WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY
Institute for
Australian and Chinese
Arts and Culture
澳華藝術文化研究院
Portraits of Women
Amani Haydar
29 August - 31 October 2024
Gallery opening hours: Monday – Friday (9:30 am – 5:00 pm)
Address: Building EA.G.03, Parramatta South Campus
Western Sydney University

Introduction

The Institute for Australian and Chinese Arts and Culture (IAC) proudly presents this uniquely empowering exhibition, featuring the Western Sydney-based artist Amani Haydar. Portraits of Women showcases the artist's vibrant and stunningly beautiful works that inspire strength, resilience, truthfulness and beauty in dealing with trauma, confronting deep-rooted injustice and bias towards women going through grieving and healing. Her self-portrait *Insert Headline Here* was a finalist in the 2018 Archibald Prize. It was created after she lost her mother in a brutal act of domestic violence perpetrated by her father. In the painting, the artist in her brightly coloured and patterned hijab is holding a framed press photograph of her mother holding a picture of her own mother killed in the 2006 war in Lebanon, adding intricate layers of intergenerational trauma and loss.

In 2017 Western Sydney University honoured Amani's late mother, Salwa Haydar, who did not get to finish her undergraduate studies at the University, with a posthumous bachelor's degree of community welfare. Amani and her younger sisters, Nour and Ola, proudly received the degree on behalf of their mother.

Amani uses her art and writing to explore the personal, political, social and cultural dimensions of trauma, gender violence, loss and identity. Amani's artworks have a distinctive style and her exquisite portraits of women featured prominently in this exhibition are a central part of her artistic practice, telling stories of women within a feminist, anti-oppressive ethos. Her use of vibrant colours evokes hope and courage. The eyes of the women in the portraits, in

particular, touch a chord with the viewer. They convey intelligence, determination, sorrow and spirit. The beautiful natural world is also reflected in these eyes. Acts of violence and trauma divide and isolate humanities, but art and artistic practice connect and strengthen us. We hope you will find the exhibition inspiring, liberating and empowering.

Professor Jing Han
Director, Institute for Australian and Chinese Arts and Culture
Western Sydney University

Various small portraits of women (2023 - 2024)
Mixed media on paper
21 x 29.5cm

About the Artist

Amani Haydar is an award-winning author, visual artist, advocate for women's health and safety and a former lawyer, based in Western Sydney on Dharug land. In 2018 Amani's self-portrait titled *Insert Headline Here* was a finalist in the Archibald Prize. As an active visual artist and former Archibald Prize finalist, Amani collaborates with organisations like Settlement Services International (SSI) and the Older Women's Network to deliver visual arts and storytelling workshops for people from migrant communities. Her illustrations have been featured in publications such as *Admissions: Voices Within Mental Health*, *The Very Best Doughnut* by Randa Abdel-Fattah, *Safar* by Sarah Malik and *The Racial Politics of Australian Multiculturalism* by Ghassan Hage.

Amani's ground-breaking feminist memoir *The Mother Wound* (Pan Macmillan, 2021) explores the effects of domestic abuse and state-sanctioned violence on women and has received several awards including the 2022 Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Non-Fiction and the 2022 Matt Richell Award for New Writer of the Year, and it was also long-listed for The Walkley Book Award in 2021. *The Mother Wound* has recently been translated into Arabic allowing Arabic readers worldwide to engage with the Arab-Australian experience. Amani's writing has also been featured in collections such as *Racism*, *Arab Australian Other*, *Sweatshop Women Volume Two,* and the anthology *After Australia*.

Amani was the recipient of the 2021 UTS Faculty of Law Alumni Award and was named Local Woman of the Year for Bankstown at the 2020 NSW Premier's Woman of the Year Awards in

recognition of her advocacy against domestic violence. Drawing on her lived experiences and legal background, Amani has served on the boards of Bankstown Women's Health Centre and the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights.

Amani Hayder

Artist Statement

This exhibition has been developed on Dharug Land, on the lands of the Burramattagal and Bidjigal people, land which has been home to art and storytelling for millennia. I pay my respects to elders past and present and acknowledge my status as a settler on these unceded lands and the responsibilities that come with that. Always was, always will be.

