



Lara Chamas, Vegemite is Halal 2.0, 560g Vegemite jar, vinyl print label, 2019

Lara Chamas, through water as smoke

Lara Chamas was born in Australia, but growing up in a Lebanese family has made her interrogate identity, ritual, and what it really is to feel part of this country, this culture. The legacies of her Arabic heritage come deeply in the stories of objects and the memories they carry.

She is an artist who explores many visual mediums, in a playful and provocative way, creating works that can take us on a journey into the glass blowing traditions of the Levante, the wear on her grandmother's prayer rug that is now a revered precious object, or the hours of sitting drawing in the smoke of an argileh (hookah, shisha) as people share stories and swap recipes.

In her practice, she is a gatherer of objects that are later reinterpreted and become part of her work. One example is the kangaroo skeleton that she found in a field, decomposed, that she would later grind and use the powder to make bone glass prayer beads (a Mashaba) she calls *Backbone of Australia*. In *Ninety Nine Names*, we see her father using the string of 33 beads to count as he recites the 99 names, or attributes, of God, a type of meditation which can be done at any time of day.

"Using a part of the Kangaroo in the beads began as an idea of "islamifying" a white colonial Australian icon (bastardised from Indigenous culture) and eventually became a serene connection between the land we stand on and the heavens above," she said.

This exhibition takes its name from the ritual of the argileh water pipe which unites the body with four elements - water; to bubble in the glass vessel below, earth; the terracotta piece that holds the tobacco, fire; the coals used to light the tobacco and air; the breath we use to activate all other elements. "We breathe in the air from the pipe, it courses through the water, to the earth, igniting the coals, until finally, we've transformed our breath into smoke," she said.

During a research trip in the Middle East before COVID-19 she watched her aunt smoke her water pipe many times throughout the day, punctuating her daily activities with the bubbling water, the fragrant tobacco in a terracotta bowl. One day when her aunt broke the glass and terracotta parts of her argileh while cleaning it Lara gathered the pieces and brought them back wrapped in towels and clothes. "I felt I was bringing a little piece of her with me. Here the parts are put back together, the cracks still visible," she said.

There is a juxtaposition of here and there in her work and how they come together. One of her iconic pieces ***Vegemite is Halal 2.0*** shows a vegemite jar, a quintessential Australian product, with a label in Arabic. She said the first iteration came as a response to the boycotting of halal products in 2015 by anti-Muslim groups who said the certification money was supporting terrorism. This work is her musing of what would happen, in 2015 if Australia was Muslim colonised and iconic products like vegemite did look like this.

For Lara, it is a paradox, she grew up on vegemite and laughs that her father eats it every day, feeds it to her for good health and energy and wont travel overseas without it. As provocateur she is also captivated by language and its power, even when she mistakes the Arabic word "nafas" means breath and "nafs" the inner self, she feels them closely aligned. Lara returns to these ideas of who we are, knowledge handed down, stories that make us, and what is left behind in our objects, in her piece *I am your mirror, here are the stones*, a piece of slumped glass that she has cast from the shape of her grandmother's worn prayer rug. The title of the work comes from a poem by Rumi that speaks of how we are the mirror as well as the face in it.

Lara said these words of self love and reflection resonated with her and the idea of this daily ritual of worship by her grandmother, kneeling to pray and slowly wearing her story into the threads of the carpet.



Backbone of Australia, Macroo Os Glass (kangaroo bone glass, original creation of the artist), thread, metal, 2019