# Mary Yacoob – Schema



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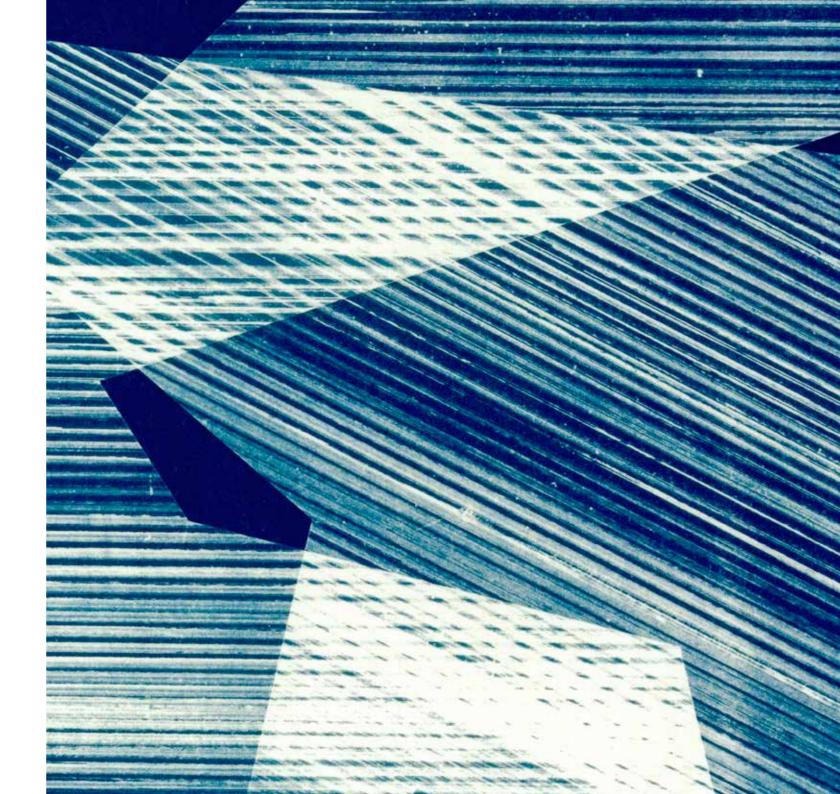
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## Mary Yacoob – Schema Exhibition catalogue

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Published on the occasion of "Schema", a solo exhibition at Five Years Gallery, London, in January 2020, following an artist's print-making residency at Mutton Fist Press.

Graphic design by Disinformation Printed by DM Design + Print Made in the United Kingdom



## In conversation - Mary Yacoob with Bob and Roberta Smith

#### B: What is a cyanotype?

M: Cyanotypes are a primitive form of photography that was invented in 1842 by John Herschel, a scientist. He wanted to reproduce technical drawings and notes. They were used about a year later by Anna Atkins who is considered to be the first female photographer. She was making prints of seaweed and plant life. Cyanotypes are also known as blueprints.

## B: So cyan is the blue in the print?

M: Yes, they are also known as sun prints. I make them using an ultra-violet light box, but you can also just make them in the sun. You can put a piece of cyanotype paper on the pavement and place an object on top of it, and leave it there for a few minutes. Where you've covered the paper so the sun can't get to it, the paper will remain white. Where the sun has hit the paper, there is a chemical reaction and the paper will turn blue.

B: Blueprints are used a lot in architectural and engineering drawings, aren't they? Well they were, before digital technology. There's a particular kind of technical information that's being conveved in the print, so that the engineer can build the steam train or the architect can make the building. What would you say is the information in your cyanotypes that you're conveying? Lots of your work is about how we synthesise information, isn't it? So the cyanotype, this new work, I'm just wondering how that works. The technology obviously has a relationship. I'm wondering how these forms that you're creating convey information or what territory they come from?

M: This is an extension of a project where I made a series of drawings that I called "Draft", where I used white lines on dark blue paper. For those drawings I gathered images from sound technology textbooks, so that was about the hardware behind the production of sound. I took each diagram and sketched it. I then stopped looking at the original source and continued drawing, enlarging them to about a metre tall, and drawing using different kinds of gestural mark making. So each drawing had

its own particular gesture, like a dot or a flick or a line of a particular width, and so the image grows organically, but the outline of the drawing is based on these technical diagrams. I was exhibiting some of these drawings, and Lisa Cradduck, who runs Mutton Fist Press, suggested I make cyanotypes. So that's how I first started making cyanotypes. I became artist in residence at Mutton Fist Press. So the information for the cyanotypes was originally from diagrams I found in textbooks. I take them out of their original context and then I drive them through my own creative process.

