

Opposite:

Ara Dolatian, *Spirit King*

2023, earthenware

h.61cm, w.22cm, d.17cm

Photo: Simon Strong

Right:

The mask of Warka; from
Warka (ancient Uruk)

Iraq, Jemdet Nasr period

3000–2900 BCE, The Iraq

Museum, Baghdad, IM45434

Photo: courtesy Osama Shukir
Muhammed Amin

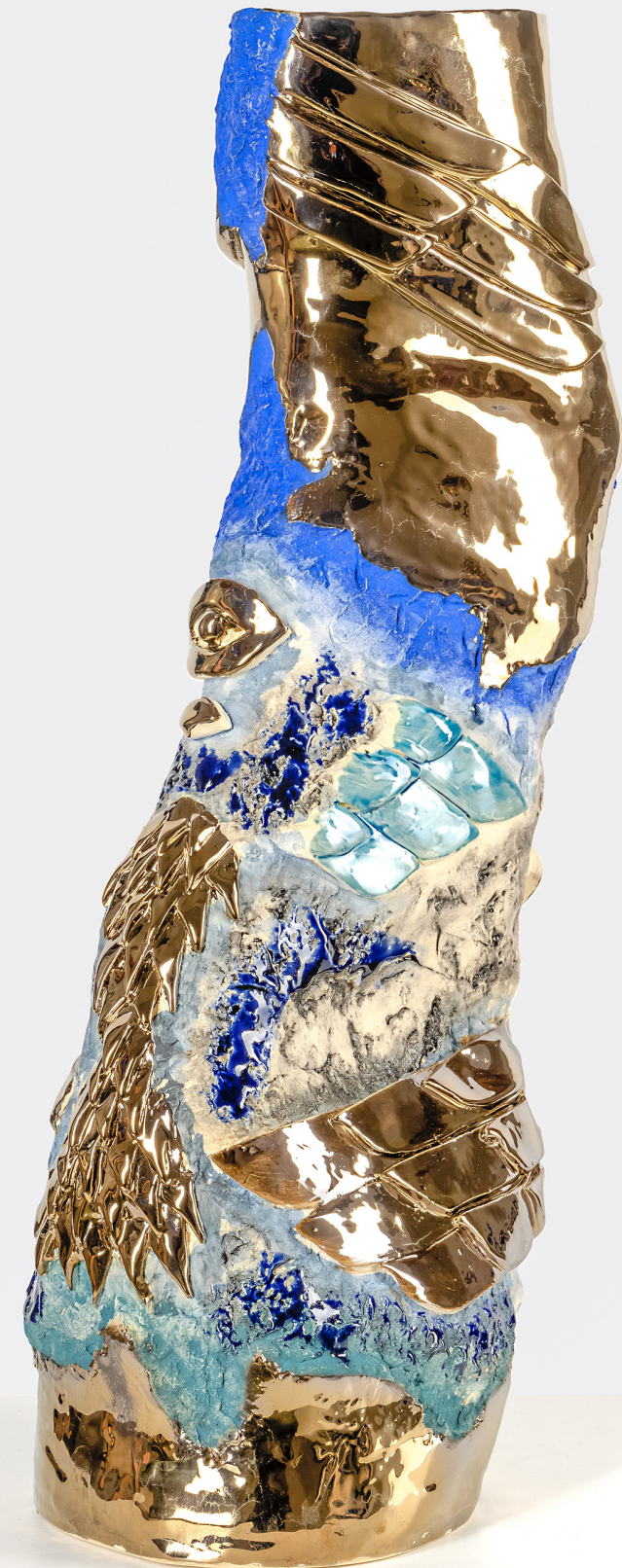


MOVING BETWEEN THE PAST AND THE PRESENT

by Ara Dolatian

"She can't remember the exact date of her kidnapping. But it was springtime when the blur of bodies burst into her home, breaking first the silence, then the stone and glass. Someone rushed at her with outstretched hands, grabbed her head, and pulled. She was whisked outside – brief breeze of warm spring air! – then stuffed into a car. A man carried her to the back of a farm and buried her. It was months before the dirt above her face began to shift. Another pair of hands grabbed her head and pulled. Again outside – autumn air this time. Again into a car. Out the window Baghdad appeared, and then, at last, her home: the National Museum of Iraq." –Sigal Samuel¹

The Mask of Warka, also known as the Lady of Uruk, is a white marble carved female face, most likely a representation of the goddess Inanna. It dates back to 3100 BCE and is one of the earliest known representations of the human face. Above, Samuel tells the story of its looting from the museum in Baghdad along with 15,000 other antiquities after the chaotic US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Mask of Warka was found and returned later that year, but many items have not been so lucky.



In my research and sculptural practice, I explore the cultural environments connected to vanished and pilfered artefacts in the Al-Jazira region, encompassing the expanse between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers – also referred to as Mesopotamia. Through my work, I aim to create visual reminiscences of sculpted deities, architectural structures and vessels. Rather than replicating historical works, my focus is on deriving inspiration from them. Consequently, my creations take the form of idiosyncratic shapes with captivating colour palettes, graceful contours, and delicate edges, evoking the essence of archaeological figures and deteriorated architectural sites.

