

*Star Framed Lock 2023, installation view*

following page:

*Sarah Ujmaia: Of Particle and Wave, installation view*





Sarah Ujmaia's practice is informed by the wide-reaching impacts of forced displacement and cultural re-writing related to the diasporic experience. A first-generation Chaldean artist living and working on unceded Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Boon Wurrung/Bunurong lands, her work contemplates the colonial treatment of minority languages and the potential for cultural continuation through visual mediums. Interested in language, loss, translation and the multiple associations of objects, Ujmaia regenerates motifs, images and linguistic structures in her material-led approach to making.

For this exhibition, the artist has produced a new series of high-lustre graphite drawings and a sculptural installation of terracotta coils. The paper-based works are facsimiles of photographs Ujmaia took on a research trip to her family's hometown of Ankawa in modern-day Iraq and are framed by steel structures that emulate the undersides of utilitarian desks. On her return she had the camera's film developed, finding that the printed photographs were underexposed and the subjects largely obscured, dark or abstract. When rendering them as drawings Ujmaia applied layer upon layer of graphite, harnessing the material's innate reflective qualities and reintroducing substance and light to the dark source pictures. As the viewer shifts around them, the images oscillate between representational still life and luminous abstraction with holographic effect, suggesting the slippery nature of translation and its ability to uncover new vocabularies.

The photographs and Ujmaia's subsequent transcriptions in graphite represent artefacts—among them a vessel, lock, quill holder and coins—from Ankawa's Syriac Heritage Museum, a site of Chaldean history and culture.<sup>01</sup> While the locally-run museum houses ancient domestic and agricultural items and traditional folk costumes, it also showcases objects made in recent times by members of staff, recreated for the museum using reference images and oral storytelling. Despite some of them being everyday things (so everyday, in fact, that you can find them at local markets), these reproductions endeavour to fill in the gaps of cultural history, which for Ujmaia provides a parallel to her own practice.<sup>02</sup>

Of the eight drawings, one is based on a photograph taken outside

01. The museum is dedicated to showcasing 'snippets of history' from Christian denominations which are minority religious groups in Iraq. See: <https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/270320186>, accessed 22 March 2023.

02. Sarah Ujmaia, in conversation with the author, 15 March 2023.





*External Circuit* 2023, installation view

the museum. *External Circuit*, 2023, captures a gate opposite her aunt's house, also in Ankawa. Although not specifically Chaldean—its architecture appears in parts of suburban Melbourne where Ujmaia grew up, as 'a Eurocentric symbol carried on through immigration'<sup>03</sup>—she observed that many in the town were similar, serving as an omnipresent boundary for the local homes. In this image a border becomes the focus rather than the periphery, and the idea of bordering and containing has poetic connotations in her work. One might consider the margins of motherland territories, or migrant passages opening and closing across state lines. Unfixed in its locality, the gate is connected to distant and local sites, while ultimately belonging to neither.

However, for Ujmaia it is less important that we, as viewers, can identify the particular objects represented. Rather, she is interested in what it means to translate them; to transliterate one material to another, to unveil alternate readings, to 'uncover something that was never there'.<sup>04</sup>

This process of starting with a reference point, then translating it through material investigations to shed light on something else—what Ujmaia refers to as her 'studio tongue'—also underpins the framing of these works. Like the drawings, the frames began with a source object that has been removed from its initial construction and re-fabricated to become something new. The artist has flipped the underbelly of the desk around, inverting the steel support's typical function by removing its legs and drilling through the existing tabs to secure the surface of the paper. The metal structures become image-holding, boundary-creating scaffoldings, with the final works straddling a space between object and image.

