

4A TALKS //

Shireen Taweel & Reina Takeuchi in conversation
as part of *Holding Patterns: Shireen Taweel*

3 - 25 September 2020

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TRANSCRIPT



REINA TAKEUCHI Hi, my name is Reina Takeuchi. I'm one of the Assistant Curators at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art. And I'm joined here today by Shireen Taweel in her beautiful Darlinghurst studio. I'm really excited to have this conversation. Before we begin, I would like to acknowledge that we are gathered today on the unceded Lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and I would like to pay my respects to all First Nations elders, past, present and emerging as the traditional custodians of the Lands upon which we live, work and create. So I guess I'd like to begin by talking a bit about the *Holding Patterns* Project. It was a project that was co-curated by Con Gerakaris and myself.

And it was conceived to engage with the process-based practices of Sydney-based artists and to reflect on what art can do in this time of uncertainty, and how artists have been given opportunities now to reflect on what it means to be creatively engaged during this time of crisis, and also how to re-examine works that have been laid to rest and develop new projects. I guess that's where your work kind of comes in because *tracing transcendence*, which is now on view at 4A was originally developed for the Next Wave

festival in 2018. And I guess this is the first time the pair has been exhibited together here. How do you feel about that?



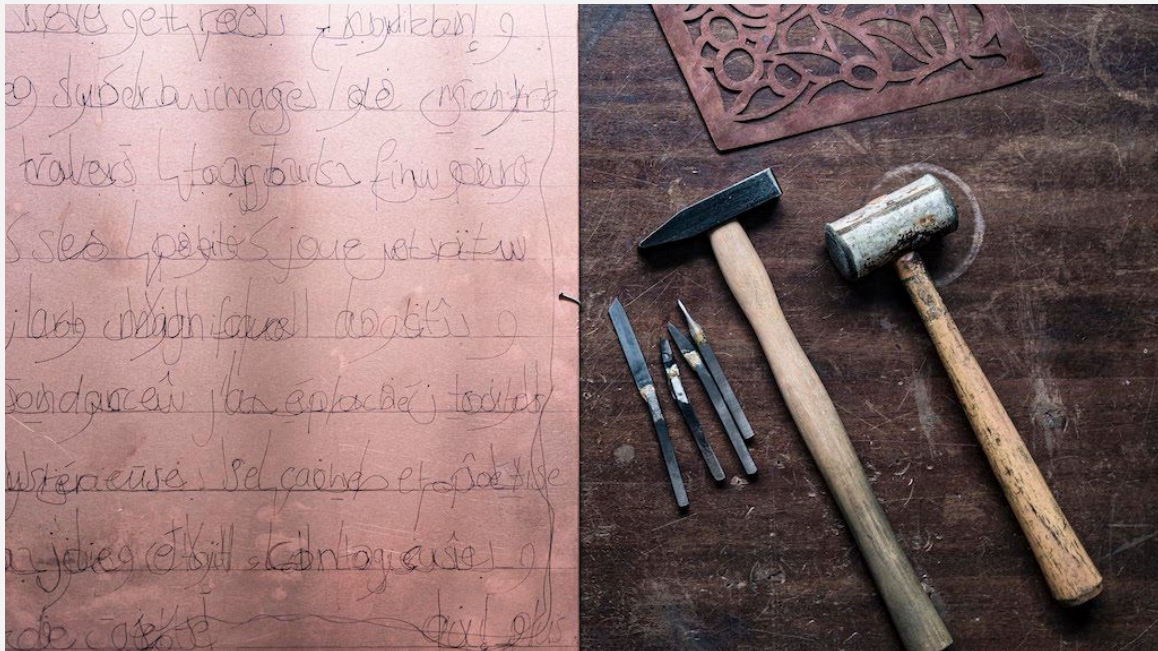
SHIREEN Taweel With the context and timing of the climate we've lived with for the last six months in Australia, I'm really aware that this work has another layer of meaning and that's been really beautiful to see the installation in another light that I could never have anticipated while making. There's so many values around this artwork for me personally, thinking of community and sacred space and the legacy of the mosque in the Australian landscape. However, with the COVID climate, it's something that, you know, coming together as a community and even praying together now has a lot of change and restrictions and I think the values of these sites are just so important and something to reflect on. But to consider for the future even: what will the mosque look like in the future, post the COVID climate we're in, and also with how our urban and gathering spaces are going to look like architecturally? This will influence what future mosques look like. So it's really beautiful to bring the work to 4A and back to Sydney and to think of that in the urban landscape within this current climate.

