



Centre for
Contemporary
Asian Art



Holding Patterns

Part Four: Sofiyah Ruqayah

Sofiyah Ruqayah's practice emerges from the embodied myths of her familial past, states of mutation and her own dream realms. Informed by her Islamic upbringing and infatuation with deep sea creatures, her art-making conflates human and anthropocentric worlds, bringing the viewer's focus to bodily plurality and its many presences. By rendering amorphous and dreamy creatures through painting and collage, she creates spillages of metallised film, ink and fur, which speak not only to the abject but to all that is spiritual and luscious. The frenetic push of art into the digital sphere during the peak of lockdown did not resonate with Ruqayah and, instead of creating works, she brooded over what is "left" for us now and what worth art has in a new world made up of fragments and leftovers. It is from here that her work for *Holding Patterns* emerges, her first solo exhibition.

As an Australian artist with familial connections to Indonesia, Ruqayah draws from her spiritual connections to both Muslim and Catholic knowledge. The role of dreams is deeply interconnected in Islamic traditions which include alternate beings such as *djinn*, the shape-shifting spirits in early pre-Islamic Arabian and Islamic theology, as well as *dhikr*, transcendent devotional acts central to Sufi Islamic ritual prayers. Ruqayah's family stories surrounding encounters with *djinn*, astral projection through *dhikr*, ghosts combined with her vivid dreams and her high exposure to horror films in her youth intertwine in her practice. Working from the evocations of memories, she investigates the fragile and tenuous mutations between the animate and inanimate to explore what transcends humans and animals.

Ruqayah's amorphous creatures luminously spill out from her painted and sculpted forms. She then renders them through digital interventions, and employs a multiplicity of technical crafts simultaneously by modifying and mutating flesh, cutting and blending in Photoshop, and using physical assemblage. As we emerge from the pandemic, barriers between what is real, imagined, digital and biological become increasingly fluid. Ruqayah's new ventures into creating sculptural forms with materials such as felt, glass and eel skin

relate back to the primal desire for tactility, the pleasure of touch and physically-immersive experiences.

This year, Ruqayah has given herself full permission to explore uncharted dream territory, a space ruled by successions of images, emotions and sensations, and the dichotomy between mysticism and science. While she continues to delve into worlds of mutation, illustrated by works like *Say the thing that is already in your mouth* (2019)—where she explored invisible sensations including "gut flora" and "gut intuition"—Ruqayah also poignantly draws from the nonsensical narratives of her own dreams and utilises her chosen scientific instrument, the storm glass, to make sense of them.

Popularised by British fishermen in the 1800s, the tear dropped-shaped storm glass is a hermetically sealed thermometer containing a watery solution. Now an obsolete weather instrument, the glass produces feathery crystals which morph in density and size in response to different weather conditions. Towards the end of 2019, Ruqayah began transcribing her dreams and would lean their written forms against her storm glasses. Ruqayah witnessed her own metamorphosis in the transformation that took place under the glass. By re-imagining the storm glass as her own crystal ball, Ruqayah makes sense of her seemingly futile dreams and sees in its cloudy, crystallised liquid, an intimate yet expansive universe.

Ruqayah's most recent works have emerged from quiet moments during Covid where she simply contemplated how different life could have been in other times and places. In the face of speculative futures, Ruqayah relishes in the comedic relief offered by the storm glass' symbolism – how a thing so pointless and nonsensical can offer so much provocation, possibly scientific justification. For Ruqayah, understanding the inner workings of the storm glass, is key to unravelling the unfathomable mysticism of her subconscious. Embracing and luxuriating in nonsense could be the only sensible move from here as we exit our holding patterns to soar into ever-shifting futures.

LIST OF WORKS

Sofiyah Ruqayah, *Harbingers of Doom*, digital collage print on satin, faux fur, plywood, storm glass, dimensions variable, courtesy the artist.

Sofiyah Ruqayah, *Self-fulfilling prophecies*, 2020, digital collage print on paper, pins, 124.9 x 42cm, courtesy the artist.

EXHIBITION ARTIST

Sofiyah Ruqayah (b. 1992, Sydney) is a Sydney-based artist working across drawing, installation, collage and painting to explore the strange territories between human and nonhuman realities. She is interested in themes of mutation, dream and spirit worlds. Drawing upon imagined and felt connections between various bodies, presences and memories, as well familial and cultural myths of embodiment, Sofiyah's practice invites us to speculate on our nonhuman origins and intertwined fates. In 2020, Sofiyah is undertaking a 12-month studio residency at Parramatta Artists' Studios, and will present her first solo exhibition at 4A in October, as part of the *Holding Patterns* exhibition series. She has exhibited both locally and internationally, including group exhibitions at Lubov Gallery (New York City, USA), Peacock Gallery (Sydney) and at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre (Sydney) with Woven Kolektif, a collective of emerging Australian artists with personal ties to Indonesia.

Curated by Reina Takeuchi.

To find out more visit:
4a.com.au/holding-patterns

Holding Patterns Part Four: Sofiyah Ruqayah 1–29 October 2020

Image: Sofiyah Ruqayah, *whatever makes you cold freezes me*, 2019, photo: Peter Morgan, courtesy the artist.

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