While completely reimagined, the frames remain identifiable enough to maintain their own set of cultural, social and scholastic references. In an oblique way Ujmaia questions the educational structures that shape our understanding of culture. Yet numerous other readings co-exist: within the desk-come-frames, work, learning, eating, sharing, solace, writing, thinking, drawing and making all come to mind, among other things. Just as different regions have their own accents and customs, different

people carry their own memories and connections. The artist embraces this open-endedness, noting: 'not

03. Sarah Ujmaia, in conversation with the author, 6 April 2023.

04. Sarah Ujmaia, in conversation with the author, 9 December 2022.

everything contained within a work can be viewed or accessed by those who are viewing and (potentially) influencing [it]. While visual language is visual, it's not always all visible'.<sup>05</sup>

The graphite drawings are accompanied by *Ongoing Coils*, 2022–23, an installation of approximately 1,000 terracotta coils piled atop a low elongated plinth. Whereas the drawings are literally built up from an image, the coils are metaphorically broken down from one. Ujmaia has taken part of the gate motif in *External Circuit*, again removed it from its original context and freshly articulated it in wave-like lines of clay. Made in a repetitive gestural process of rolling and shaping, the coils draw references to line making in art as well as the ontology of line as a building block for written language. On a material level, the coil is a foundational element of hand building in ceramics, a medium the artist has begun using in recent years, and the basis from which a ceramic object grows.

As the title suggests, the coils form part of a continuous project which Ujmaia revisits over time. After she began making them she was introduced to the work of Italian–Brazilian artist, Anna Maria Maiolino, and the ongoing collaborative series *Terra Modelada* (Modelled Earth), 1994–. Conceived as an installation that can exist anywhere, and be continued by other people, *Terra Modelada* is similarly made of basic clay forms that are moulded by hand, such as rolls and balls. For Maiolino, 'These installations are works-in-process that can remain open-ended ... [They] deal with the dignity of human work, which, since the dawn of time, has been about building cultures'.<sup>06</sup>

While divergent in scope and intent, Maiolino's work resonates with Ujmaia and her interest in translation, cultural continuation and the evolving nature of a studio language. *Ongoing Coils* presents a body of work to which she can return and methodically make, as and when desired, with gentle re-iterations of the material unfolding at different moments. In this way the coils exist

in a constant state of open-ended translation.

Novelist and translator of her own work, Jhumpa Lahiri, has noted: 'Translation must continuously adapt to the needs of the present. It cannot divorce itself from the moment at

05. Sarah Ujmaia, *Research Documents: Tracing a Line / Writing a Star*, paper presentation, HDR Symposium, Monash University, VIC, AUS, 18 November 2022.

06. Amanda Dalla Villa Adams, 'Truth of the Real: A Conversation with Anna Maria Maiolino', 5 February 2021, <https://sculpturemagazine.art/truth-of-the-real-a-conversation-with-anna-maria-maiolino/>, accessed 17 March 2023.





Water into Thirst 2023, installation view

previous page:  
Ongoing Coils 2022-23, installation view

hand ... that is why even the greatest works of translation are always replaced by others'.<sup>07</sup> Like translations that are fluid and move with us, *Ongoing Coils* shift in form along the platform, with looser waves transforming into rounder shapes. Depending on the observer and their own set of personal and cultural associations, they might be links in a chain, rolling seas, or locks of hair. Evoking movement and routes of travel, they function as poetic meditations on how oral and visual traditions are constantly in motion and situated within changing contexts.

The title of this exhibition, *Of Particle and Wave*, refers to a concept in quantum physics known as the wave–particle duality, where the physical entity of light is described as having both wave- and particle-like characteristics.<sup>08</sup> Light is central to the installation, both as a metaphor and a physical element. Its binary quality is reflected in the graphite medium, in how it interacts with fluctuating daylight, and in how Ujmaia has ‘returned the drawings to light, for the full function of the material and image to be received’.<sup>09</sup> Additionally, the coils can be perceived as independent units, or particles, while at the same time embodying waves and motion when displayed as a collective.

A sense of duality underpins Sarah Ujmaia’s striking and thoughtful exhibition at Heide. Layered, complex, and tactile, her visual lexicon—developed through a material and iterative process—is at once abstract and figurative. The work is personal and communal; it speaks to the artist’s own lineage as well as minority cultures at large. It fills in the gaps while offering new readings. It looks to the past to adapt to the present, and invites us to consider what we might pass on to the future.