### B: Why are technical things and information interesting to you?

M: I like diagrams and charts and alphabets – visual languages that exist in the world outside of an artistic context. I became interested in those when I was doing my BA in Fine Art at Cass School of Art. It may be that I found them intriguing because I was also working at the London School of Economics where I would see diagrams and charts. They have an allure, but I find them hard to comprehend because they're so specialist. So putting them through an artistic process allowed me to claim them for myself and relate to them in my own way via my own visual practice.

B: I suppose the chart or diagram or graph is trying to make visible some technical information, which the layman would find difficult, but the chart would aid understanding? Does it work like that with your diagrams.<sup>9</sup>

M: I have made work in the past where I use diagrams to chart the minutiae of my daily life. In the "Draft" project, and in this new cyanotype project, though, I'm allowing the diagrams to be open to interpretation, so people can view them and see different things. People impose upon them their own history of visual knowledge.

B: I was going to ask you what your mum and dad did?

M: My mum was mostly a housewife, sometimes she sewed linings into coats.

B: Did she work with patterns?

M: Not so much, though a lot of my family sell textiles and jewellery. My cousin used to design textiles, I remember seeing her with pattern books.

B: Pattern is interesting, isn't it? What kind of textiles were they selling?

M: They sell brocades. They used to sell laces, Dutch and English wax prints, which are mainly used for traditional West African clothing.

B: Did those patterns interest you? A lot of things come out of Africa, from blues, to abstraction and Cubism. That kind of repetitive geometric pattern that you see in African fabrics creates a kind of magpie-like allure...

M: Yes. Pattern and geometry, visual systems - again, that takes me back into why I like diagrams and charts, schematics...

B: What does schematics mean?

M: ... a visual system. You've got some information about how something works and you're trying to find the simplest way to convey that in a diagram. That is what I was trying to do when I was a student at Cass, where I was representing information about my daily life. For example, I would count the number of dust particles that would collect on the television screen over a period of time, or notate the sounds I heard in the house over a 24 hour period. I would gather the information and then try and figure out how to convey it in visual form.

B: How did you first get into art? What made you pick up a pencil?

M: I've always enjoyed drawing as a way of responding to and learning about the world through creativity and imagination. It's something I've always done.

B: But you haven't always done it. You had a break, or have you always made art through all these different day jobs that you've had?

M: I took a break when I was studying for an English & Politics BA in the 1990s, then, when I got my first job as a secretary, which happened to be at the Royal College of Art, I realised that I missed art. I would see the students coming out of their studios with rolls of paper, having done life drawing, so I started going to evening classes and that led to doing a BA in Fine Art, completed in 2004.

B: Are there connections between your background in Politics & English that feed into your work in some way? So, a kind of literary or political dimension to your graphs and diagrams?

M: I curated a series of events at the Charles Dickens Museum in Bloomsbury with the artists Pippa Koszerek and Marco Cali. I saw that Dickens was interested in prisons because his father had been imprisoned for debt. Dickens visited a prison in Philadelphia and wrote about his experience and his horror at how people were treated there. He wrote a novel "Little Dorrit" in which one of the main characters was imprisoned for debt. I did a project about panoptic prisons, which is an institutional plan devised by Jeremy Bentham in the 1790s, in which all the prisoners are arranged in a circle around a central point, from which one guard can continuously monitor all the prisoners. The prisoners don't know when they're under observation, so they can only assume they're being watched all the time.

Michel Foucault writes in his book "Discipline & Punish" about panoptic prisons and about how we internalize structures of power, so that we police ourselves. Structures of power have become hidden because they are more psychological rather than imposed on the body. People used to be punished by public executions, so punishment was public and physical, but now it's more internalized.

So, I became interested in architectural drawings of the panopticon as a visual symbol for these ideas. There was a panoptic prison planned at Millbank, in London, where Chelsea College of Art is now, though another design was taken forward in the end. I've seen a representation of that plan on a map that a surveyor showed me, and the building looks like a masonic symbol or some kind of mandala.

B: I mean, that's really fitting people into an idea in the most brutal way. What's the most poetic and beautiful diagram you've ever come across?