The artworks in this exhibition consist of a collection of self-portraits painted over the past few years, a collection of various works engaged with themes of nature and spirituality, and a collection of more recent works reflecting my current creative practice. Portraits of women feature in each of these collections and are a central part of my practice as an artist who works within a feminist, anti-oppressive ethos. I am interested in exploring and presenting the ways women engage with one another and how their inner worlds are shaped by familial, social and political factors.

Self-portraiture is an important and regular part of my creative practice. I use it as an opportunity to ‘check in’ with myself, evaluate my work, reflect on what I've been doing and where I want to go next. The first self-portrait, *Insert Headline Here* (2018), a finalist in the 2018 Archibald Prize, was created after the most devastating trauma and loss in my life. When my mum was murdered in her home by my abusive father on 30 March 2015, some media outlets circulated a Fairfax photo taken in 2006 while my mum was grieving the death of her own mother, who was killed in an Israeli airstrike while fleeing the southern villages of Lebanon. I incorporated the photo, which I printed straight off the internet,

as a way of reclaiming my story from the headlines. By painting a self-portrait, I was able to reinstate its personal significance to me. I also saw it as an opportunity to challenge assumptions that women victims of crime are helpless, weak or subservient. I have used vibrant colour to convey a sense of hope, while the repetition of patterns echoes the repetition of trauma in my life, but also draws on the type of art found in mosques, which for me symbolises faith, survival and regrowth.

My subsequent self-portraits demonstrate the ways in which I have engaged in processes of healing, recovery and truth-telling. *A Year of Recovery* (2019) shows the journey of recovery through creativity and self-care, while *Burnout Culture* (2019) looks at the self-immolative nature of activism and political protest. *Self Portrait with Memories* (2021) reflects the writing process and the memories I revisited as I wrote my memoir, *The Mother Wound*. The text includes random words and phrases from my book, referencing the way the body experiences and stores stress and conflict. The background represents an ongoing sense of grief about my homeland, which intensified through the writing process. I've learned that writing a memoir is like self-portraiture in the way it demands that the author look closely at herself and interrogate inconsistent and unresolved experiences.

After writing my book I was able to participate in therapeutic experiences which led to a period of spiritual growth and healing. That, in turn, leads me to think about how the human mind makes sense of reality through the metaphorical and surreal and the creation of a collection of works engaged with themes of nature

and spirituality. These works reference dreams and meditative experiences as well as remembered and/or imagined places. Themes of homeland persist even in these dreamscapes and even when I did not consciously set out to depict them. For instance, *The Garden* (2022) draws on fond memories of a pine tree in my grandparent's garden which sits in the shade of a large hill known as Kheil, a distinctive feature of my village of origin.

Late last year Israeli settlers and politicians held a conference advocating for the occupation and settlement of the southern parts of Lebanon. Hundreds of Lebanese people have lost their lives due to the regional consequences of the genocide in Gaza. Thousands more have suffered from past Israeli occupation and the people of southern Lebanon have a long history of resisting this violence. Over 100,000 Lebanese people have been internally displaced from their villages since October 2023, including my own relatives, and the Australian government has recently signalled an intention to criminalise Australians who choose to travel to the southern parts of Lebanon. The implication of this is that it dehumanises all people who live there and frames our presence on our ancestral lands as suspicious.

I feel a sense of disease, grief and anxiety about how this furthers the distance between me and my homeland. I find myself yearning for something that does not exist in the form I imagine it. I find myself internally, spiritually, physically displaced. For those of us who are affected or moved by the current genocide, there is a sense of being forced to sit still through a crisis, the sense of being tied to the tracks, of moving

like glue through time, of not knowing where to place the next step. Each of my self-portraits attaches itself to new personal and political meanings in this context and my recent works are acts of creative resistance against imperialist narratives. *We Swear by the Olives* (2024) and *We Shall Inherit the Soil* (2024) are both inspired by old photographs of my mother and grandmother. They are not intended to be strict depictions of either, but rather an attempt at capturing the relationship between these women and their land. In their expressions and stances, they reaffirm the certainty of their sense of belonging, a certainty which frustrates colonisers, a certainty that cannot be challenged by outsiders.

