

Story **NUR SHKEMBI**

Photography **TARA CALLAGHAN**



# **A. D. Mather**

*The Space Between*





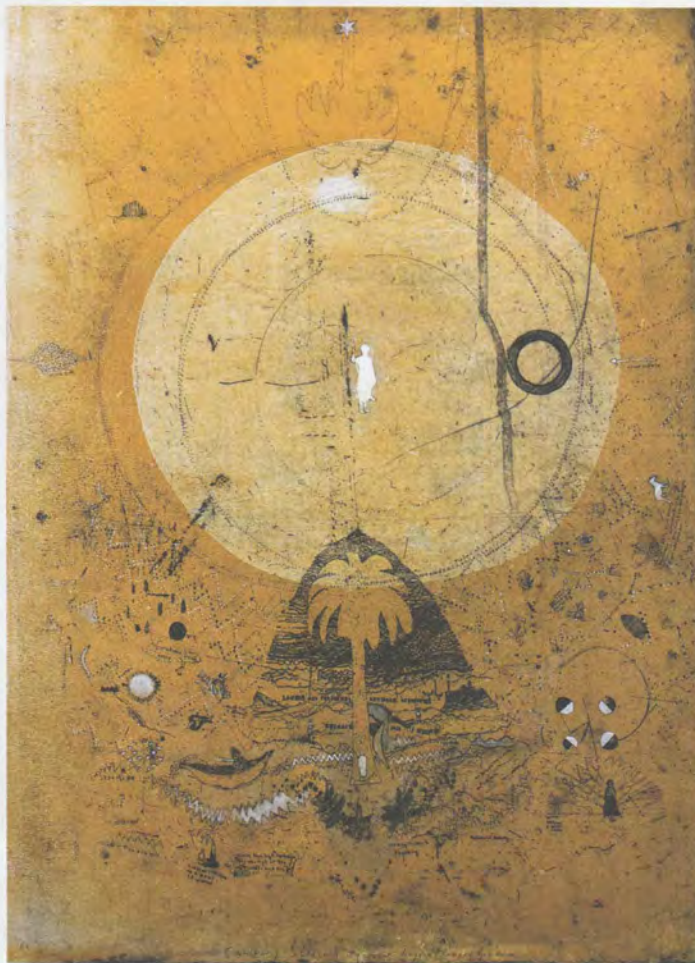
IN A CONVERSATION WITH NUR SHKEMBI, BROKEN HILL-BASED ARTIST ASMA D. MATHER REVEALS THE TENSION BETWEEN 'KNOWING' AND 'NOT KNOWING' IN THE FORM OF BOTH VISIBLE AND ERASED MARKS IN RECENT PRINTS AND INSTALLATIONS. AT THE HEART OF MATHER'S PRACTICE IS THE SEARCH FOR DEEPER WAYS OF KNOWING AND BEING, AND THROUGH THAT THE WORK REVEALS A JOURNEY OF TRUTH SEEKING AND WONDER.

When we spoke about your practice and recent body of works referencing the *barzakh*, you referred to both moments of clarity and complexity throughout the process. In light of the quote by twelfth century Andalusian Muslim philosopher, mystic and poet Ibn 'Arabi: 'If you find it complicated to answer someone's question, do not answer it, for his container is already full and does not have room for the answer', can you explain how this tension informed the constant and rigorous process of both mark-making and erasure in your current work?

There is a *barzakh*, or balance, between complexity and clarity, as there is between any two things. *Isthmus* knows both yet is neither, hence it is seen as either a potential barrier or a mediator. I was looking at the relationship of the mind to the heart, as real apertures of perception.

Etching involves alchemy. Many attempt to control these variables however, through intention, it is a good medium to witness the interaction/*barzakh* between idea and material. For example, many of the lines of complicated and intelligent discourse the mind had collected, were obliterated in the





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01 *Camping stories; a point beyond comprehension*, from 'Drawing Water' series, 2020, copper plate etching on Hahnemühle paper, 60 x 45 cm  
 02 *(There has arisen in your heart a light that) gleams*, from 'Drawing Water' series, 2020, copper plate etching on Hahnemühle paper, unique state, 60 x 45 cm

etching process, becoming part of the landscape. They were not so much erased as absorbed and transformed. Perhaps a type of veiling occurs between the plate and the print – the one and the many.