M: Maybe the astrolabes in Islamic Galleries at the British Museum. They are technical instruments for making astronomical measurements. They're not only diagrams, they're also tools, but I would imagine them as drawings, which is why I like looking at them.

B: Is there something about the search for a kind of mathematical truth that you're trying to get at, or something that you admire in the search for a specific quotidian reality that you're interested in?

You've been documenting things that happened to you, or you have done that in the past, but this now seems like it's a shift. It seems like a celebration of the materiality or visuality of the effort needed to try to understand the world, or the tools needed to try and understand the world?

M: I do like the idea of drawing as thinking, figuring something out on paper. That is another reason why I like diagrams and sketches, because you can see someone trying to figure something out on paper, and they exist in this exciting state between the abstract and the real. I've done lots of drawings that are proposals for artworks and large scale interventions that I might never do, they just exist in the realm of the proposal, they're an imagining of what reality could be.

B: How relevant is the idea of the iteration to your cyanotypes? They seem, when I've seen a few of them together, to be almost different attempts at trying to do the same thing, but this idea of trying to produce a number of different versions of similar images, it seems a key thing...

M: I have been reversing and mirroring templates, and experimenting with printing the same image in different colours, to test how the perception of the shapes can shift. I've been thinking recently about how a lot of my drawing centres on the circle, square and triangle, shapes which are common across different visual languages. That's what makes them so open to interpretation.

... And it's the same with the "Draft" drawings. I was interested in how people

interpreted them in very different ways. There was one drawing that somebody said looked like a hip bone. She was a nurse, so she immediately applied her own visual references. That's the interesting thing about when you reduce things down to basic geometry.

B: With that fundamental kind of geometric shape, that seems to sum up ideas that could be spiritual, religious or philosophical. How much does that underpin what you're interested in? The abstraction that was in Islamic art or the complexity in the roof of a cathedral?

M: I am very attracted to that kind of visually intense patterned surface. Cyanotype printing is quite an unpredictable process. You can be editioning a print, printing the same artwork, using the same paper and template, exposing for the same amount of time on the light box, and each one will come out differently because you get chemical splashes, for instance. So there's a kind of ethereal atmosphere that comes across, that's a part of the materiality of the process. It has its own agency.

B: So do you to think of yourself as a magician, working away with these chemicals, do you say "Abracadabra" when it's finished?

M: Well, it's the process itself that's producing these variations. I'm trying to be as systematic as possible.

B: The process is running away from you?

M: ... and that's an exciting thing. I play a lot with chance in my work. Sometimes my drawings are quite controlled, but sometimes I allow more random variations to come in. For instance I repeatedly draw a letter of the alphabet, when I'm listening to music, and every time the verse of a song changes, I increase the size of the shape, like a letter K or a number 4, and when I hear someone talking, I'll change the shape or colour, so it's a process of order and chance.

B: Maybe it's like an after-the-fact musical notation. You can't play a piece of music from seeing all these Ks, but you might think all the Ks reflect the experience of the artist listening to the music?

M: The mark making is rhythmic, there is repetition in the dots and lines. In some drawings I use quite a thick pen, and if I skip it across the paper the line comes in and out of view because the ink doesn't have time to hit the paper, so you get these rhythmic markings within the line and between lines that you can't quite control.

B: Do you play a musical instrument?

M: I sing in a choir.

B: Singing in a choir is about making sound, isn't it?

M: You're making sound, trying to harmonise with other people.

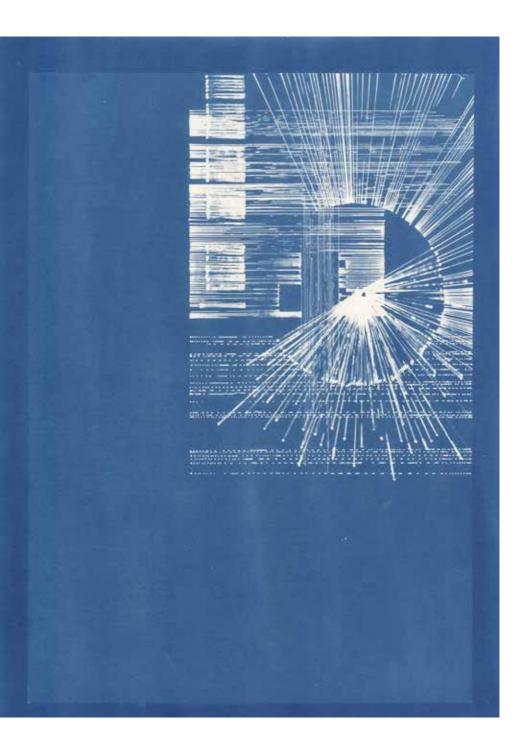
B: How do harmonics work in your drawings, with these cyanotypes? They seem to be quite harmonious images, it's to do with the geometry, there's a kind of rhythm and pace to them?

