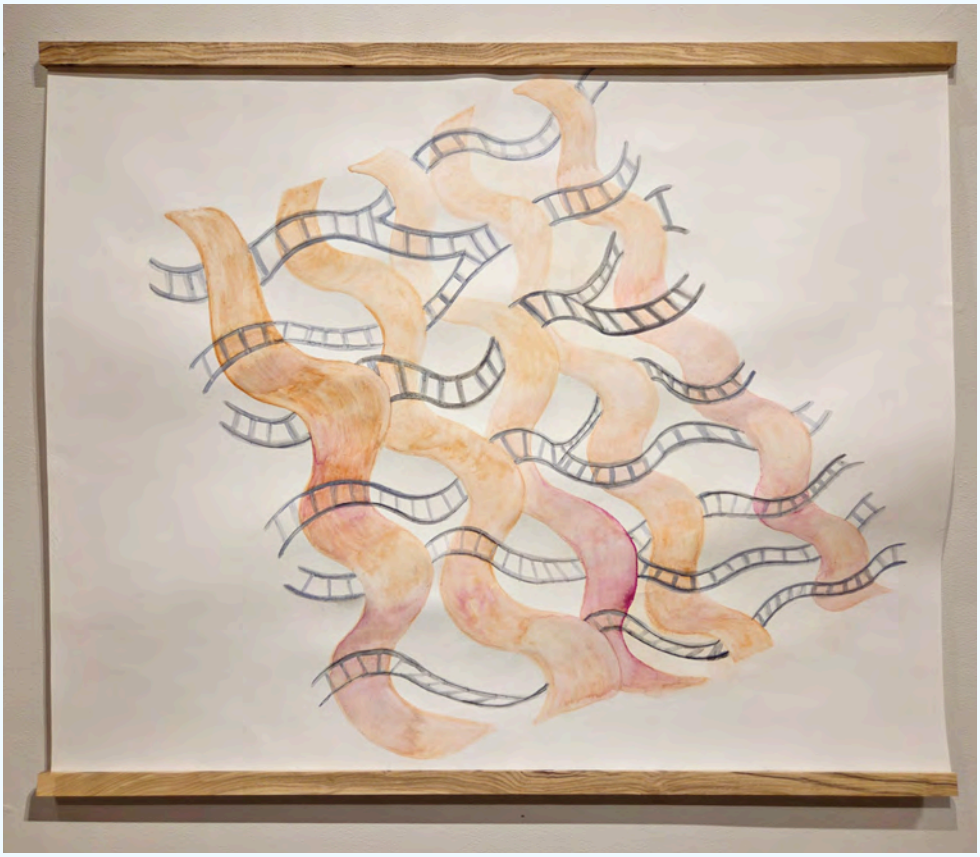
Olivia Luke, 2026, Weave/unweave: How can waves be woven? 120 in x 100 in, installation, projected



Can a shadow be held still?



What does a parallelepiped figure look like?



Can paths of movement be woven?

What are waves impressed upon?

(The) Invisible Threads

Behnaz Ghasempour

My work unveils invisible threads, those hidden bonds that weave identity, endurance, and collective memory. Through lines that each scream a human presence, threads that stitch generations together, oxidized copper that etches cultural resilience, and transparent layers that expose vulnerability, I reveal how others dwell within us.

In Iran's crowded streets, calm faces hid fear, grief, or tenderness beneath masks. The 2022 Women, Life, Freedom movement placed me among the youth risking their lives for dignity. Migration etched these presences into my body—family, friends, and fleeting encounters that shaped my identity and path.

Now my large-scale self-portraits are living vessels of this memory: my face not a fixed subject, but a landscape of intertwined lives. Each line becomes an individual woven into faces; shadows appear as others' invisible traces; transparent layers suggest openness; copper speaks of Iranian endurance; familial threads recall needlework — and sound fractures the silence.

Viewers are invited to move through immersive installations — where their position rearranges faces and shadows, transforming private feeling into collective experience.

This art makes empathy tangible, our invisible threads of connection, endurance, and humanity visible, palpable, unforgettable.

