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WORRY FLOWERS

Lenore Mizrachi Cohen

Many Jewish women living in the diaspora have two names: a Hebrew one, rarely used, mostly for religious function and ornament, and a “lingua franca” one, used in everyday speech and to present ourselves to the outside world. I grew up with three: Lenore, my lingua franca name; Leah, my Hebrew name; and, Lela’, my Arabic name, a tenuous connection to a matriarch long ago and far away, a nod to where my family came from. My Arabic name didn’t come up much, but our roots in Syria were an important theme in my family, members of a tight-knit community in Brooklyn in which everyone we knew was likewise Syrian, Egyptian or Lebanese on every branch of their family tree.

Beyond its more obvious outward cultural expressions in the culinary and liturgical realms, our Syrianness was integral to our worldview. Our attitudes toward religion, education and engagement with the wider world were all informed by and viewed through the lens of our Jewish Arabic culture. As I grew older and began to think more deeply about these cultural markers and what it means to be a member of an immigrant community in a modern world, one gaping hole was apparent in our cultural fabric. Why was it, I wondered, that aside from the most recent waves of immigrants to the community, none of the descendants of this long and proud history could utter a proper sentence in Arabic? It’s estimated that over 360 million people worldwide speak this language. Syrian Jews pride themselves on their 2,000-year culture, rooted in Aleppo and Damascus. Why, after a mere 100 years of resettlement in New York, were my peers and I left with little more than the barest snatches of slang, thrown around here and there like a cute little code between us?

We do use odd words of Arabic in our everyday speech; some of them I learned in Arabic before being introduced to their English equivalents, but I never registered the uniqueness of this experience until I looked outward at other communities. Cash was *floos*. Around here, instead of “enough already,” you’re more likely to hear an exasperated *hajeh*. *Ma fi*, there isn’t any. Kids aren’t cute, they’re *aboose*—literally, I want to kiss him! Foods, too: Bulgur is *burghol*, meatballs are *kibbe*, and so on, to the point that our Ashkenazi counterparts or schoolteachers needed mini-translations to fully understand us. One of my earliest school memories is of a teacher frowning when I answered a question, asking whether I wasn’t remembering or pronouncing something wrong, because I didn’t know I’d used a word in a different language. However, while people pride themselves on knowing this set of

words, they don't link this to any desire to speak Arabic as our grandparents did. It was a language I heard in full sentences only when the grownups didn't want me to understand.

The reasons for this contradiction are multifaceted, but it is mostly a result of the first generation—for me, that of my great-grandparents—wanting desperately to assimilate quickly and become American. The result is a consternating one for me, as an artist seeking to explore connections to my past. A recurrent theme in many of my artworks is the continued relevance of our heritage to our present-day lives. I'd always been drawn to Arabic script on purely aesthetic grounds, for its graceful curvature and its potential for creating seemingly endless landscapes out of words, by recombining them, arranging them, cutting them, scripting them—entire worlds made with the right flick of the pen. When I create using Arabic calligraphy, I'm at once making artwork and inching closer to my roots, learning new words and phrases as I go. It's language practice and a way to forge a connection of my own with my heritage.

In my parents' home, the library took pride of place. My father built our bookshelves himself, and for many years they followed us from house to house as we moved, always one of the first things to be set up. They held many standard modern-issue Judaica volumes, but also books salvaged from my great-grandfather's house, including old, rare books from Syria in Judeo-Arabic, the Hebrew-influenced Jewish language used by Jews throughout the Islamic lands, derived from Arabic but written in Hebrew characters. Some had handwritten notes in the margins by my great-grandfather, who wrote in Nus Qalam, a cursive Hebrew script used widely throughout the Middle East for writing both Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic. We also had some Arabic textbooks and workbooks from the Arabic courses my father took in college, in a similar attempt to mine to better understand his predecessors. These books were a natural and familiar part of my surroundings, which I took for granted, like the Arabic tunes we sing around our Shabbat tables.

My father, a businessman and community rabbi, is also a *sofer Stam*, a scribe of traditional Hebrew texts used in ritual objects like *mezuzot* and *megillot*, and he aimed to complete at least one Scroll of Esther each year. His calligraphy tools were usually set out on a table in the dining room, and I liked to watch him form the letters with a *kolmos*, the reed pen used by Syrian Jews, like their Muslim counterparts, in contrast to the feather nib favored by European Jews. He tried to teach me a few times, but I usually lost interest pretty quickly, daunted both by the box-like rigidity of the Hebrew characters and by the difficulty of scripting with a reed pen, which, as a child, I lacked the focus and discipline to master.