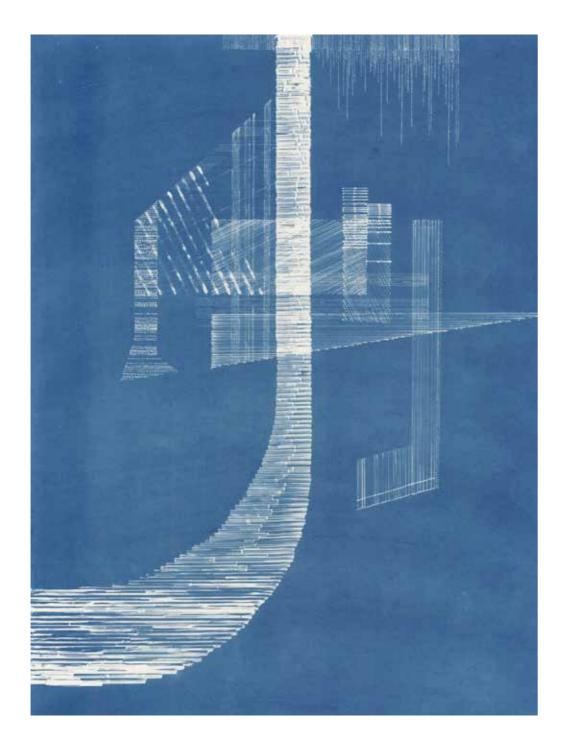
M: I'm conscious of harmonious composition and unexpected rhythms. For example, I don't know how opaque the ink is going to be on the acetates or tracing paper I use to make a cyanotype, so it's unpredictable how that's going to come out in the print.

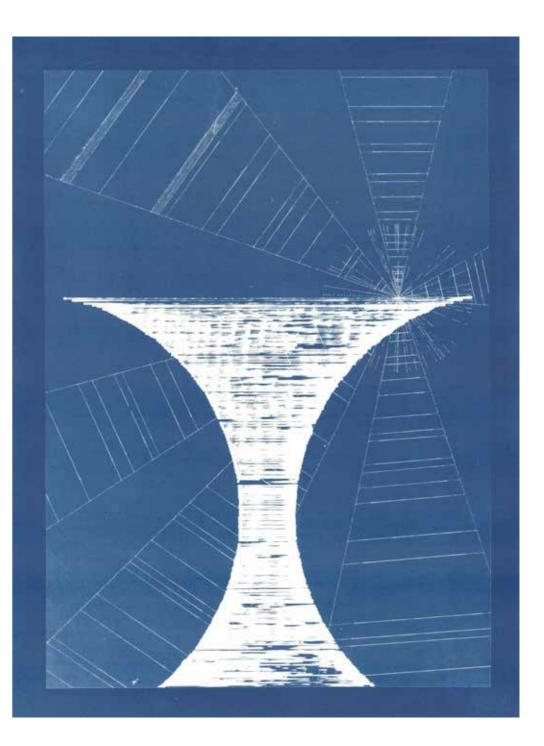
B: I think they are quite beautiful things...

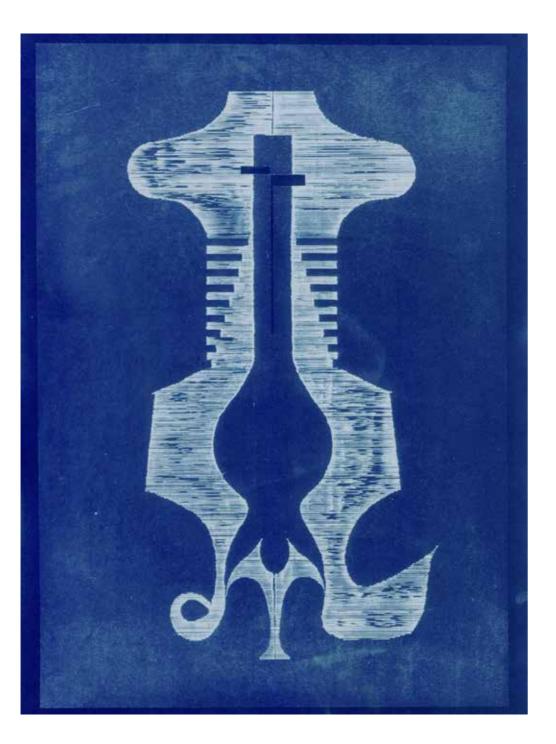
M: I want to draw people in.