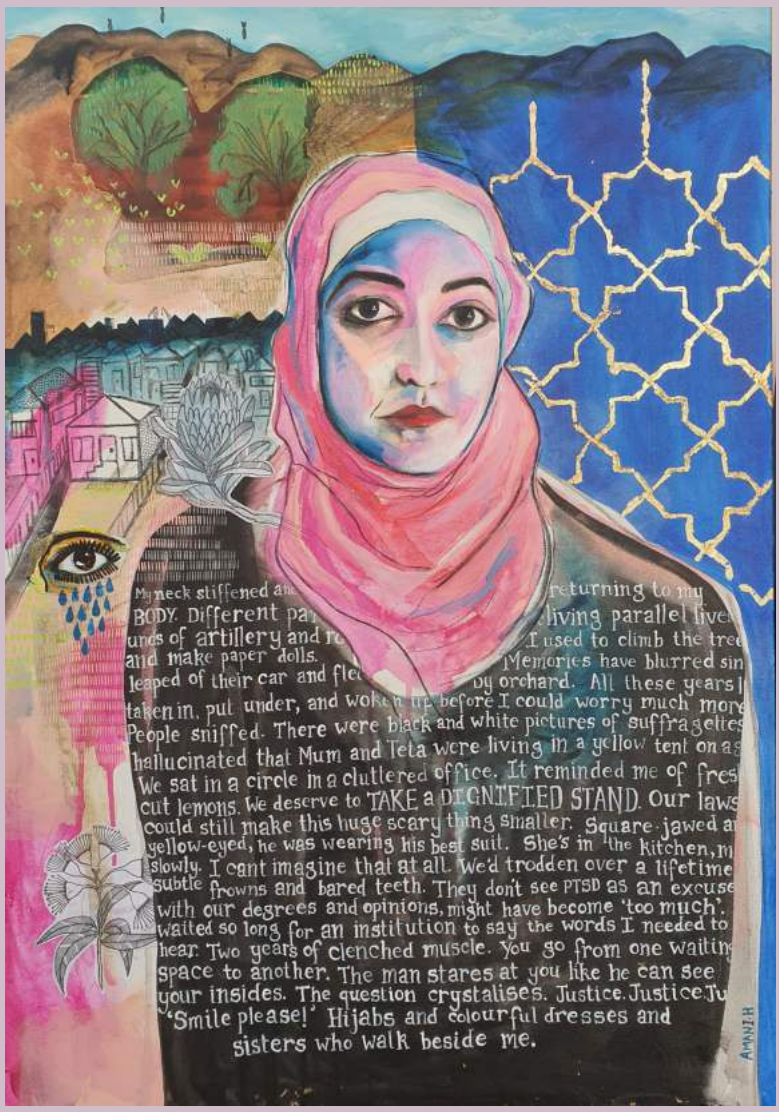
It is well established in literature on trauma that repeated exposure to traumatic events hinders recovery. We are unable to heal ourselves in a society that is chronically unwell and our repeated exposure to trauma – directly or vicariously – has cumulative detrimental effects on our wellbeing. Art has long been a mode of processing and healing for me, but the climate I live in demonises my people, and exposes us to grotesque, unbridled violence.

This reality cannot be watered down or manipulated by a paintbrush. I do not believe it is possible to adequately respond to the immense trauma of these events while they are still unfolding, but I do believe that it is a privilege and a responsibility to be able to make art during this time. I am aware that my works do not have the power it takes to relieve us of suffering. I do hope, however, that they provide a safe landing pad for grief, rage, nostalgia, or whatever else is being felt by those of us who are affected – materially and emotionally – and the true allies who walk alongside us.

