

In “When the Div Came Home,” Soheila Kayoud Mixes Whimsy and Macabre

The Iranian-born artist’s first solo exhibition at Andrew Rafacz uses mythological creatures to explore otherness.

BY EMMA RIVA | MARCH 30, 2026

To understand reality, Soheila Kayoud turns to the fantastical. The Iranian-born artist’s first solo exhibition, “When the Div Came Home” at Andrew Rafacz, uses mythological creatures to explore otherness. Where it can be alienating to be on the outside, Kayoud uses the div, a demon-like figure from Middle Eastern mythology, to show the whimsy in being an outsider.

Kayoud had a long career as an engineer and began formally making textile work during the pandemic. “When the Div Came Home” is the work of an artist with a lifelong love of learning and a mixture of technical skill and a vibrant imagination.

The dynamism Kayoud achieves with thread is astounding. She renders fabric as a painterly material. The divs’ bodies have vertical threads defining their figure, whereas the landscapes have swoops and long horizontal lines to create structure and composition. The works have real movement in them, even more so than some painted canvases. “Divs #11” is an impressive example of this, with the cross-legged div



Soheila Kayoud, "Divs #11," 2025, Hand dyed wool on muslin, 19.75 x 16 in.

sitting on a glamorous chaise on a checkered floor. The sheer amount and depth of patterns is staggering—with only one material, Kayoud creates multiple planes.

In “Divs #8,” a standout piece in the show, a div dives into a herd of multicolored wild horses, galloping among florid trees and plumes of clouds. What is the div leaping away from? Wherever they came from, they join the revelry of the herd. No single thread is the same in Kayoud’s hand-dyed wool. The viewer gets the sense they are looking at something that can never be recreated. In a moment of constant reproduction of images, Kayoud creates work of singular detail.

There’s a timeliness to Kayoud’s work on the geopolitical scale, too. The United States began its military escalation with Iran just before the show opened. The show reminds gallerygoers of the richness of Iranian history and mythology beyond current events—the divs predate even Zoroastrianism in Iran. In Sufism, the div is a symbol of human vice, so Kayoud invites us to ask who decides what vice and wickedness is.

Though the divs’ traits are androgynous, they wear trappings of femininity like long nails and makeup. In “Divs #6,” Kayoud depicts them with both breasts and a penis, one with a clown-like face and the other with horns and large ears. “Divs #9” shows the divs throwing up their red-painted fingers and dancing, breasts hanging in the air. Images of the “divine feminine” often merge femininity and sexuality. Kayoud’s divs show a femininity not based in seduction, but rather in play.

There’s a mystery and enigma to the work. Even if someone knew every possible biographical detail about the artist or every piece of historical context, the works would still have a life of their own. Under Kayoud’s needle, the divs gesticulate, gyrate, dance. They frolic together, grins on their faces. Demonhood never looked like so much fun.

“Soheila Kayoud: When the Div Came Home” at Andrew Rafacz, 1749 West Chicago through April 4.