

We came to transmit the
shimmering
from which we came; to name it

—Etel Adnan, *From “Surge”*

It’s hard to tell whether the image has been built up from diaphanous layers of paint or carved out from sedimented time, but one thing is clear: it is its own source of light. Against this pomegranate wall, the painting shimmers with the assurance of the truths it holds. It is astonishing.

27 is a scene of exiled Armenian orphans in Alexandria, Egypt, arranged for a camera. Like so many of Muriel Ahmarani Jaouich’s paintings, the image finds its origins in a historical photograph, propaganda of the Ottoman State in the aftermath of the Armenian genocide. Ahmarani Jaouich seeks traces of her family’s intergenerational migrations and, as is so often the case, finds the few material records of this history through the imperial archives of the perpetrator—the Ottoman Empire and Turkey.

The painting is on a ground that holds the warmth and texture of a ripe apricot. A group of female figures—some barely sketched in, others clearly defined—are circumscribed by a fez, a symbol of Ottoman authority. A small hand on the bottom right of the canvas seems ready to tear at the edges of the fez, or to draw back the curtain on the scene. The little girls are holding a flag—erased—and a portrait of a man, the Pasha—also erased—those visual cues of propaganda elided by the collective will of the orphans presented here. As much in the photograph as in this painting, it is the girls who we honour, those who survived and will survive, their children and grandchildren who now carry their stories.

Teta Rose, the artist’s grandmother, was assigned the number 27 when she entered the orphanage as the sole survivor of her family, an anonymizing gesture that might have presented yet another rupture and loss in this young child’s life. But Teta Rose grew to see that number as a sign of resilience and survival, and the number remains a lucky one for the Ahmarani family. “My grandmother spoke of it often, and with pride,” the artist reflects. “I draw from archival photographs of Ottoman-era orphanages, in which I’ve often searched — in vain — for her face. This work becomes a gesture of reclamation, transforming absence into presence, and grief into light. It is a tribute to her strength, and to the legacy of endurance passed down through generations.”

Ahmarani Jaouich tells me that her mother, Anahit, sees her own mother in this painting, and points to the figure that has caught her mother’s eye. The artist knows that this is another child her mother sees and claims, and yet the painting speaks an honest fiction: it is her grandmother, and it is not her grandmother. Two things can be true, and this painting—like all paintings by Ahmarani Jaouich—contains many truths, none easy, all necessary.

Windsor-based artist Tina Rouhandeh visited *An Archaeology of Echoes* and told me that she was moved by the honesty of Ahmarani Jaouich's paintings, and in so doing she captured in language what I had been trying to say about the exhibition since we first began planning it. The paintings look like dreams, but they feel like memories—they exist at the shimmering horizon of events half-forgotten, as urgent as they are beautiful. But no matter how compelling the aesthetic experience, they beam a sincere message to those who are willing to receive them. The paintings—like the artist—are reliable narrators of a story we must hear. And they are honest.

Whisper is one of those paintings that will be heard. During a special program organized for members of Windsor's Armenian community, the artist spoke of her history to an audience who shared similar origins within the diaspora. Her family, she told us, was from Mardin, a city that remains in what is now Turkey. She has never been. When I look it up, the city holds the palette of one of Ahmarani Jaouich's paintings: built into the side of a mountain with the limestone quarried from within it, the mountainside city is pink and warm beige in the soft sunlight, the architecture a mix of Islamic and Christian traditions.

When I picture what it is to be in Mardin, I imagine the long view onto the plains below the city. On clear days, it is said that one can see as far as the Syrian border, blue and hazy in the distance. The height of the mountain relative to the plains below it means that the citizens of Mardin were witness to the forced marches of Armenian deportees as they were driven from their homes towards desert camps in Syria. With each stepped terrace forming the roof of the home below it, it's hard to believe that anyone living in Mardin could claim ignorance of the historical events which transpired below them.¹ And yet, the genocide has yet to be acknowledged by the Turkish government, despite the fact that nearly all the Armenians in the city were killed or driven out during the Armenian genocide, beginning in 1915. Their architectural traces are like a palimpsest within the streets of the city, testifying for absent voices that will not be silenced.

