

**Shamiran Istifan**

**Manor Art Prize 2026**

**12.6. – 6.9.2026**



Shamiran Istifan (\*1987) explores social systems through her installation works. The artist draws on personal experiences and often uses imagery from everyday life or references from pop culture. She transforms these into new meanings, sometimes with sacred connotations, and condenses them into constellations that shift perceptions of social and structural interrelationships.

For the exhibition at the Aargauer Kunsthaus, Shamiran Istifan developed a series of new works from fragments of memory and the present. Aargau thus becomes a resonant space. The artist, who now lives in Zurich, was born in Baden. She grew up in a diasporic reality shaped by the minority perspective of an Assyrian community in Switzerland. The works on display navigate the tension between the private and the public, the visible and the invisible, the familiar and the hidden. Objects such as paving stones and letterboxes encounter the aesthetics of the cosmetics industry and motifs from teenage culture. A multi-layered interplay of images, materials, and symbols thus emerges in a spatial narrative in which different worlds coexist in parallel.

At the threshold between reality and imagination, Shamiran Istifan guides us through different layers in the exhibition – from the underground into the midst of our everyday lives, and on to transcendent spheres. In a manner that is both poetic and precise, her installations draw attention to the structures that shape perception and create contemporary monuments and memorials to the complexity of social coexistence in Switzerland.

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### Room 1

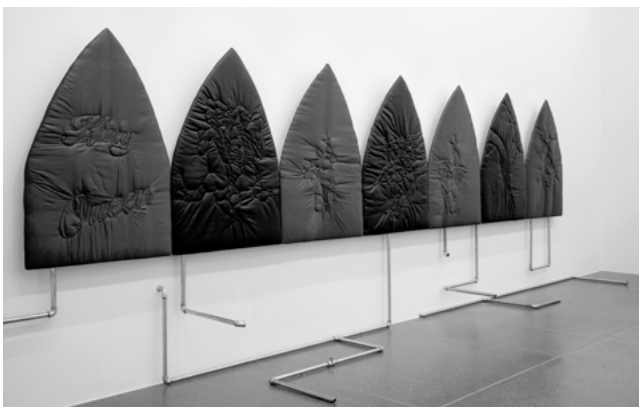
An installation – consisting of a metal structure with works in black fabric attached to it – forms a kind of passage between interior and exterior spaces. The framework of interlocking metal tubes is reminiscent of construction sites, oil pipelines, and archaeological excavations. The tapered forms of the textile reliefs, in turn, evoke Gothic cloisters or gravestones. The robust tubes contrast with the soft textures of the padded black faux leather reminiscent of car interiors. Layering various references, Shamiran Istifan deliberately leaves room for a range of interpretations. Beneath the glossy surfaces – which serve as screens for projection or as symbols of control and desire – complex layers of meaning unfold.

On the darkly shimmering works in the *Unearth Angel I–VII* (2026) series, various motifs embroidered onto the fabric emerge: one angelic figure gently rests its head on its knees as if asleep, while others seem to be floating away on their wings. Cherub-like, angelic figures are a recurring motif in the artist's work. Angels are considered messengers and liminal figures, capable of moving between earthly and supernatural realms. Yet the artist brings the motif back down to Earth, into the

here and now: her angels wear high heels and embody childlike innocence, as well as strength and self-confidence. Other motifs inspired by the internet culture of the 2000s, such as stars and lettering, can also be seen in the works. They playfully disrupt the otherwise rather sombre aesthetic of the work, which engages with hidden layers, including those lying underground – a tension reflected in the title itself: She uses the English term '*Unearth*' to focus on the act of bringing something to light.

### Room 2

In Shamiran Istifan's work, the everyday becomes a mirror of social issues. In *Inbox* (2026), the artist focuses on the letterbox: an object in which the transition from public order to private, often hidden narratives, comes sharply into focus. The artist transplants this quintessentially Swiss design object into a museum context, while simultaneously imbuing it with new meaning: as on beauty-industry billboards or posters of celebrities in teenagers' bedrooms, the face of a woman gazes back at us. It is the Lebanese singer and actress Haifa Wehbe, one of the most successful Arabic-speaking pop stars of the 2000s. She holds a finger to her lips – a gesture associated



*Unearth Angel I-VII, 2026 Pipelines, 2026*



*Inbox, 2026*



*Skin City, 2026*

with innocence, but also with discretion, or the keeping of confidential information, and thus one that carries subversive potential. The letterbox, with its repetitive geometric structure and bureaucratic, standardised formal language, becomes a symbol of social projections through layers of paint and make-up.