Insert Headline Here (2018)
101.5 x 76cm
Mixed media on linen

A Year of Recovery (2019)
120 x 100cm
Mixed media on canvas

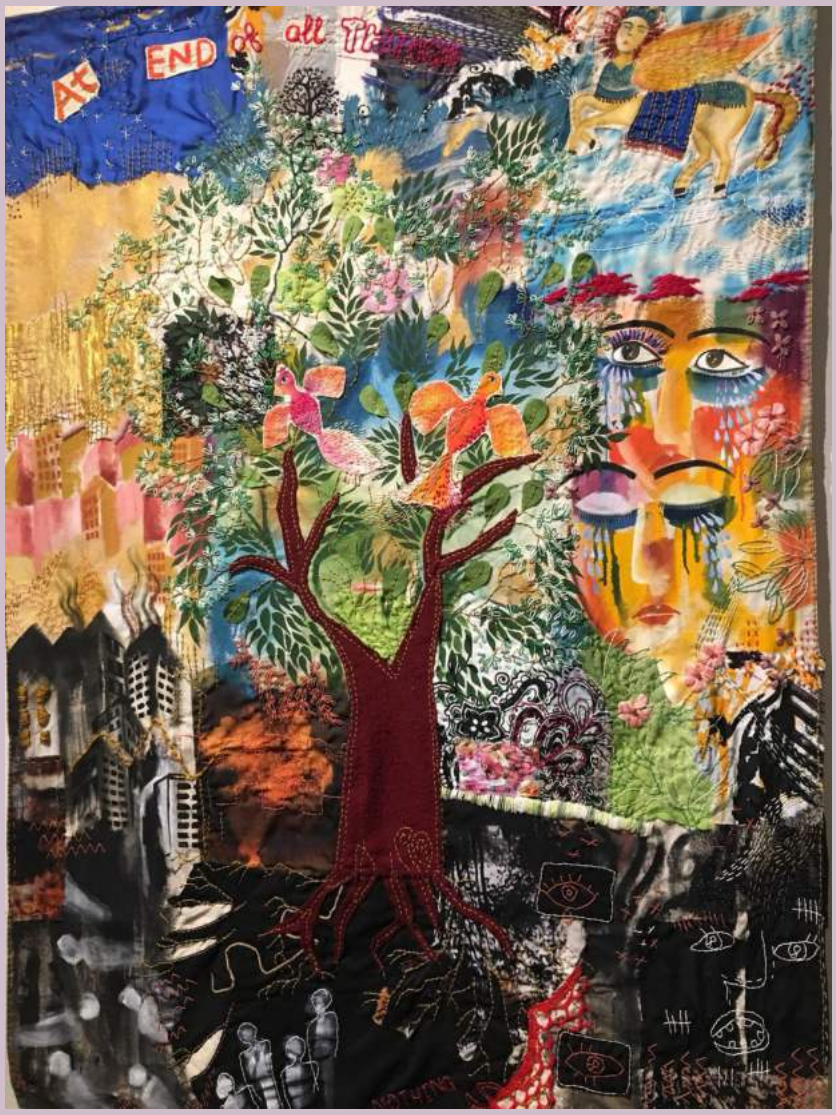
Burnout Culture (2019)
100 x 90cm
Mixed media on canvas



Self Portrait with Memories (2021)
100 x 70cm
Mixed media on canvas

War Stories I (2014), 54 x 73cm, Mixed media on paper

War Stories II (2014), 54 x 73cm, Mixed media on paper



At the End of All Things (2019)
150 x 106cm
Linen, paint, ink, hijab and garment off-cuts, recycled beads, various threads and fibres

Prayer Pose 1 – Gratitude (2022)
100 x 70cm
Mixed media on canvas

Prayer Pose 2 – Abundance (2022)
100 x 70cm
Mixed media on canvas

Ablution (2022), 56.5 x 77cm, Mixed media on paper

In the Garden (2022), 56.5 x 77cm, Mixed media on paper

Girl Under Lemon Branch (2022)
120 x 90cm
Mixed media on canvas

Sight for Sore Eyes (2022)
77 X 56.5cm
Mixed media on paper

Portrait of Nour (2024)
120 x 80cm
Mixed media on paper

Silk Tree (2024)
67 x 60.5cm
Mixed media on paper

We Shall Inherit the Soil (2024)
80 x 60cm
Mixed media on paper

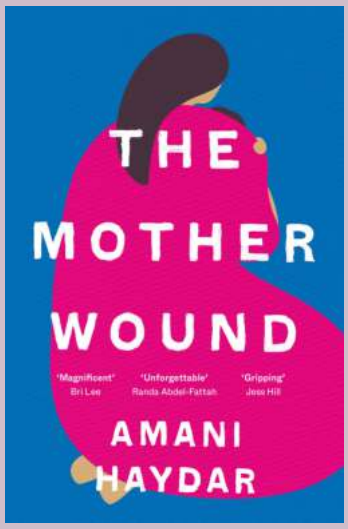
We Swear by the Olives (2024)
80 x 60cm
Mixed media on paper

