

Shumon Ahmed  
Chun Yin Rainbow Chan  
Bashir Makhoul  
Veer Munshi  
Shireen Taweel  
Curtis Taylor

# Familiar Stranger



Centre for  
Contemporary  
Asian Art

There is a connection to land that lives within us, as if encoded from birth. We seek beacons within landscapes that enable us to orient ourselves so that we may define a place as our space. It is a complex process of lived experience, of stories passed from generation to generation, and of humanity's insatiable need to delineate somewhere in the global expanse as home.

*Familiar Stranger* brings together six artists for whom their artistic practice is implicitly connected with their need to collapse their hyperreal memory of home with the lived experience of returning to it. For many, the concept of home is no longer a lived experience. 'Home' pulls at us from a distance, a feeling only heightened by the complex process of migration. Through the distortive lens of distance home is but a memory, an internal bearing that can only be visited in one's imagination. Memories oscillate with each act of remembrance, slipping and shifting from reality into hyperreality.<sup>(1)</sup> Here, with little distinction between the real and the remembered, the memory of home is accessible only to one.

Bashir Makhoul's distinct lenticular micro-lens prints act as markers of deeply personal feelings of displacement that emerged from his trips to Palestine and Beirut in the late 1990s. The artist's experience of returning saw him searching for recognition and legitimacy in a now unacquainted geography. The topographical monuments Makhoul once relied upon to steer him home had vanished, the shops he frequented in his memories were now vacant and he found himself a stranger in the place that anchored him as home. Presented at 4A is the large-scale lenticular series *Wounds* that depicts eight bullet holes that remain scars on the buildings of Beirut where his grandmother still resides. Ripped from their locales, they appear here as abstractions, constantly refiguring and defiguring themselves as the viewer moves before them. It is as if you can feel Makhoul attempting to close the wound, to soothe the trauma and to allow his hyperreal memories to override the brutal reality before him.

Similarly, the act of returning for Veer Munshi sees him plagued by a perpetual feeling of displacement. Forced with his Pandit family to leave their home in Srinagar, Kashmir, in 1990, Munshi remains preoccupied by a home he no longer inhabits. In Delhi, his dreams are filled with recollections of his childhood home believing that, although his house was burnt in 1993, it is still alive: 'Homes don't get demolished. They live inside us. They grow here.'<sup>(2)</sup> In 2008 the artist returned to Srinagar with his mother for the first time and visited their home. This dislocated experience is depicted in the two-channel video work *Like the hands of flame* where a reconstructed vision of his Pandit home burns in a horrific hypnotic manner accompanied by his journey – by boat and foot – through the trenches of a Kashmiri winter to reach the now destroyed house. The unmistakable feeling of the inability to regain what is lost through the act of returning remains a haunting veracity in Munshi's work.

By contrast, Shumon Ahmed always knew he would return home. His sojourn to Perth at the turn of the millennium was determined by opportunity rather than necessity, and as such his work doesn't have the excruciating rawness of the work of Makhoul and Ahmed. Instead, Ahmed's work demonstrated how, through distance, an individual's understanding of home became clear. It was within Australia that he became aware of his primal ties to his homeland and how home was inextricably entwined with his relationship with his mother – she was 'home' as much as Dhaka was. This clarity enabled him to perceive her, for the first time, as a person rather than simply a mother. Her personal struggles were only grasped in their entirety by Ahmed during this period and he returned to Dhaka resolved by his new appreciation of their relationship. *What I have forgotten could fill an ocean, what is not real never lived* (2014) was created more than a decade after their separation as a reflection of this understanding and as a commemoration of the relationship between mother and son.