Laura Lantieri  
Exhibition Curator

07. Jhumpa Lahiri, *Translating Myself and Others*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2022, p. 53.

08. <https://www.britannica.com/science/wave-particle-duality>, accessed 10 March 2023.

09. Sarah Ujmaia, in conversation with the author, 15 March 2023.







above and previous: Sarah Ujma: *Of Particle and Wave*, installation view

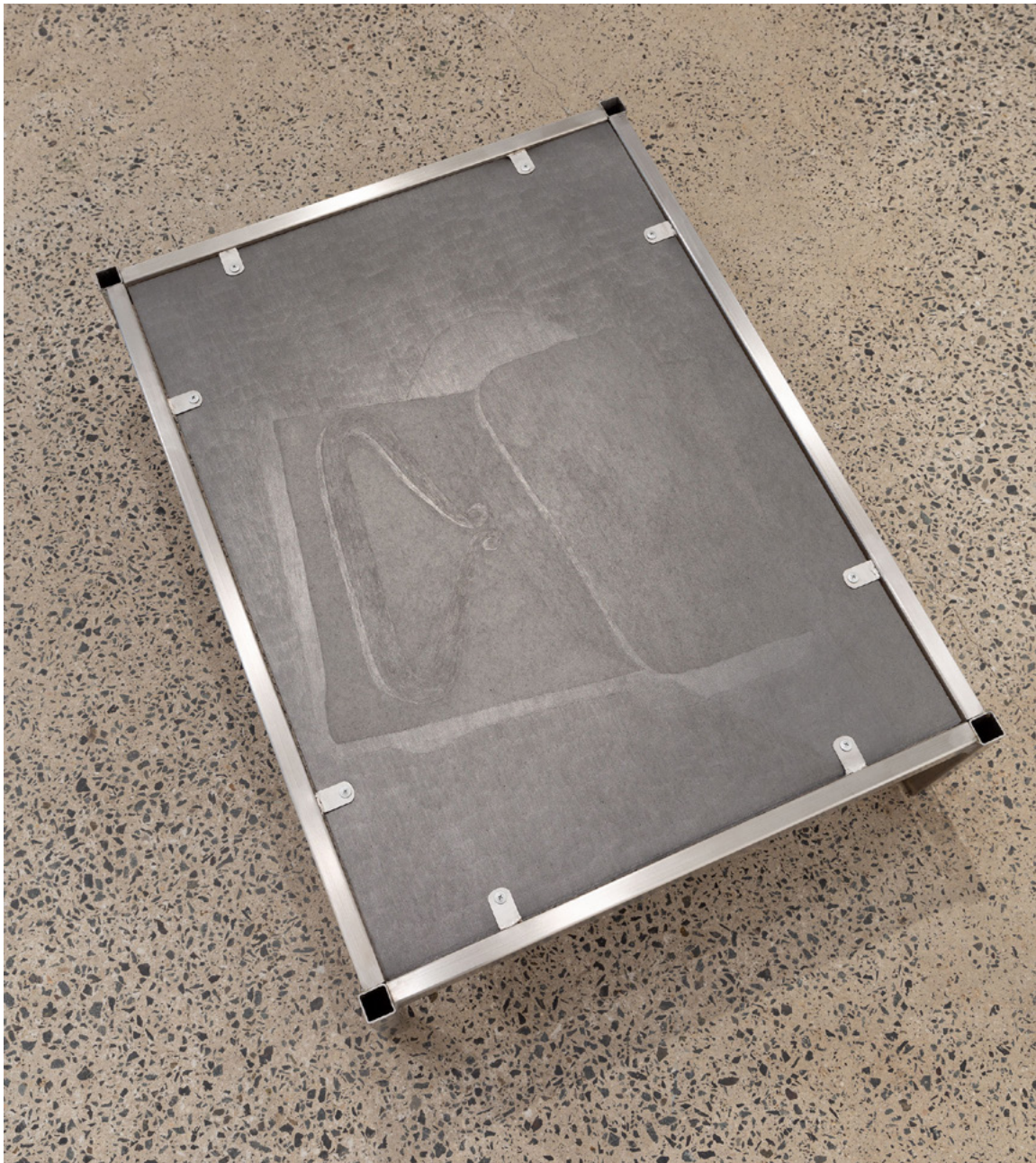


Table Top Drawing 2023, installation view

## Fluent

The collection of words we must gather in order to communicate, in any form and in any language, work in modularity. Collaborators and accomplices each, in an utterance. In turn utterances themselves are contingent on contexts, references and pronunciations that stretch them and push them to interact with their malleability, their poetry.

Each of the works in Sarah Ujmaia's suite of sculptural drawings on show at Heide is presented as a modular element both familiar and abstract, and at the ready; at once rich in its multiplicity of potential and in its ability to reflect. In this way the works are at the same time dormant as they are active.

In our conversations in the lead up to the exhibition Ujmaia expressed her interest in the everydayness of the objects presented, and their functionality within the domestic space: a lock, a pitcher, an ink well. These items were photographed by the artist while researching at the Syriac Heritage Museum, Ankawa. Museums have a way of separating items from their context and rendering them into artefacts. Ujmaia has put these items through yet another process of translation by photographing, drawing, and working them into framed objects. Here they are presented to the viewer as both representational and autonomous.

I have begun to see the images in Ujmaia's works as words or syllables in a sentence, but at the same time I resist my impulse to want to perceive them as a full sentence and acknowledge—it is I who needs to adapt to their plurality. In fact, there is no lack of legibility in the language that these objects—which are also drawings—belong to. They speak very fluently, very confidently in their fragmentary form, in their mix of memory and history and belonging to the world now. As individual components, in their unfinished-ness, the sentence is still functional.

