

Kunsthalle Wien
Museumsquartier

EN

Chalisée Naamani
Octogone
29.1.–6.4.2026

Chalisée Naamani layers and collages images, fabrics and text to produce sculpture, print and textile works. Informed by a wide range of sources, her work brings together ornamental traditions from the decorative and fine arts, Persian, Christian and Islamic iconographies, quotations from popular culture and the internet as well as personal photographs and archival material. This exhibition presents a series of new and recent works that form Naamani's first institutional exhibition outside of France.

I create what I like to call 'image garments'. They are real garments, with cuts, seams, and finishing touches, but they are not meant to be worn. They're more like sculptures.

– Chalisée Naamani

Central to Naamani's work are questions of cultural transmission, transfer, imitation and the appropriation of symbols and ornamentation. For the artist, these dynamics are particularly evident in the context of migration and forced displacement and intensified by a globally operating fashion industry as well as the internet's expansive regime of image circulation. Several works take up these processes on a formal level.

The exhibition begins and ends with works that combine subjects of global tourism with migration and instability. Parked at the entrance to the exhibition, *Life is a carousel (Pharrell Williams)* (2025) is an installation consisting of an ensemble of suitcases, unfolding via a variety of details. A neck pillow patterned with the names of global metropolises points to international tourism, elsewhere oversized emblems from luxury brands raise questions of authenticity, imitation and desire. The work reflects diasporic experiences anchored in the artist's family history: A miniature Iran Air plane rests on one of the suitcases, another bears a luggage tag with a black-and-white photograph of Naamani's Iranian grandparents. Some of the luggage is covered with tulips, both the artist's favourite flower and a symbol of martyrdom in Iran.

Inside the space, the exhibition takes as its starting point the *Zurkhaneh* or 'House of Strength', found in Iran and neighbouring countries. This training space is dedicated to the practice of *Varzesh-e Pahlavani*, a martial art rooted in the pre-Islamic period. Following the Arab conquest of Iran in the seventh century, the sport was banned due to its perceived revolutionary potential as a form of cultural and physical resistance. Naamani reimagines the exhibition space as a gymnasium with works that variously imitate or incorporate sports equipment. The physical act of training a body and building strength becomes a metaphor for other forms of resistance.

Suspended from the ceiling, *Bunch of Flowers* (2025) takes the form of a knot of punch bags upholstered in various fabrics – some industrially manufactured, others handcrafted and passed down through generations of the artist's family. Many of these employ the Persian motif, *boteh jeghe* which was popularised in the West in the 18th and 19th century, where it became known as paisley. Naamani refers to the circulation of the ornamental textile design which was transported via colonial networks, from Persia to the Mughal Empire and eventually to the United Kingdom where it took the name of the Scottish town where it was reproduced. *L'Octogone* (2025) [The Octagon], installed beneath it, is a mat composed of puzzle-shaped cushions, referencing the traditional architecture of the *Zurkhaneh*, where *Varzesh-e Pahlavani* is practised. Naamani cites the sport as an exclusively male domain – officially forbidden to women in Iran – while also noting its increasing reclamation by women as a symbol of female emancipation. On the mat, elements of training equipment are combined with objects

used for the cognitive development of young children. Drawing on her own experience of motherhood, Naamani reverses entrenched gender stereotypes and deconstructs societal ideals of growth, optimisation and bodily discipline.

At the centre of the exhibition space, furniture resembling lockers and a gym bench situates the sculpture *Who claims love?* (2025). Comprising a row of red capes, it alludes to the traditional garments that belong to the rituals of *Varzesh-e Pahlavani*. A photograph of Naamani's grandfather wearing medals awarded for sport is appliqued onto the fabric of a cape. Other elements connect to the artist's birthplace, Paris, through the iconography of luxury brands and tourist souvenirs, including effigies of the Eiffel Tower. The artist's research on attire used in martial arts continues in breastplates covered with houndstooth patterns. The textile motif thought to originate in the Austrian Salzkammergut region is known in its contemporary form via tweed cloth woven in the Scottish Lowlands and a pattern that was popularised by major fashion houses including Chanel. The pattern is taken up by Naamani to raise questions about originality, imitation and appropriation. Opposite, the hanging sculpture *T'es bombé comme une arme* (2020–21) [You're pumped up like a weapon] implies the presence of a body with a breastplate and boxing gloves – equipment that both protects and restrains it.