I was reading something that said the mind likes to grasp knowledge, to particularise, while the heart absorbs knowledge in wave form. I was thinking about this point where the mind becomes perplexed and there is the possibility of surpassing ordinary logic; where everything begins moving in unison, the symphony, within which is a point of silence. Bewilderment is considered a desirable form of knowledge by the Sufis.

**What was the impetus for the series of prints *Songs for Drawing Water* (2020)?**  
 I was thinking about the barzakh as a type of zone for survival, where water comes from and its ability to reflect absorb and change states. We were deep in drought. The barzakh between the visible and invisible worlds, which Ibn 'Arabi calls the 'imaginal world', allows for communication between them, he maps this thoroughly. I found this concept in some





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form in many of the traditional systems of cosmology and metaphysics I researched, including quantum physics. Each of these works is within or pointing to this realm in some way, one which has a radical potential ecologically, and imagining this mysterious potential to draw water. Ibn 'Arabi discusses the concept of the 'universal human' as the possibility of balancing between the two worlds, between the outward and the inward, where a potential exists for a harmonious agency.

I find it inspiring that barriers to water flows – we are all thinking especially of the river the Darling/Barka – could be overcome through a hidden natural law, that there was a space *where from rocks the water springs forth, forth*. Quiet marvels. Barkandji artist Uncle Badger Bates and I had conversations where we agreed water

and compassion are the same thing. I had in mind times in history when knowledge was collated and synthesised, manuscript or codex style, with the emphasis being on truth rather than categories.

**Broken Hill is a well-known outback mining town which has a long history of British colonisation, but it is also home to one of the oldest mosques in Australia. Do the physical remnants of that history inform or inspire your artistic practice?**

The presence of the Afghans in this region is within the work. They had come from another desert and transported water in the inland regions. I imagine many of the ideas we are discussing would have been known to them. I like the idea that it is possible to walk upon land respectfully wherever one is, and I have heard they were a good example of this. They were able



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to survive in this way in the harshest of conditions. They did not leave many traces.

**Reflecting on the use of colour in your earlier work, such as the gem-like hues in your 'For the High Pass' series (2015-17), can you share the rationale behind the 'absence' of colour in your current prints?**

This came about from discussions with Blake Griffiths, who basically curated my recent show 'silence and symphony; notes from the barzakh'. Blake has an insightful design sense which is never separate from meaning. We were thinking of the barzakh as a purer state that is beyond the usual five senses, so to add colour is a layer of multiplicity that was unnecessary. There was the poetic idea of 'walking in and feeling I have my eyes closed'; colour is there, but the eyes are relaxed and an in(ner) sight is given space.





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- 03 *Notes from the High Plain*, 2017, etching and hand colouring, 45 x 66 cm
- 04 *Discernment and the Desert Passage*, 2017, etching and hand colouring, 45 x 33 cm
- 05 *Navigating binary code*, from "Horizontal scroll" series, 2018-20, aluminium etching, ed 1/17, 30 x 30 cm
- 06 *Light people*, from "Horizontal scroll" series, 2020, aluminium etching, ed 1/17, 30 x 30 cm
- 07 *Quantum Grammars*, 2020, plaster etchings, 200 x 300 cm (variable)

Courtesy the artist and Broken Hill Regional Art Gallery, NSW

Also, the barzakh is negotiating between two; so black, white, and some grey. The first print off a plate, or 'matrix' as it is termed in printmaking, is usually printed in black to understand what is happening without added distractions. It is called an artist proof and in some way is the closest to the original. 'For the High Pass' was about the wonders of the world. That's a lot of reason.

**Your practice usually consists of prints - can you describe the sculptural works you have included in your recent series, in particular the copper installation *super conductor* (2020)?**

I have always had an installation element to my practice, whether sound, video or sculpture. Here there is an installation of plaster 'blobs' or clouds with images taken from the plates, called *quantum grammars*. It was the idea of taking these static forms and putting them into movement in a type of constellation, into another, time zone. *Super conductor* is a copper plate, folded at the edges with inked dry point lines, resembling perhaps a strange prayer rug. Copper is a very conductive material and it references the conductivity of the heart; the heart is the central human barzakh. ■

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## EXHIBITION

barzakh; silence and symphony

Until 14 November 2020

Broken Hill Regional Art Gallery, NSW