REINA Takeuchi Yes, there's something really immersive and inviting to the body to enter the space where the work is because of the suspension off the ground. And you do get that sense that it has a traditional meaning, with I guess, a reimagining of what a mosque could be or the sort of, I guess, the way that secular spaces of worship invite the body in.

SHIREEN Taweel And also, I guess that beautiful legacy of the first mosques in outback Australia across many different countries of South Australia and New South Wales, W.A., Queensland. These first mosques were very much about community members coming together to build a space for their people, using very local, very vernacular Australian materials to have their cultural practices within their community. And I think that's really special to think of like those elements who still carry through today. It's those really big values of why we pray and why we come together and why we share these spaces? It's interesting to think of the past and present as still really relevant. And then where we're

going in the future with these really, really special and valuable social spaces, whether we see them for the secular religious side, but also community and what does community mean today?

REINA TAKEUCHI Mmm, exactly. I think you bring with you this embodied knowledge through like the coppersmithing craft, but also kind of your relationship with the community. And I was kind of wondering how that kind of embodied knowledge comes through with your craft. And I guess the devices that you use to create?



SHIREEN Taweel So for *tracing transcendence*, those works are pierced and they're hand-sawn. And I think for me, like I was really interested in the play of material, hand-made and also copper particularly because it's a material that is also about transformation. And I feel like the cameleers that had come here in the settlement period of the 1800s really brought their own skills, but also they used what they could. The sites they built were really like beautiful, warm local materials that are hand-made. I was thinking, how could that translate back into the installation and what features could really inform the work.

But also thinking of copper again and its transformation... that it's almost like by working this material by hand, it is going through a huge process. And for me, that's really reflective of also the transformation these communities have made over time with their cross-cultural exchange and their sense of belonging and how that has changed was in the Australian context when they were settling here. [Also] with the new experiences, inter-marriages with First Nations people across many different countries, [it's] a really beautiful harmony, and I think that really talks back to my material and thinking of all these sites coming together and what copper means, even like that element of how it's a communication device. It transfers energy, this material. All these things I feel like come back into not just transformation, but also the sacred and transcendence. So that's why I really held on to this process and investment into the handmade copper, how it kind of speaks back to lived experiences through process.



REINA TAKEUCHI And I think that is like a really intriguing aspect to the work. But then also it's accompanied by the soundscape and that also brings together a lot of different places and kind of cultural histories. Would you like to expand on that?

SHIREEN Taweel Yes, I think the soundscape for this installation is really beautiful because prior to *tracing transcendence*, I hadn't worked with sound in my installations and it was originally instigated because of the site and context, us working with The Substation. My installations were quite compartmentalised with so many different rooms and I really found that a challenge. How would I know, thread, and make a connection between these installations for the viewer? And that's where sound was like a really important material to connect those spaces. So while I was doing my research and fieldwork across Broken Hill and Maree, particularly Maree because up on Arabana country. It's near the Salt Lakes, Lake Eyre and there's just a vastness there. It's extraordinary.

But I really wanted to capture the site because the first mosque that's in Maree is very much like, it's more of an essence of the mosque. The framework is there, but that it's not like, it's a ruin essentially. It's a relic that's more like seen as a heritage site, but it's not one for use anymore. But I wanted to capture all the elements around it, including the beautiful wind and the field recordings of the local landscape. And with that wind, it's really high pitched in the soundscape.

So it's almost like an electric current which comes back into the material of copper, and connecting these sites and spaces across Australia and also time. And then we have the azan that's coming through. And this azan is recorded for across many different places. Through my work in Turkey and Lebanon and here in Western Sydney. And I really wanted that play of not just time, but space and these connections that we hold within us. So that soundscape, I feel like having left *The Substation*, is still really important for the installation.

[*tracing transcendence* soundscape plays]

REINA TAKEUCHI You can see when people enter the space, it's kind of like the sound is also interrupted by the body. And it kind of changes the way you engage with the work because of how it kind of, I guess, sound, it transcends time as well. It has that aspect to it.

