



Centre for  
Contemporary  
Asian Art

# Holding Patterns

## Part Three: Shireen Taweel

Shireen Taweel's artistic practice sits within her personal experiences and physical spaces of her extended community, including the radiant mosques dappled throughout Sydney. Her practice is a collection of reflections, focussing upon the transformative virtues and plurality of the cultural landscapes she has inhabited. Taweel's family migrated to Sydney from Lebanon and her Lebanese heritage constantly informs and is infused in her art practice. Taweel's practice is guided by the rich histories founded in the artisanal skills of the coppersmithing communities of the Middle Eastern and North African region (MENA).

Using a progressive application of both coppersmithing techniques and ancient motifs, Taweel manipulates traditional approaches by turning them into gateways between shared histories that allow Australian MENA communities<sup>1</sup> identities and generational knowledge to be embodied and nurtured. With a strong sense of discipline and customary practice, Taweel's labour-intensive processes and coppersmith artisan techniques act as a research vessel for her own creative practice; they also extend into her engagement, facilitation and mentorship of young people in her local communities in Western Sydney.

Taweel's large-scale installation *tracing transcendence* is an evocation of tranquility and introspection, referencing the holy spaces where heaven and earth meet and join in unity. Originally created for the *Next Wave Festival* in 2018, *tracing transcendence* is inspired by the first mosque constructed in the remote South Australian landscape of Marree and a subsequent Mosque in Broken Hill in the 1860s. The presence of Afghan cameleers, or 'Ghans', in outback Australia during this time led not only to booming transportation of trade supplies to regional towns, inland mines and stations but also to the development of sacred sites of prayer and ritual through their outback wayfinding and exploration. What remains now are traces of these early cultural stories that, to this day, continue to shape and evolve contemporary Arabic-Australian

identities. Each mosque has its own individual architectural signature, impacted by the stylistic variations of locally-sourced materials.

Copper, in particular, is a feature of Lebanese Islamic art: hand-cut sheets are commonly utilised as screens or sculptures that resemble mosque architecture. It is this ornate metallurgy that inspires Taweel as she intimately references the vernacular architecture of these sites while reimagining the future of mosques within our Australian cultural landscape.

In the universal symbol of the circle, the two floating bands in *tracing transcendence* allude to The Eternal, Islamic decorative arts, the landscapes of remote Australia, and the spirals that circle within one's own heart, body and mind. *tracing transcendence* echoes the words of Sufi poet Jalal al-Din Rumi and his articulation of the circle's symbolic nature in *We Came Whirling*:

"We came whirling out of nothingness, scattering stars like dust, the stars made a circle and in the middle we dance... every atom turns bewildered, beggars circle tables, dogs circle carrion, the lover circles his own heart".<sup>2</sup>

The act of reimagining and paying tribute to the past are interconnected with our present-day circumstances. Taweel, who spends 12 hours a day "self-isolating" in her studio immersed in her craft, would have, in an alternative version of her world this year, been travelling and working internationally. In a positive twist of fate, however, the pandemic has allowed her more time to devote to her creative process.

Amidst global uncertainty, especially with reference to the shared spaces, public gatherings, future art and architectural spaces, Taweel enacts a quiet homage to time and the sacred, secular spaces of past traditions, which, in turn, offers us introspection and contemplation on the past, present and possible futures that lay before us.

1. Stevens, C. (1989). *Tin mosques & gphantowns: a history of Afghan camel drivers in Australia*. London: Oxford University Press.

2. Rumi, J. (1207-1273). *Fragments, ecstasies*. Translation from Persian by Daniel Liebert (1981). New Mexico: Source Books.

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## LIST OF WORKS

Shireen Taweel, *tracing transcendence*, 2018, pierced copper, band 1: 30 x 180 x 180cm; band 2: 30 x 210 x 210cm; courtesy the artist.

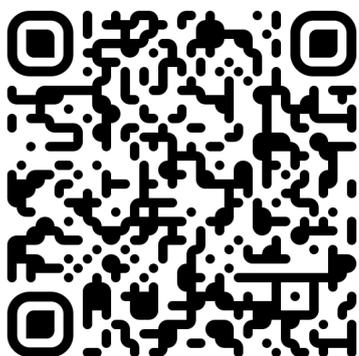
## EXHIBITION ARTIST

**Shireen Taweel** (b. 1990, Sydney, Australia) is a multimedia installation artist whose work broaches issues of the construction of cultural heritage, knowledge and identity through language and the constantly shifting public space of the social, political and religious axiom. Her artistic practice draws from the personal experiences of being Lebanese Australian living between cultures, and how the physical spaces within her community reflect a complex cultural landscape of transformation expressed through hybridity and plurality. The project development of Shireen's works are often site-specific, weaving local narratives and research with a focus on experimentation in material and sound through site. Shireen's constant acquisition of traditional coppersmith artisan skills is a research vessel for community focused conceptual development, and through a progressive application of the collected artisan techniques and a manipulation of the traditional acts of making that leads to possibilities of cross-cultural discourse opening dialogues of shared histories and fluid community identities.

Curated by Reina Takeuchi.

## SUPPORT

In light of the recent disaster in Beirut, we encourage anyone who would like to make a contribution to Taweel's designated organisation, Beirut fundraiser Nation Station (@nationstation\_) – scan below for details. Their collective work supports Beirut locals with food and sanitary supplies during this time.



To find out more visit:  
[4a.com.au/holding-patterns](http://4a.com.au/holding-patterns)

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**3–25 September 2020**

Image: Shireen Taweel, *tracing transcendence* (detail), 2018, pierced copper. Image: Matthew Stanton, courtesy the artist.

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