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Why Sara Rahbar is hanging the American flag for safety, tolerance and togetherness

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In Dallas, Texas, 700km from the border with Mexico, hangs an enormous American flag that reads, "You are safe here with me." Repeatedly embroidered along the flag's red stripes, it's a bittersweet sentiment amid the news of migrant children separated from their parents – even though the flag was made 10 years ago, as part of the artist Sara Rahbar's dissection of the flag as a symbol of power. It is now part of her exhibition at Dallas Contemporary, curated by Justine Ludwig.

Carry Me Home is the first museum show of the New York-based artist, who fled Iran with her family when she was five years old. The exhibition is organised like a mini-retrospective, showing examples from her four main series – Flags, War, 206 Bones and Confessions – which investigate violence, terror, and injustice.

"It's a very crazy time," she says about the current political climate. "But, for me, I've been doing this since day one. It's not like I ever did landscapes or flowers or portraits. I grew up the first five years of my life with revolution, war, migration, violence – that's ingrained in me. Talking about social issues is part of my fibre.

"Part of the reason I became an artist was to speak up," she continues. "How can I do something that matters? I can't just watch this like a movie. It's a horror movie. I don't want to just eat popcorn and watch it. Ever since I was young I thought, 'What am I going to do with the time that I'm on this planet?'"

The flag at Dallas Contemporary, *You Are Safe Here with Me*, is unusual among the series that Rahbar began in 2008, which now numbers more than 50. "I did it 10 years ago and haven't done another one like it," she says. "It's just very simple. All the other ones have all these objects. This is just text."

To make the works in the series, Rahbar generally sews together different items – ranging from magazine strips and camouflage fabric to Berber chain belts and woven textiles – into the form of the American flag. The presence of the

iconic stars in the flag's upper-right-hand corner help identify the standard as that of the US, Rahbar's adopted country, while the sewn-in items often suggest the cultures of the Middle East.

Rahbar's works are made of such juxtapositions, evoked either by iconic symbolism or the memories associated with objects. In the series *War* Rahbar made designs and assemblages out of army uniforms and kit. In *206 Bones*, items such as police batons, rifle butts and farm tools combine to form wooden and metal sculptures laden with the traces of past violence. In one, a butcher's hook faces outwards, calling to mind the carcasses it once pierced. The smooth curves of rifle butts proliferate in others, their widening forms being immediately distinguishable.

Rahbar is intent on the fact that her work be approachable for a wide audience. She enthuses about *Dallas Contemporary* firstly for the show's curator, but particularly for its lack of an entrance fee: "It's such an amazing institution. The fact that it's free makes me so happy. Art should be accessible. I want everyone to be able to experience it and not just the few."

She pays careful attention to the ways that her audience can identify with the pieces. Around 2013, she says, "I found myself wanting to humanise the work a bit more," and began literally populating her works with body parts, which she casts in bronze at a foundry in Queens.

The casts are mostly of her own limbs ("because no one else would come with me and sit there for six hours!", she says), caught in poses of anxiety. The gesture "always stems from memory – something that I've seen, or something that I've felt so deeply. The first thing I did was the stress positions with the toes curled, because that's what I've been doing for the past 30 years. Every time I get stressed I go in that position. It is a very natural thing and a lot of people related to that."