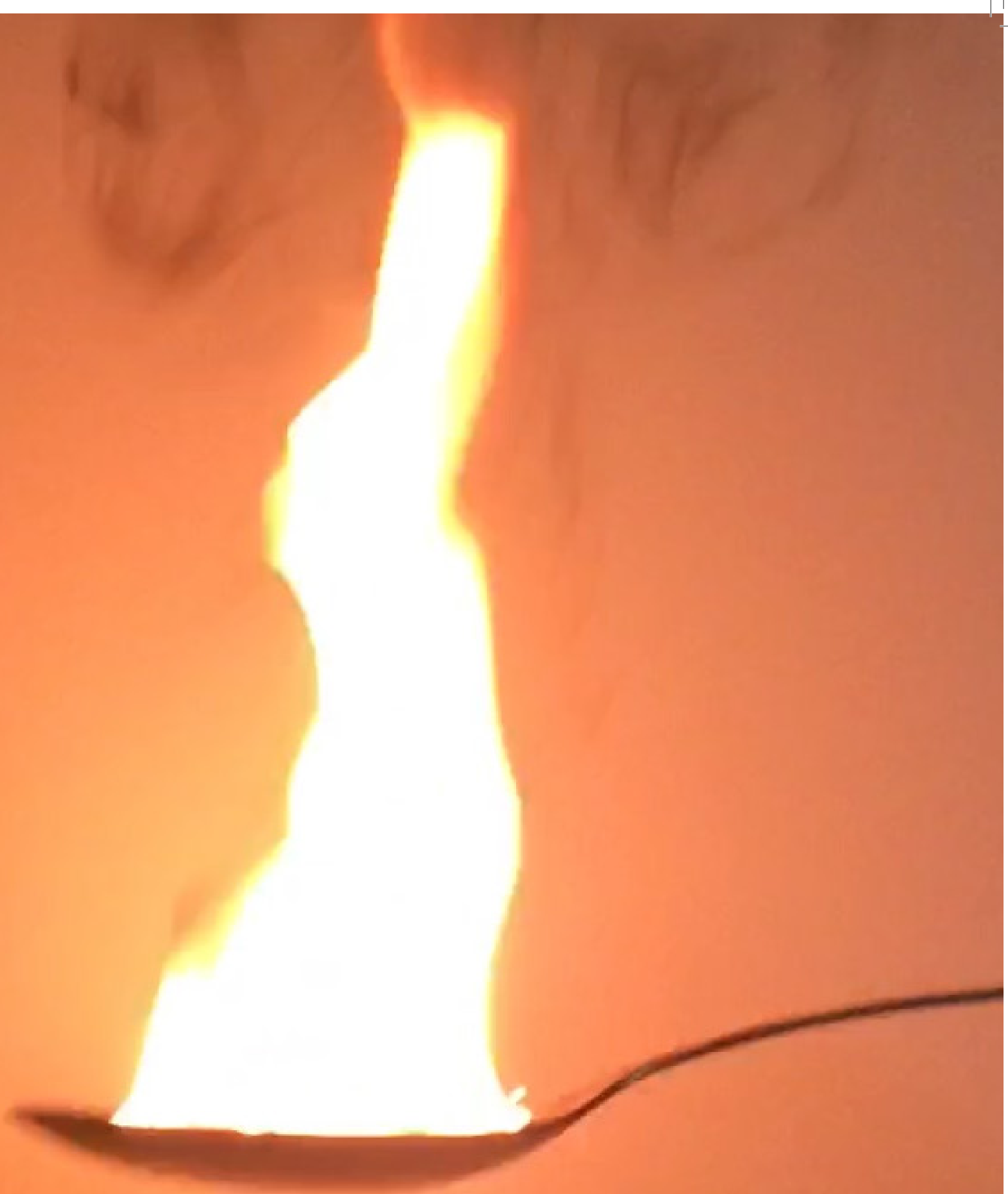




**Centre for  
Contemporary  
Asian Art**



**Justine Youssef:  
All Blessings,  
All Curses**



4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art's singular defining principle hinges on a perpetual consideration and reconsideration of what and where Asia is and what it might become. In 1996, when the organisation first formed, the focus was predominately on East Asia; in the early 2000s these conversations crept to encompass Southeast Asia; in recent years, the focus has extended to consider South Asia. *All Blessings, All Curses* represents a further expansion of this view and is the first solo presentation of work by Justine Youssef, an emerging artist who identifies as belonging to the West Asian diaspora.

