

Sukaina

Kubba:

Not Soft

by Nature

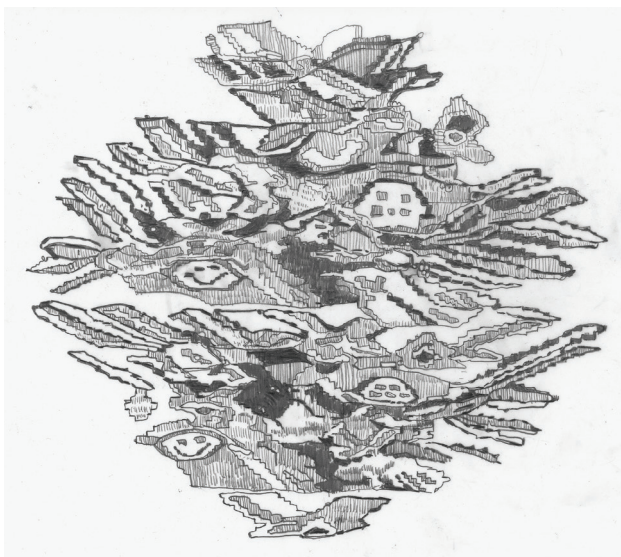


Sukaina Kubba: Not Soft by Nature **by Leila Timmins**

There is a particular kind of contradiction embedded in manufactured lace. It is delicate but enduring, ornamental yet technical, intimate but industrial. It carries an aesthetic of softness with its airy perforations and floral tracery that makes it appear as if it would be soft, but it is often coarse to the touch. Lace is not simply decorative but carries the weight of desire that has shaped an industry and labour system for over five centuries. Sukaina Kubba's *Not Soft by Nature* unfolds within these convergences. Presenting a new body of work centred on the history of lacemaking, the exhibition draws from both the legacy of industrial textile production and the deep cultural circulation of ornament across time and geography. Lace, here, becomes a conceptual structure as much as a material one: a surface built from repetition, interruption, translation, and the uneasy proximity between intimacy and industry.

Enveloping the backwall of the space, the exhibition is anchored by a series of large bespoke white Jacquard lace panels, each a towering 13' high. The lace was produced in 2026 at MYB Textiles in Scotland, the last remaining lace factory in the country and one of the only remaining facilities for pre-digital lace production in the world. But the story of lacemaking begins long before the period of mechanization. The origins and early history of lace are highly contested, but the earliest known books on lacemaking come from Venice in the 1550s and it is known that high-quality lace was being produced all over Europe by the 1600s. During this time, lacemaking was both a domestic art and a form of economic survival, often produced by women in guild-like systems or cottage industries where skill was passed down through generations. The making of lace required patience, dexterity, and time: the slow accumulation of pattern and image through tiny gestures.

During the industrial period, lace became one of the first textile forms to be radically transformed by mechanization. What had once been a highly specialized handmade practice began to shift into factory production through the development of lace-making machines, particularly those that could mimic the complex interlacing of threads that had defined handmade lace. This transformation from domestic production to large-scale manufacturing dramatically reshaped the relationship between labour and value, and maker and object. Lace was reproduced, distributed, and sold at scales that would have been unimaginable in earlier centuries, and the conditions of its production increasingly linked to the expanding desire for decorative objects and the reach of global trade.



Maker Unknown, *Kilim Rug*, wool, cotton. 193 × 140 cm, 1950-1970. Collection of Textile Museum of Canada. Gift of Thomas Kalman.

Sukaina Kubba, *Not Soft by Nature*, graphite on mylar, 2025. Courtesy of the artist.

Kubba Family Rug - Yusuf and Zulaikha. Image by Sukaina Kubba.

Sukaina Kubba, *Not Soft by Nature*, graphite on mylar, 2025. Courtesy of the artist.

MYB Textiles, where Kubba's lace was produced, is not simply a site of fabrication, but also a living archive of this transformation. The factory was founded with a steam powered Nottingham loom, purchased directly from the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in London in 1851. The founders knew the Irvine Valley was full of talented textile workers who could easily be trained on the looms, especially the many Flemish Huguenots who settled there after fleeing persecution. This, combined with the heavy rainfall and large river that runs through the valley, made the perfect conditions for lacemaking: the humidity prevented the fine cotton thread from breaking, and the river provided easy access to markets and global trade routes.