Whisper tells us of that march, showing a group of figures driven through a blistering landscape, glowing before a group of Ottoman soldiers. The composition is laterally balanced, the two groups of figures cascading from the upper left quadrant to the lower right; in contrast, they are bracketed by two Egyptian figures, who watch and hold the vulnerable refugees in their journey. The moment reads like a screen capture of a cross-dissolve between two separate but related moments: the forced march through the Syrian desert, and the refuge that Ahmarani Jaouich's family would find in Egypt in the years to follow.

Writing about another painting, Ahmarani Jaouich notes: "I wanted to build a haunted landscape, inhabited by ancestral presence." It is as true of *Whisper* as it is of *In the Earth, in the Sky*, of which the artist originally writes.² As Eve Tuck and C. Ree remind us, haunting is "the relentless remembering and reminding that will not be appeased by settler society's assurances of innocence."³ Landscapes are not haunted where histories are acknowledged, addressed, and

¹ For a discussion of eyewitness accounts of the genocide from Mardin, see David Gaunt, "The View from the Roofs of Mardin: What Everyone Saw in the 'Year of the Sword,'" *Armenian Weekly*, 7 January 2015. Available online: <https://armenianweekly.com/2015/01/07/mardin/>.

² This painting is also in the exhibition.

³ Eve Tuck and C. Ree write of settler colonialism in Turtle Island, but this statement is also true for ethnic Armenians and their Indigenous territories, the Armenian Highlands, which include parts of modern-day

atoned for; it is only when we deny these histories that they return to us, as spectres. Ahmarani Jaouich's landscapes are honest, and they are haunted, and the experience of them is haunting.

In an essay for Ahmarani Jaouich's exhibition at Patel Brown in 2024, writer and artist Élise Lafontaine writes, "Her approach to the material, its superimposed layers made fragile through different treatments — faded, sandblasted, sometimes obliterated — allows for the resurfacing of distant voices and figures distorted by time." Like me, Lafontaine sees Ahmarani Jaouich's process as archaeological as much as additive, something unearthed as much as laid down.

Exile of Teta Rose (2022) and *je vous vois, toujours* (2025) show that archaeological approach, as promised in the exhibition's title, *An Archaeology of Echoes*. *Exile of Teta Rose* seems to convey a hieroglyphic message, despite countercurrents and eruptions that threaten its narrative throw. It shows us what is unimaginable, that which beggars belief: the exile of a three-year-old orphaned child on a forced march from Armenia to Syria, and sailing from Syria to Egypt. *je vous vois, toujours* is more glyptic than hieroglyphic, with an Ottoman soldier's uniform fading into near-linguistic marks as the imperial image dissolves into a peaceful wash of blue. *Exile of Teta Rose* and *je vous vois, toujours* seem to bookend some of the artist's explorations over a busy three-year period, the first highlighting a grandmother's journey to safety and the second a beloved father's illness and his corresponding loss of language. In both, looking is a recuperative and fiercely protective act; in the first, for the child that was her grandmother, and in the second, the man that was her father. But each feel borrowed from time, showing a simultaneity of events that reflect how we experience trauma, both inherited and personal. And, too, in their watchful surveillance of all they capture, how these epigenetic traumas can begin to be healed through processes of intergenerational labour.

"we deal with a permanent voyage," the poet-in-exile Etel Adnan reminds us in *Surge*. "the becoming of that which itself had / become." It is hard to believe that the artist built these paintings, faced with the same canvas and armed with the same materials that all painters are tasked with. They are more than a meeting of artist and canvas, but a record of how we embody the generational cycling of the long histories that shape us, and how we can transform them through acts of creation. The paintings are not burdened with time, but they do carry it, indicting and healing in equal measures. I see in them so much that is necessary, so much that is truth.

—Emily McKibbin, Head, Exhibitions & Collections

This essay accompanies the exhibition *Muriel Ahmarani Jaouich: An Archaeology of Echoes*, on view at Art Windsor-Essex between October 16, 2025 to February 15, 2026.

Armenia, Turkey, and surrounding areas. See Eve Tuck and C. Ree, "A Glossary of Haunting," in Stacey Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams and Carolyn Ellis, eds., *Handbook of Autoethnography* (Left Coast Press, 2013): 642.