

# THE LOCAL IN THIS CONTEXT

*In Conversation with Eliel Jones*



Katarzyna Perlak, 'darning and other times', 2022. Installation view, St Matthews' Church, Willesden, Brent Biennial 2022, In the House of my Love. Image by Thierry Bal

**Eliel Jones and Lachlan Taylor**  
**March 3 2023**

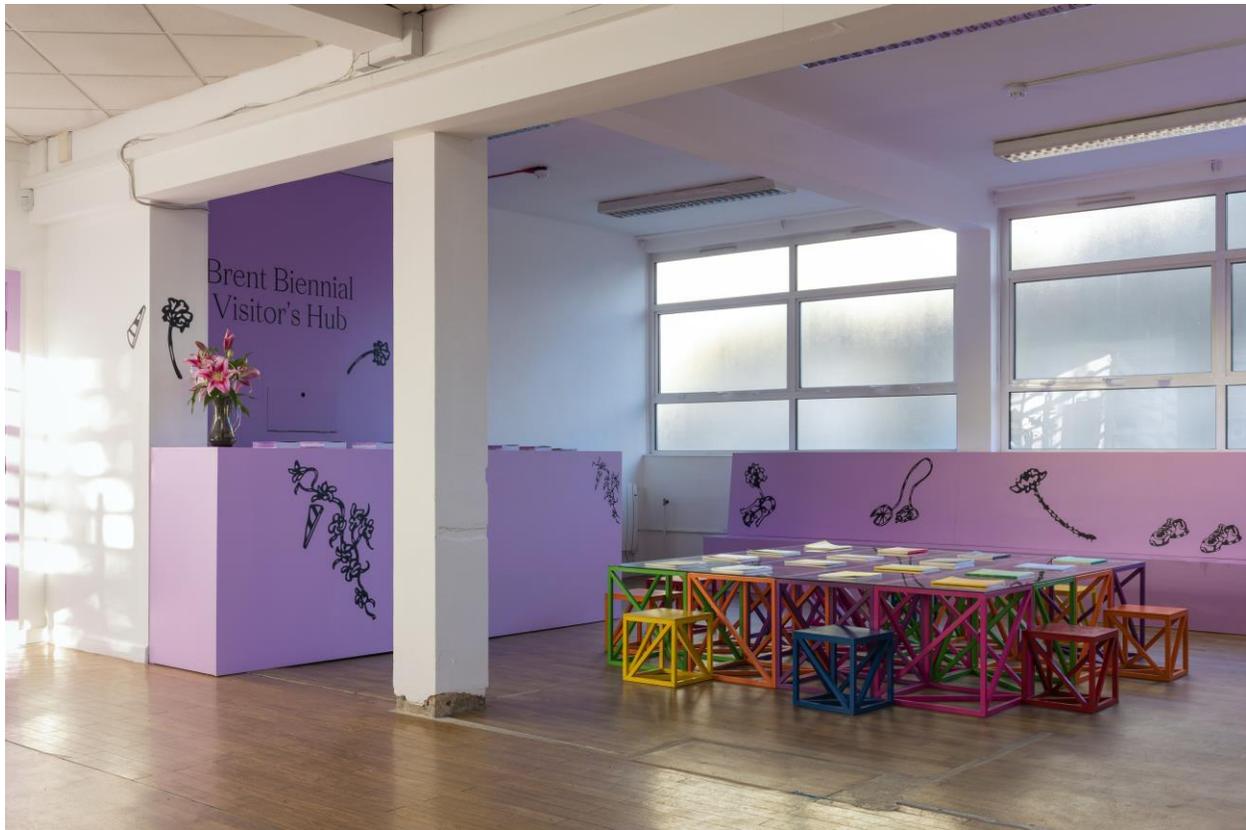
THE FIRST THING I ask in this interview is a slightly politer and more expansive version of *why the fuck would you want to curate a biennial?* Not from any personal animus towards the idea of big, survey-style exhibitions. But out of a recognition that—with what seems to be increasing frequency and severity—taking on the public, curatorial face of a biennial-style event comes with incredible personal and professional costs. Well past good-faith critique, we're in an era of personal attacks, professional threats, and worse. The enterprise is fraught, to say the least.

