

TRANSCRIPT



REINA TAKEUCHI I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered today, the land of the Burramattagal people of the Darug nation. And pay my respects to all first nations, past, present and emerging. And acknowledge that these lands have always been ones of creation, work and learning.

So to begin, I guess, talking about the Holding Patterns Project, I conceived this project with Con Gerakaris and we co-curated it together and basically it was kind of formulated focused on the emerging practices of Sydney based artists and the processes that they've been invested in at the moment, particularly this year, and coming out of, I guess, this unprecedented time. So I guess to begin talking about this, Sofiyah, how do you feel about emerging out of lockdown, having gone into making your first solo show?

SOFIYA RUQAYAH It's been really surreal for this to be my first solo exhibition. It's also a big relief as well, especially having that long period of inertia and finally having an opportunity to present work that I had created during that time. That really was a result of that time as well. So yeah, it was very much a relief [laughs].

REINA TAKEUCHI Do you think that the works that you made were kind of in response to the time that you spent?

SOFIYA RUQAYAH Definitely. Bit of both, like I knew that I wanted to work this year with ideas that I'd started to work with last year and materials that I'd started to work with last year as well, like the storm glasses. But the works that came out this year and that are in Holding Patterns are very much a result of things that were going on this year and things that I was thinking about and feeling that I don't think that I would have unless we had this pandemic.

REINA TAKEUCHI Definitely, it kind of shifted a lot of ways of thinking, I think, for everyone.

SOFIYA RUQAYAH Yeah, very much.

REINA TAKEUCHI I guess your practice emerges from familial stories around dreaming, but then also your personal dreams and your connections to Indonesia, but also to Sydney. And I guess I was wondering how your recurring dream that you had leading up to Holding Patterns played into the project and formulating the work Harbingers of Doom.

SOFIYA RUQAYAH So I had this recurring dream this year where these large, very, very large dogs were resting in my lap and they would slowly approach me and just lay their heads in my lap and then just gradually sink their teeth into my knee over time. And I'd just let it happen. And it was very sad. It was a really sad, recurring dream. And it very much reflected what was happening in my life at the time and the mood around me. So it felt just like a natural progression to utilise that dream when I was already exploring dreams as a concept in my work. So this recurring dream, I guess, reflected a sense of melancholy and pessimism that I was perceiving in my waking life that I wanted to kind of play with in the studio as well.

REINA TAKEUCHI Have dogs been like a symbol for you in your dreams?

SOFIYA RUQAYAH Not previously, no, but it was an interesting symbol to have is a recurring dream when there is so much that is attached to that symbol across cultures as well. And, you know, in a lot of cultures, the black dog is symbolic of depression or of a deep sadness. And then in other cultures, like in Islam, it can be symbolic of "ash-Shaitan", which is the devil. So, yeah, it's a very interesting symbol to have as a recurring dream this year in particular.

REINA TAKEUCHI And when you look at the I guess the fabric, they kind of seem luminous or something as well. They don't just seem black, but it's kind of this shifting iridescent quality as well. And with Harbingers of Doom, you've included your storm glasses, which you've been quite infatuated with since last year. I was wondering if you could talk a bit to that.



SOFIYA RUQAYAH So I came across the storm glass by chance and was just enamored with it. It's this antiquated weather instrument that is constantly mutating in response to the environment and at the time that I came across it, I was really interested in looking at bodies of water in relation to other bodies of water or watery bodies. And so I was really drawn to this contained body of water that was constantly in relation to and changing in relation to other bodies around it. And so this object, it's no longer used for its accuracy I don't think [laughs] because it's really that accurate but it's still this really fascinating object that has a really long history and very strange history. No one really knows who invented it, but it's said to have been around since the 1700s and was popularized by Admiral Fitzroy, who was on the HMS Beagle to accompany Charles Darwin on his great expedition across the world. So he was the first person to kind of popularise it, and he took it upon himself to popularize it among illiterate fishermen because it doesn't require any tools, like any written measurements or anything like that. So it did offer a lot to the working class in his community, which was very interesting.

