

NAZAFARIN LOTFI

A Garden to Build

Educator Handout: Grades 7-12

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

[*A Garden to Build*](#) presents new drawings, sculptures, photographs, and prints by Tucson-based artist [Nazafarin Lotfi](#). The artist's practice is rooted in her experiences of growing up in post-Revolutionary Iran and continuing her education and artistic career as an immigrant in the United States. Lotfi cites the body, the house, the garden, and the nation as "some of the enclosures that define the self and other, inclusion and exclusion, access and belonging." In her newest works, the artist explores her current location through the lens of garden-making, which, she points out, has a 5,000-year history in her culture.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Nazafarin Lotfi was born in Mashhad, Iran, and is based in Tucson, Arizona. She is currently the Matakjev Research Fellow at the Center for Imagination in the Borderlands at Arizona State University. Lotfi has been awarded artist residencies by the Arts + Public Life and Center for the Study of Race, Politics, & Culture at the University of Chicago, and Artpace International. She received both her MFA and her Post-Baccalaureate certificate from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and her BA from University of Tehran. Her work is represented by Regards, Chicago.

VOCABULARY

- **Access:** permission, liberty, or ability to enter, approach, or pass to and from a place or to approach or communicate with a person or thing¹
- **Colonialism:** the practice of extending and maintaining a nation's political and economic control over another people or area²
- **Composition:** the arrangement of visual and auditory elements in an artwork or exhibition
- **Identity:** our understanding of who we are and where we belong. Our identities are shaped by our experiences and can change over time.
- **Imperialism:** the extension or imposition of power, authority, or influence³
- **Mediums:** artmaking materials such as colored pencil, papier-mâché, or photography
- **Papier-mâché:** paper bonded with glue, paste, or starch
- **Shapes:** two-dimensional enclosed areas that have height and length, but not depth. Shapes can be *organic* or *geometric*. *Organic shapes* are irregular and often seen in nature—such as the outline of animals and clouds. *Geometric shapes* are based on mathematical principles—such as circles, squares, and triangles.
- **Subject matter:** what is portrayed or suggested in an artwork—such as a person, place, or thing

¹Access (2022). In Merriam-Webster.com. Retrieved August 25, 2022, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/access>.

²Colonialism (2022). In Merriam-Webster.com. Retrieved August 25, 2022, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/colonialism>.

³Imperialism (2022). In Merriam-Webster.com. Retrieved August 31, 2022, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/imperialism>.



Left: Installation view of *Nazafarin Lotfi: A Garden to Build*, at University Galleries of Illinois State University, 2022. Photo credit: Jade Nguyen.

Right: Nazafarin Lotfi, *Counter-Landscape (Water, Land, Wall)*, 2022. Colored pencil on paper and archival pigment print on watercolor paper. Courtesy of the artist and Regards, Chicago. Photo credit: Jade Nguyen.



CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

RESPOND - VA:Re8

Nazafarin Lotfi grew up in Mashhad—a city in northeastern Iran—and currently lives in Tucson, Arizona. In response to her experiences residing near national borders, Lotfi's work examines histories of **colonialism** and **imperialism** and the arbitrary nature of imposed boundaries. In *A Garden to Build*, Lotfi references maps and [Persian Gardens](#): two different ways of organizing space and partitioning the landscape.

- As a class, search for and discuss references to borders, boundaries, and maps in the [exhibition](#).
- In what ways does Lotfi suggest these references through her use of **mediums**, **subject matter**, **shapes**, **composition**, and other artmaking techniques?
- Prompt students to consider and discuss connections between Lotfi's work and places and spaces in their immediate surroundings.



Nazafarin Lotfi, from the *Maps of No Return* series, 2022. Colored pencil and collage on paper. Courtesy of the artist and Regards, Chicago. Photo credit: Jade Nguyen.

CONNECT - VA:Cn10

In a stop-gap projects [interview](#) with Azadeh Gholizadeh, Lotfi states: “Learning how the boundaries of a place have changed through time is learning the history of that place.” To create works in this exhibition, Lotfi studied Google Earth archives of her garden in Arizona, which she combined with current images and personal observations. By examining how her own garden has changed over time, Lotfi was able to gain a greater understanding of her surroundings.

In response to Lotfi's process, guide students in researching the history of boundaries within or around a location of personal significance.

- If students are interested in studying the changes in city, county, state, or national borders, consider introducing them to online resources such as [Old Maps Online](#), [USGS topoView](#), or the [Library of Congress](#).
- Online state or national archives—such as the U.S. Census Bureau or state Board of Education sites—are useful for researching voting precincts, tax zones, or school district boundaries.
- Students could also reference personal archives of their chosen location—such as blueprints, photographs, drawings, postcards, or atlases.

After researching boundaries and borders within and around their chosen location, have students document its visual characteristics. Encourage them to consider the colors and textures of plant life in the area; architectural details—such as the materials, heights, colors, and shapes of the buildings; and industrial landmarks like power lines, cell towers, and wind turbines.

- Lotfi's [Counter-Landscapes](#) and [Maps of No Return](#) series include texture rubbings from her garden that she scanned and digitally manipulated before printing on graph paper. Her *Counter-Landscapes* series also features colored pencil drawings documenting Lotfi's close examination of the colors in her garden.
- Invite students to use similar methods when documenting the visual characteristics of their chosen location.

Prompt students to create a series of works using the data they gathered in their research.

CREATE - VA:Cr2.3 (extension activity)

Encourage students to reflect on how their **identities** have been defined and shaped by the borders, boundaries, and characteristics of their chosen location.

Then prompt students to re-imagine and map a future version of their chosen location with consideration for how the space is designed, what colors and textures are in and around it, and who has **access**.

- Educator resources are available on the exhibition [webpage](#).

You can find [University Galleries](#) on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), and [Vimeo](#) and sign up to receive email updates through the [newsletter](#). Please contact galleries@illinoisstate.edu or call (309) 438-5487 if you need to arrange an accommodation to participate in any events related to this exhibition.