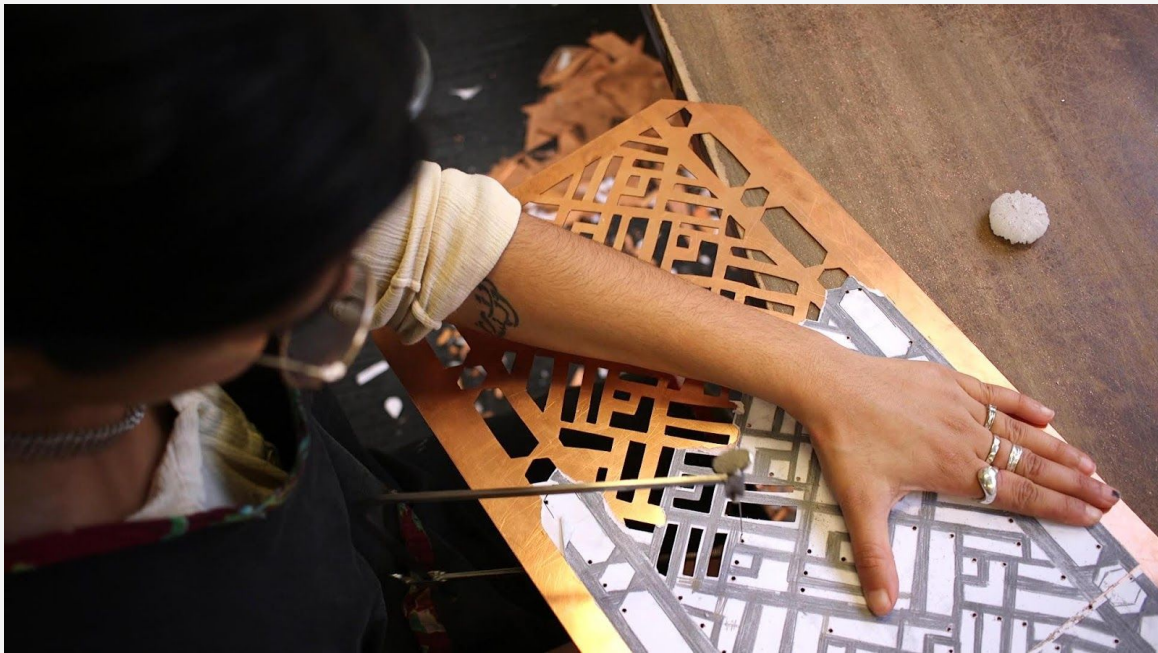


REINA TAKEUCHI I guess, talking about your sort of connections with Lebanon and connections with Western Sydney, as well as like a Lebanese migrant artist. How are the fluid perspectives of your own identity interconnected with your work?

SHIREEN Taweel Well, see, I feel like I've been really privileged to grow up across many different cultural spaces. And for me, growing up very much in a Lebanese household. But again, really curious about my local community environment. I was always really fascinated how this identity of being Lebanese and Australian has come together. And for me, at times, it's been tricky to navigate. But I think, like I see that, similar with my material coppersmithing. How I'm not a trained coppersmith. I'm a sculptor and an installation artist, but I am really committed to experimenting with this material with my hands. And I feel like that really connects back to, I guess, my sense of place and identity as an Australian Lebanese, that I'm in between both cultures constantly and I'm navigating that.

SHIREEN Taweel And the older I get. I feel like the more fluid it has become. But yeah, like I just feel it's similar to my approach to making and how I, I don't have all this direct knowledge of necessarily what I'm doing. But through that experimentation and that sense of being connected, I'm allowing that space to grow and develop things. And I feel like that's really tied. Like it's almost like I feel like there's a lot of self-reflection in the works I make for the journey it takes to make them. And quite a lot of uncertainty and challenges that I'm experimenting with constantly. And I don't necessarily really know the outcomes

because often each new sculpture is like an entirely new project; I haven't been through those processes before. And it's a huge navigation. I feel like just as much as I'm growing up, and now as an adult, I'm really aware of how I sit between all these cultural spaces and how I navigate them. And yet they are so transformative. And I've grown so much and so much richness has come out of that. And yeah, I feel very attached to the material, particularly because it gives me this hands-on agency. And just as much as I connect across all my communities I'm very involved and it's very intimate just as much.