REINA TAKEUCHI And I feel like it's very based on instinct as well. It kind of talks to that, I guess, even similarly to the compass. It's kind of something that you use intuitively.

SOFIYA RUQAYAH And I also really just like the idea that it was used as a tool of prediction and it has that kind of connotation to a crystal ball. And both of those things are a little bit dubious, you know, in their scientific purpose.

REINA TAKEUCHI And it could also be a real symbol of faith as well. That it will show some sort of guiding force or some sort of significant sign to follow. I was wondering if you would think about making your own scientific instruments or have kind of thought about, I guess, constructing something like that for yourself in your practice.

SOFIYA RUQAYAH I mean, I wouldn't say I wouldn't rule it out [laughs] as a possibility. It's not something that I really thought about before, but it would be really cool to learn how to do, like glassblowing, and make my own storm glasses.



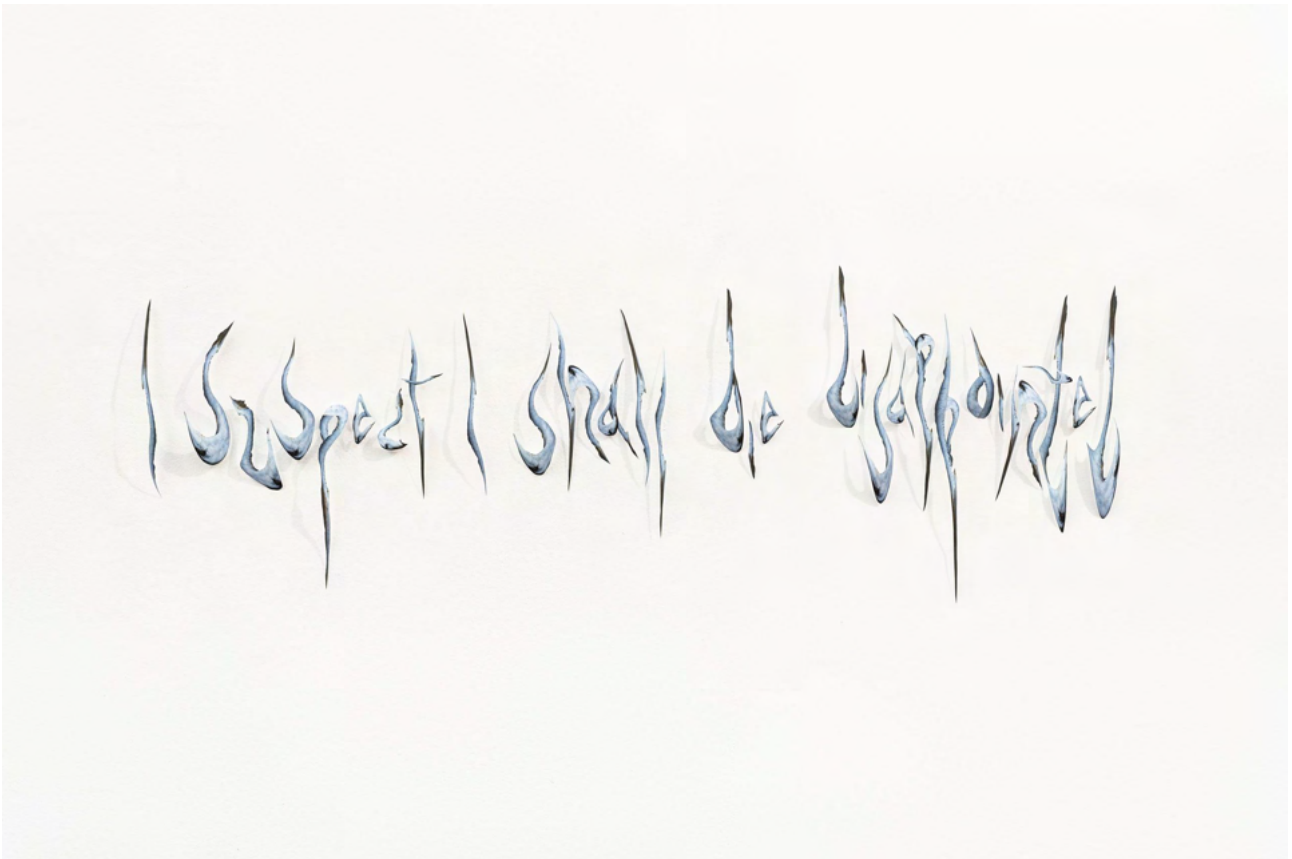
REINA TAKEUCHI In your work, *Self-fulfilling Prophecies* as well, there's these calligraphic shapes that you've made out of prints that show dead eel flesh and flies kind of nibbling on them. And then you've carved out the sentence "I suspect I shall die disappointed". And it's from the tv show...