When I decided as an adult to take a deep dive into Arabic calligraphy, I first spent many hours practicing via online tutorials. My first in-person lessons were with a calligrapher in northern Israel, during my participation in a residency program via the Jerusalem Biennale. A few years later, back home in New York, I studied with a talented Dubai-based artist then visiting Manhattan, Majid Alyousef. I am grateful to him and to Wissam Shawkat, true masters of the medium, with whom I connected



Figure 1. *Possessions*. 2019. Cut paper, collage and digital techniques on backlit lightbox film. 24" x 36". © Lenore Mizrahi Cohen.



Figure 2. *Distraction*. 2019. Cut paper, collage and digital techniques on backlit lightbox film. 24" x 36", 2019. © Lenore Mizrahi Cohen.

via Instagram; they continue to support my training and critique my work remotely, providing examples and corrections when needed. I wouldn't have come as far as I have in my calligraphy work if not for these modern conduits, along with the huge number of practice hours that this art demands.

Eventually I came to include some Hebrew in my works as well, circling back to my father, who was happy to sit down with me again and give me proper instruction in Hebrew calligraphy. Both languages take turns featuring prominently in my work, and they sometimes appear together. When it's appropriate to the concept I'm exploring, I use Hebrew, as I did in my series contrasting modern obsessions with ancient values, viewed through verses in the Book of Ecclesiastes. The default language for my creative work, however, is Arabic, as simply using it is an act of learning and connection.

Some of my series focus more on the calligraphy itself, while others use it as a means to an end. As a conceptual artist, I choose the best tools at my disposal to express a concept visually—usually a combination of calligraphy, cut paper, drawing, painting and sewing. I've also done murals on the street in Jerusalem and New York, using Arabic phrases.



Figure 3: *They Put the Dog's Tail in a Vice for 40 years. It Emerged Curved.* Part of a path of 22 murals incorporating traditional Arabic sayings with imagery, leading from the Beita Gallery to the Ades Synagogue in Jerusalem. Created during a residency with ArtBnb Jerusalem. © Lenore Mizrachi Cohen.

The reactions I get are mixed. At first, my family and friends couldn't understand why I'd bother: "Nobody wants to see artwork with Arabic in it!" They apparently didn't think our own history was particularly interesting or worth exploring; it just *was*. Others were critical because, unfortunately, Arabic is perceived today as a language used primarily by an enemy—even though it was spoken by our own grandparents. Once, in Jerusalem, as I was painting a mural outdoors, a woman in the street—clearly, by her accent, of a similar heritage to mine—started yelling at me. She assumed I was writing anti-Jewish messages. A fellow passerby asked her, *ve'at, mah*—so what are you? Why are you opposed to an expression of something that you yourself embody?

While participating in the Artbnb residency program in Jerusalem, I created a pathway of street art murals leading from my hosting gallery, Beita, to the Syrian Synagogue, Ades, in the Nachlaot neighborhood, each presenting Arabic phrases used in our community back when everyone still spoke the language. When I first bounced this idea off fellow Syrian Jews in Israel, they were strongly opposed; Arabic inscriptions on Jerusalem walls, they insisted, would immediately be seen as a call to harm Jews. To me, though, it is a shame that the language has become so politicized, in the context, that people feel they must deny their own heritage to avoid offending those who don't understand it. Preferring to help bring back some sort of comfort level with this aspect of Jewishness, I went ahead and created the murals. Over 50% of Israelis are immigrants from Arabic-speaking countries; if their heritage is not to be completely effaced, it needs some affirmation in public spaces! So many generations of Jews spoke and wrote in Arabic; why should mine be the first that can't?

On other occasions, responses to my work have been supportive and even appreciative. In both Israel and New York, where the mainstream Jewish narrative tends to skirt this element of Jewish experience, I've had immigrants from Arabic-speaking countries thank me as their faces light up in recognition. On viewing my works in a public forum, they feel seen. As part of the 2021 Jerusalem Biennale, I curated a show called *Maktoub* at the Jerusalem Theatre, presenting works by Israeli and UAE-based calligraphers. I watched a smile come over the features of a Jew from Tunisia as he viewed one of my works, a flower constructed out of a calligraphic rendering of the word *wata'ah*, pressure. He was no doubt remembering some personal connection to the word, but he appreciated being able to dialogue with me about its many synonyms and how apropos it is in so many situations.