Various small portraits of women (2023 - 2024)
29.5 x 21cm
Mixed media on paper

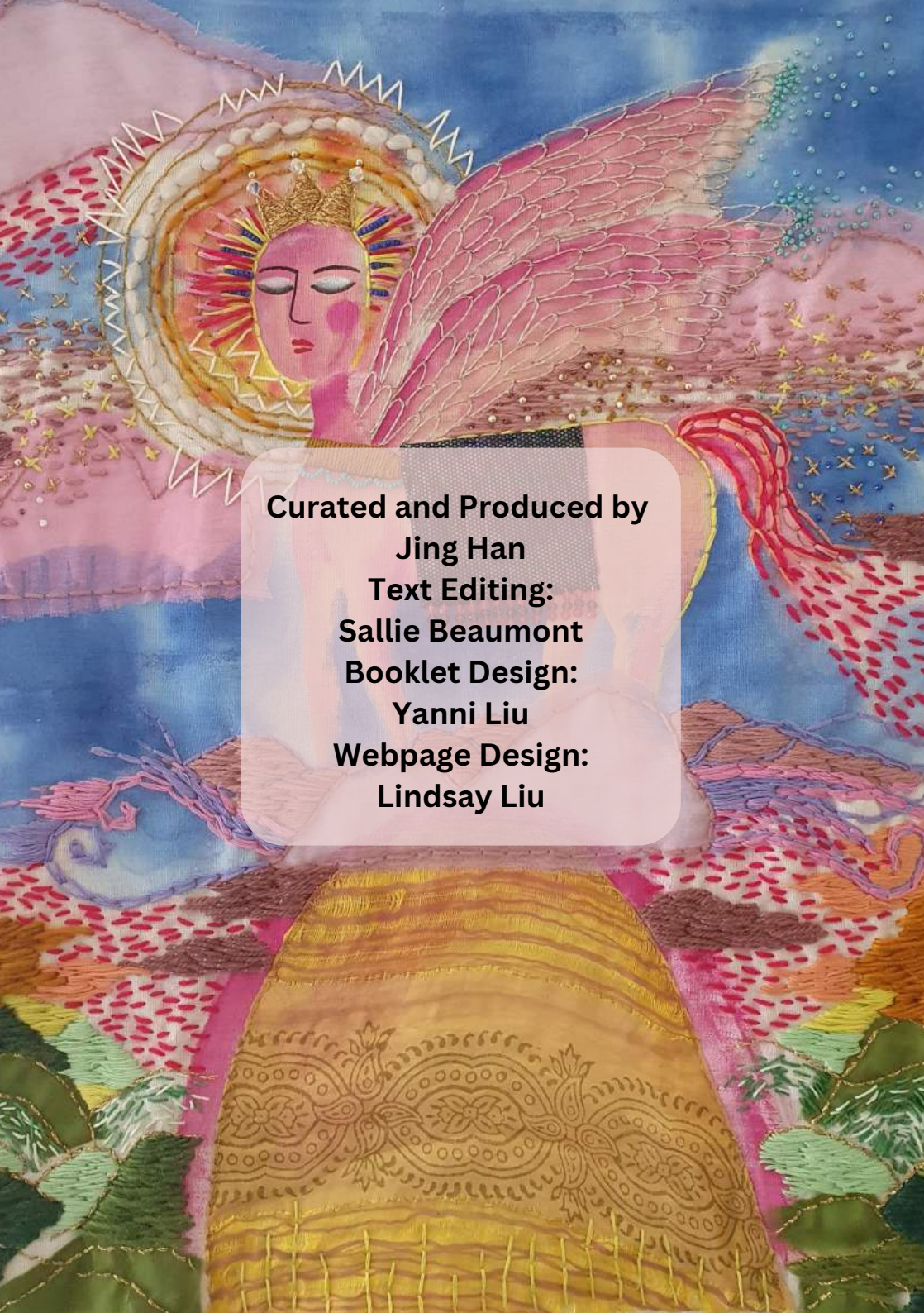
Still Life with Native Flora I (2023)
51 x 40.5cm
Mixed media on paper

Still Life with Native Flora II (2024)
76 x 56cm
Mixed media on paper

The Dome (2021)
56 x 41cm
Linen, paint, ink, hijab off-cuts, recycled beads, various threads and fibres



In her multi-award-winning book, *The Mother Wound*, Amani Haydar tells her own story and looks at the myths and the impact of domestic abuse. She writes with grace and beauty, detailing a story of female resilience and the role of motherhood in the home and in the world. In this book, she uses her own strength to help other survivors find their voices.



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