Significantly, lace production in Scotland was never isolated. It was tied to systems of imperial extraction and international commerce, reliant on imported cotton and other raw materials, and embedded in trade routes that connected Great Britain to its colonies and markets around the world. Textiles, perhaps more than any other category of production, reveal these global systems. Cotton, silk, dyes, and thread all move through vast networks of exchange and production before they become finished goods traded in foreign markets. One of MYB's signature products, Madras lace, is named for the fabric's wide distribution throughout the city of Madras (now Chennai) in India.

Kubba's engagement with MYB foregrounds this history not as a backdrop, but as an active condition of the work. The lace panel she has produced is not nostalgic or a return to the purity of craft but is a confrontation with the industrial reality of textile production, and with the ways that decorative domestic objects have long been implicated in systems of global exchange and colonial power.

The central custom designed large-scale Jacquard lace panels produced with MYB, weave together motifs and imagery drawn from multiple sources: fragments of Kurdish Senneh rugs, decorative artefacts from the Textile Museum of Canada's Permanent Collection, and most significantly, a rug that used to hang at her grandparents' living room in Baghdad. These sources are layered into an anachronistic field of figures, flora, and ornament. The lace does not attempt to stabilize these references into a singular narrative or origin. Instead, it holds them together in tension as inheritance, memory, and archive.

This kind of layering reflects the historical reality of decorative production. For centuries, textiles have been shaped by cultural exchange and translocation, with motifs and designs travelling across continents through trade, migration, and conquest. Specific floral patterns, geometric elements, and figural scenes are rarely confined to a single place or time, but instead are continuously shared, adapted, and reinterpreted. In the industrial period, this movement accelerated. Pattern books circulated, colonial exhibitions displayed "exotic" goods, and European manufacturers frequently appropriated motifs from Middle Eastern, North African, and Asian textiles. What was once embedded in local knowledge became flattened into design vocabulary.

