

Shaya Ishaq spins fibres into rich tapestries capturing our past and present

Her research fellowship from the Black Perspectives Office reasserts our need for intergenerational and afro-futuristic practices

November 29, 2021 | By James Roach



Shaya Ishaq: "The world around me inspires my drive to create." | © Concordia University, photo by Lisa Graves

Shaya Ishaq, an Ottawa born and raised interdisciplinary artist and undergraduate student in the [Fibres & Material Practices](#) program is the first recipient of a research fellowship from [Concordia's Black Perspectives Office](#).

"Ishaq's application reminded us of where we come from and where we hope to go," says Annick Maugile Flavien, founding coordinator and manager of the Black Perspectives Office.

"Her ability to call in community through practice is a gift that needs to be valued and nurtured. We feel so grateful to have Shaya as our research fellow, as her work so strongly embodies the values of our office, and we look forward to supporting her continued success."

Ishaq is also a research fellow with the Textiles and Materiality Research Cluster as part of the [Milieux Institute for Arts, Culture and Technology](#).

What brought you to this point in your journey as an artist?

Shaya Ishaq: Years of focus and commitment to my art practice and my deep curiosity and wonder with the medium I work with. I am very passionate about textiles and its capacity for storytelling and archiving histories. It really informs how I see the world around me and offers a window into history and current events if we really look deeper.

I've been able to find and refine my creative voice over the years and am incredibly grateful for my time as a student here at Concordia, Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, and formative residency experiences in the Maritimes. These have also shaped my journey to where I'm at now.

What is it that inspires you and drives your need to create?

SI: The world around me inspires my drive to create in response to my lived experience and sometimes in response to structural questions of the moment.

Language is such a powerful tool that can create, destroy, connect and divide us and I'm interested in how expansive it can be. I'm inspired by the subjectivity yet human reality of liminal experiences. The politics of space and how we relate to each other within it is something that also inspires me.

What materials do you feel most drawn to and why?

SI: I am drawn to cotton yarn as my primary material for weaving wefts because it is strong and reliable. These days I also feel drawn to cotton rope and have been incorporating it into my ceramics, fibre, and wearable studio experiments.

Another fibre material I am drawn to is wool roving. I love how its texture completely transforms through a mesmerizing technique called wet felting.

My heart is forever bound to clay because of how grounding it can feel just to simply hold it in your hand. You have to understand its seasons and its properties to best manipulate it. All materials require me to listen deeply.



What are some ways in which Afrofuturism and exploring the psychological aspects of rites of passages come alive in your work?

SI: Afrofuturism is a launchpad for conceptual thinking and worldbuilding for me. The work of certain writers and artists such as Rasheedah Phillips and Camae Ayewa relating to time is what inspires me most in my current work.

I'm also interested in concepts around time stemming from the afropresentist theorist, Neema Githere.

In the body of work I am continuing this year, themes of grief and the connection to the ones we've lost across space time are at the root of what I'm exploring. Death and grief are rites of passage that affect us all. Using weaving as a methodology, I am exploring how time collapses when we are hit with waves of loss.

I've been using the double weave structure (when you can weave two pieces of cloth at once) as a way to think about multiple time planes, the courage and messiness of moving forward in the wake of grief.

Do you sense a shift towards greater interest in the work of Black visual artists? What challenges do you still face?

SI: I see greater efforts towards materially supporting the work of Black visual artists with more available grants and fellowship opportunities such as this. Interest can wane over time but how can we really support and champion the work of Black visual artists in a sustainable way beyond this cultural moment?

A mental challenge I face even in a time of seemingly greater interest is one around scarcity mentality. I want to believe that beyond this moment in time, this support will exist for future generations. Cultivating an abundance mentality is key to opposing this.

Can you tell us about the significance of your research fellowship from the Black Perspectives Office for your practice?

SI: It has taken me a long time to find the right place for my academic pursuits and over the last few years within my program of Fibres and Material Practices, I've grown a lot.

I feel so grateful to have the support of the Black Perspectives Office because it's incredible to have my research affirmed in an interdisciplinary context and to be given resources beyond the capacity of my department to thrive.

What's next for you?

SI: After this academic school year, I will prepare for public presentations of new work in 2022 and also continue developing an ongoing project, Library of Infinities, but more as a curatorial project.

'Energized and inspired towards a collective purpose'

Maugile Flavien sees an important connection between Ishaq's art practice and the intention behind the [BPO's research fellowships](#).

"Storytelling is one of the oldest forms of Black resistance and existence," says Maugile Flavien, whose own creative and collaborative practice has explored storytelling as a means of exploring and preserving Black knowledge.

"It's a practice that transcends form, time, place, and space in ways that have allowed our communities to conserve our presence and carve futures that are not bound to a limited sense of possibility.

"This practice is so key in fostering our collective sense of community and reciprocity. Black storytelling functions as a call and response, where there is an expectation that the act of storytelling will activate us. This is what brought us to supporting Shaya Ishaq's work, in reviewing her application our committee was re-energized and inspired towards of collective purpose."

Find out more about [Shaya Ishaq](#) and [Concordia's Black Perspectives Office](#).

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