

How do second-generation artists mobilise cultural objects—particularly textiles—to articulate nostalgia and inherited identity, and give voice to the experiences of the first generation? How do decorative textiles transmit heritage and become objects of intergenerational connection for diasporic artists?

This essay seeks to argue how the ‘atmosphere’ and aesthetic of decorative objects such as textiles are used by second generation diaspora artists to represent their cultural heritage and the ‘voice’ of their parents. ZS: [...] I guess the first generation didn’t want to speak about their experiences as they were still fresh and therefore too painful (McGonagle and Sedira, 2006, p. 627)

Second-generation diaspora artists Andrew Mania and Zineb Sedira engage with patterned and decorative objects—particularly textiles—not as aesthetic accessories but as material archives through which identity, memory, and intergenerational voice are represented. Both Sedira and Mania’s parents were affected by war in their home countries. Sedira’s parents moved from Algeria to France due to the war of Independence and Mania’s mother moved from Poland to India during the Nazi invasion. This essay aims to address how textile objects have been used by Sedira and Mania to trace the lives and experiences of their parents and to articulate the connection to their heritage and cultural belonging.

Unlike:

What became clear was that it wasn’t the subjects that were interesting to me, but the repetition, the redundancy, the predictability of these domestic backdrops.” (Berens, S. and Tumlr, J. 2013 p. 77)

Michelle Grabner argues “all forms are political” and “re-articulating vernacular patterns [shift] the unobserved into critical sight” (Cohan, 2021). In this sense, textiles operate as visual languages through which artists reclaim cultural histories and form tangible relationships to their heritage.

Andrew Mania – Pattern and Language

Andrew Mania is a British born, second-generation Polish artist based in Bristol. Mania’s work has been exhibited alongside members of the Pattern and Decoration movement within the context of how (decorative) pattern can be “understood as a carrier of history and emotion”

(APT Gallery & Studios, 2026). His work references the journey of his mother's migration from Poland to India as a refugee during the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939. Mania creates physical assemblages of textiles and painted portraits; a nostalgic recreation of experiences his mother may have encountered during her migration to India.

The National Archive (2025, p5) documents the journey of Polish refugees who "were first moved to Iran and placed in makeshift camps run by the Middle East Refugee and Relief Administration. Mania's mother was amongst a group of refugees who were moved out of Iran, to India. The journey through Turkey, Iraq and Iran were along the retired Silk Road, a merchant trade route for textiles and spices. The commerce of the Silk Road (historically) brought "people and cultures into contact and facilitated exchanges between them" (UNESCO, 2025, para 5). Andrew Mania's work reflects and brings into materiality the cross encounters of culture, tracing his mother's experience during her migration. Andrew Mania's exploration of nostalgia through portraiture drawing are developed within "assemblages set on decorative backgrounds such as hanging printed fabrics" (Island, 2018) found in flea markets in a nostalgic sense "compounds past and present, authentic and imaginary" (Herbert, 2006).

Christou and King's reference to Blunt and Dowling (2006, p. 199) cogently point out, the lived experiences and spatial imaginaries of people living in diaspora revolve around specific places and landscapes; the relationship between home and homeland; and the intersections of home, migration, memory, identity and belonging." (Christou, A. and King, R., 2010, p. 638)

How can meaning be drawn out of these works? Are the patterns smaller stories within the work or part of wider themed ideas and motifs that connect across multiple works? And how can we think of these questions in relation to [Michelle Grabner](#)'s motivation for her pattern work where she says 'that [since] all forms are political, [she has] committed [herself] to re-articulating vernacular patterns in order to shift the unobserved into critical sight.' (Melsom and Askheim, 2020)

"His mother is Polish and arrived in England via India. His German father was captured as a paratrooper and brought to England as a prisoner of war. The artist's up-bringing was filled with tales of his parents' extraordinarily turbulent experiences and these feed into the complex personal allegories that he creates in his work." (Chisendale, 2005)

O'Reilly's review of Mania's work points out "the accumulation of goods and information is practically unstoppable [...] Curios and car boot tat are subject to a temporal split: we have

knowledge of their usage coupled with the mystery of their provenance.” O’Reilly ‘s Andrew Mania uses this familiar/unfamiliar duality of another’s cast-offs, mining the universal appeal of old stuff and appropriating the status of the antique. (2002, p.33)