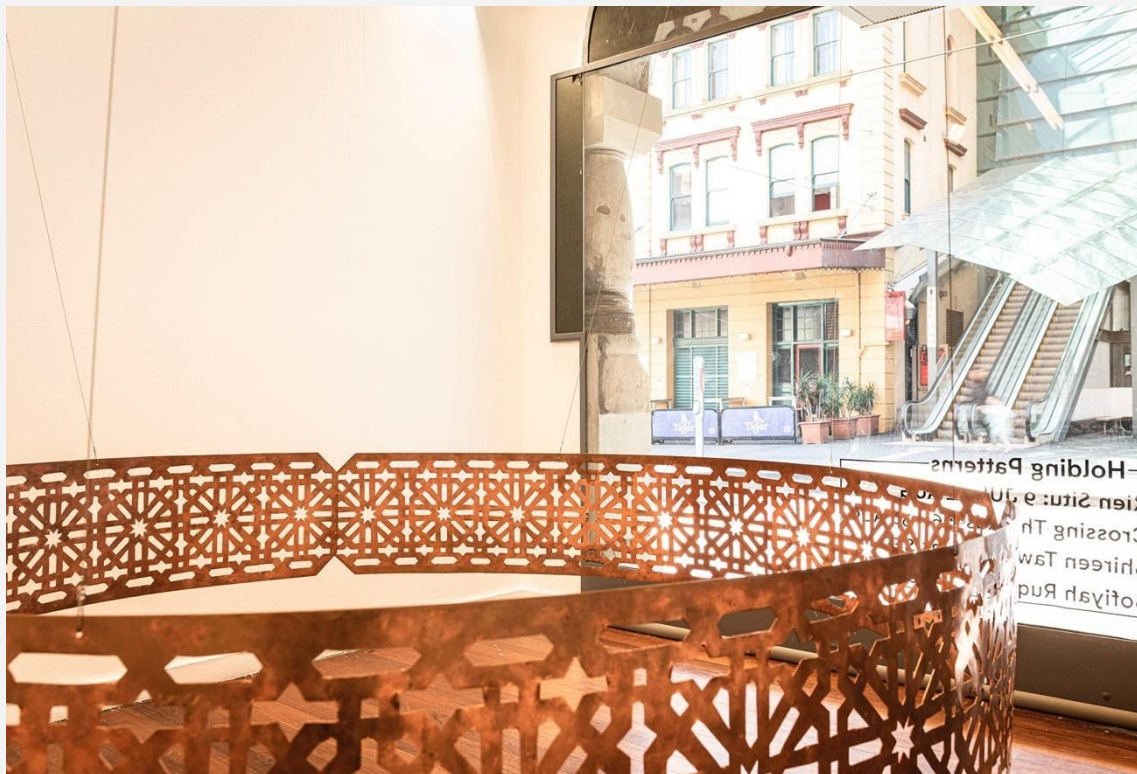
REINA TAKEUCHI And it's a craft that you sort of shared through workshops and education, kind of like facilitation as well.

SHIREEN Taweel Oh, yeah. I think it's so important. Like what I've been able to access and develop. I think there's such a richness in material and process that I have the capability to share that. And I just love seeing how young adults are being hungry to learn these skills. And they just can connect concepts and materials and their voices and stories and ideas into these processes are just so exciting. And yeah, I feel almost like this responsibility now that I am establishing myself as an artist and I'm really committed to being part of the community. So what can I bring to the next generation of artists for my own practice and open that up?

REINA TAKEUCHI Definitely. In our previous conversations, we've sort of talked about your kind of investigations into language as well, and how that was also kind of a vital aspect to this like kind of transcultural, I guess, dialogues. And I thought maybe we'd like to talk about that, especially with the kind of upcoming projects that you have this year as well.

SHIREEN Taweel Yeah, I mean, language has been so fluid in my life. I very much come from an Arabic speaking household and English, of course, beyond the household. It's been really present in my life, but also being of Lebanese descent.

SHIREEN Taweel What I found really interesting, having worked in Beirut and Lebanon quite a lot now in my early career, that language is fluid there on a whole other level, where often as Lebanese we code switch. So we use French, English, Arabic all in one sentence and it has really long roots way back, why we do that. And I think the proximity of that being on the Mediterranean, our ancient trade routes, even back to the Phoenician culture and the use of Phoenician alphabet and its influence around the Mediterranean across many different languages has built up over time. But I feel like that experience of code switching in Lebanon really puts me in a reflective situation of where I am in Sydney, also by my connections to Western Sydney, knowing so many different members who do code switch. And it's so natural and fluid here.



And I just thought wow, that's so much to unpack and explore about language and how that navigates cultural landscapes across Sydney and greater Australia. So I'm really interested to delve deeper into that and unpack what language is and where is it going? How are our uses of language evolving? So I've really had a lot of fun, just kind of delving into that and then bringing that into material and thinking of material also as like a communicative device. Copper is amazing for that. And yeah, it's been fun thinking that around sculpture too and thinking of sounds, like directional sound sculptures. And yeah really like pushing those boundaries again of what do we define as a language?

REINA Takeuchi Yeah. I guess sound plays a major aspect of that as well because like phonetically we can talk and all this kind of thing and we don't necessarily have to have the same kind of language capabilities as some of the members of the community. Yeah, I feel like I guess since *tracing transcendence*, your use of sound has kind of shifted and you're including it a lot more in your work.