Eliel Jones' answers to my question, and the ones that follow, are a refreshing and, honestly, kind of exciting rejoinder to the idea that the toxic future I'm anxious about is set in any kind of

stone. *In the House of my Love*, the title of the second Brent Biennial (July –September 2022), was Jones' (along with a curatorial committee of artists Adam Farah, Jamila Prowse, and Abbas Zahedi) contribution to a notion that the space between the biennial-event's radical promises and intractable problems is still territory for exploration and imagination. And that fracture, or market takeover, or even violent dissent are only so many possible futures of a multitude we still might make of this format.

This conversation covers ground, but it frequently returns to dynamics pertinent to the concerns of the arts communities of Aotearoa: the relationship between local and global audiences, the role and responsibilities of arts organisations as members of their immediate communities, responses to financial precarity, and the mounting pressures on art and arts organisations to function as service-providers. Jones describes how the Brent Biennial was shaped by these dynamics—how it embraced, challenged, adapted to, or was ultimately frustrated by them. To me, at least, his responses are a pretty successful answer to the question of why the fuck anyone would want to curate a biennial: because they remain sites of enormous potential, spaces where acts of care and creativity can amalgamate and interact to form that all too important reminder that what we do isn't done in isolation, that we are more than just so many atomised practices.

- Lachlan Taylor, commissioning editor



Brent Biennial 2022 Visitor's Hub, Metroland Studios, Kilburn; and Rasheed Araeen, 'Reading Room', 2016-ongoing. Installation view, Brent Biennial 2022, In the House of my Love. Image by Thierry Bal

**LT: If any theme could be said to unite large-scale, survey exhibitions in recent years, it might be fracture. Biennial-style events are increasingly foregrounded as sites of rupture and conflict, despite—or in spite of—curatorial intentions. This trend felt especially present last year, with the enmity and censure surrounding the 12th Berlin Biennale and documenta fifteen. My question is, in the face of these international headwinds, what made you want to curate a visual arts biennial?**

**EJ:** Well, I didn't really want to curate a visual arts biennial, or more like, I didn't very intentionally set out do so now. But, as it sometimes happens, the things that you least expect or are looking for end up being just right. In my case, I was very close to leaving the art world. I had just gone through a fairly traumatic experience with an employer and I was feeling pretty disillusioned and disappointed with how that had all panned out, leading to myself and a colleague resigning from our permanent roles. It was early 2021, a year after an intense period of reflection sparked by the experience of Covid-19 as a shared global condition—something that in the art industry, despite its supposed intentions to be 'responsive' and to 'adapt', was starting to feel like yet another lip service exercise rather than a movement for real reparation and change.

Despite the confinement, or precisely because of it, so much of what I experienced during Covid-19 was a heightened awareness of community, not just as a desire for it in its physical absence, but also because of all the solidarity that many of us experienced in being part of collective efforts towards resistance and survival. I personally focused a lot of my time towards supporting queer and migrant communities, on the one hand through a mail-art initiative that I ran during the pandemic, titled [Queer Correspondence](#), and on the other with a group through which I have been organising since 2019, [Lesbians and Gays Support the Migrants](#).

When I resigned from my position at the gallery, I organised a prints fundraiser for LGSM that was quite successful. I seriously considered going into full time organising work after this, but then Amanprit Sandhu, a brilliant London-based curator and educator who had been involved in the first edition of the Brent Biennial, got in touch with a very gentle encouragement, and convinced me to put forward a proposal for the second edition. What tickled my curiosity was Amanprit's insistence that I should propose something that felt truly meaningful to me, and that perhaps I wouldn't get to do anywhere else. It seemed like an odd invitation matched with what I knew of biennials and how they operate, but I took it as a challenge and I put forward a project that, for the first time in my practice, would allow me to explore the intersection of curatorial and organising work. To my surprise, it fully aligned with the nascent vision for Metroland Cultures, the organisation that runs the project in Brent.

