

stitch by stitch

jordan nassar's idyllic
landscapes explore culture,
history and belonging.

WORDS SHIRLEY WANG

As a kid, artist Jordan Nassar was always playing with crafts; he loved origami, then crocheting and weaving. He grew up surrounded by Palestinian embroidery in his home in New York's Upper West Side, where delicate art adorned pillows and walls. There, Jordan could connect to his Palestinian heritage. His identity outside of those walls, however, was much more complicated. His neighbourhood was predominantly pro-Israel. "I felt very conflicted about it," he says. "I was young and I didn't know who to believe and just felt like, 'OK, I don't want to think about it.' That was the default for many years."

After graduating from university, he began to explore more pro-Palestinian perspectives while travelling in Berlin. "I felt like Berlin was a safer place to discuss these things," he says. "Whereas in New York, I was more familiar with the pitfalls of this conversation that I am immediately oversensitive to it." It was in Berlin that Jordan met his Israeli boyfriend, Amir Guberstein, who is now his husband. The pair visited Israel together to meet Amir's family. "It was a completely new experience for me and definitely catalysed this need to be like, 'OK, where do I fit into this situation? What does it mean for me to be half Palestinian? What does it mean for me to be Christian Palestinian rather than Muslim?'"

Around this time, Jordan began to explore making art, to help him navigate these questions around identity. However, he stays clear of the term "political" when speaking about his work. "I don't consider my work political," he explains. "There's a political situation that is connected to the topic, but what I strive for with my work is more to share the human experience with other human beings. And to communicate feelings and beautiful things about life with others – not necessarily good things, either, but even pain can be beautiful." Jordan spent these first few years "homeschooling art school" – conceptualising ideas and learning how to make them into visual projects. Jordan's canvases are based on Palestinian tatreez cross-stitch embroidery; he first copied the embroidery patterns from books, then adapted them and developed his own versions. "It's traditional yet has my own spin on it. I can create this visual language."

Jordan's idyllic landscapes of rolling hills and layered mountains are not specific to any locations. A part of them expresses the diasporic Palestinian experience, of longing and inherited nostalgia for the mystical homeland, but Jordan wants people to experience their own truths and memories while viewing his work. "That same feeling of longing for this place and imagining the beauty of this place. You obviously don't have to be Palestinian," he says. "It doesn't have to be about Palestine specifically. It's about a human being, having these feelings of dreaming of somewhere, which anyone can relate to." Jordan strives to create universal and timeless pieces that don't require any context to explain the art. Instead, the final piece stands the test of time, so that even in 100 years, anyone would be able to appreciate it.

Jordan has two distinct creative processes. The first is attending to the pattern design – he will spot a flower on a pillow, for example, and figure out how to include it on his canvas. He'll sketch the flower, digitise it and "copy and paste" it over and over again into a pattern. Then he begins sketching the landscape and dreaming up colours and shapes. The second part has to do with stitching, and basically, doing that all day. "The planning process is relatively quick and then the execution is very long," he explains. Jordan used to embroider every piece himself, but in the past few years, he's also begun collaborating with a group of women in the West Bank. He sends them patterns to embroider, and their work becomes the frames or backdrops for his own embroidery on top. "I can spend months making just one piece," he says.

As he stitches each thread, Jordan feels that he is participating in an important cultural practice that connects him to his Palestinian background. More recently, he has begun exploring other crafts from Arab, Palestinian and Levantine traditions. Jordan hopes to find thoughtful collaborators across the world to teach him these skills. "The exciting thing is that I feel like I'm going to keep doing many different mediums over the years to come," he says. "I just really like learning how to do these things with my hands. I'm just a busy body." ❀

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