SHIREEN Taweel Yeah. Oh, I'm also interested in making sculptures that may evoke sound or may evoke a conversation that one can almost hear. For example, I'm making these tablets which are influenced by some of the first scripture tablets, but all the language use is very conversational. And it's all mixed between like French, English,

Arabic. A lot of it's very colloquial. But I feel like some of them you may be able to find words that you can read through and others totally blurred. I feel like that, these works hopefully could evoke a sense of conversation and sound. And then there's other works where the sculptures do incur like a sound piece directly, or, I've made sculptures that really asks for the viewer to listen. But what they are listening to is really up to them.

REINA TAKEUCHI I remember seeing *devices for listening* and it kind of encourages the viewer to sort of think about what it is like to listen, listen through the device. But it's not necessarily something that you actually physically do.

SHIREEN Taweel Yeah, totally. And I like that openness. I think it allows the viewer to bring their own to the artwork and also consider maybe the not just reflective, but reciprocate their experiences and what the artist has experienced. So there's a lot of, I think, subtle exchanges happening. And I like the idea that my work is active when it's experienced.

REINA TAKEUCHI I guess a major thing from the *Holding Patterns* project has been kind of encouraging artists to, I guess, contemplate where their practices are going. And I was wondering if this year has brought about a lot of time out to think about these things, but where do you see your projects going from, this year and in the future?

SHIREEN Taweel Yeah, it's really interesting how I think I see my practice as quite social. And I like to see that my work is going in a direction socially engaged. And it's really interesting with our climate and all the changes that have happened throughout this year. How could I navigate that and what new spaces that would involve and how engaged? What does engagement look like now? Yeah. So I'm really having to think about that. Also, I am so strongly tied to Lebanon and the Arab world, and yet there are these great restrictions around travelling and how do I, how can I maintain those connections and feel like I'm involved and part of those communities? Even though I'm now literally like in one place. So it's going to be really interesting how to navigate that in the next coming years. But at the same time, I think all this reflectivity is really valuable and really important. And I think we can make so much use of that to bring into future projects and so much to learn from that, too.

REINA TAKEUCHI Yeah, definitely. I think it's kind of like a period of stasis, it's very fruitful because we're thinking through ideas and letting things brew a little bit.

SHIREEN Taweel Yeah, absolutely.

REINA TAKEUCHI...and to come out of it.

SHIREEN Taweel There's no more like 'the norm' and there's nothing that can be taken for autopilot and the conventions we used to play upon in the community. The industry has really shifted. So I think it's really interesting for us to be like really use our creative skills and build a structure that can also be more sustainable.

The recorded conversation between Shireen Taweel & Reina Takeuchi took place in Taweel's Darlinghurst studio on Monday 7 September 2020, as part of Holding Patterns: Shireen Taweel at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 3 – 25 September 2020.

4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art acknowledges the Gadigal People of the Euroa Nation, the traditional custodians of the Land on which this interview took place.

**#HoldingPatterns4A #ShireenTaweel
@4A_au #4AAustralia**

Images:

- 1) Shireen Taweel in her artist studio, April 2020, photo: Leigh Griffiths for Broadsheet Sydney, courtesy the artist.
- 2) Shireen Taweel, Holding Patterns: Shireen Taweel, Installation view, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, September 2020. Shireen Taweel, 'tracing transcendence', 2018, pierced copper, band 1: 30 x 180 x 180cm; band 2: 30 x 210 x 210cm; photo: Kai Wasikowski for 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, courtesy the artist.
- 3) Shireen Taweel artist studio (detail), April 2020, photo: Leigh Griffiths for Broadsheet Sydney, courtesy the artist.
- 4) Shireen Taweel, Holding Patterns: Shireen Taweel, Installation view, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, September 2020. Shireen Taweel, 'tracing transcendence', 2018, pierced copper, band 1: 30 x 180 x 180cm; band 2: 30 x 210 x 210cm; photo: Kai Wasikowski for 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, courtesy the artist.
- 5) Shireen Taweel, Holding Patterns: Shireen Taweel, Installation view, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, September 2020. Shireen Taweel, 'tracing transcendence', 2018, pierced copper, band 1: 30 x 180 x 180cm; band 2: 30 x 210 x 210cm; photo: Kai Wasikowski for 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, courtesy the artist.
- 6) Shireen Taweel, tracing transcendence studio process (detail), hand piercing copper, photo: Eloise Fuss, courtesy the artist.
- 7) Shireen Taweel, Holding Patterns: Shireen Taweel, Installation view, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, September 2020. Shireen Taweel, 'tracing transcendence' (detail), 2018, pierced copper, band 1: 30 x 180 x 180cm; band 2: 30 x 210 x 210cm; photo: Kai Wasikowski for 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, courtesy the artist.