My proposal for the second edition of the Brent Biennial, titled [In the House of my Love](#), was therefore as much a thematic and programmatic concept as a framework for trying to do a biennial differently. At the end of the day, I don't think biennials are any less broken than the systems and structures that we perpetuate through institutions and which are ultimately endemic of the art world. Indeed fracture, as you point out, is one such inevitable outcome of this. For this very reason it felt like a relevant thing to try and play with what is essentially a very malleable format for curating and instituting: pulling the biennial, extending it and moulding it into something that felt purposeful and generative in the place where it is happening. I think, as a result, we managed to offer something not just for Brent and its immediate community, but also hopefully to a larger conversation around the place of contemporary art, as well as artistic and curatorial practice in the aftermath of a global pandemic and in the context of on-going political and social crisis.



Susan Schuppli in collaboration with Forensic Architecture / Omar Ferwati, Nicholas Masterton, 'Freezing Deaths & Abandonment Across Canada' (video still), from the series 'Cold Cases', 2021-22, video, colour, sound, 31'55". Image courtesy of the artist

*It seemed like an odd invitation matched with what I knew of biennials and how they operate, but I took it as a challenge and I put forward a project that, for the first time in my practice, would allow me to explore the intersection of curatorial and organising work.*

**LT: During these years of Covid, I've had a lot of conversations with artists and arts workers who are clamouring for a kind of new localism in the arts in Aotearoa. Whenever I hear calls like this, I feel torn between being excited for its potential and afraid for its adjacency to parochialism and cultural isolation—with all of the political consequences that can entail. The 'local' was a consistent guiding force for the 2nd Brent Biennial. What specifically did it mean for you? For the planning, execution, and after-life of the biennial?**

**EJ:** To give a little more context, Brent is a borough in North West London. It straddles the North Circular, a thoroughfare dividing 'inner' and 'outer' London, and it is a place that in many ways holds the complexity of this identity of being both inside and out. Brent is the third most diverse borough in London, and the local authority with the most first-generation migrants in the country. It is a place rich in culture and history, but one that has been systematically underfunded to the point that there has been no real infrastructure or support for artistic and creative practice. It has led to many young people leaving the borough and pursuing work and the development of their practice elsewhere, and to a perception that not much happens in this part of London.

The Brent Biennial came out from the Borough of Culture Award, which is given to a part of London that the Mayor of London's office defines as having little to no art and cultural life. Though financially quite generous, the one-year focus of the award often struggles to truly develop long-term strategies for redressing the lack of funding and opportunities that have preceded this investment. This is in no small way because it at times fails to recognise that it's not that there is no art and culture in these parts of London, but that there haven't been substantial efforts to nurture or sustain it over time. Brent was a very interesting exception to the one-year delivery of the award, in that Covid-19 confounded the plans for a year-only programme to take place in 2020, leading to a redistribution of the funds and the creation of an independent charity, Metroland Cultures, that would deliver the project over time and build on the legacy of the award into the future (props to Metroland Cultures' Founder and Director Lois Stonock for introducing the trojan horse). I came into Brent right at this moment, with an offer to curate the second edition of the Brent Biennial as the first fully independent project to the Borough of Culture.

The idea of the local was crucial from the moment I was invited (I indeed wrote about it in a short piece for [ArtReview](#) early on in the development of the project). This push for the local importantly wasn't just a thematic or programmatic concern, but also a structural approach and strategy. It became pretty clear from the beginning of my involvement that I wasn't just going to be curating a biennial, but that I was going to help set the foundations of a new project and organisation whose aim is to build, share,

and support the creation of various types of art and culture in Brent. This was an exciting challenge for me as someone who had come into the project with a desire to instil organising principles through a curatorial framework, as well as with meaningful experience of working closely with and for communities.