Several sculptures engage – both formally and symbolically – with the visual codes of international protest movements and political resistance. *Athéna* (2020) [Athena] demonstrates Naamani's approach to layering, combining various elements that here refer to pro-Ukrainian protests. The work includes a football scarf which displays the title of Liverpool F.C.'s emotive anthem in the Ukrainian national colours. The scarf is paired with a fake mobile phone showing an Instagram post by fashion journalist Sophie Fontanel, acknowledging the courage of a Moscow subway driver dressed in the same colours. Other works refer to the use of colour as a political signifier. For example, *Sacs à dos porteurs d'images* (2020) [Rucksacks bearing images] and *Cape et gilet jaune* (2020) [Cape and yellow vest] cite the French "Gilets Jaunes" [Yellow Vests] and their eponymous high-visibility garments.

On the adjacent wall, *No Kings, Only Queens* (2026), newly produced for the exhibition, addresses recent struggles for transgender rights in the United States. The title and image printed on the necktie are drawn from a meme that circulated widely on social media in response to President Donald Trump's rhetoric and policies. Here, the tie – an emblem closely associated with his public persona – becomes a vehicle for ironic reversal. The sculpture conflates and unsettles gendered codes through an assemblage of womenswear, propped up by equipment used in football training. Naamani subtly exposes and destabilises entrenched gender stereotypes via a combination of tools designed to discipline and optimise physical performance.

Naamani's practice is grounded in research on the history of fashion and an approach that positions it as inherently political, exploring how questions of form, function and aesthetics are bound to power and cultural significance. A series of new

commissions draw upon local cultural references to examine how traditional garments such as the *Dirndl* and *Lederhosen* encode and reaffirm gendered ideals through their design, while limiting bodily autonomy. *All the Women in Me* (2026), for instance, consists of a series of *Dirndl* dresses, one featuring an image of the Empress Elisabeth of Austria ('Sisi') and the other a picture of the Eiffel Tower, also known as *La Dame de fer* [the Iron Lady]. Naamani connects two female-coded icons of the respective cities of Vienna and Paris.

The neighbouring sculpture, *Born to Be Growth* (2026) deploys a stack of mass-produced children's *Lederhosen* alongside a height chart and a cushion in the form of an edelweiss flower – a symbol of the Alpine regions and a plant which is able to survive in harsh mountain environments. Opposite these works, *Heimat Liebe* (2026) [Heimat love] seems to suggest a bending body wearing a T-shirt embroidered with the German word 'Heimat' [home], whose interior lining bears an image of Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss* (1907-08). In this work, Naamani resituates the concept of *Heimat* from a migrant perspective. The term has historically been used to construct notions of cultural purity and national identity, most notably through its instrumentalisation under National Socialism. In reclaiming it, Naamani foregrounds the exclusionary logic of a singular, geographically fixed home, especially for those whose lives are shaped by movement and displacement. *Shall we* (2025) expands this reflection, combining the traditional trousers worn for *Varzesh-e Pahlavani* with underwear featuring the phrases 'so we fought for' and 'a country of our own'. In dialogue with the surrounding works, it questions contemporary conditions of belonging.

Installed within the recesses of Naamani's gym lockers, the multi-part work *Mohamed Ali, Britney Spears and Me* (2026) takes the form of suit bags, garments and fabric rose brooches. One component of the work is a scarf, where Naamani has placed the slogans 'Free Britney' and 'Free Iran' side by side. The artist refers to the liberation movement in Iran and the campaign to free pop singer Britney Spears from the guardianship of her father that lasted from 2007 to 2021. The work draws a connection between two movements that sought to disseminate their message via social media in order to fight against patriarchal systems and the oppression of women.