Soap paving stones lie on the museum floor. The fragility of the material and the associations it evokes contrast with the stone-paved streets of European cities. Several hundred bars of soap in different shades of green combine to form a geometric surface – a quiet reminder of Aleppo soap production or of the colour palette of suburban Aargau.

On closer inspection, the individual elements reveal their different qualities: alongside the soaps made from natural ingredients, Shamiran Istifan has included a few translucent bars that appear somewhat artificial. Embossed lettering reading *Diva Nation* refers to the nail-design and lip-blush studio *DIVAS 4 DIVAS*, which Shamiran Istifan runs together with her sister. Here, and in her work generally, the artist employs appropriation and reinterpretation as a means that is both playful and subversive. Often reduced to its outward appearance and used in a manner that is at the same time derogatory and admiring, the term *Diva* takes on a new, even territorial, meaning in the work.

The artist designs paving stones and letterboxes as architectural structures that both contain personal stories and point to overarching collective systems and power relations. She focuses on the relationship between the individual and the state, between the body and society, making it clear that the political reality always finds its way into private lives.

### Room 3

Finally, an imaginary urban landscape opens up in the last room: a transparent, latex-like fabric covers a mysterious, towering building. Beneath the textile skin, the contours of a wooden skeleton reminiscent of Gothic church architecture emerge. Once again, the artist combines sacred and formal urban languages with soft, tactile materials.

Starting in the mid-1970s, the Swiss artist Heidi Bucher created impressions of rooms in uninhabited buildings through a kind of 'skin-peeling' process, thereby literally drawing the past into the present. Shamiran Istifan, on the other hand, detaches herself from an actual location in *Skin City* (2026). Rather than carrying the traces of lived memory, her house, which cannot be clearly located, radiates an inner restlessness, a peculiar emptiness: it is no longer part of an abandoned Gothic

cityscape, but appears here more as a passage into the spiritual world, like a portal to another dimension.

Shamiran Istifan is the recipient of the 2026 Aarau Manor Art Prize, which is awarded every two years to promote young Swiss artists. The award provides the occasion for this solo exhibition and accompanying publication.

Curator  
Sarah Mühlebach

Scientific trainee  
Renée Schwerzmann

#### Acknowledgements

Shamiran Istifan would like to thank Rakhel Cemikyan, Sara Hadad, Naima Ghoul, Josh Johnson, Philip Ortelli.

The Aargauer Kunsthaus would like to thank the Canton of Aargau, the Aargau Art Association, Manor, the City of Aarau, and the Federal Office of Culture for their generous support.

#### Publication

To mark the exhibition, a bilingual publication (German/English) will be published by Verlag für Moderne Kunst, Vienna, featuring contributions by Moshtari Hilal, Shamiran Istifan, and Sarah Mühlebach.

#### Events

##### Guided Tours

Sunday, 21 June 2026, at 1 pm  
Tour with the artist Shamiran Istifan and curator Sarah Mühlebach

Sunday, 26 July 2026, at 11 am  
Tour with curator Sarah Mühlebach

##### Closing Reception and Book Launch

Sunday, 6 September 2026, at 2 pm

##### Public Guided Tours

Saturdays at 3 pm  
Sundays at 11 am  
Every first Thursday of the month at 6.30 pm

All upcoming events can be found at [aargauerkunsthhaus.ch/agenda](http://aargauerkunsthhaus.ch/agenda)

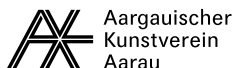
#### Opening Hours

Tuesdays – Sunday 10 am – 5 pm  
Thursdays 10 am – 8 pm  
Closed Mondays  
Free admission  
Thursdays 5 pm – 8 pm

#### Opening Hours on Public Holidays

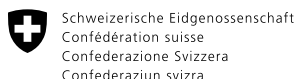
10 am – 5 pm  
Maienzug Eve 2 July 2026  
Maienzug 3 July 2026  
Swiss National Day 1 August 2026  
Mary's Assumption 15 August 2026

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