

Kim, Ho Won. (2025, September 19). Emma Safir: Uyt Den Gheest. The Brooklyn Rail. Online.

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ARTSEEN | SEPTEMBER 2025

Emma Safir: *Uyt Den Gheest*

By Ho Won Kim



Emma Safir, *BABY DARLING*, 2025. Digitally printed silk, pewter, mirrored glass beads, reflective thread, neoprene, ochre oxide pigment, 33 × 21 × 2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Hesse Flatow.

HESSE FLATOW

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Emma Safir's *Uyt Den Gheest* at Hesse Flatow doesn't merely present windows—it interrogates the act of looking itself. Through silkscreened tulle, pewter-cast seashells, and photographs dissolved through smocking, Safir constructs an architecture of productive opacity where each surface functions as both threshold and barrier. The exhibition transforms windows—those presumed portals of transparency—into sites of deliberate interference and strategic refusal.

Uyt Den Gheest
Hesse Flatow
September 5–October 4,
2025
New York

The show's Dutch Golden Age title, meaning “from the mind, spirit, or imagination,” signals Safir's method: decorative forms drawn from memory rather than direct observation, accumulated until they generate their own urgent reality. This invocation of Dutch culture proves particularly pointed. In Holland, where open curtains have signified Protestant transparency and moral virtue historically, Safir documented contemporary acts of resistance—frosted glass, decorative window stickers, improvised privacy screens. Here, these everyday boundary-making strategies become raw material for radical transformation. Through digital collaging and masking, she dissolves photographic clarity, and the resulting abstractions become templates for smocking patterns or grounds for screenprinting. Each translation moves the image further from documentation while making it more materially insistent and more politically charged.

For years, Safir has excavated territories that are often dismissed as merely decorative, recognizing that an ornament's devaluation is a distinctly gendered violence. While major strands of modernism equated transparency with moral virtue and dismissed decorative practice as feminine frivolity, Safir locates resistance in opacity's deliberate disruption. Her wall-mounted, upholstered panels materialize this refusal. In *BABY DARLING* (all works 2025) and *GREY PEARL (THE MOUSE)*, windows are transformed into something more ambiguous: their irregular edges cut to follow Baroque frames drawn from memory, while printed silk surfaces beaded with mirrored glass together create viewing experiences that oscillate between invitation and denial, shimmering with promise yet ultimately withholding full access.

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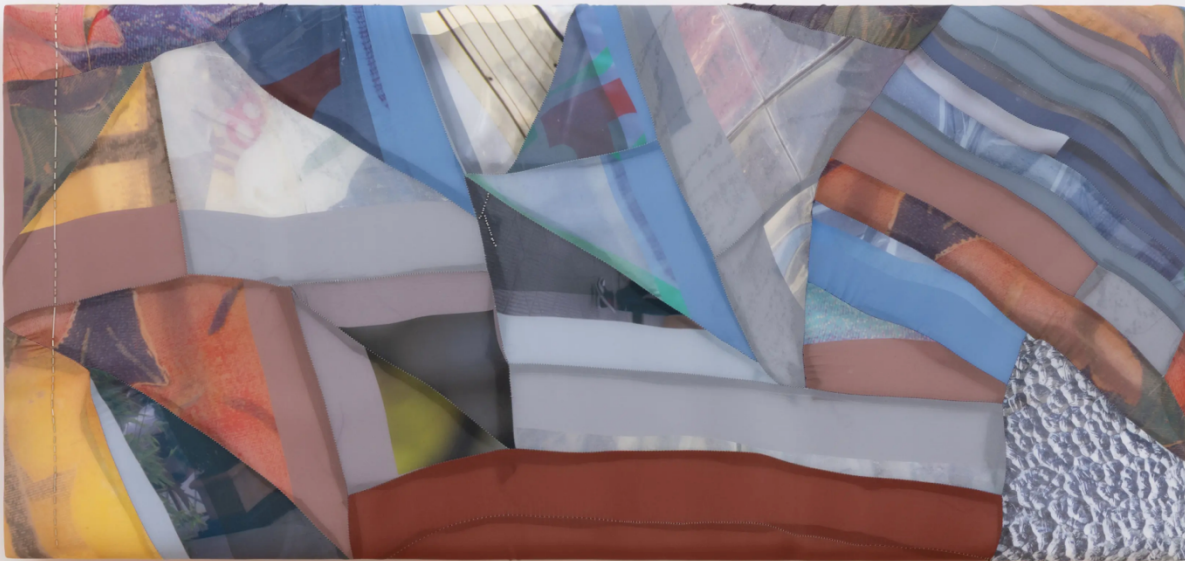
Installation view: *Emma Safir: Uyt Den Gheest*, Hesse Flatow, New York, 2025. Courtesy Hesse Flatow.

This tension between revelation and concealment reaches its apex in *screened nacre*, the exhibition's pivotal work. A quilted folding screen with a meandering stainless steel frame supports silk georgette patchwork presenting two distinct faces: one dense with dark patterns, the other, on the reverse, in shell pink and seafoam green. The piece recalls the fourteenth-century Tristan quilt, whose narrative sequence was scrambled through centuries of restoration, surviving because its beauty outlasted its legibility. Like that medieval precedent, Safir's screen accumulates through interruption. Each sewn panel and metal curve builds a structure that remains fundamentally permeable, neither transparent nor opaque but something more complex and protective.

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Throughout the exhibition, Safir systematically confuses material hierarchies in ways that challenge conventional craft distinctions. Pewter-cast seashells carry metal's weight while maintaining their fragility. Rigid frames soften under upholstery's touch. Photographs reconstitute through smocking, a technique historically confined to domestic labor. This logic extends to her treatment of information itself: digital collages receive the same meticulous attention as hand embroidery—pixels handled with the care reserved for thread. Crucially, she withholds certain revelations. The reverse sides of her embroideries remain hidden, protected from consumption. This selective disclosure echoes Édouard Glissant's "right to opacity": his radical assertion that respect doesn't require total comprehension.



Emma Safir, *Murex Pastiche*, 2025. Digitally printed silk, pewter, mirrored glass beads, reflective thread, neoprene, flashe, 23 × 49 × 2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Hesse Flatow.



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Safir's core strategy—ornamentation that overwhelms structure, decoration that refuses subordination to function—emerges as decoratively grotesque in *Murex Pastiche*. Fractured silk geometries collide with reflective thread and glass beads, creating surfaces too dense to serve as windows. These aren't representations of privacy but architectures of privacy, their ornamental complexity becoming a form of protection—a productive opacity.

Across the gallery, perception slows to handwork's pace, stitch-by-stitch, bead-by-bead. Viewers must invest time to parse accumulated layers of imagery and texture, balancing seduction by and distance from the material to maintain careful equilibrium to understand labor's intensity, while crucial aspects of Safir's process remain guarded. This temporal dilation resists easy consumption, protecting partial visibility as a right rather than a limitation.

Safir's practice ultimately repositions ornament as information architecture built on strategic disruption rather than mere embellishment. Her constructed apparitions recognize that privacy, memory, and feminine labor aren't given conditions but continuously produced through decorative acts. In her hands, the dismissed crafts of domestic life emerge as technologies of refusal. Opacity shields where transparency surveils. Ornament resists where minimalism extracts. Decoration becomes not frivolous addition but fundamental methodology—a way of being in the world that honors what remains hidden, values what layers slowly, and protects what refuses to be fully known. Through complexity rather than legibility, Safir transforms limitation into power, crafting spaces where looking itself becomes an act requiring patience, care, and respect for all that will not be revealed.

Ho Won Kim is a Seoul-born, New York-based curator and writer.