



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 4 EPISODE 7 (mid September 2022)

SHIREEN TAWEEL

BETWEEN CULTURES

IN CONVERSATION WITH PROF PEDRAM KHOSRONEJAD

Shireen Taweel:

I'm a Sydney-based artist and I was really interested to get involved with this residency that was originally posed to be at the Sydney Observatory. Which is also part of the Powerhouse Museum here to undertake a three months residency with the observatory and the observatory's collection. Investigating this legacy of celestial navigation and its connections to migration. My parents migrated from Lebanon at separate times, so my father came here as a child. My mother came here during the Civil War when she married my father. So migration has definitely been a huge...

Pedram Khosronejad:

Impact.

Shireen Taweel:

Yeah, it's formed our lives incredibly. And so this idea of settling here in Sydney and rest in Sydney originally and finding a sense of home and belonging has, I think, very much shaped how I consider myself as an artist. My cultural practice is really reflected in those experiences where I almost try and find this exchange in my work that encompasses a cultural environment that speaks about plurality. At the end of the day, there's so many factors and cultural discourses that inform my research and my work that it almost creates this new distinctly different work. Whether it be an installation or an object, but it has quite a lot of cross-cultural references that come to it. But I feel like that really reflects how I live my life today, very much between cultures.

Pedram Khosronejad:

I would like to know the influence or impact of two different cultural topics. First the Arab culture and secondly Islam.

Shireen Taweel:

Well, I think when I think of the Arab culture and it's influence, it's really very much through language, like language. And then that does cross into Islam and the Islamic faith I've grown up with that connects back to language because so much of the Quran is so significant in my understanding of faith. And that is originally in the language of Arabic. So they are always intersectioning regardless. But then of course coming from the Middle East, particularly Lebanon, very distinct part of the Arab world. And one that I feel like is very much a melting part of a lot of ethnicities and histories and legacies, but this is also across the region. So I love that, you can go quite micro and then macro and there's all these connections and histories that overlap. And then particularly with Islam, I mean the faith has shaped my practice in a way because I just see this incredible richness and visual language to dive into that I'm always still learning and discovering and unpacking through the sciences, through architecture for design, for the arts.

Shireen Taweel:

There's like millennia of incredible references that I am literally always finding my way through, to bring into a contemporary discourse because I think there is a lot of my own sense of place and references to understanding my environments. To understanding the world I live in today that do connect back to the Islamic arts and architecture and the lineages of migration throughout that and cultural exchange. I can really relate to that and I find that really incredible visual language to unfold. And that comes into the use of copper. Copper is very much my material. It's become something that I've becoming more of an

expertise in, even though I learn very much for experimenting in my studio. But this material, it's early technology comes from the region for across Jordan and the Al Sham and it has incredible strong roots within the Islamic arts practices and cultural practices and the sciences. So I feel like the research and knowledge just in the materiality of coppersmithing and my sculptural installation work really, they just speak to each other so beautifully.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Do you consider yourself a Muslim artist?

Shireen Taweel:

Well, it's funny. I consider myself for sure an artist. And I think an artist term even can be something like, "Well, what is an artist?" But this Islamic lens I have is very formative and important in my work. It's always there because it's directly referencing my experiences and my environments. And also the resources that I lean into as I find quite enriching. But then maybe there's a part of me that pushes into that more because I grew up in an environment that was incredibly hostile towards Islamic culture when I was young. And now that I've become an adult that I am and the arts is very much my world and it's my language, I just feel like there's so much to celebrate. And also unpack within these discourse of Islamic art. So I think it's partly also a passion that I want to bring forward in an Australian arts environment that I felt like had been quite suppressed in my early formative years.

Pedram Khosronejad:

With such an Islamic heritage, family, art work minding, may I ask, was there a reflection of the galleries, gallery directors and media when for the first time you want to reach them or when you send your portfolio to them. What was their reaction? Is it something exotic attractive for them or block them or never reply as soon as they understand you are from Arab world, Muslim culture, your art influenced by Islamic art?