Bob and Roberta Smith is an artist.

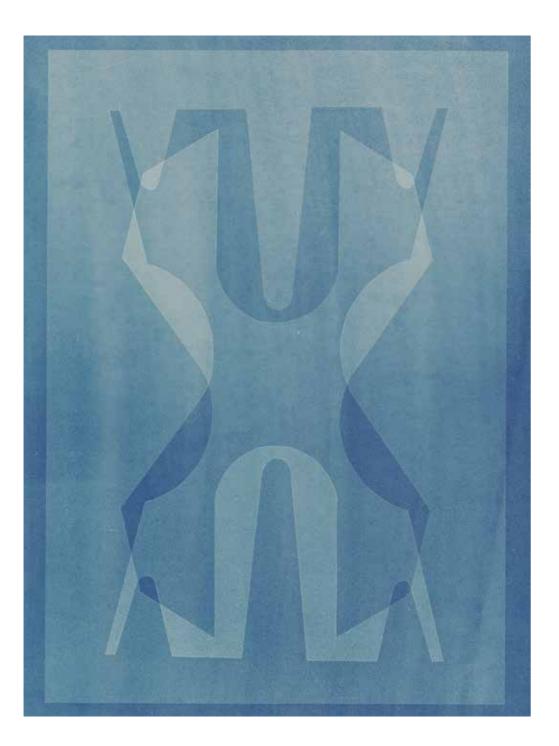




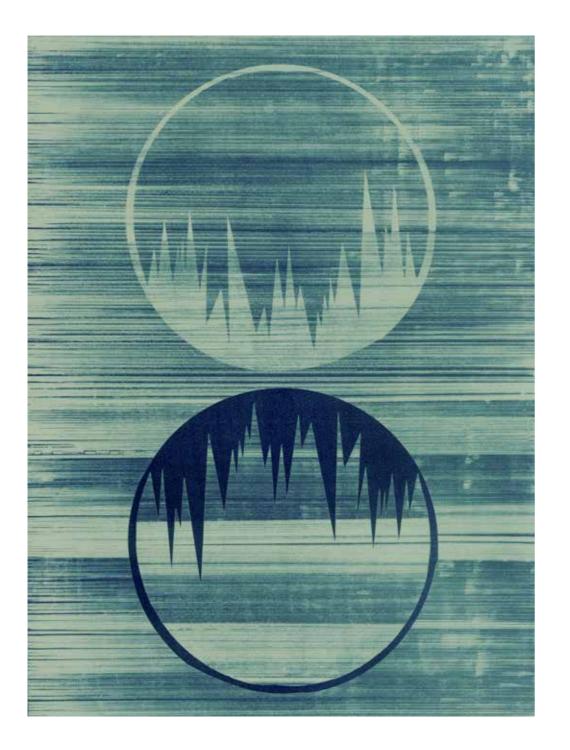


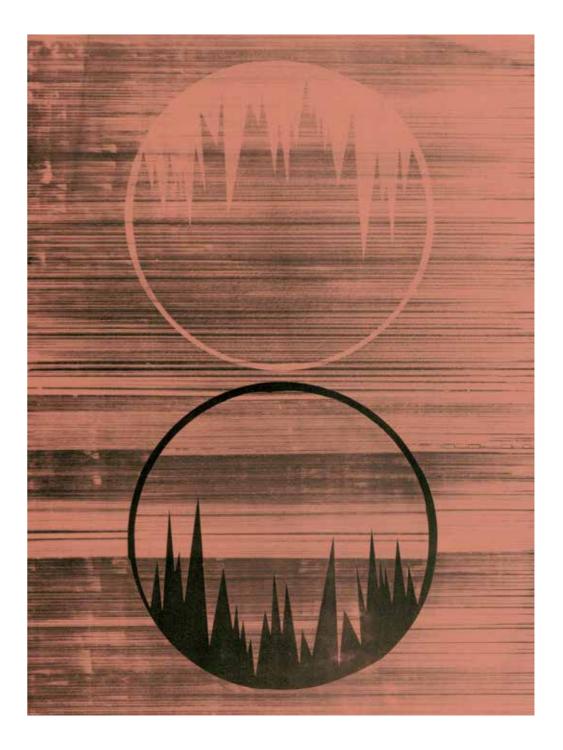




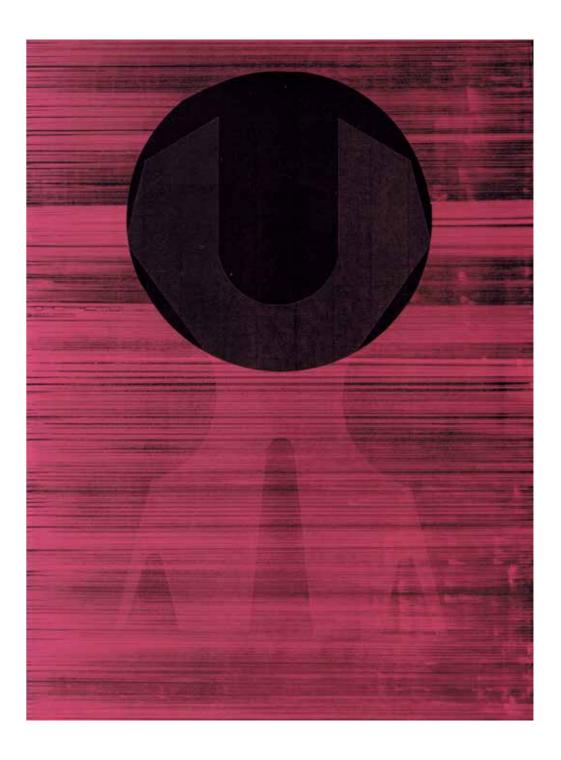


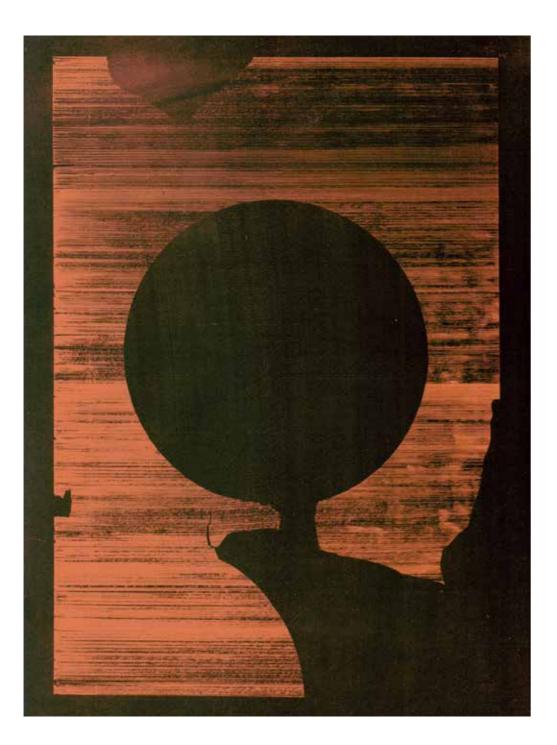




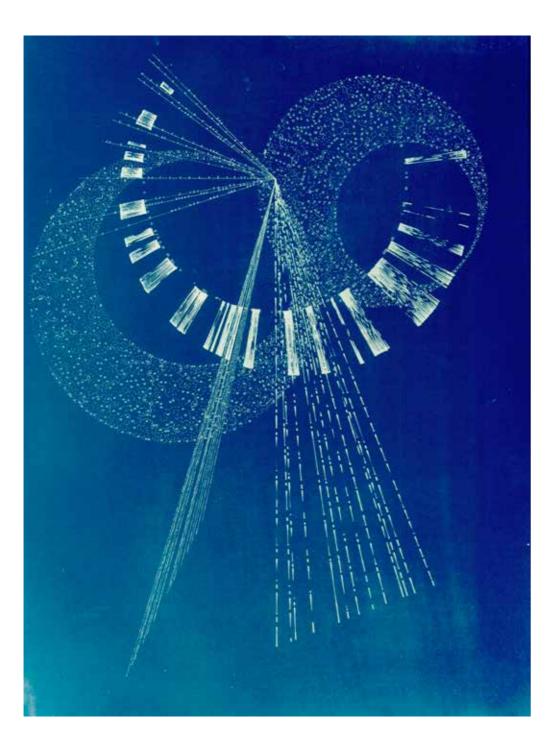


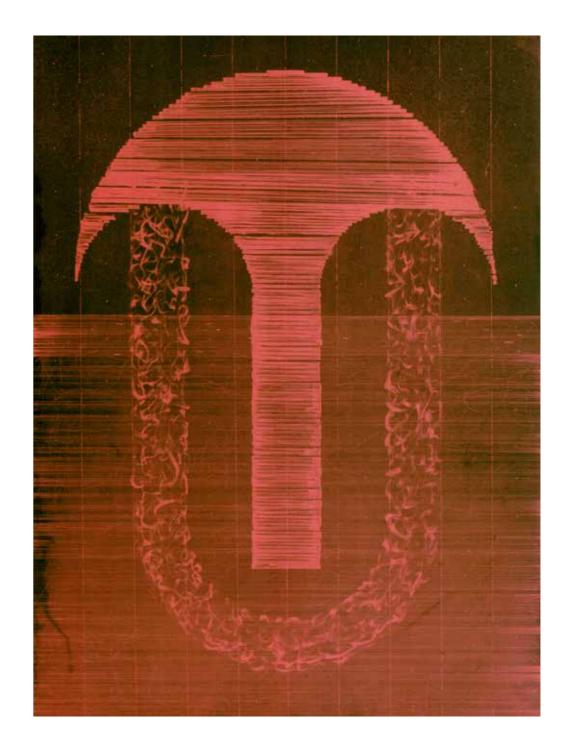




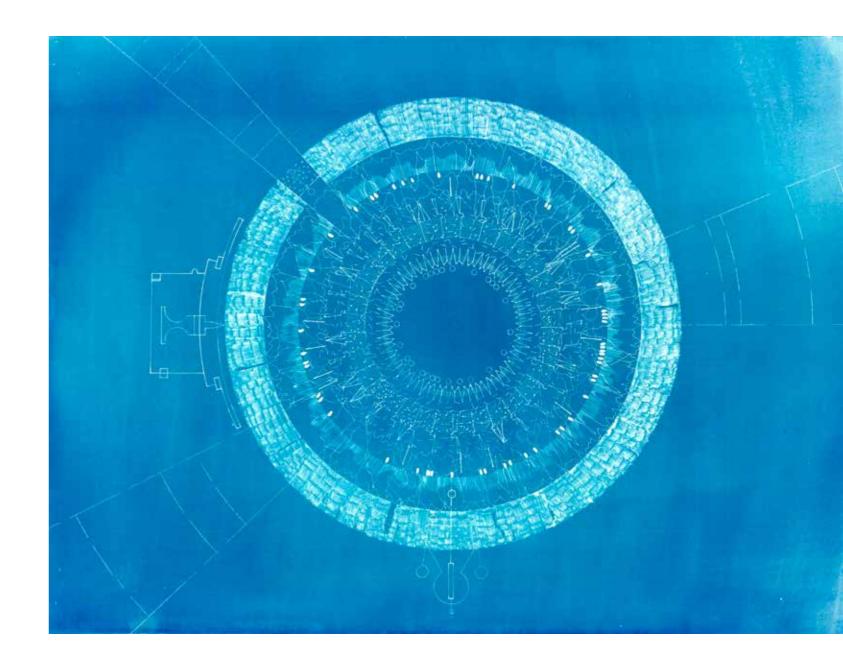


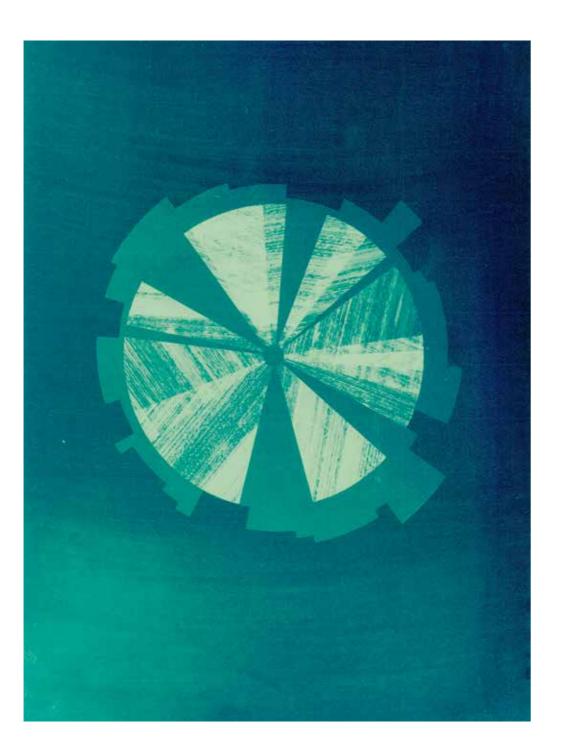


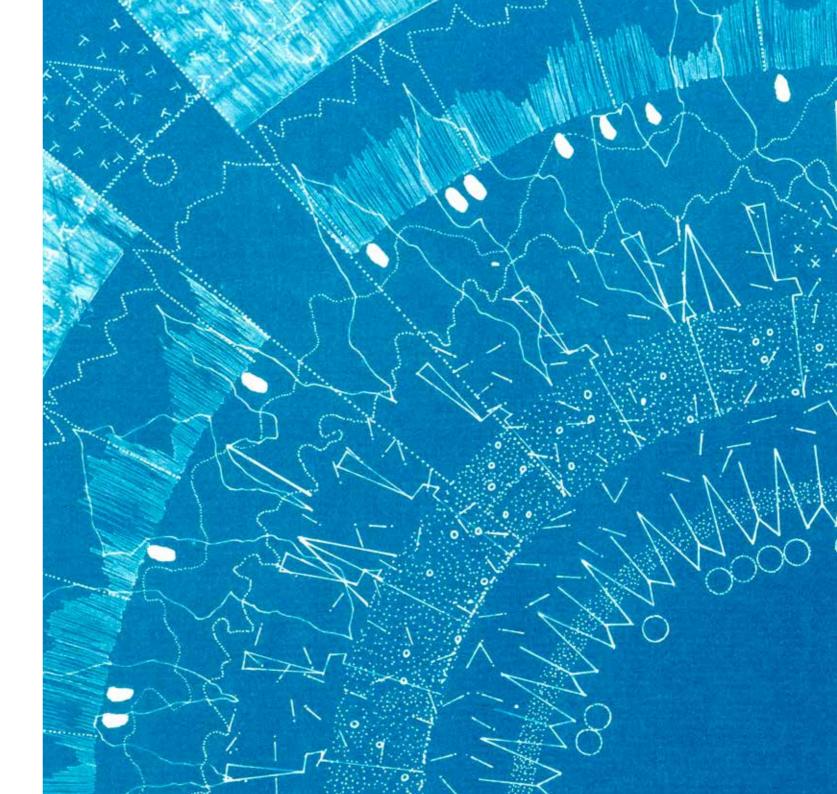












#### **Artist Biography**

Mary Yacoob's practice encompasses pen and ink drawings on paper, printmaking, wall drawings, and