Another time, I brought together work by Jewish artists from around the world to look back at their histories of forced migration. Some Egyptian visitors to the show were very excited to see the synagogue from their hometown of Alexandria represented front and center in a large painting by artist Camille Fox, who was expelled with her family from Egypt. The events of the mid-twentieth century have complicated the Jewish relationship to Arabic language and culture, making any work done in it a lightning rod for discussion of the Israeli-Arab conflict. For



Figure 4. *Weight / Stress / Pressure (wata'ah)* / 2021. وطأة. Spray paint on paper. © Lenore Mizrachi Cohen.

me, though, it is simply a matter of creating what feels natural to me, because it's a part of who I am. It is never consciously political, though I suppose there may be something political in my attempt to remind people that Jewish Arab culture goes back a long way. There's a lot more to this relationship than current events.

I first conceived of the series *Worry Flowers* during a Covid lockdown. I had recently moved from New York City to Jerusalem with my husband and children and was finally beginning to feel settled. For the first time in years, my children were all in school, and I had found a perfect space to work, a very supportive and inspiring women artists' collective called Studio of Her Own. Maybe now life could get back to normal; maybe, for the first time in several years, I could dive fully into my art practice. With an affordable studio and creative hub only ten minutes from my house, I felt that I could realistically integrate my artistic life into my roles as a traditional religious spouse and mother—always my greatest challenge, especially in New York. It felt like a dream come true! Then Covid and its world-upending

consequences ensued. I was also expecting our third child at the time. Events, visits and operations at the studio shut down, and everyone was home and needing me, all day, every day. There were many days when it all felt like too much. On the few occasions when I did manage to carve out some studio time, meditating on my “worry flowers” and meticulously cutting each of them by hand gave me a path forward, as I faced and considered each issue they represent.

This series and its planned future iterations marry form and function to succinctly give visual expression to the concepts imbuing each flower. It’s about the human tendency to gather our problems around us and hold them close. We often use our problems as a crutch and begin to identify with them, as if they were something beautiful and worth saving, instead of letting them go. The overall effect of my flowers is bright and attractive, yet their twisted metal stems have barbs and sharp, raw thorns.

Each flower in the series is constructed of a single repeated word in Arabic, chosen because it represents a specific worry, burden or problem. The two-dimensional hand-scripted work is cut meticulously with a knife to produce a three-dimensional cut piece of paper, which I mold with wire to form stems and leaves. The wire and its ends are intentionally left with raw edges, shaped to be as spindly as possible as they wind their way down a clear glass vase. The finished work is twisted, spiny and poking, a visual reminder of the danger to us of becoming our worries or letting them overtake us. The gentle balance between beauty and pain, benefit and obstacle, is encapsulated in the flowers’ brightly colored, delicate appearance. Sinister though they may be, they beg to be looked at and enjoyed.

The first vase and set of hand-cut flowers are now in a private collection. My vision for this series is to continue adding new words and designs, to be used in creating an immersive installation of thousands of cut and shaped flowers, engulfing the walls, ceiling and floor of an entire room, leaving only a small pathway for viewers to walk through. We are more than our fears, and this creeping growth of flora is intended to warn of what happens if we allow ourselves to be taken over by them.

As I face the challenges of my life as an artist and mother, the series grows and expands. Arabic is a language of many layers; words can have double or triple meanings, and I intentionally choose ones that beg for consideration from multiple angles. The words’ connotations aren’t necessarily positive, but I view this project as an honest way to document and face life’s difficulties.

My family has recently moved back to New York. I will always love Israel, but we’ve come to appreciate that the best place for us is with our extended family. There’s a tremendous value to communal life, which we’ve come to appreciate in new ways and to recognize that it can’t be transplanted or replaced. Accepting this, setting up our life anew for the second time in three years, hoping to achieve a measure of stability—it isn’t easy. The *Worry Flowers* are a way for me to channel these struggles creatively as I work patiently to overcome them.

Below is a selection of flowers in the *Worry Flowers* series, with a look into the circumstances that inspired me to include them.