Shireen Taweel:

Oh, that's a really interesting question. It's funny, I haven't really reflected on those experiences in a way when I think about my early studies, which were actually in Tasmania. And I didn't really feel like there was a broader Islamic community I connected with at first. And my art practice in a way was quite foreign in the university system in Hobart. But I was really supported by my professors. They saw my conviction to experiment in this material copper and the ideas I was bringing to it. And I guess I was considering what structure is and this idea of fluid infrastructure that relates to cultural exchange. I think they were really supportive around that. But I guess in a way people or curators or say professors in that environment would tip toe around the Islamic discourse. Because I feel like they didn't feel that was their expertise of knowledge or how they knew how to talk about it.

Shireen Taweel:

But over the years I've been able to work with incredible curators like yourself, with Nur Shkempi, who's also incredible scholar and a prolific curator around artists that work within the Islamic world. And other artists that do have an Islamic background in their practice or bring those conversations in. So I've had to find my connections to feel like there's a discourse in my practice. But I think the broader Australian arts community has welcomed my work. I don't feel like I've been rejected or unwelcome. But then there's

definitely maybe that space of not too, there's not an overly understanding sometimes of what I'm doing. Or sometimes people will focus on the craft side of the work and I guess that's quite evident in what you see when you experience the art. And if that's what they can relate to, that's wonderful. But I guess there's a lot of layers to the work and it's depends what gallerist or curators affiliate with. Or what the artwork speaks in a broader context that they're curating. But I've relatively felt quite included.

Pedram Khosronejad:

You mentioned that your inspired always by the cultural Middle East and especially the Bilad al-Sham regarding the usage of copper, which is very ancient. But very flexible material for craftsmen of the world of Islam. Tell me about your work when you really felt that copper is your material and how you follow and develop your work based on copper.

Shireen Taweel:

So the material, I feel like it suits my type of practice, particularly that I really love it how over time, very slowly the artwork unfolds and transforms and the material allows me to work with my hands in every stage of the process. So I love this long transformation it gives in the studio and by building it little by little I move towards this really significant body of work. And I find that quite reflective to almost my own lived journey. I feel like one's experiences of cultural exchange is quite transformative. So with my own slow understandings of this material, copper and experimenting with the material and kind of finding my own transformation in that. But over the years I've learnt certain skills like engraving and that's been a particularly important way that I mark make my surfaces. And I went on a fellowship through the Paramatta Fellowship Creative Fund to Gaziantep in Turkey to learn this engraving practice that they've been practicing for millennia.

Shireen Taweel:

And the Master Coppersmiths there and engravers invited me into their studios and taught me this really incredible mark making process of engraving on their sheet copper. And for me that's been incredibly informative to have this cultural understanding of the region and practice of coppersmithing. And the many guilds and studio processes that say, one object is worked on many hands that goes through very different studio processes across the master workers. Whether that be the Turners who shaped the object to the engravers, to the silver inlays, to the Tin Smiths. There's many stages and I loved that insight to understanding how these very sophisticated objects have been made over time. And then I bring that into my studio where I work with my own two hands and I experiment and try all these processes to fit my concepts and to fit the research that I'm looking at.

Shireen Taweel:

But it's incredible when I can go and access objects and collections and use that as a form of research to inform my work. But also just for catalogs and books are really wonderful resources in the Islamic arts. But a lot of work can also be informed very locally. So I look at a lot of local architecture or objects that are involved in cultural practices and then they transform and change into becoming something of their own that have all these multitude of references involved in the work. But at the end of the day, I have my humble tools, various humble hand tools and that allows me to slowly build up these artworks.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Since when you are interested to what you are doing now on Islamic science, Islamic astronomy, astrology and related tools and objects like astrolabe?

Shireen Taweel:

Oh absolutely. So my work has had this theme and reference to architecture, design, and science. And those forms of research have always been involved, but particularly in astronomy, I wanted to further investigate this stream of science in my work. Because I wanted to see where we've come from through migration from moving across land and sea. And celestial navigation has been incredibly informative in that. And of course the Islamic sciences and these objects and instruments, like the astrolabe are very key to those technologies and our understandings of the universe. But with my sense of place now and thinking of where we're going, I wanted to create this lineage historically of how the technologies and science have evolved. Particularly through Islamic sciences of astronomy. But then where are they going into the future? So this residency has been really incredible to also engage with the Powerhouse's collection of celestial navigational instruments. Because I feel like they've bridged my understanding to the Islamic collections that you'd see in museums that are mainly overseas.

