

# Issue 18 – Amale Freiha Khat

SOS / Sculptors on Sculpture is a series of weekly condensed interviews with early career contemporary sculptors.

Amale Freiha Khat is a British/Lebanese artist whose work encompasses sculpture, video, sound and prints. Her installations contemplate the theatre of the world through different scenes and windows, playing with the senses and perceptions of spectators, allowing them to see current events from different perspectives, an essential tool in this media saturated world.

SOS: As we enter into 2021 after such a turbulent year, I'd like to begin this interview by asking you about your hopes and ambitions for the year to come. Is there anything you'd like to accomplish this year?

AFK: What an unforgettable past year! Covid, Black Lives Matter, Brexit, the explosion in the port of Beirut, and the global revolts...

On the personal side, my hopes would be very simple, they are being able to hug without thinking twice my family and friends, meeting them around a good meal without any restrictions regarding numbers, going to enjoy a great concert, dancing till dawn, going to museums and galleries at anytime, being mesmerised by a play at the theatre or cinema and hearing the spectators laughing or sobbing.

On the professional front I am determined to further explore the theme of clouds and shadows that you see in two of my recent sculptures, using a blend of video, sound, stories and conversation recordings.

SOS: The first artwork I saw by you was your piece "Light and Dark Cloudy Shadows" at the Royal Society of Sculptors last year. I recall beautiful contrasts between each of the materials depicting these clouds: stone, wood and steel. Can you talk a little bit about this work and how it came into fruition?

AFK: The theme of clouds started in 2011, I was looking at them through my window and started sketching them. I just wanted to materialise them. Impossible to grab this floating, cold cloud



'Light and Dark Cloudy Shadows', 2018, marble, limestone, wood and steel, 110 x 55x 88 cm.

composed of water drops or ice crystals. At the time I had always sculpted by adding materials (thinking positive space). The closest physical material to the cloud was marble as it is cold, composed of re-crystallised carbonate minerals. This is how I started my cloud theme in a durable sculptural process, by removing of materials (thinking negative space) carving a light limestone and then a dark marble.

The harsh shadow of the finished piece appeared on my wooden table...I cut the shadows on a recycled door that I found. And years later, in 2018, I finished the work by raising the cloud on welded steel legs. And the sculpture came to life when I had the freedom of materials and process, and through a combination of carving, welding and assembling, I constructed the sculpture.

I played a lot with the concept of shade and shadows. Shade implies shelter, which could be of course from the sun, or from bright and shiny lights, but also from happiness. Dark and Light clouds overlook the scene. Imaginary; unreal; fanciful. Symbols of sorrow, anger, worry, and confused thoughts. Will these clouds eventually bring rain, and with that, the release of some tension?

SOS: [Guest Question] This question comes from an interview between Danh Vo and Francesca Pagliuca from 2009. To me this question felt relevant given your background as a British Lebanese artist and you've also spent time in Paris. (Is there anywhere else you've lived/worked?) "How has your history influenced the way you produce art?"

AFK: My art has often had a political dimension and examined also the role of the media and focused on the plight of refugees. Growing up in Lebanon in the middle of a civil war and in a



country with 1.5 million Syrian refugees, had a huge influence on my work.

SOS: One thing I am particularly drawn to in your work is the blurring of the boundaries between the real and the virtual. Within your films you often translate some of your sculptures and objects in the gallery space into the virtual. What draws you to work in this way?

AFK: I select this format because I am truly fascinated by how we perceive, feel, think and communicate with all the information available to us today through various medium. Our memories and what remains of the past are with us today, and expressed and manifested in various forms. Luigi Pirandello's play "right you are...if you think you are" contrasts art and life, the truth of the matter remains a mystery.

Using the screen as a tool to recount my stories has been at the centre of my work to re-activate history. History as repetition. It just started by me refusing the banality started by



Top Right: 'Testimony of a Refugee', 2018, cherry tree root, 16 amber resins, plywood, MDF, timber, screen-print on five acrylics, one-way mirror window film, HD monitor and player, headphone and school chairs, various dimensions.

me refusing the banality of war images and their repercussions. All the different layers of the conflict need some space to breathe. Arranging all the information to try and make sense of this absurd picture of reality in a virtual world is a challenging goal.

I started tracing the connection between the theatre proscenium and the barrier of the screen through the historical development of the audience and the spectacle. The ancient Greek drama gave birth to democracy, the Romans closed off the space from the city with a huge wall behind the stage. It changed the perception of the spectator. Theatre throughout the following centuries had this egalitarian relationship between the performers and the audience people could chat to their neighbour if they were bored, they would boo the performance if they disapproved. The barrier was permeable. Victorian sensibilities of class and correctness along with the use of electricity, walls of behavioural norms began to form. The proscenium arch helped the performers focus in one direction in a four walled environment with the wall facing the audience being invisible.



This barricade that I investigated as a spectator and my experience of war, with the technological advances in the gaming industries, the boundaries of play and space have been blurred. Harun Farocki creator of "serious game 3 immersion" explores the connection between the virtual reality and military, and how fictional scenarios of computer games are used both in training of US troops and in therapy for war veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

I investigate this space of the fourth wall by layering and building a play which punctuated and broke my understanding of the staging of the spectacle of war.

SOS: Are there any reoccurring questions that you continually return to in your work?

AFK: Questioning the theatre, is it agreeing with the fake or is it trickery unfolding the truth? The distance helped me understand the importance of the theatrical space, the real space and their elasticity.



'Cloud Over Crater', 2020, Indian cream soapstone, pine wood and steel, 52 x 35 x 32 cm.



Top Right: 'Crafting Memory Lane' 2017, two HD monitors and players, prints, two headphones, timber and tete-a-tete rocking chairs, various dimensions.



The dissemination of the space between the spectators who are the fourth wall, the performance and the proscenium, the barrier of the screen in cinema and mobile phones from a long distance and a close up angle. The imperative to always use destruction and creation which work from the void, space but are never equal. One is using nothingness to eradicate freedom of thought, the other using absurdity as the starting point of a story. But how make them part of our daily life.

The concept of framing screen relates to protection and separation as we become spectators in our safe homes.

SOS: And to close, I'd like to ask you what is filling your head right now. Are you working on anything at the minute?

'The Proscenium' 2018, MDF, timber, screen-print on five acrylics and one-way mirror window film.

I am focused on carving, creating a new series of prints, at the same time continuing on sculpting around the theme of screens and clouds but hoping for more white clouds instead of dark ones and recording stories.

Last spring, the RAGE collective, established when I was at the RCA, had a show and talk planned with the university of Bologna. If all goes well it will be pushed to this coming spring. In addition with three other artists, we are working on an exhibition in London, around the theme of light and cyanotype. Cross fingers I will meet you at one of them.

Interviewer: Josh Wright