SOFIYA RUQAYAH The Great!

REINA TAKEUCHI Yeah! And I guess what is the significance for you between the sentence and the TV show?

SOFIYA RUQAYAH I mean, to be honest, the TV show to me doesn't really matter too much in the context of the work. I was just watching a lot of television during lockdown and when you couldn't access the studio. And I didn't really have a lot of expectations for what I was watching at the time. Well, I mean, often in general, either really for the time that I was watching it. But this sentence really stood out to me because it was said in a really endearing way. That was kind of both accepting of this fact that I suspect I shall die disappointed. It was accepting but it was also said with a sense of defeat. And that kind of just echoed to me what was happening around me, not just with, you know, what was going on collectively, but very much reflective of what was happening in my personal life at the time as well. And so that sentence...those six words...it's just such a simple sentence. But it says so much. And it just really summed up where I was at. And, for me, it's about unconditional love. But it's also really morbid. It's so morbid. And I loved playing with this image of a dead eel and then mutating that into this sentence where it was already

“death”. You know, it was this kind of tautology, where it's like it's already what it says it's going to be.



REINA TAKEUCHI Very deep. But also very not. It's very silly. It is not meant to be taken too seriously.

SOFIYA RUQAYAH I also really loved though that sentence has this kind of implication about fortune-telling, which also ties back into the crystal ball or the storm glass in Harbingers of Doom. And there's a sense of kind of yeah, like I said before, like acceptance and defeat and this kind of hope for the future. Or like anticipation that it's carved out of something that's already dead.

REINA TAKEUCHI I think something that I noticed from people walking in and reading out the sentence is that sometimes people will interpret it differently depending on like maybe they'll swap out the die for something, another word, just 'be' disappointed or something like that. And usually that's just them reading the sentence. Then I was thinking, oh, maybe it's actually that they're interpreting what is being stated in different ways. And that whole conversation that you're having with the viewer, that's again, there's something in that, I think.

SOFIYA RUQAYAH Yeah, I agree. And a lot of people that I've encountered viewing that work have also had the same reading of it as well. Because I mean, in that one word 'die' the 'i' in that word is very small. It's hardly there. And so it does from a distance just look like it says, I suspect I should be disappointed. And I actually really like that, that it's not really the reality. But it is. It is both. Yeah. I will 'be' and 'die' disappointed.

REINA TAKEUCHI Exactly! Yeah, it kind of speaks to that slippage in language as well, like you sort of say something and it has a different meaning from what you know,

someone else will interpret or you yourself think and then it reads differently. Yeah. There's a lot of different I guess layers to that. And I guess that also ties into sort of your infatuation with like mutation. And I kind of was wondering whether you could speak to that and the use of the eel flesh.



SOFIYA RUQAYAH So for me, mutation is something that we're always doing. And that's kind of an overriding theme across all of my work, both as a concept that I like to explore, but also in the processes that I use as well. And the work *Self-fulfilling Prophecies*, even though it is this kind of hard and fast statement, it does have that ability to mutate in meaning across viewers or depending how much time you spend with it, maybe. And for me, I just really loved that image of this dead eel and stretching that and mutating that in Photoshop which just began as an experiment. And then I thought, why not just make this into a font? That's pretty weird and morbid.