large format vinyl artworks. She appropriates visual languages from architectural plans, maps, geological and engineering diagrams, and from alphabets and musical notation.

Mary's working methods involve, for instance, enlarging and de-contextualising diagrammatic elements, to create visual connections, and transform functional devices into mysterious, architectural, spatial and monumental imagery. The hand-made gesture, intricacy, repetition, rhythm, and systems employing order and chance, are all key elements in Mary's work.

The work also involves site-specific projects that re-imagine architectural spaces, creating propositions that stand as artworks in their own right, interventions that reconsider what was or what could be based on existing structures and patterns. Mary's panopticon project investigates the architecture and geometry of power.

Mary Yacoob is an artist based in London who studied at Central Saint Martins and Cass School of Art. Solo exhibitions include the Hospital Club, the Centre for Recent Drawing and Seven Seven Gallery. Group exhibitions include the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition in 2019, Guest Projects, Saturation Point, Platform A, Gallery 46, PayneShurvell, Dark Matter, Galerie8 and OVADA. Residencies include the AA2A residency at Camberwell College of Art print department in 2011, and Mutton Fist Press in 2019.

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## **FIVE YEARS**

With thanks to Joe Banks, Marco Cali and Helen Ward, and special thanks to Lisa Cradduck, Mutton Fist Press. Mary Yacoob gratefully acknowledges the generous financial support of the Arts Council National Lottery Project Grants for the "Schema" exhibition. Thanks also to David Field, Managing Director of The Field Effect Ltd, for their support.