The local in this context became very much about thinking from the onset about what was needed in Brent, and trying to respond accordingly across the development of the project. For instance, the notion of a biennial or even that of a curator doesn't mean very much in Brent, so we sought to diffuse my sole curatorial voice and distribute it alongside a curatorial committee of artists with various important ties to Brent (Adam Farah, Jamila Prowse, and Abbas Zahedi) as a way of expanding our knowledge pool of the borough, our capacity to reach out to its many communities, as well as to advocate and support the work of the biennial artists that we invited. We also sought to support and amplify the already existent work of four community groups who aligned with the Biennial project, we allocated resources towards an artist development programme for emerging Brent-based artists, and embedded a professional placement programme for Brent-based young people alongside the delivery of the Biennial. All of these programmes have now become the permanent and yearly work of Metroland Cultures as an organisation—refuting the idea of the Biennial itself as the only work that is being done in support of communities in this part of London—both artistic and otherwise—and creating opportunities that crossover with the before and after of the biennial programme (along with the hope that it can be meaningfully influenced by them). Indeed, the artists that are part of the development scheme will hopefully be commissioned for the biennial editions going forward, and the young people that we're supporting might become the workforce that leads the organisation in the near future.

Thematically, I similarly sought to respond to Brent, in particular its various histories and legacies of migration. This enquiry was a point of departure to think about experiences of hostility and the ways that individuals and communities resist and survive these through gestures of making home, pushing back against racism, xenophobia, homophobia, patriarchy, ableism, political austerity, or climate catastrophe. Importantly, it was as much about recognising how this has already been happening in various ways in Brent for a long time, as much as connecting with wider efforts of solidarity against the [Hostile Environment policy](#), a piece of legislation that was introduced by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2012 to make living in the UK a literal hostile experience for so-called 'illegal immigrants'. The local here is a microcosm that speaks of a social and political reality that has a larger significance in the rest of the UK, but also internationally, in many ways pushing against this very parochialism that you rightly point out as being potentially quite

dangerous in its process of singling out—irrespective of whether this is a particular issue or a community of people.



'A Day Against the Hostile Environment', an event organised at Metroland Studios, Kilburn, as part of the public programme for the Brent Biennial 2022, In the House of my Love. Image by Kes-Tchaas Eccleston.

*It became pretty clear from the beginning of my involvement that I wasn't just going to be curating a biennial, but that I was going to help set the foundations of a new project and organisation whose aim is to build, share, and support the creation of various types of art and culture in Brent.*

**LT: I wonder if you might expand a little on some of the responses to the Biennial, both from communities within Brent (artistic and otherwise), and from without? For a project with this approach, I'm interested in how local communities felt their wants and needs were met by a large-scale art event of this kind. And, on the other hand, whether groups outside Brent—the arts ecosystems of greater London, the UK, or further afield—felt welcomed by such a model?**

**EJ:** Something else that I became very aware of from the start was that, because there are so many different communities and needs in Brent, it was going to be a challenge for Metroland and the Biennial to 'be' for everybody. That's not to say that everyone isn't welcome, as everyone is, but I guess I came into the project very much seeking to refuse the simplistic policy agenda of 'art for everybody' as a solution for the on-going failures of the welfare state, particularly in a place like Brent where art and culture hasn't been allowed to be for everybody for a long time, as many other things haven't.

A challenge that Metroland has been facing the idea that the organisation—and the Brent Biennial as its main public project—can ever be the 'it and all' of Brent's artistic life. This is a hang-up of sorts from having initially been set up as the charity that delivered the Borough of Culture project. It has ultimately led many people to seek from Metroland what should ultimately be a local and central government responsibility towards developing a strategy for on-going support and the building of infrastructure in places where there is little or none of it. To put this into perspective, the London Borough of Hackney—which is about half the size of Brent, and has a smaller population—has 25 National Portfolio Organisations across various disciplines, a funding status awarded by Arts Council England that secures them funding for a three-to-four-year period. By contrast, in the last award cycle in 2022, Brent had six. Notably, none of them are focused on visual arts.

Working from this position of precarity is not easy, particularly because, irrespective of whatever you're able to offer, it will never be enough. Building the support structures that I mentioned earlier for emerging artists and young people was one way of reckoning with this huge lack, but so was the Biennial's thematic exploration on the ways that individuals and communities have resisted and survived some of these hostile conditions. Crucially, though remediating access and participation in art and culture is a central part of Metroland's work, the second edition of the Brent Biennial focused on addressing much wider experiences of hostility, seeking to point towards these issues of precarity as not existing by nature but by design, always hitting marginalised communities the hardest.