REINA TAKEUCHI Yeah. I feel like people wouldn't think of carving words out of eel flesh as well. It's kind of something so unexpected.

SOFIYA RUQAYAH Yes. Very silly and melodramatic and so is the whole work and the whole sentence.

REINA TAKEUCHI I guess with also our previous conversations about how you've made the works and I guess your process of coming into the headspace of formulating some of the ideas behind the show, sound and music seems to be a really large part of it as well. What kind of sounds do you like to listen to the studio?

SOFIYA RUQAYAH I listen to a lot of Gregorian chants in the studio [laughs], which just helps to focus. Yeah, it's also, I mean, I guess a lot of the work that I want to do is to access some type of spiritual place or spiritual zone. Whether or not that comes across to

the viewer. But that is where my head is at when I'm making and so listening to music that is made in that way as well. I find it really effective in the studio.



REINA TAKEUCHI Your Spotify public playlist [Haunted Water](#), [created] for Holding Patterns, has music from Kate Bush and Ana Roxanne and kind of these really like empowering songs. And yeah, it's quite dreamy and luminous to listen to. And I was wondering whether it was formulated before, like maybe were you thinking about new songs while you were making or did it come after the exhibition?

SOFIYA RUQAYAH A bit of both. I was definitely listening to some of those songs in the lead up to the exhibition, but there were some as well that I only added after the opening. I wanted this playlist to kind of reflect all of the moods that come into play in that exhibition. So there is an element of like spaciousness, and sadness. There's a bit of melancholy, there's a lot of melancholy in there. But then there's also this like, highly dramatic element as well in some songs. With artists like Simone Istwa, her song in that playlist is called Parting Song. And it's super emotive, it feels like, yeah, extremely dramatic song that came from this album that was meant to be like a really intense musical [laughs]. And then I also really wanted to play around with putting things together that didn't really seem like they belong like Lee Hazlewood and Senyawa as well who's an Indonesian artist. And that to me is like a process that reflects how I work in the studio as well, bringing elements together that don't really ordinarily have a place together.

REINA TAKEUCHI Yeah. And they sit together nicely though. I remember when I was listening to Senyawa and then comparatively to Kate Bush, there are these different arcs across these different musical traditions which actually really fit together nicely.

SOFIYA RUQAYAH Thanks, yeah I wanted it to be enjoyable to listen to as well [laughs].



REINA TAKEUCHI I guess with Holding Patterns, it was a project that Con [Gerakaris] and I had thought about and okay, well, the processes for artists are really going to change from here. And this is a very, for lack of a better word for it, an unprecedented time that we find ourselves in and we're not really sure what kind of future that we're soaring into. It's gonna be very nebulous and it's going to shift a lot. And I guess for you, has this project given you an opportunity to sort of reflect on your practice thus far and perhaps how it's going to shift into the future?

SOFIYA RUQAYAH Very much. I definitely found this year that my practice changed and the time this year where we did all have to slow down had a huge impact on how I worked and what I thought about and what evolved out of that and into this exhibition and this project. Yeah, there were times like throughout the year where I just didn't do anything. I wasn't productive at all. And that was great [laughs]. I really enjoyed that for a change and the opportunity to just re-evaluate, but also just to rest, and to really value that aspect of health. And it's interesting like that this year that has been so focused on health collectively has made us all reflect on that as well, personally and the health in our practice and having that balance as well.

REINA TAKEUCHI Exactly. Yeah. That's something that I think rest is really hard for people in Arts because when you're creatively involved, you never really have a break.

SOFIYA RUQAYAH True and you're not going to be encouraged to rest, but maybe this year that's what's going to change.

REINA TAKEUCHI Has emerging from this time given you thought of where your practice might lead in the future or like maybe your life in general, how do you see it evolving?

SOFIYA RUQAYAH Well, this year was the first time that I branched into sculpture and installation and I've loved having that opportunity to present that type of work and Holding Patterns really did encourage me to think about my practice differently in that sense as well, that I could just take that opportunity to experiment and do something different, something that I don't ordinarily do. So that's been really enjoyable. And I definitely see myself making more installation based work in the future. But I am also really keen to do some watercolor again. I've had a good break from it and I'm kind of itching to get back into it now.