Herbert describes Mania’s work as “an array of losses and dubieties against an attempt at symbolic restitution, powered primarily by nostalgia for a past only partly illuminated; it also appears to serve notice of his desire to tangle with history and the treachery of personal and collective memory” (2006). This observation chimes with Pechurina, who observes that “diasporic objects are understood as objects that are detached from their place of origin; through their subsequent use and ownership they are invested with new sets of meanings.” (2020, p671)

His works have been described with the Portuguese term ‘Saudade’ (Martin, S., 2016) a word with no English equivalent, meaning a deep emotional state of nostalgic or profound melancholic longing for an absent something or someone beloved. (Island, 2018)

Saudade is a cultural concept expressing a profound sense of longing, nostalgia, or melancholy associated with absence, loss, or unattainable experiences. [...] While sometimes described as untranslatable, its uniqueness reflects deep historical and cultural embedding rather than a linguistic limitation. Saudade, therefore, functions as a multilayered symbolic category, revealing the interplay between emotion, language, and cultural identity in Lusophone contexts. (Amante, 2026, p. 1)

“achieved through silence, temporal layering, and marginal spaces to evoke what may be described as an aesthetic of absence, one that exposes the fissures between mythic continuity and lived historical experience [46]. Comparable dynamics can be observed in Brazilian cinema, where saudade often informs a melancholic engagement with memory, place, and history.” (Amante, 2026, p. 8)

“Saudade thus operates simultaneously as a lived emotion, a cultural symbol, and a mediated myth. Its continued reinterpretation across artistic and commercial fields demonstrates how a historically specific emotional concept can circulate internationally while retaining its function as a condensed expression of collective memory and belonging.” (Amante, 2026, p. 9)

“saudade exceeds the register of private emotion. It operates as a shared cultural idiom through which individual experiences of longing are inscribed into wider historical and symbolic frameworks.” (Amante, 2026, p. 9)

“reputed “untranslatability”, a claim that has played an important role in shaping its symbolic status in cultural and linguistic debates. The widespread nature of this perception is illustrated by a 2004 report from Today Translations, which identified saudade as “the seventh most difficult word to translate” [8] (p. 1). Although it is commonly rendered in English through terms “such as longing, yearning, missing, homesickness, or nostalgia” (Amante, 2026, p. 2)

In response to representing the voice of the first generation, Zenib Sedira reflects on the 'blase' retelling of the Algerian war. Sedira also “noticed that the Algerian war or colonization is often explored (via writing or art) by the children of Algerians living in France [...] as it's the first generation who are silenced and the second generation that makes them speak (McGonagle and Sedira, 2006, p. 627).

Zineb Sedira: Migration, intergenerational transmission and textiles

Zineb Sedira was born in France to Algerian parents. Sedira's autobiographical work examines cross-cultural identity and the transmission of culture through memory, translation, language and diaspora (McGonagle, 2007). Sedira's expression of heritage as a second-generation, French Algerian artist is made with an intention to translate her “conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity.” (Hall, 2021, p. 235). Although Sedira's work is primarily video and photography based, her work frames the textiles and clothing worn by generations of family members, to show both difference and cultural lineage. This is evident in works such as *Mother Tongue* (2002), *Mother, Daughter and I* (2003) and *La Maison de ma Mère* (2002).



Figure 2: Mother Tongue (Sedira, 2002). Source: Tate. © Zenib Sedira

The complexity of diaspora and identity is presented by Sedira in a video piece she created in response to motherhood, called *Mother Tongue*, 2002 [figure 2]. Sedira created a piece of work around three generations of women in her family to address the “idea of transmission - how do you pass on to children cultural tradition?” (Tate, 2017). The family includes Sedira’s Algerian mother who is born in Algeria and speaks Arabic, her daughter who is born in England and speaks English; and herself – born in France and speaks French. The five-minute video is an exchange of memories between family in French, Arabic and English. However, the daughter does not speak Arabic, and the grandmother does not speak English. The work explores the many languages spoken in one family (Arabic, French and English), but it also confronts a fragmented connection with “the non-possibility of communication” (Tate, 2017) between a family of three generations, with three countries of birth. Sedira, who is multi-lingual, became “the interpreter, the mediator, or the transmitter” (Tate, 2017) between the family members. This work is thus symbolic of an “effort to preserve cultural identity across generations” and “underscores the difficulty of maintaining a shared heritage across national and linguistic divides” (Mehrez, 2021). The dynamic represented in *Mother Tongue* (2002) chimes with Grossberg’s read of anthropologist James Clifford, who explained how diaspora is a “signifier not simply of transnationality and movement, but of political struggle to define the local [...] – as a distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement” (1996, p. 92). Sedira explores

the family transmission between grandmother, mother and daughter as a physical union on screen, refracted by difference in communication and difference in clothing, thus emphasising “the historically spatial fluidity and intersectionality of identity, its articulation to structures of historical movements (whether forced, chosen, necessary or desired)” (Grossberg, 1996, p. 92).