For Sydney based artists Chun Yin Rainbow Chan and Shireen Taweel the concept of home is further complicated. While their personal pockets of Sydney are their homes, they are underpinned through their collective memory by a distinct understanding of another ancestral home. For *Familiar Stranger* Chan has constructed a progressive installation that becomes increasingly more immersive throughout the exhibition's duration. Examining the idea of returning, or 回 (hui), she repetitively transcribes translated text from English into Chinese attempting to access or connect to the language she is unfamiliar with. In a similar vein, second-generation Taweel seeks to reinsert herself into the folds of Islamic culture through painstakingly etching copper forms with the patterns and traditions that tie her and her family to Lebanon. For both Chan and Taweel there is a palpable need to, with their own hands, graft a physical connection to their ancestral homes.

Martu Country's Curtis Taylor's oeuvre has predominantly been in the field of documentary filmmaking. As a filmmaker he has actively encouraged storytelling and historical understandings of Parnngurr and wider Martu Country in central Western Australia. After two decades of petitioning, remote communities in the Great Sandy Desert of Western Australia that comprise Martu Country were finally acknowledged with Native Title Rights in 2002. Taylor's work is informed by respect and recognition of this history and the deeply connected ancestral affinity he has with the land. In addition to exhibiting a series of his short films, 4A has commissioned *Marrka Marrka - Mirage* (2017) which sees Taylor work in installation for the first time.

Here his connection with Country is palpable; his animated text emerges from the dirt and dissolves back into it collapsing the concept of home into that of Country. The cycle of returning for Taylor is not simply a physical necessity but a spiritual certainty.

In *Familiar Stranger* the moment of return is the focal point where, for some, it is a wistful hope and for others a violent decimation of expectancy. The artists examine how their memories may falter but their connections to place, to land and to home remains. Resisting melodrama, the artists turn to the familial archive and the personal memorial to bring form to this constant internal struggle between what is and what was.

1) The term hyperreality refers to that defined by Jean Baudrillard in *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1981).

2) As cited by Sukant Deepak in 'I have lost my address, says contemporary artist Veer Munshi, on his burned-down house in Srinagar' in *India Today*, March 4, 2016.

## LIST OF WORKS

### Ground Floor:

Chun Yin Rainbow Chan (陳雋然), *To enclose one's mouth*, 2017, ink, silk, wood, video loop, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist.

### First Floor:

Shumon Ahmed, *What I have forgotten could fill an ocean, what is not real never lived*, 2013, polaroid photographs, analogue phone set, original sarod score composed by Yusuf Khan and poetry recited by Nader Salam, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist, Samdani Art Foundation, Dhaka, Bangladesh & Project88, Mumbai, India.

Bashir Makhoul, *Wounds*, 2007 – 2008, lenticular print, 400 x 200cm. Courtesy the artist.

Veer Munshi, *Leaves like hands of flame*, 2010 – 2012, two channel video, 5: 32. Courtesy the artist and Latitude 28, New Delhi, India.

Shireen Taweel, *Al Nahas*, 2015, etched copper, 90 x 40 x 30 cm. Courtesy the artist.

Shireen Taweel, *Al Nahas*, 2015, etched copper, 100 x 90 x 40. Courtesy the artist.

Shireen Taweel, *Dome*, 2015, etched copper, 24 x 17 x 17 cm. Courtesy the artist.

Shireen Taweel, *Sophia*, 2015, etched copper, 20 x 20 x 20 cm. Courtesy the artist.

Curtis Taylor, *Karlaya*, 2014, video, 23 seconds. Courtesy the artist.

Curtis Taylor, *Marlu*, 2014, video, 42 seconds. Courtesy the artist.

Curtis Taylor, *Marrka Marrka – Mirage*, 2017, red dirt and animated projection, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist.

Curtis Taylor, *Parnajarrpa*, 2014, video, 29 seconds. Courtesy the artist.

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# FAMILIAR STRANGER

## 7 April – 21 May 2017

Image, front page: Curtis Taylor, *Marlu*, 2014, video, 42 seconds. Courtesy the artist. This page: Shireen Taweel, *Dome*, 2015, etched copper, 24 x 17 x 17 cm. Courtesy the artist.

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