REINA TAKEUCHI Have you done watercolour this year at all?

SOFIYA RUQAYAH Not at all [laughs].

REINA TAKEUCHI Yeah.

SOFIYA RUQAYAH Such a release.

REINA TAKEUCHI It's been nice. I mean, I think that, especially the sculptural aspects of the works have really drawn people in. They've gotten really excited about peering into these little worlds. And kids really wanting to tactilely get involved with the dogs.

SOFIYA RUQAYAH Cool, I like that.

REINA TAKEUCHI It's really sweet. It kind of really reminds me of just how we need that tactility in our lives. And with Holding Patterns, like all the materials have really shifted. We had Kien's show which was heavy concrete. And now it's just like this really soft and inviting but yeah, it feels like a really nice way to kind of close the series.



Held as part of the 4A TALKS series, the recorded conversation between Sofiyah Ruqayah and Reina Takeuchi took place in Ruqayah's studio at Parramatta Artists' Studios on Thursday 15 October 2020, as part of Holding Patterns: Sofiyah Ruqayah at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 3 – 29 October 2020.

4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art acknowledges the Burramattagal people of the Darug nation, the traditional custodians of the Land on which this interview took place.

#HoldingPatterns4A #SofiyahRuqayah
@4A_au #4AAustralia

Images:

- 1) Sofiyah Ruqayah in her studio at Parramatta Artists' Studios, 2020; photo by Jacquie Manning, courtesy Parramatta Artists' Studios.
- 2) Holding Patterns: Sofiyah Ruqayah (Installation view), 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney, October 2020. ground: Sofiyah Ruqayah: Harbingers of Doom, digital collage print on satin, faux fur, plywood, storm glass, dimensions variable, courtesy the artist. Wall: Sofiyah Ruqayah, Self-fulfilling prophecies, 2020, digital collage print on paper, pins, 124.9 x 42cm, photo: Kai Wasikowski, courtesy the artist.
- 3) Holding Patterns: Sofiyah Ruqayah (installation view), 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney, October 2020. Floor: Sofiyah Ruqayah, Harbingers of Doom (detail), digital collage print on satin, faux fur, plywood, storm glass, dimensions variable, courtesy the artist. Wall: Sofiyah Ruqayah, Self-fulfilling prophecies, 2020, digital collage print on paper, pins, 124.9 x 42cm, courtesy the artist; photo: Kai Wasikowski, courtesy the artist.
- 4) Holding Patterns: Sofiyah Ruqayah, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney, October 2020. Sofiyah Ruqayah, Harbingers of Doom (detail), digital collage print on satin, faux fur, plywood, storm glass, dimensions variable, photo: Kai Wasikowski, courtesy the artist.
- 5) Holding Patterns: Sofiyah Ruqayah, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney, October 2020. Sofiyah Ruqayah, Self-fulfilling prophecies, 2020, digital collage print on paper, pins, 124.9 x 42cm, photo: Kai Wasikowski, courtesy the artist.
- 6) Holding Patterns: Sofiyah Ruqayah, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney, October 2020. Sofiyah Ruqayah, Self-fulfilling prophecies (detail), 2020, digital collage print on paper, pins, 124.9 x 42cm, photo: Kai Wasikowski, courtesy the artist.
- 7) Sofiyah Ruqayah in her studio at Parramatta Artists' Studios, 2020; photo by Jacquie Manning, courtesy Parramatta Artists' Studios.
- 8) Holding Patterns: Sofiyah Ruqayah (installation view), 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney, October 2020. photo: Kai Wasikowski, courtesy the artist.
- 9) Holding Patterns: Sofiyah Ruqayah, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney, October 2020. Sofiyah Ruqayah, Harbingers of Doom (detail), digital collage print on satin, faux fur, plywood, storm glass, dimensions variable, photo: Kai Wasikowski, courtesy the artist.