



Shireen Taweel: *Edge of the C*

to the stars

From here on Earth, *Edge of the C* invites us to look upwards, to the stars. And that looking upwards, astronomers say, is like looking backwards in time, because by the time light from a distant celestial object reaches our eyes, it may long since have extinguished.

The unaided human eye can see up to four-thousand light years into the distance, which means the light in today’s night sky is anywhere between a millisecond and four-thousand years old. This light has borne witness to human history over millennia. Seen countless pilgrimages and migrations across land and sea. Now, our gaze upwards carries new questions, and the stars are no longer just something to wonder at, but something to move into. This shift – from awe to ambition – poses the question: what will human movement into outer space look like?

We find ourselves in a moment of transition— and with us, the diverse definitions of what it is to be human. These, too, are suspended in the in-between. Adrift. A weightless mass, searching for a place to belong in a stranger’s galaxy.

If historical legacies of exclusion, possession, and occupation are allowed to repeat in futures of space migration – such as they have throughout earthly migration – this wayward and uprooted sense of belonging could lie ahead for many, particularly those from the Global South. The result is a diluted cultural landscape, and a struggle against the powers that decide which cultural and spiritual identities are represented – or left behind – on an interstellar voyage.

In *Edge of the C*, Shireen Taweel re-imagines a tomorrow shaped by a reflective rather than reductive vision of humanity, asking us to consider how we might re-centre diverse cultures in speculative, decolonised futures among the stars. Perhaps, Taweel suggests, we begin by remembering – and reclaiming – underrepresented Arab contributions to celestial science: contributions that have long shaped our modern understanding of the cosmos.

Taweel adopts an Arab Futurist perspective, which imagines Arab traditions in speculative futures as a way of confronting present-day social and cultural inequities. For Taweel, this means offering her own cultural traditions passage into a future where they might otherwise be forgotten. But it’s also an opportunity to reflect on the historical significance of Arab celestial navigation technologies, especially for migration and pilgrimage in the past, present, and years to come.

The exhibition brings together drawing, a selection of hand-built copper sculptures, and a series of copper-plate prints, all of which drift in orbit

across the four rooms – and four cardinal directions – of Lewers House Gallery. Together they propose ways in which acts of gathering, ritual, and ceremony might eventuate beyond Earth.

Conceptually and materially, the works draw on historical celestial navigation devices, and the way they reflect a long-standing relationship between science and spirituality. The title of the exhibition, *Edge of the C*, hints at these intertwined histories: to calculations, cartography and cosmologies; to constellations and celestial bodies; to a compass and a crescent moon; to the cultural, calendrical, communal and ceremonial.

Copper, too, rests within this framework, a material Taweel has worked with almost exclusively since learning traditional copper-smithing techniques in Gaziantep, Turkey. The craft of transforming sheet metal into decorative and functional objects – often intricately embellished with Islamic motifs and Qur’anic calligraphy – is part of a time-honoured tradition in Taweel’s ancestral home of Lebanon. This was the method used in the making of ancient celestial navigation devices, and its heritage techniques of hammering, piercing, and engraving have since been passed down through generations. In *Edge of the C*, the practice of copper-smithing is not only preserved by Taweel— it is catapulted into the future. Copper becomes the medium of her own celestial navigation devices; speculative instruments that invite us to observe through the material lens of history to wayfind ethical futures off-Earth.

Thousands of years before now, that power of observation – of using hands and arms’ lengths to gauge the altitude of the sun and stars – helped travellers tell time and find their way in the featureless dunes of the desert. The stars were a divine gift— Wayfinders from the heavens, as the Qur’anic proverb recalls: “*He has given to you the stars so that you may guide yourself in the darkness of land and sea.*” (Surah Al-An’am, Ayah 97)

Soon thereafter, as technologies progressed, ornate hand-crafted instruments such as the astrolabe, sextant and quadrant were developed— the tools referenced by Taweel in *Edge of the C*. The astrolabe (from the Greek astrolábos, meaning ‘star-taker’) has been described as a handheld map of the universe. It was likely invented in early Greece before arriving in the Islamic world by the 8th Century, where it was presented to Muslim scholars as a tool with profound spiritual potential— something that could strengthen humanity’s connection to the night sky. This instrument could measure latitude, pointing the faithful towards Mecca (the Qibla), and it could find the altitude of a star to calculate time, allowing the Muslim to pinpoint the five daily times of prayer.

Muslim scholars were thus motivated to continue mapping the heavens, continue tracing the contours of the cosmos. And as a result of their dedication, astronomical knowledge saw profound development in the

Islamic world. In time, Europeans made further adjustments to the tools— but Arab contributions were never entirely overwritten.

Mapping Astronomy (2022), Taweel’s large-scale graphite drawing made while on residency at Sydney Observatory, charts the endurance of Arab legacies that she saw while handling these ancient instruments. In the drawing, Taweel observes how knowledge was shared from culture to culture, generation to generation. She traces the Islamic motifs and patterns that remained steadfast on these devices, sharing space with multilingual annotations. Expansive and scroll-like, the edge-to-edge drawing seems conscious of unwritten histories that may have come before— and affirms the enduring value of Arab contributions in a broader, cross-cultural dialogue moving forward.

Taweel then distils those histories and latent futures into singular, sculptural forms. Her *Sacred Architecture and the Celestial Body* (2025) sculptures are as intricate and precise as the devices they reference. Bearing a light surface patina and standing almost human in scale, they present as both ancient and architectural; alluding to the possibility of a mosque or, indeed, a *Sacred Architecture* for non-secular worship in outer space— a means to giving gravity to the spirit in the vastness of the ether.

Devices for Seeing (2022) and *Calculations for Movement: instrument three* (2024) differ in that they are smaller, curious, near-artefactual objects that allude to the virtue of being handheld. Their intricate surface patternings are inspired by embellishments seen on ancient navigational tools, and similarly seem to carry decorative, functional, and spiritual purposes in her sculptures. Like all of Taweel’s ‘devices,’ they await activation; their purpose only truly fulfilled when they are used to frame our perception or guide us in a direction of travel.

If we were to orient our bodies at a precise angle – position our gaze so that the pierced patterns align with, and become a lens through which to view, the stars and sky outside the gallery windows – we might find something to observe or measure. Taweel’s geometric and botanical designs would be superimposed onto the sky, serving as frames or viewfinders allowing history to inform how we see, or recalibrate how we understand ourselves within broader historical and cosmological contexts.

Perhaps the astronomers’ anecdote of the night sky as a time capsule serves as a timely reminder: if the way forward is upward, then our movements must remain grounded in an awareness of history. In looking up we must look also back – must recall, reclaim, and reflect on the past – so that humanity’s diverse ways of knowing and being are carried with us. These are the things belong in our blueprint for travel, and the key to the map that guides humanity to the stars.

Tia Madden, Exhibition Curator