Figure 3: Mother, Daughter and I: Triptych 1 (Sedira, 2003). Source: © Zineb Sedira

The theme of language, generational transmission, and translation are key points of interest in Sedira’s work, which convey the historical movements of her family’s history. In an interview with McGonagle, Sedira states her interest in the connection between the generations in her family by “the way we speak, the way we are, the way we think, and even the way we dress”. *Mother, Daughter and I* (2003) are two triptychs [figure 3 and 4] of Sedira’s mother “who is dressed in her traditional Algerian outfit; [her] daughter in an urban, funky top and trousers; and [she wears] a pseudo-Eastern tunic” (McGonagle and Sedira, 2006, p. 618). The textile references in *Mother, Daughter and I* (2003) represent the generational differences and her family’s historical migration from Algeria to France and (presently) England. These works are extensions to *Mother Tongue* (2002) and serve to represent her “family—composed of three

generations—[...] three countries of birth and three languages” but “through their body language and clothing” (McGonagle and Sedira, 2006, p. 618). In the first triptych, the square portraits show inward body language between the family members and the oval segments home in on the connection made, by holding hands. The second triptych shows another side to the family’s relationship. The middle portrait of Sedira’s daughter and mother are united in the colour of their clothing, but they are looking outward, in opposite directions, with hands holding their own. The portraits on the far left and right show Sedira’s prevailing link between the generations. Physical contact is maintained with her mum with held hands, whilst they both look and face in the same direction. With Sedira’s daughter, the lean towards her shows a sense of ease and comfort, a contrast to the straighter posture held when sat next to her grandmother. This difference, distance and simultaneous connection between first and third generation is visually represented in both *Mother Tongue* (2002) and *Mother, Daughter and I* (2003), confirming Mehrez’s observation of Sedira’s “effort to preserve cultural identity across generations” (2021). It could also be argued that Sedira is showing her current ‘home’ through three generations of her family by “creating both pasts and futures through inhabiting grounds of the present’ (Christou, A., & Janta, H. 2019, p668).



Figure 4: Mother, Daughter and I: Triptych 2 (Sedira, 2003). Source: © Zineb Sedira

The intention to maintain the cultural link between her family generations and Sedira's interest in how to transmit cultural traditions is conveyed in Sedira's idea of 'home' in relation to her mother's wares. In Christou's reading of Mallet 'home' becomes sensorial in combining spaces inhabited by familiarity, family, people, things and belongings" (2019, p668). Sedira's observations of her mother's home is represented in a series of photographs called *La Maison de ma Mère* (2002), which was commissioned for an exhibition called Fold—by the City of Leicester Gallery. Sedira captured the folds of "draperies, curtains, [...] a kind of kaleidoscope, a mosaic representing fragments of curtains, bedsheets, pillows, table covers, [her] mother's dress" (McGonagle and Sedira, 2006, p. 623), which are all white. McGonagle draws a parallel between white and Sedira's wearing of the white haik in her work the Series Self-Portraits, Self-Portrait or the Virgin Mary" and her Algerian heritage when observing "white is a colour traditionally worn by Algerian women and the haik is a traditional form of Algerian dress [...]. Her garments align her specifically with the country of her parents' origin" (2007, pp. 221-222). It thus could be argued that textiles shown in Sedira's work are being mobilised to "play a central role in anchoring identity and the past during displacement" (Savaş, Ö, 2014 p. 187).



Figure 5: *La Maison de ma Mère* (Sedira, 2002). Source: © Zineb Sedira

Conclusion

In the case of both Sedira and Mania, second generation artists affirming their heritage within the diaspora, textiles become haptic archives (Fulton, G., 2023), that embody and represent cultural references. This has been explored in how Mania seeks to journey with his mother's past through found artefacts, which share a decorative style to the Middle East. The collected items and the composition with portraiture, brings to life the past and creates a connection with the experience of the first generation. As explained by Pechurina, diasporic objects are used as a way to bridge relationships between cultural identity and the meaning of home constructed in the context of movement and migration (2020, p671)

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