Shireen Taweel:

But a lot of these tools in the Powerhouse collection have developed from Islamic science. So later on into the 17, 18 hundreds, 19 hundreds, the objects in the Powerhouse collection I feel like have this really direct lineage to the instruments that I'm interested in from Islamic arts and sciences. So that's been really wonderful to connect to the western instruments here and then bridge my research and understanding of Islamic scientific instruments in astronomy. And then it's allowed me also to be quite creative in my studio and speculate and create not hybrid instruments, but ones that fuse those sciences together. But then also speculate to where our use of astronomy is going into the future. And that's allowed me to think more atmospherically and environmentally, like what cultures and environments of living would it look like to live in space. And that's led me into thinking about what architecture would develop in space.

Shireen Taweel:

So the studio residency has been really fruitful. I feel like I've been able to join a lot of dots but then also be quite creative in my own speculation. And very much weaving back this cultural narrative within astronomy. And that's what I love about the Islamic science is they cross over not just culture and faith and spirit and science and mathematics, but they're just so encompassing of our lived experience as well. I feel like the western sciences have really moved them apart and I think as an artist that's what I'm really interested in. Like where the cultural practices was in those sciences that actually relate to us in the everyday. And that's led me to thinking about future technologies but also environments in space that we'd live in and those cultural practices that can be encountered while in space.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Something that majority of maybe our audiences they don't know is that Islamic calendar is based on lunar calendar and the movement of the moon. And there are many elements connected, let's say occasions or ceremonial activities of the Muslims all around the world based on the movement of the sun and the moon. And for example, beyond the normal Islamic calendar, the choice of five days preying time, the Salat is based on celestial knowledge. And the Ramadan and the other Eid al-Adha. And the others are based on celestial knowledge, which require this Islamic tools and astronomy and strong

practice of astronomy and astro numbers in land of Islam. Which is interestingly connected to the regions that you again said the Bilad al-Sham, Turkey, Persia, India even there.

Shireen Taweel:

Oh yeah, hugely.

Pedram Khosronejad:

And I see here in your studio many astrolabes from different part of world that you are inspiring for your artwork here, which is amazing. It's the tools and instruments of Islamic astronomy, they're small objects, but you are transferring them to your artwork, which is big and hybrid. And I did see in your previous works that in your artworks, you create light, space, shadow. And regarding a space, your objects are very hybrid. Emptiness is a thing, in your work is not empty, is a volume and therefore your art works, they are in constant dialogue with space. And this brings me to architecture of the galleries where you present it and want to present your installations. Tell me a little bit about the challenge of your artworks and space of gallery and gallerists.

Shireen Taweel:

The space around the artworks is very, and light particularly is very much a material in the installation. It's interesting you go back to these instruments with the astrolabe and these devices across Islamic sciences and astronomy. They're very much connected to the body. And I think for me, the body also is very key in this space and these installations. All artworks I make, I think they're always related directly to the individual or collective.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Embodied objects, without humans, those objects they cannot...

Shireen Taweel:

Absolutely. Absolutely. And I think that's the thing with my installations and thinking about architecture and how we bring the culture to those sites. We bring the rituals and we bring ceremonies and we bring experiences that are inhabited in those infrastructures and spaces. And with my artworks, a lot of them do touch on the sacred and sacred space is so key. Without this play of light and this sense of transcendence, what would sacred space be? So this is something that I think about a lot and to translate in a gallery can be quite tricky sometimes and involves a lot of negotiation with the gallerist and the-

Pedram Khosronejad:

Tell me about those challenges. I really would like to-

Shireen Taweel:

Yes, and the sensitivity to light. And this is something because I think creating the sense of atmosphere and environment is so loaded and important was the installations I want to bring to an experience was visitors in the audience. So the negotiation period does often take a lot of time and a lot of give and take. And I must admit I've felt like the most empowered at times to install my artworks when it's been my own agency and I've been given a carte blanche in the space to do whatever I want. And it's been really incredible to sit in the space and slowly install and slowly consider all these really key sensitive

aspects to the installations that I've made. But it's a whole thing, the context of the work is in a direct museum or if it's in an artist run space, there's all these variables.

Shireen Taweel:

And the most recent installation I made, which is called Shoe Bathers, was very much considering the environment and the senses of the Haman. And that experience and this sense of cleansing and what cleansing means on many levels. But the whole space had very particular lighting because I feel like that was really key to embody this atmosphere. See that really has a mood that has also maybe a mystery that I think art can be really powerful when it opens up an experience to an audience moment that they didn't expect. And they're in this situation where they are actually fully immersed in an artwork in that way.

