

The Africa Center Plaza Commission

Sarah Elawad
When the War is Over

On view: June 10, 2025—May 10, 2026

Artist Statement

I still remember the first time I went to Sudan. I was twelve years old, and my uncle was getting married. I don't know why it took so long for my entire family to visit, but what I do know is that my first time there was immersed in celebration. The wedding stretched across several days, each event filled with music, laughter, and color. I wore a different dress to every occasion, I remember one that had puffy sleeves and another that matched with my cousins, a moment we had carefully planned. What lingers most in my memory is the palette of those nights, the rich fabrics, the colours and lights. I remember watching the older women as they danced in their tobés, they were graceful, dignified and beautiful. I wanted to be like them.

My design for The Africa Center's window installation is inspired by those tobés, the patterns, the movement and the symbolism. In Sudan, the tóbe is more than a garment. It is a marker of womanhood, identity, and cultural continuity. As I worked on this piece, I held close the women in my life and the many traditions they carry with them.

But this reflection is not untouched by grief. Over the past two years, Sudan has experienced one of the largest humanitarian crises in the world. More than 14 million people have been displaced. The family home where we once celebrated my uncle's wedding has been destroyed. That uncle, his wife, their children, and nearly all of my extended family have fled. The war has touched every part of our lives. Women, in particular, are bearing the heaviest burdens. Amid loss and upheaval, we rarely have space to grieve, to feel, or to simply be. Which is why I resonated with the words of Safia Elhillo, in her post "One Year of War in Sudan": "When the war is over, I will make space for my feelings."

This piece is a tribute to the Sudan I once knew. It is a love letter to our culture, to the strength and grace of our women, and to the traditions that persist even in exile. It is also a prayer for return, for healing, for a future where joy, memory, and beauty can thrive again.

When the war is over, we will go home.