This language can only be spoken about and translated within its own terms for each modular segment has its own history, approaches and possibilities in its everyday functionality. An object framed into a very low table and a wave of repetitive forms made out of terracotta clay are various iterations of the one action.

Cultural continuity exists like this for marginalised communities who have endured layers of erasure. Specificities may not be easily detectable from the outside because they are experienced in their everydayness. They are functional, never just fragmentary but also ready components existing in new settings, essential parts of languages of the domestic, of the familial. They are continual and aggregative.

If oral language stores a culture's history, its values, its exchanges with other cultures, its humour, its poetry, so too does the visual realm. It reflects, deflects, and builds upon the cultural. The linearity that guides the colonial project would have us believe that through occupations, migration and colonisation we are moving away, never to return to a life previous to its ravages. But within this new setting on the lands of others, the First Nations peoples of this continent, languages adapt in their awareness of surrounds, constantly learning.

Sarah Ujmaia's work shows us that multiplicity and layering and the pragmatic are in fact the realm through which culture endures and adapts. The components are neither one thing or the other, but indeed many things at once within an endless process of relationships that shifts as we migrate, adapt, return, and pass information to next generations.

Lucreccia Quintanilla





Sarah Ujmaia: *Of Particle and Wave*, installation view

## List of Works



*Brace 2023*  
graphite on paper, stainless steel  
80 x 62 cm



*Sliding Coins 2023*  
graphite on paper, stainless steel  
62 x 45 cm



*Covalent Structure 2022-23*  
graphite on paper, stainless steel  
59.6 x 40.7 cm