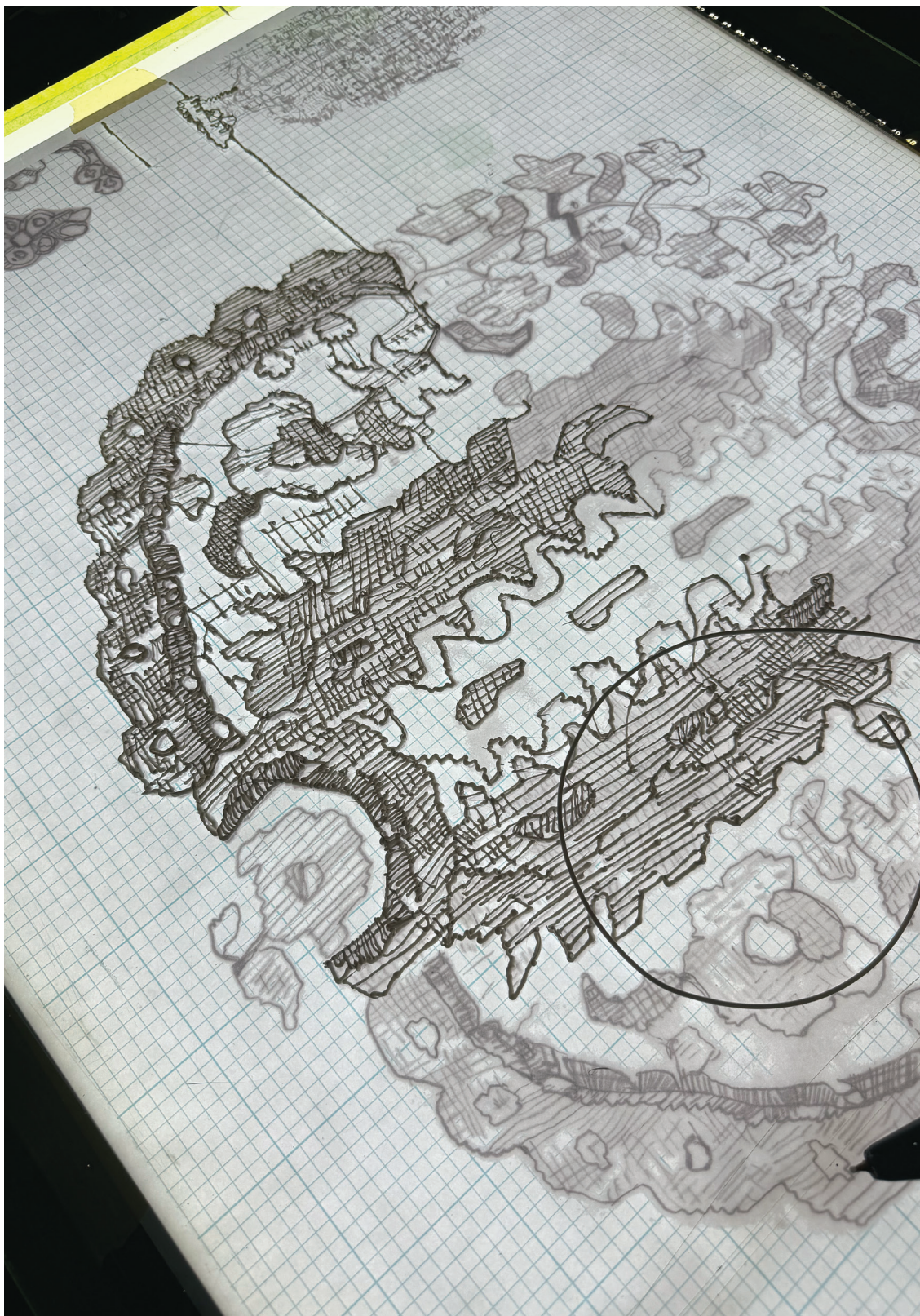
Kubba's lace acknowledges this history while complicating it. Her anachronistic composition resists the idea of origin as something singular or stable. Instead, her work treats ornament as a living, migratory language—one shaped by longing, displacement, admiration, and exchange. Her lace becomes a site where different temporalities coexist: the domestic interior in Baghdad, the museum archive in Canada, the industrial factory in Scotland, and the historical fragment from the seventeenth century. These places do not resolve into a seamless whole but remain visible as layers.

The most significant narrative embedded in the lace comes from the family rug in Baghdad, which depicts a famous scene from the Quranic story of Yusef and Zulaikha. In this story, Zulaikha—overwhelmed by desire and determined to prove Yusef's extraordinary beauty—invites a group of her courtesans into a room, offering them oranges and knives to peel them. When Yusef enters to serve tea, the women become so transfixed by his radiance that they accidentally cut themselves while peeling the fruit. Their blood becomes proof of the potency of desire and that beauty can overwhelm reason. Transformed by their love for each other, the couple cannot escape their desire and continue to return to union despite great odds and sacrifice.

Throughout her work, Kubba has been drawn to stories of obsession and desire. What compels someone to create? To dedicate one's life to honing a craft, repeating the efforts day in and day out? What inspires the devotion to a practice and relentless striving needed for production?

The work in the exhibition embodies this kind of labourious creation. Beginning with drawing, Kubba renders textile objects and motifs through an act of close looking that is itself a form of devotion. Using a background grid or "ground" similar to those in lace making, Sukaina builds her drawings by hand in graphite, collaging motifs and elements that she has pulled from her various source materials. Although never presented, this drawing becomes the origin point for a constellation of translations and reinterpretations. Returning to the same imagery repeatedly in filament drawings, reliefs, prints, cyanotypes and sculptural interventions, creating copies and versions that echo the original but refuse to replicate it perfectly. Instead, Kubba shifts between materials and methods, allowing each translation to generate new kinds of surface, with new failures and new insights.

The first iteration of the process is Kubba's signature TPU filament drawing. Tracing the original drawing in TPU, which is commonly used in 3D printing, extends the work into three dimensions and introduces a synthetic, modern material language. Yet Kubba uses it not to create sleek technological objects, but to draw in three dimensions, creating work that exceeds the page and interacts with the environment. Suspended from the ceiling, the filament tapestries cast shadows along the walls and floor, further duplicating the imagery and immersing the viewer.