Professor Zainab Bahrani reminds us that:

“We should not forget that cultural heritage and monuments, despite their significance to the world, are a powerful basis of local histories and identities. Historical artifacts, works of art, and monuments are the agents of memory and even the sense of self. Their loss is psychologically devastating well beyond the loss that is calculated at the market value of antiquities.”²

I have always had an interest in social and environmental ecologies. My early sculptural ceramic works were combined with kinetic and organic elements such as plants, water, mist and small electrical motors. My very first incorporation of ceramics into my sculptural practice was with the 2011 project *Perceptual* (during my studies at RMIT, Melbourne). I needed a few vessels to hold dye for a large-scale drawing machine installation that produced one large floor-based drawing over a 48-hour duration. I remember sealing the bisqued interior of vessels with hot wax instead of glaze. For many of my early projects, I incorporated a few ceramic elements within an installation.

Over the past few years, I have immersed myself in the world of ceramics, constantly exploring and refining my techniques. I see my works as sculptural experiments driven by multiple tests. I began with moulding and slipcasting, but soon developed a hybrid approach that combined slipcasting with handbuilding. Over the past year, my passion for spatial and sculptural practice led me to shift my focus entirely to handbuilding. I’m currently embarking on a new phase of experimentation and development, working on a larger-scale body of work.

Building one of my sculptures usually starts with small slabs of clay and the construction of a base structure that serves as the foundation of the piece. In some instances, as the work evolves, I let gravity add curves and movement and commit to what happens unintentionally throughout making. I try and incorporate these natural shifts in the clay – it lends a sense of dynamism and fluidity to the final work.

I employ an eclectic mix of ceramic tools, industrial tools and found objects – imprinting each piece with unique charm and character. A drawing journal has always been an integral part of my creative practice, allowing me to capture fleeting ideas quickly with a pencil or whatever materials are at hand. For glazing, I work with earthenware glazes, oxides and lustres which bring vibrancy and depth to the final work. I prefer a minimal first glaze application using brushes, and I usually do a second or third firing.



Left:
Ara Dolatian, *Anzu*, 2022
h.37cm, w.27cm, d.18cm
Photo: artist

Below: Ara Dolatian in
his studio, 2023
Photo: Simon Strong





1 Ara Dolatian, work in progress; photo: artist

2 Ara Dolatian, *Mythos of the Island*, 2022, installation view, photo: Ivana Smiljanic

3 Ara Dolatian, *Belief System*, 2022, h.36cm, w.16cm; photo: artist



Some of my sculptures reference the 'evil eye' which is a popular decorative element and superstitious belief in the Middle East and in Mediterranean countries. In Baghdad where I grew up, blue-coloured gemstones like turquoise, or blue ceramics and glass are thought to have a similar ability to an evil eye – the ability to repel negative energy. Generally, blue is a rare colour in nature. The evil eye belief is rooted in the idea of the eye as an active organ with the power to project energy or light. Ancient people often described the eyes as supernatural beings, animals, or humans, or as *fiery* or *flashing*, and emitting energy comparable to the sun's rays, fire or a lamp. Understanding popular beliefs is crucial to understanding the conceptual metaphors and metonymies associated with the eye in Sumerian³ literature. Sumerians considered the eye as an active organ capable of causing harm. In one of the earliest mentions of the evil eye dating back to the pre-Sargonic era, a Sumerian sage cautioned against using one's eye to cause harm, stating, *igi-zu-ta hul na-ak*, "do not do evil with your eye".⁴

According to ancient Mesopotamian beliefs, deities resided in the heavens, but their earthly statues were considered physical embodiments of these gods. My art is a reflection of these divine figures and the impact they have on the world, history and culture. Drawing inspiration from actual Mesopotamian archeological imagery, my sketches and sculptural works become embedded with the essence of these ancient narratives and deities. With prominent eyes, long beards and animalistic gestures alongside human forms, my sculptures bring to life mythical beings and hybrid entities. Through these works, I explore how ancient deities have evolved and morphed into new figures.

1 Sigal Samuel, *It's Disturbingly Easy to Buy Iraq's Archeological Treasures*, The Atlantic, 2018

2 Dr Paul Collins, *Rethinking Mesopotamia in Oxford*, The British Institute for the Study of Iraq, Webinar, 2021

3 Sumer is the earliest known civilisation in the historical region of southern Mesopotamia/Iraq.

4 Zacharias Kotzé, *The Evil Eye of Humans, Animals, and Demons in Sumerian Literature*, Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, University of South Africa, 2021

Ara Dolatian will be participating in Sydney Contemporary, 7–10 September 2023; and will have a solo exhibition *Heavenly Creatures*, in November 2023 at James Makin Gallery, VIC.

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