The Iranian freedom movement is also the subject of the photo-mural *From Iran* (2025). It uses a found image to cite the protests against the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement formed in response to the death of Mahsa Amini while in police custody in 2022. In a photograph (widely shared via social media), a wall is painted with the Farsi phrase 'مقاومت زندگیست' which can be translated as 'Resistance is life'. The graffiti was repeatedly painted over with white paint by Iranian authorities, only to reappear in the same place. In the work, Naamani pays tribute to the artist-led Instagram account @from_iran, where she found the image, and commemorates the figure of Amini, who was allegedly arrested for 'wearing inappropriate clothing'. Positioned directly beside it, *You Must Hide Love in the Closet (Ahmed Shamlu)* (2025) brings together prints of photographs from different public spaces arranged as a paravent, a form traditionally used to hide something from view. The work is named after the late Iranian poet and activist Ahmed Shamlu (1925–2000).

The soft sculpture *Khorshid Khanoom* (2026) presents puzzle-shaped cushions and a toy puppet theatre alongside Persian iconography. The ornamental language of the work combines the visual identity of luxury brands with traditional Iranian patterns, such as the *boteh jeghe* (paisley). At the centre of the work is an image of a clock with the face of *Khorshid Khanoom* (Lady Sun), a Persian allegory depicting the sun as a woman. Behind a theatre curtain, a photograph of the Iranian Alborz mountain range appears bearing the Persian inscription 'سره‌م من از تحت زمین' ('My contribution to saving the earth').

The last two works in the exhibition, employ objects associated with luggage. Commissioned for this exhibition, *Love and Ornament* (2026) features a hotel luggage trolley adorned by sweaters bearing the slogan 'I love Vienna' and shopping bags printed with heart symbols. Naamani cites the inflationary and affective use of the heart in social media to highlight its significance within contemporary iconography. The title of the installation alludes to the canonical essay *Ornament and Crime* (1908) by the controversial Austrian-Czechoslovak architect Adolf Loos, which advocates for a reduced and 'rational' formal language in contrast to the Occidental style of its cultural 'Other'. Finally, *La Liberté guidant le peuple* (2026) [*Liberty Leading the People*] takes the form of an airport luggage trolley 'dressed' with an image of Eugène Delacroix's eponymous 1830 painting commemorating the July Revolution in France. Conceived in 2025, it unwittingly cites a longstanding emblem of revolutionary optimism within a work that was installed in the wake of renewed protests following years of social, economic and political repression in Iran. Against this backdrop, the figure of Liberty acquires renewed significance as a figure of resistance in the context of ongoing struggles for freedom. For Naamani, *Liberty La Liberté guidant le peuple* crystallises a resonance between past and present revolutions, emerging as both a point of convergence within the exhibition and a guiding mantra that connects historical imagery to lived political reality.

Biography

Chalisée Naamani (b. 1995, Paris) has held solo exhibitions at Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2025) and La Galerie – Centre d'art contemporain de Noisy-le-Sec (2021). Her work has also been exhibited at institutions including Le Delta, Namur (2025); Hangar Y, Meudon; FRAC Champagne-Ardenne, Reims (both 2024); MUDAM Luxembourg; La Friche La Belle de Mai, Marseille (both 2023) and the Biennale de Nice (2022). Naamani received the Pista 500 Prize from the Pinacoteca Agnelli, Turin (2023) and the Benoît Doche de Laquintane Prize (2021). She lives and works in Paris.

Public Programme

- 28.1. 18:30 Artist Talk: Chalisée Naamani
in conversation with Noit Banai,
Professor of Diaspora Aesthetics,
Institute for Art Theory and
Cultural Studies, Academy of Fine
Arts Vienna (EN)
- 5.2. 18:00 Curator's Tour with Anna Marckwald (DE)
- 22.2. 16:00 Guided Tour (DE) – Free Sunday
sponsored by Dorotheum
- 24.2. 11:00 Babyfriendly Tour (DE)
- 14.3. 14:00 Guided Tour in Farsi
- 2.4. 18:00 Guided Tour (EN)

Full programme details for the exhibition are available online:



All works are Courtesy of Chalisée Naamani & Ciaccia Levi, Paris/Milan unless stated otherwise. Kunsthalle Wien is grateful to Ciaccia Levi, Paris/Milan; the E. Righi Collection and the Collezione Claudio Ravetto, Turin for generously lending works for this exhibition. Chalisée Naamani would like to thank Horya Makhoulouf, Mojgan Teymouri, Marjan Teymouri and Céline Furet.

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