

Artist's Statement

My work gives physical form to relationships: between people, between the body and the land, and between the strength we possess and the freedom we are given. Working primarily in bronze sculpture and drawing, I bring the human figure, landscape, and architecture into a shared visual language.

Born and raised in Iraq, I left amid the violence that followed the war and eventually made my home in the California Bay Area. Both places continue to shape my understanding of belonging. For me, belonging grows through memory, affection, and the connections we build with people and places.

The human figure is central to my practice. I simplify and abstract the body, moving beyond individual likeness to explore how people belong to one another. Couples, families, and groups may share a body or connect through a gesture. Their bonds become structure: figures support one another, share weight, and define the spaces between them. Affection and dependence shape both the meaning and construction of the work.

Many of my figures stand firmly on strong legs yet remain still. This tension between strength and restricted movement emerges from my experience growing up under a dictatorship. Their grounded presence expresses endurance while suggesting confinement. I return to the contradiction of a body with the strength to move but without the freedom to do so.

My forms also carry a lasting connection to ancient Mesopotamian art. Through my work reconstructing antiquities, I developed a close engagement with Sumerian and Assyrian sculpture—its dignity, stillness, and physical presence. Broad shoulders, shaped arms, and simplified hands reflect this inheritance, reinterpreted through my own life and contemporary experience.

The landscapes of Iraq and California enter my work through hills, rocks, mountains, and architectural elements. These become part of the sculptures themselves, shaping the bodies and the spaces they inhabit. The figures belong to their surroundings as much as they belong to one another.

The recurring heart form begins with a simple image in nature: two hilltops meeting. It brings my attachment to the land and my understanding of love into a single shape. For me, it holds affection between people, connection to place, and the love of life that has sustained me through difficult times.

Bronze allows me to explore these relationships through weight, balance, surface, and the spaces within and between forms. Drawing extends this exploration through line, shadow, and layered shapes. Across both mediums, I seek forms that hold strength and vulnerability, closeness and constraint together, giving shape to how we carry our histories and make a place for one another.

Mishaal Atheer