

## Holding Queer Time in Sahar Khoury's *Untitled (12 dates blue)*

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We could think of Sahar Khoury's sculpture *Untitled (12 dates blue)*, 2019, as an illegible clock, a nonlinear history, or an alternative timekeeping device. Emphatically messy and handmade, the piece is composed of a wobbly blue net of pulpy, papier-mâché numbers that rest gingerly atop a pair of green ceramic armatures. Backed by bright orange paper, the crudely drawn digits softly glow from behind and shift their allegiances with one another depending on how you look, almost like a lenticular image. An astute observer (or one who has consulted with the artist) might finally conclude that the first four numbers resolve into the year "1973," its neighbor then appears to be "1969," while "2000" appears just below, and so on until we realize that we are looking at the representation of 12 nonconsecutive years arranged in a grid six registers high. Just below, sandwiched between the two green brackets sits a papier-mâché relief of an anthropological bone holder crafted by students in the 1980s to—what else—hold their bones.

Khoury's sculpture was originally shown in a solo exhibition called "Holder," a title that points to her longstanding interest in sculptures with cheekily visible modes of display or structural apparatus. Often, shelves and hangers are formally embedded into the compositions or sculptures are strapped together by conspicuous belts and bolts. The works themselves start to seem like they are animatedly holding themselves together, often in a slapstick manner. "Holder" also makes us think about artworks as holders of meaning. How do artworks hold meaning, and, moreover, in the case of *Untitled (12 dates blue)*, how might a work hold time?

A queer theorization of temporality moves away from notions of time as defined by development or a teleological march towards meaning.



Queer time is not linear; it is not defined by reproductive futurism. Rather, as Annamarie Jagose has described it, queer time is “cyclical, interrupted, multilayered, reversible, stalled”—an apt string of adjectives too for *Untitled (12 dates blue)*.<sup>1</sup> Jack Halberstam writes, “Queer time for me is the dark nightclub, the perverse turn away from the narrative coherence of adolescence—early adulthood—marriage—reproduction—child rearing—retirement—death, the embrace of late childhood in place of early adulthood or immaturity in place of responsibility. It is a theory of queerness as a way of being in the world and a critique of the careful social scripts that usher even the most queer among us through major markers of individual development and into Normativity.”<sup>2</sup>

Khoury’s sculpture certainly holds time, but does so imperfectly. In her rattletrap composition, time is not organized as a progression undergirded by productive futurity. Instead, the sculpture braces, buttresses, and holds time up not to monumentalize it but to carry it around tenderly, lopsidedly, feebly—and with a wink to the absurdity of the task.

As Khoury started to build her grid of numbers out of papier-mâché, she just added the dates that came to mind. Some years are tied to important people in her life, while others are drawn from moments in Iranian history or are completely random. In Khoury’s papier-mâché structure, the delicate fibers of the paper wetly press up against each other until many of the numbers are almost illegible. The point is not to fetishize or monumentalize certain dates, not to understand time in terms of “narrative coherence,” as Halberstam puts it. Her representations of time are wedged together, randomly arranged, and nonhierarchical. Khoury divorces her timestamps from the task of being representative of a narratively stable identity or normative expectations of time.

Even if we’ve managed to identify some of the dates in Khoury’s numbered grid, the odd object sitting below them presents another element ripe for misinterpretation. What could be a cartoonish rendition of an ancient clay tablet or a mismatched string of repeated number ones, is actually the papier-mâché relief of an amateur anthropologist’s bone holder. Khoury has collected dozens of these hand carved trays (used by students at San Francisco State to store the bones they were studying in class) and utilized them as a repeated form throughout her recent work. Theoretically, bones are used in anthropology as stable markers, objects that allow for the establishment of dates and chronologies. In Khoury’s sculpture such stable markers are absent, only leaving behind indexes of the odd, handcrafted trays that once held them. By engaging affectively with this object from the past, she has reclaimed a historical object without needing to assign it a static purpose or meaning.

Ultimately, Khoury’s sculpture reminds us that trying to hold time is a Sisyphean task. Time can’t be wrangled into orderly succession; it constantly eludes our attempts to master it. This elusion, however, shouldn’t be observed too gravely. Holding time may be a Sisyphean task, but, in Khoury’s universe, Sisyphus is less a tragic character and more of a Buster Keaton type. He keeps pushing his boulder up the hill with a knowing wink. When he fails and it rolls back over him, we all laugh. Yes, *Untitled (12 dates blue)* holds time. It grasps, carries, and clutches it imperfectly until it rolls away. ☹

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<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman, Roderick A. Ferguson, Carla Freccero, Elizabeth Freeman, Jack Halberstam, Annamarie Jagose, Christopher S. Nealon, and Tan Hoang Nguyen, “Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2-3 (2007): 186-7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.