Sukaina Kubba, *Tonight I Received News That My Beloved Will Come I* (detail), hand-drawn TPU filament, 150 x 400 cm, 2026. Courtesy of the artist.

These filament works are also directly used in the creation of other works in the exhibition. The pulped paper reliefs are made from cotton thread discards produced through the lacemaking process at MYB and reformulated into molded paper fibers. When the fibers are wet, the filament is pressed into the pulp to create subtle relief panels. Here, waste becomes material. The discarded threads—byproducts of industrial production—are transformed into new sculptural surfaces, making visible what textile histories often obscure: that production always generates excess and that beauty is accompanied by waste.

The filament works also act as source materials for the cyanotypes and screen prints, forming the negative image that is captured on paper and screen. These works introduce a different kind of repetition—one driven not by machine but by exposure, transfer, and imprint. Cyanotype in particular carries its own historical weight, tied to early photographic documentation and botanical study, it was also historically used by lacemakers to record designs for archives and future reproductions. The cyanotypes produced by Kubba are not in the typical vibrant indigo hues but instead are a fleshy pink colour which references the colour of the punch cards used in analog Jacquard looms as well as natural latex, a material that Kubba has returned to throughout her practice. Cyanotype is a medium of trace and evidence, a way of recording what touches the surface. In the context of Kubba's work, cyanotype becomes another form of textile logic: a negative space where presence is registered through absence.

Across these works, repetition is not merely formal but reflects the obsessive and passion-driven undercurrent of their production. Like the story of Yusef and Zulaikha, where enduring longing and the desire to return become a metaphor for grace, Kubba engages in a process that mirrors this energy, devotedly remaking textiles. She returns to the same motifs again and again, not as a way to seek perfection, but because repetition is itself a form of inquiry.

In Kubba's hands, lace becomes more than a textile form. It is a framework for understanding how we inherit the past through the surfaces we live with. The rugs, fabrics, and decorative works that make up our worlds and inform our sense of beauty and desire are also among the most culturally charged objects. They are bound to the histories of labour, gendered production, colonial trade, industrial exploitation, and the museum's appetite for preservation and taste-making. *Not Soft by Nature* does not attempt to resolve these tensions, but instead holds them in suspension, allowing ornament to remain seductive, while revealing the systems that have privileged decoration and imbued material with memory.



Sukaina Kubba is an Iraqi-born artist whose work is rooted in material and cultural research, material experimentation, storytelling and drawing connections. Kubba has exhibited at Western Exhibitions, Chicago and Patel Brown, Montreal; in Toronto at Venus Festival, two seven two gallery, Patel Brown, Greater Toronto Art Triennial at MOCA, Mercer Union SPACE Billboard Commission, the plumb, The Next Contemporary, Art Gallery of Ontario and Aga Khan Museum; and in Scotland at Dundee Contemporary Arts, Centre for Contemporary Art, Glasgow Project Room, Glasgow International and Kendall Koppe. In 2026 Kubba will also exhibit at Carleton University Art Gallery and Oakville Galleries. Kubba has attended residencies at the International Studio and Curatorial Program, New York and La Wayaka Current, Chile. She is a sessional lecturer in Visual Studies at the University of Toronto, and was previously a curator and lecturer at The Glasgow School of Art.

Leila Timmins is the Senior Curator at The Robert McLaughlin Gallery.

Sukaina Kubba, *Turn Me Into A Flower*, Dundee Contemporary Arts, 2024. Photo by Ruth Clark. Courtesy of the Artist.

Sukaina Kubba: Not Soft by Nature

Curated by: Leila Timmins

April 11 – September 6, 2026

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Mylar: Sukaina Kubba, Tonight I Received News That My Beloved Will Come I, Hand Drawn TPU Filament, 150 × 400 cm, 2026. Installation at Oakville Galleries 2026. Image by Sukaina Kubba. Courtesy of the artist.

Back cover: Sukaina Kubba, Tonight I Received News That My Beloved Will Come I (detail), hand-drawn TPU filament, 150 × 400 cm, 2026. Courtesy of the artist.