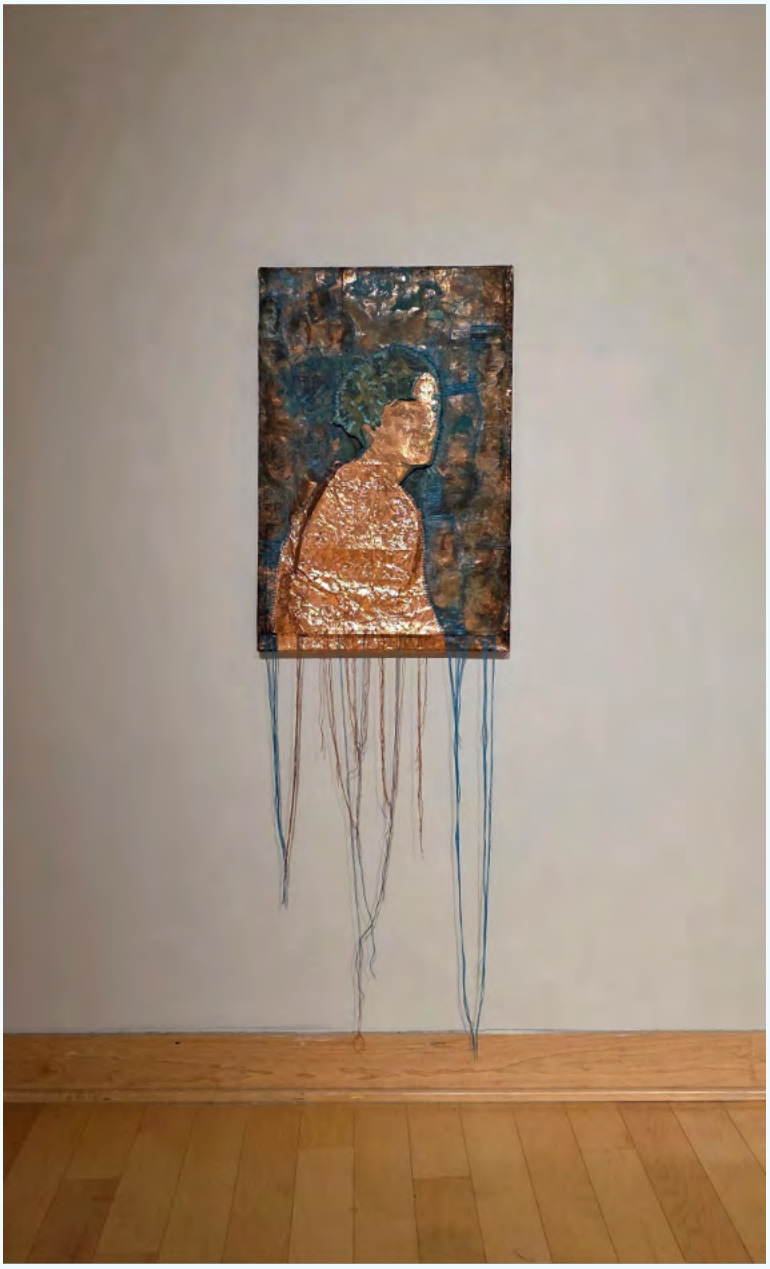
Thesis Committee:
Lisa Tubach, Chair
Greg Stewart
Mark Rooker

Behnaz Ghasempour, 2026, (The) Invisible Threads. 120×100×100 in, Installation, Mixed Media

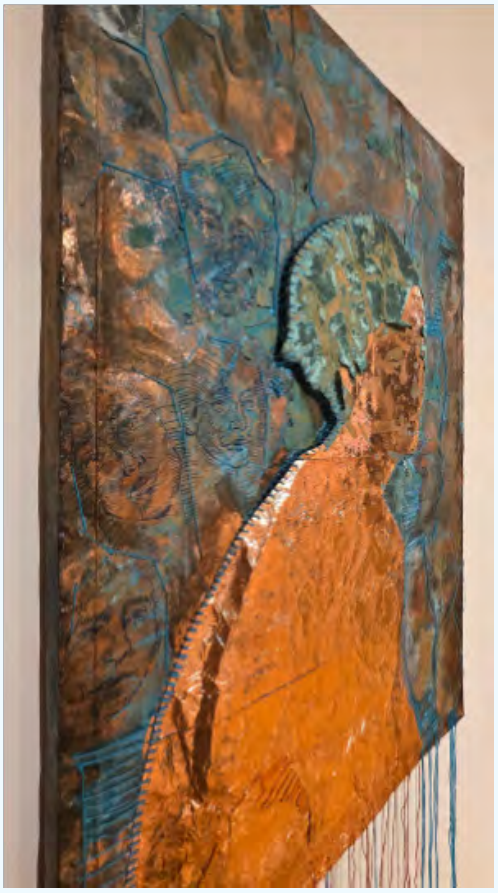
Invisible Threads

Invisible Threads
Behnaz Ghasempour

Behnaz Ghasempour, 2026, (The) Invisible Threads. 120×60 in, Mixed Media.



Behnaz Ghasempour, 2026, (The) Invisible Threads. 24×36 in, Mixed Media.



Behnaz Ghasempour, 2026, Patina of Persistence: What Remains, from the series Invisible Threads (in memory of January 2026). 85×62×20 in, Installation, Mixed Media.

Belonging

Ver Ikeseh

Belonging explores public art as a space for conversation, participation, and shared experience. Through murals, painting sessions, writing, and community interaction, the project turns painting from a personal act into a collective one shaped by many hands, voices, and stories. The project began with simple questions about space, connection, and who feels seen within public environments. Rather than treating the wall as a fixed surface, Belonging approaches it as a living space where people can gather, respond, leave traces of themselves, and become part of the work itself. The wall became both a surface and a meeting point.

Throughout the exhibition, students, faculty, staff, local artists, university leadership, friends, and community members were invited to participate directly in the making of the mural. Conversations, gestures, writings, marks, and layers slowly transformed the wall into a shared record of presence and interaction. Some people came to paint. Some came to talk. Some simply stayed.

The work also reflects on systems that shape movement, identity, visibility, and access. It considers how public art can create moments of openness within spaces that are often controlled, structured, or temporary. In this way, the mural becomes less about a finished image and more about the relationships created around it. Because the project centers participation and change, the mural wasn't meant to exist permanently. Its final paint-over gathering became part of the work itself. Community members returned once again, this time not to create the mural, but to slowly cover it together. What could have felt like an ending instead became a moment of reflection, release, celebration, and care. The act of painting over the mural symbolized impermanence, transition, and the idea that belonging is not something fixed. Even as the images disappeared, the conversations, memories, and connections remained.

The mural changed many times throughout its life, and its final transformation completed the work. Belonging exists not only in paint, but in the people, conversations, and moments carried beyond the gallery walls. Long after the mural disappears, the traces of participation remain in memory, movement, and connection.

Thesis Committee:
Corinne Diop, Chair
Nieko McDaniel
Sanjun Yoo

EXIT
adidas

Belonging
Ver Ikeseh

Belonging
Ver Ikeseh