Figure 5. *Bouquet of Burdens*. 2022. Mixed media (cut paper, calligraphy, spray paint, wire). © Lenore Mizrachi Cohen.



Figure 6. *Bouquet of Burdens*, detail. © Lenore Mizrahi Cohen

Pregnancy / Burden / حمل

One of my favorites. The multiple meanings of the Arabic word complement each other and enhance our understanding. The physical burden that constantly carrying a growing child creates is accompanied by mental apprehension about the burdens to come. I love my children dearly, and in some ways they are the best thing to happen to my art career; before I had them, I had lots of time, but I lacked the focus, sense of purpose and experiences to draw upon that come with being a parent. Nevertheless,

parenting a baby undeniably takes many, many hours of time. Pregnant during a lockdown, with everyone home from school and work and depending on me in ways I hadn't anticipated, I worried about the next phase and how we'd do all of this plus a newborn. Not only did all that make the word an obvious addition to the list, but I liked the way the ending letter, the Arabic *lam*, formed a natural flower petal.

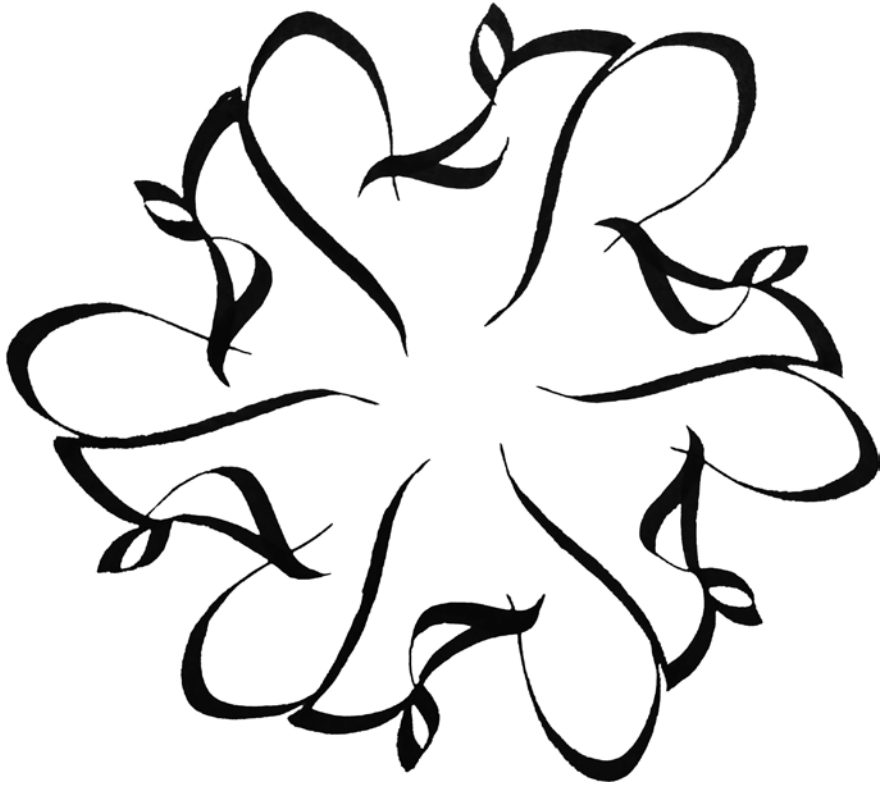


Figure 7. *Pregnancy / Burden (Hemel)* / 2020. حمل. Ink on paper. © Lenore Mizrachi Cohen.

Love / حب

Some words in this series have overtly positive connotations, but, on a deeper level, words like *love*, *hope* and *caring* also carry heavy burdens. If you care about someone and love them deeply, you are also constantly concerned about their welfare, even if it's a burden you happily take up. My life's privilege is to provide for my family members' wellbeing and to have them in my life at all, but, once shouldered, this is a burden that can't be put down. If, despite your best efforts, a loved one

is struggling or failing, you don't get to just stop caring; you struggle and suffer through it along with them. Watching my family try to adjust to a new country while forced to stay indoors for months felt like a double hurt. I had my own problems, but I felt theirs at least as deeply. Love, caring and hope spur us on even as they present us with an unending source of worry.