One way in which I think the Biennial was successful with local audiences was in opening up a dialogue around this, and specifically the Hostile Environment policy, which I mentioned earlier. On the back of this, many of the projects facilitated formal and informal conversations around personal experiences of hostility that really surprised me, and also at times deeply moved me, leading to discussions around the importance of intersectionality. For instance, I had a couple of interactions with local people who had either experienced or closely witnessed immigration raids in the borough, and hadn't known exactly why they were happening or what to do about them. Upon visiting [Mahmoud Khaled's Proposal for a House Museum of an Unknown Crying Man](#)—a fictionalised intimate space based on the life of a gay man who goes into exile after experiencing a raid and its ensuing criminalisation on the grounds of 'sexual deviancy'—they ended up recognising the violence implicit in raids and also being able to name it as one of the consequences of the Hostile Environment. It's one thing to experience something and to know that it's wrong, but another to understand that is the by-product of designed legislation that is supposed to scare, criminalise, and discriminate against a certain community—in this case, migrants. That our discussion began through Mahmoud's work, speaking to [a raid that took place at a queer party on a boat in Cairo in 2011](#), is no small detail.

The Brent Biennial Hosts, a group that we recruited and remunerated to help us engage with visitors and hold space at each of the venues, similarly reported situations when the works triggered relatable responses with locals, whether that was through the celebration of Jamaican culture and dancehall in [Linett Kamala's](#) concept-takeaway installation, or [Shenece Oretha's](#) sonic and oral history project around the lives and uses of community spaces in North West London. All of the commissions held an air of celebration and joy while also managing to speak of some very difficult and at times painful realities—in these two examples, that includes the discrimination and violence that many Jamaican and Caribbean communities have experienced when making life in the UK, and the erasure of public spaces as a means of diminishing the possibilities for sustaining and organising community.

For what was only the second edition of the Biennial—and with the first having had the restrictions of a global pandemic—we had a great turnout of visitors. The London and national art scene seemed to have caught onto the project towards the end, with a big surge in visitors in September when the word had gotten around in art circles (or perhaps when everyone returned from their summer holidays!). We also had some great responses, with critic Hettie Judah writing for [The Guardian](#) that we had 'reimagined that international monster, the art biennial, as a simple expression of ongoing commitment to creative engagement.' It surprised me to read this, and not only because of the slightly dodgy title of the piece (I'll let readers search for it if they wish),

but mostly because Judah's generous words rang true. That's not to say that we have *actually* re-imagined everything that we have put forward, there are other examples and models of this kind of work being done, both in biennial contexts and in organisations (the documenta fifteen project being one of them, and it actually took place concurrently to this edition of the Brent Biennial). I guess it surprised me because, [unlike the horrific abuse that ruangrupa and many of their artists had to deal with in Kassel](#), we fared quite well. I have a sense that many of the people that engaged with us understood what we were trying to do in some way or another and were excited by it, both near and far. That was a very affirming response to receive, and something that I'm still reflecting on now.



Mahmoud Khaled, 'Proposal for a House Museum of an Unknown Crying Man', 2017. Installation view, reproduced as part of the Brent Biennial 2022, In the House of my Love. Courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation. Image by Thierry Bal

*All of the commissions held an air of celebration and joy while also managing to speak of some very difficult and at times painful realities...*

**LT: It's interesting to see you talk about the dexterity and innovation that went into funding and supporting the Biennial: redistributing funds, establishing a charity, connecting with existing organisations within the community – all work done before, during, and after your involvement with the project. Funding precarity, and the ways in which we adapt to it, is a common crisis in public-facing arts sectors across the world – one that's biting particularly hard in Aotearoa at the moment. Higher levels of financial, institutional, and bureaucratic literacy are being asked of artists and arts workers in order to take increasingly complicated bites at a shrinking pie. To what extent do you draw a connection between your skills and experience in organising work with your capacity to stage an event like the Brent Biennial?**