Pedram Khosronejad:

So do you feel in, generally speaking, but especially the case of artists and artworks, we need a specific external curator that knows the culture, your work and art. And art director should stay all director working on marketing.

Shireen Taweel:

Oh there's so many roles, isn't there, these days.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Yeah. What do you think? Do you think the role of external curators can help the artists for installation and contextualization of the art and artist?

Shireen Taweel:

Yeah, absolutely. You underestimate the specialty that an independent curator can bring to the institution for a particular show. Oh my goodness, it would look so different curated by just even any other curator let alone... So it's really interesting, especially when that independent curator has had a long discourse or relationship with those artists they're working with. I think they really then have this understanding of the work and the most optimum platform or setting for the artworks. Yeah, I think it's partly having that relationship with the artwork and the artist too, to really understand and have that dialogue. It's interesting because these works are quite cultural and there's a lot of context that if they are misrepresented they lose a lot of the power of the work. So it's quite sensitive. It needs to have a lot of conversation between the artists for sure. If not, the whole experience changes and the power of the artwork may not be best represented.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Definitely. Shireen, tell us a little bit about your project at the moment in your studio, what we are seeing, because I see the samples of beautiful quadrant and sky, star, astrolabes. Tell us about your project at the moment, what is in the studio. And what's the next step? Are you preparing an exhibition, a show, and do you have any gallery in your mind where you want to present them? Searching for the galleries or no, please let us know about this.

Shireen Taweel:

See the works that I'm developing from this residency operate in a few different directions. And I think that's been really exciting and it's actually allowed me to be more strategic in all the research and the material I've gathered over the three months here at the Powerhouse and the Sydney Observatory. So initially I thought, "Okay, I'm going to be looking and researching a lot of objects and engaging with the collection and consuming a lot of information." The amount of learnt, let alone the objects I've really investigated and thought about and sculpted with Marquette. I wanted to map everything that I'm looking at onto my papers. So I do a lot of drawing in my practice and that informs the details of the sculptures and the installations. How the copper has responded with my medium of embellishing the material. But I wanted to map that up on a 10 metre roll of paper.

Shireen Taweel:

So over the residency I've been drawing and drawing my research material has created this own sky mapping of instruments and star charts that are drawn across different collection objects at the Powerhouse and Islamic devices of the astrolabes. But then also a lot of quadrants and even the sextons from the Powerhouse collection are quite prominent in the work and different charts of cosmological equations. So it's all really come into this. So there's a mix of many charts and even calculations and equations and instruments. But that's also been a really great, like a mind map of what I'm looking at. To then experiment on my sheet copper through making a series of prints. And so I wanted to translate my mark making with engraving on copper into printmaking. And I think there's this beautiful synergy with the material of engraving that crosses back into the Islamic instruments and devices from astronomy.

Shireen Taweel:

They're all mostly embellished for engraving, mark making, whether that be the meticulous scales that are on there or the actual decorative features that work with the instruments. So I think that's really exciting terrain that I'm going to soon explore. But there's also the sculptural works that have come out of my studio and I'm interested in this idea of an installation that unpacks these qualities of sacred architecture and space. But to speculate and put that forward into what this sacred architecture will look like in space or on a planet other than earth. And their works that are very much still in development. But it's really exciting to have them informed by all this research and the questions I have. And the cultural practices I want to further investigate to think about what they will evolve into if they had the opportunity to actually be involved in the space industry that is more increasingly privatized.

Shireen Taweel:

But I don't feel it's quite representative to these sciences that have informed where the industry is today. And in terms of an exhibition, there's so much work in development. And I'm going to undertake a residency at Vermont for four weeks where I'll be printmaking in their studios every day to develop a really nice body of work and series. But I think it's really interesting because this has happened over the last three months and it's almost taken a while for curators to catch up where I am and what I'm doing and where the research is going. So maybe by the time I get back from Vermont and curators and gallerists can see a body of work that has come out of that. It would help them also join the dots where I'm going with my work or whatnot. But it's been really wonderful. It's given me so many incredible ideas and I've been really inspired and quite passionate to weave all these questions I have around the research.