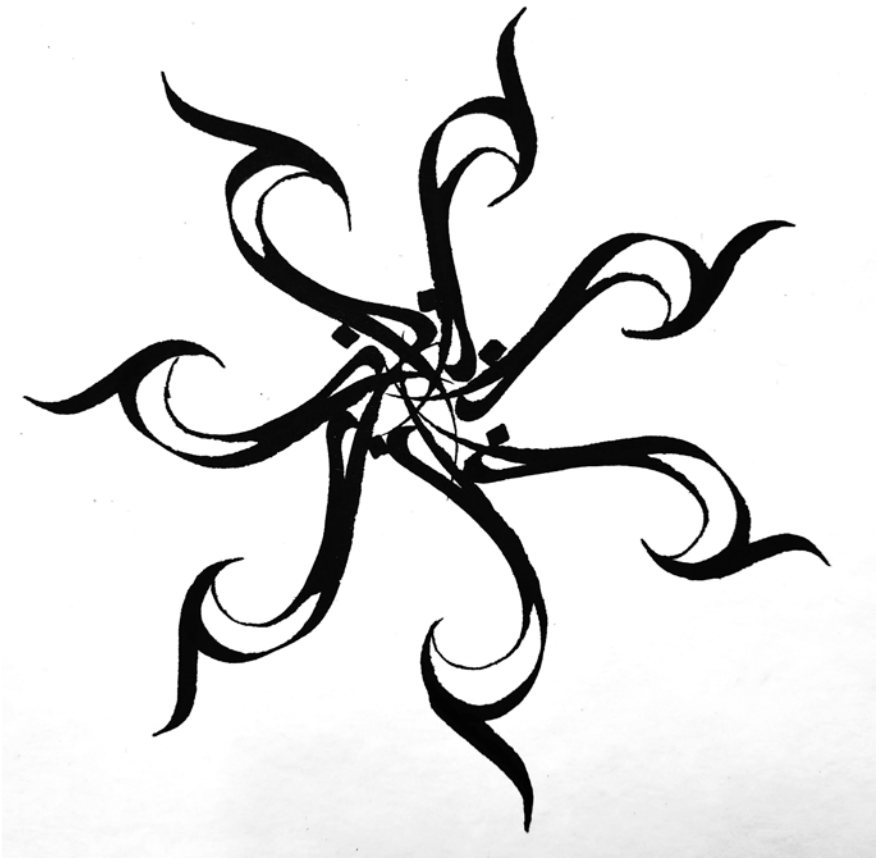


Figure 8. *Love / (hib) / حب*. Ink on paper. 2021. © Lenore Mizrachi Cohen.

Distraction / Diversion / لهو

A major theme in any working mother's life is distraction. I need to focus on my work, but there are groceries to buy, laundry to do, schedules to coordinate, lists to make, remembering doctors' appointments, preparing for holidays; the list goes on. Add to this wanting to be a present and involved parent: How about a little fun and relaxing with these little people I'm working so hard to keep alive? It's a

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wonder we don't give up every day. And then there's all the *noticing*: It's not only doing things (for which I can enlist a spouse's help); it's keeping a grip on what we need to get done. In the context of my family's welfare, all of this is important, and someone's got to do it. In the context of my art practice—it's a huge distraction! This word, too, has a positive connotation. I chose it because, burdensome as all these distractions can be, I have a symbiotic relationship with them. I like being involved with my family; I like the sense of purpose I derive from everything I do for them, even as it drives me nuts. It's easy to backslide into routines, putting myself and my own needs and goals aside. It's a struggle not to lose myself, whether or not I'm enjoying the diversions. If I drop the ball, I worry, I'll be subsumed and, in a way, erased.



Figure 9. *Distraction / Diversion (lahw'a) / لاهو*. Ink on paper. 2021. © Lenore Mizrachi Cohen.

Caring / نهتم

I care about my family, and also about my career and art practice. I care about the impact I may or may not have on the world while I'm in it; I care whether my work is successful; I care whether I accomplish my goals. As it turns out, creating both art and people takes up a lot of time. At some point in my mothering journey, I realized that I'd have it a lot easier if I just *didn't care*; if I could focus on one role instead of splitting myself constantly into two or three. Modern feminism encouraged me to have it all, without mentioning how very, very tiring that can be. Having invested so much energy and emotion in the field I care about and had small instances of success, I can't just switch off caring about it, but I also want to put my best into being a good spouse, raising my children and being a role model. It might be better if I could let something go, but I can't! I'll probably always feel pulled in opposite ways.