*Table Top Drawing 2023*  
graphite on paper, stainless steel  
21 x 80 x 60 cm



*External Circuit 2023*  
graphite on paper, stainless steel  
84 x 86 cm



*Water into Thirst 2023*  
graphite on paper  
44 x 62 cm



*Ongoing Coils 2022-23*  
terracotta  
dimensions variable



*Writing Cavity 2023*  
graphite on paper, stainless steel  
44 x 62 cm



*Star Framed Lock 2023*  
graphite on paper, stainless steel  
46 x 64 cm

Published to accompany the exhibition  
*Sarah Ujmaia: Of Particle and Wave*  
Curated by Laura Lantieri  
Heide Museum of Modern Art  
25 March to 23 July 2023

© The artist, writers, photographers,  
designer and Heide Museum of Modern Art

This publication is copyright. Apart from  
any use permitted under the Copyright Act  
1968 and subsequent amendments, no part  
may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval  
system or transmitted in any form or by  
any means whatsoever without the prior  
permission of the copyright owners.

Editors: Lesley Harding and Laura Lantieri  
Proofreaders: Kendrah Morgan and Tim Andrews  
Designer: Michael Gibb

All works illustrated by Sarah Ujmaia  
unless otherwise indicated

All photographs by Christian Capurro  
unless otherwise indicated

ISBN: 978-1-921330-83-4  
A catalogue record for this book  
is available from the National Library  
of Australia



Heide Museum of Modern Art  
7 Templestowe Road  
Bulleen Victoria 3105  
Australia  
heide.com.au

Heide Museum of Modern Art acknowledges  
the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation,  
the Traditional Owners of the land upon  
which Heide stands.

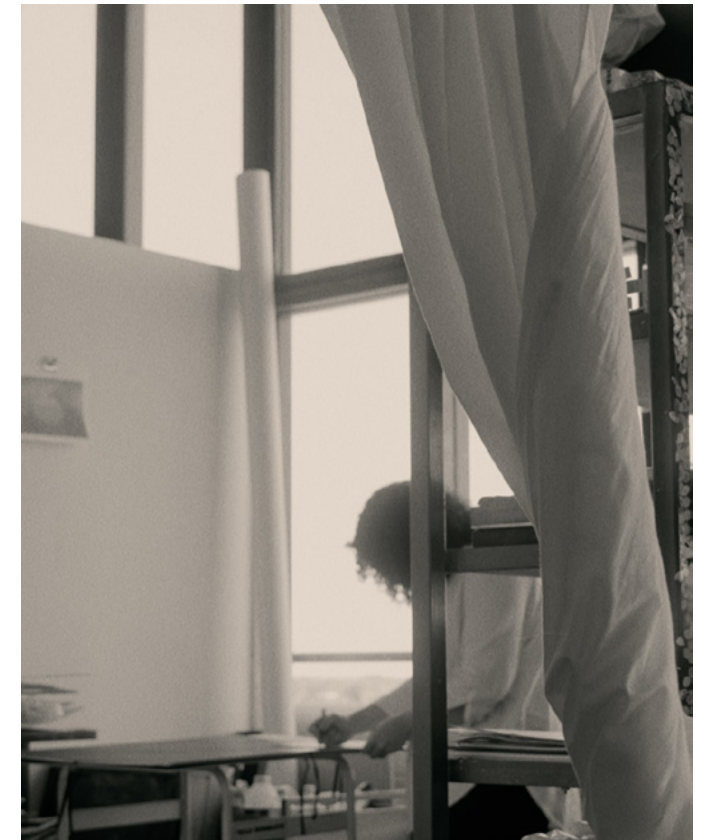


cover image:  
*Brace 2023, installation view*

endpapers:  
Details from Sarah Ujmaia's studio,  
photographs: Ainsley Halbmeijer

opposite:  
Detail from Sarah Ujmaia's studio,  
photograph: Ainsley Halbmeijer

Artist's acknowledgements:  
With thanks to Laura Lantieri, Lucreccia Quintanilla,  
Dan Truscott, Nada Ujmaia and Olivia Radonich.





Kerry Gardner & Andrew Myer  
Project Gallery  
Heide Museum of Modern Art  
25 March – 23 July 2023

**HEIDE  
MUSEUM  
OF MODERN  
ART**