And yet, where is West Asia? The very concept of Asia is itself a construction; while other continents are clearly defined by geography, the conjoined continent of Eurasia is severed in two. This division is not distinct, it is in fact a concept of division that has enabled Europe to develop a cohesive archetype of a region while the rest of the continent—of which continental Europe comprises a singular substantial peninsula—is defined simply by the fact that it is different to Europe. From this definition, Asia is a vast and paradoxically diverse region that stretches from Japan to Afghanistan and Siberia to Sri Lanka, where the commonalities are so general that they could be linked with those of South America, Africa or Europe itself. In fact, Asia itself comprises of a series of regions that, through proximity, have developed cultural cohesion and operate as a series of conjoined sub-continents. As one of these sub-continents, West Asia occupies a similar area to the Middle East (itself a construct in geographic relation to Europe) but doesn't include Egypt as it rests on the African continent and includes the northern Caucasus<sup>1</sup>. The western parts of Asia remain incongruous to popular imaginings of 'Asia', despite it being an extremely culturally rich region where contemporary visual art practice is thriving.

As was the case for the majority of Asian migration to Australia, the White Australia policy largely prevented people from West Asia from settling in Australia until the dismantling of the policy in the mid-1970s. This coincided with the Lebanese Civil War that raged from 1975–1990 and resulted in one million people fleeing the country. Justine Youssef's family were part of this exodus; both of her parents arriving in the suburbs of Western Sydney, her mother in the 1970s and her father in the 1980s, in search of safety, stability and work. Born in South-Western Sydney, Youssef's childhood was deeply connected to locale but fundamentally embedded in her familial village in Lebanon. For Youssef, this experience has indelibly marked her; she is born on the unceded lands of the Darug people but inexplicitly connected to her ancestral home of Lebanon.

Justine Youssef's artistic practice is anchored in daily performativity. Her work, and her focus, is on singular acts that are gently radical. The distillation of rose water, the grinding of kohl, the scrubbing of rugs—all small gestures that initially appear as considered reverence. But there is purpose to her movements where, through the conscious act of re-performance, these daily rituals become something else. With each action it is as if intangible intergenerational forces emerge through muscle memory, the evocation of memory is palpable for the viewer. Throughout *All Blessings, All Curses* Youssef makes public a series of private performances of tradition, of community and – most pertinently – of self. Depicted in the home, in a quarry, on the sands of Cronulla beach, Youssef's *mise-en-scène* remains anchored in the Australian landscape but the gestures and motions of her body are intimately connected to that of Lebanon. These gestures are not without intent.

In 2018, the white-hot racial divides that have metastasised since 9/11 are especially palpable in the sprawling suburbia of Sydney. Opportunistic, cynical and powerful politicians and media commentators have steered this conversation into tropes that weaponise difference in order to protect the perceived archetypes of culture. Such protectionism has fuelled the rise of politicised nationalism where culture has been reduced to symbolism and a repetitive regurgitation of 'masters'. The nuanced diversity of the contemporary age is at odds with such static understandings of culture. By this order, gestures of tradition, of celebration, of family and of love can be read as threats if they are not enacted within the expected norms. Youssef encapsulates this complexity of contemporary Australian life in *Ashes to Ashes, or palm ash to your wrist* (2017) where she films her mother as she paces the

house in the early light of dawn. She is led by her outstretched hand that clasps a spoon of burning *bakhoor*; Youssef's camera work is tight, it is only her mother's hand and the spoon that appear in the frame with the flickering licks of flame the focal point. It is an act of blessing, a perfume that scents the house of home and is a daily ritual but, in the background, the smoke alarm blares. The wafts of smoke are perceived as a threat, the piercing warning sounds eclipsing this gesture of good luck and good will. The work epitomises a world defined by difference; where the benign is mistaken for the malignant.

*All Blessings, All Curses* brings Justine Youssef's quietly forceful practice into focus, at 4A Youssef's work is presented as a cohesive gesture, each individual artwork linked through the materiality of sandstone. Presented as structural formations the sandstone becomes the anchor in which Youssef's poetic storytelling is intensified. The scale and physicality of the installation enables her individual works to be read as a unified voice where her investigations into residual histories, societal structures and cultural and ecological degradation combine. The resulting articulation is a clear and resounding reflection on the complexities of the West Asian–Australian diasporic experience.

#### ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

**Justine Youssef** (b. 1992) is currently living on the unceded territory of the Darug peoples. She received her Bachelor of Fine Art from the National Art School, Sydney, Australia and is currently working from the Parramatta Artist Studios. She has been awarded the New South Wales Artists' Grant (NAVA and Create NSW), as well as a studio residency at Blacktown Arts. She has held collaborative solo exhibitions at Seventh Gallery, Melbourne; and Firstdraft, Woolloomooloo with Duha Ali in 2018; and has participated in group exhibitions at Airspace Projects, Marrickville; Bankstown Art Center, Bankstown; Sullivan+Strumpf, Zetland; and Collab Gallery, Chippendale. Her work can be found in the collections of the National Association for the Visual Arts; the National Art School Drawing Archive; and the Sydney Gallery School.

#### PUBLIC PROGRAM

Thursday 22 November, 2018

##### Please Explain Panel Discussion: Why is my curriculum White?

6.30pm – 8.00pm

4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art  
Exhibiting artist Justine Youssef moderates a discussion in response to Dr Omid Tofighian's recent article in *The Conversation* that challenges our education system to rethink and reframe Eurocentric norms that currently provide the foundations from which to learn. Joining Dr Tofighian are Western Sydney based community workers and artists including Alissar Chidiac (Arab Theatre Studio) who base their practices in diversifying ideas of 'the norm' and seek to tell complex, diverse and sometimes paradoxical stories of who we are today.  
Free, register online at [4a.com.au](http://4a.com.au)

Saturday 3 November, 2018

##### Manoosheh Breakfast Tour

10.00am – 12.30pm

4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art  
Join artist Justine Youssef and curator Mikala Tai for a tour of *All Blessings, All Curses* followed by a Sobhiyeh – Lebanese Breakfast – in the gallery. Hear from the artist about the process of developing this series of works over a traditional Lebanese breakfast of za'atar manoosheh, labneh and olives.  
\$25 (+bf) includes breakfast. Book at [4a.com.au](http://4a.com.au)

Thursday 6 December, 2018

##### Closing Performance

6.00pm – 7.00pm

4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art  
Justine Youssef's final performance for *All Blessings, All Curses* is her critically acclaimed rose water performance *an other's Wurud*. The performance uses scent to signify insidious replications of colonial power structures, while seeking to heal wounds in the technologies that connect us.  
Free, no bookings required  
#AllBlessingsAllCurses @4a\_Aus

Register online and find out more about *Justine Youssef: All Blessings, All Curses* and our public programs:

[4a.com.au](http://4a.com.au)

**Curator: Mikala Tai**  
**Curatorial Assistant: Tian Zhang**

#### LIST OF WORKS

##### Ground floor:

Justine Youssef  
*R'sasa*  
2018  
Scorpions, scorpion enclosures, 80 x 45 x 40cm, and single channel video, 6 minutes

##### Ground floor and first floor:

Justine Youssef  
*All Blessings, All Curses*  
2018  
Sandstone installation, dimensions variable

##### First floor:

Leila El Rayes and Justine Youssef  
*Burying that which binds into the chest of my beloved*  
2018  
Photographic documentation, dimensions variable

Duha Ali and Justine Youssef  
*Body/Cartography*  
2018  
3 channel video, 6 minutes, two rugs, 280 x 190cm and 230 x 315cm, and photographic documentation, dimensions variable

Justine Youssef  
*an other's Wurud*  
2017–ongoing  
Installation incorporating photographic documentation, video and mixed media including David Austin rose, water, two ring gas burner, gas cylinder, aluminum pot, sieve, pavers and glass bottles, dimensions variable

Leila El Rayes and Justine Youssef  
*Burying that which binds into the chest of my beloved*  
2018  
Single channel video, 6 minutes

Justine Youssef  
*Ashes to Ashes or palm ash to your wrist*  
2017  
Single channel video, 56 seconds

Duha Ali and Justine Youssef  
*Kohl*  
2018  
Three channel video installation, 4 minutes, and 3 brass bowls, kohl, sandstone and clay, dimensions variable  
This work was produced with the support of the NAVA NSW Artist's Grant 2017

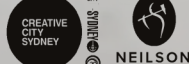
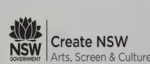
**Front:** Justine Youssef, *Ashes to ashes or palm ash to your wrist*, 2017, Single channel video, 56 seconds

**Back:** Duha Ali and Justine Youssef, *Kohl*, 2018, three channel video installation, 4 minutes, and 3 brass bowls, kohl, sandstone and clay, dimensions variable, this work was produced with the support of the NAVA NSW Artist's Grant 2017

## Justine Youssef: All Blessings, All Curses

2 November – 16 December 2018

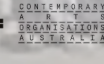
Government Partners



Media and Design Partners



Member



MEDIA PLAYER PARTNER



<sup>1</sup> The countries generally considered to comprise West Asia are: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Cyprus, Georgia, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine and its occupied territories, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.