Figure 10. *Caring (nahtam) / نهتم*. Ink on paper. 2022. © Lenore Mizrachi Cohen.

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Them / Worry / Concern / هم

Ah, the proverbial “They.” A self-actualized adult should be able to look past the perceptions and concerns of others, but, though I may try to make choices in life and spend my time based on what I need, I exist within a community, and my family does, too. I love my community and friends, and the choices I make will affect the comfort of my family’s existence in their midst, as would be true of any community I might join. There will always be a tension between what I want and what I need to do for Them.

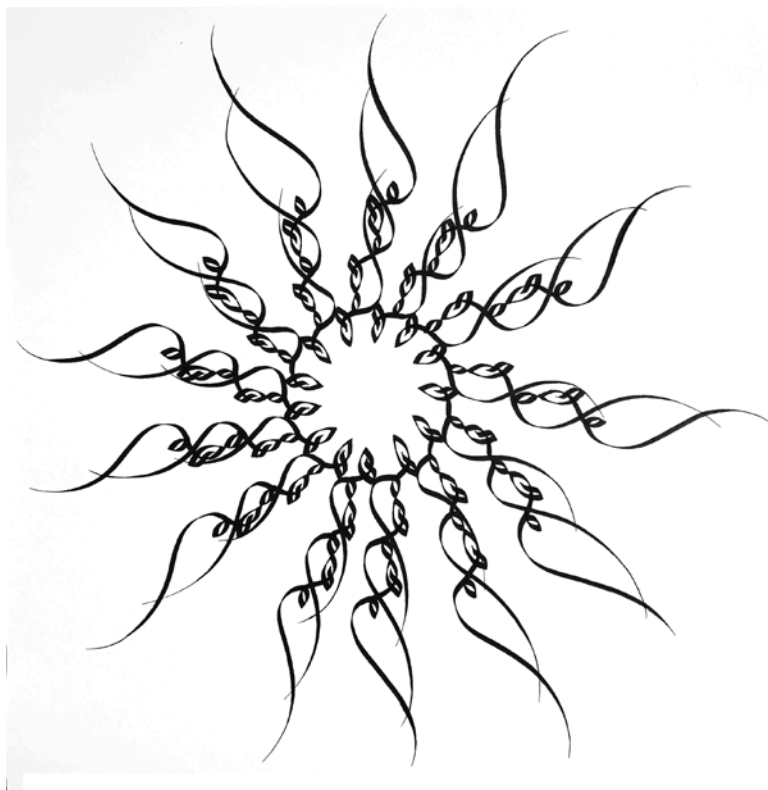


Figure 11. *Them / Worry / Concern (houm) / هم*. Ink on paper. 2020.

Doubt / شك

In both my mothering and my career, my actions are based on instinct. There isn’t an instruction manual, so I do my best, but there will always be doubts. Did I make the right call? Did I dedicate my time to the wrong things? Did I do irreparable damage

in taking that stand? Will this or that work out? I did a whole series (in English!) on the ever-present swirl of doubts that keep us up at night with their eternal ambiguity. Doubt is a burden that will be with me always, in varying degrees or forms. I don't know if it's possible for me ever to let it go.

While my artwork is inspired by the past, I'm forever looking forward and contemplating my next big project. I've learned to trust my tested process, which is to speak about my vision to as many people as possible, as often as possible, until the idea reaches the right people to facilitate its becoming a reality. This helped me curate and produce two large-scale international shows, *Maktoub* and *Homelands*, of works by artists who also create based on their Middle Eastern heritage. For now, I'm narrowing the focus inward to realize the full potential of these flowers in an immersive installation. I welcome comments, connections and requests for studio visits. In the meantime, I'll be growing my garden.



Figure 12. *Doubt / (shakh) / شك*. Ink on paper. 2022. © Lenore Mizrachi Cohen.

Lenore Mizrachi Cohen

Lenore Mizrachi Cohen is a conceptual artist who uses her Syrian heritage as a lens through which to examine cultural shift and change. Her works have been exhibited, published and collected internationally. Her series “Worry Flowers” is currently on display at the Jewish Museum of Lecce, Italy. She currently lives in New York with her husband and three children. To learn more about Lenore’s work and curatorial projects or to schedule a studio visit, please visit www.lenorecohen.com.