**EJ:** Yes, indeed what you describe is very familiar to what is happening in the UK. It's actually quite concerning, and it doesn't look like it's going to change anytime soon. As the North American model of philanthropy as practice becomes more and more crucial to the ways that arts organisations are getting their money, the solution becomes less about asking for a real commitment from governments to fund the arts and culture as a civic and public right, and more about vesting it into the hands of private individuals. Don't take me wrong, I'm all for people with money distributing their wealth, and when done so ethically and without too many personal self-interests, it can have a huge impact. I'm not sure how it is in New Zealand, but my concern in the UK is more about what it means to have a shift in social and political discourse where funding, and the ensuing competitive wars of who is included and excluded from it, is determined by a set of parameters that reduce the production of art and culture to either a good or a service.

On the one hand, there is the argument that the arts and cultural industries make a considerable financial contribution to the country, and that they should be seen as part of the wider capitalist/neoliberal economy, able to generate their own income and profit. On the other, and perhaps more insidiously dangerous, there is a very reductionist push towards the arts as a social good, demanding artists and organisations to fit within a set of working practices and principles in order to secure funding. What worries me about the latter is not, of course, the desire to explore the role of arts in society, to develop community-orientated practices or to instil more equitable and sustainable ways of working. Instead, it's this idea that doing so hinges on fulfilling a provision of social and material care that the welfare state is denying in other ways.

I've recently seen marketing from libraries trying to tantalise people to visit, not because you can find great books or media, or use computer and AV equipment, or simply just to hang out and study, but because they have free heating! It's this question of precarity that I was speaking of earlier. When the gaps that need to be filled are so

vast there is simply not enough that the arts can ever do to fix the problems that have been designed through more than a decade of austerity. And, more importantly, we shouldn't give into being used as the temporary plug. I'm in no way saying that we should shy away from doing good by individuals and communities in whatever ways we can, as there are many people struggling and a lot that the arts and arts organisations *can* do to help. However, we simultaneously should be pushing for a refusal of the instrumentalisation of art and people's livelihoods and wellbeing for the benefit of the few people—and corporations—in power. This refusal is certainly one of the ways that curatorial and organising work can and should meet.

In the context of the Brent Biennial, a lot of the work that I sought to do was heavily influenced by my engagement as an organiser with Lesbians and Gays Support the Migrants, a solidarity group with whom, through direct action and fundraising, we stand in support with all migrants. Because of this, it was important to me that we very explicitly took a stand against hostility not just as a conceptual or thematic concern, but as a reflection of ten years since the conception of the Hostile Environment policy, and taking the opportunity of the biennial as a platform for advocacy.

In a very pragmatic sense, producing a biennial in a place where there is little to no existent infrastructure is incredibly challenging, and at least half of my time was spent just trying to get people on board with what we were doing. I'm literally talking about knocking on doors, talking to town centre managers, attending community meetings and generally being out there—particularly when we were in the process of looking for venues. I cannot tell you how many places of worship we visited and how many leaders we met until we found Father Andrew at St Matthew's Church in Willesden, for example, who was the only one that generously opened the doors for Polish London-based artist [Katarzyna Perlak's](#) beautiful commission featuring sculptures that invited conversations to form between queer and Catholic aesthetics, and folk practices. This process was one led by conversation and relationship-building, which was essentially sparked not just by a desire to produce contemporary art that is engaged with its surroundings, but also for its presentation and dissemination to be an opportunity to create solidarity and instil an impetus for change.

Since closing the Biennial I've been thinking about this as something that is at the core of my practice, and why I feel that operating across curating and organising is an interesting intersection for me. In the past I've described this way of working as exploring the act of hosting as a queer and curatorial framework, and now it is clear to me that the purpose of this across most of the projects that I've done to date has been to fulfil a desire to build community. This is also why I'm now —dare I say it— tentatively excited by the prospect of working in art institutions again with this cemented

knowledge and experience on my back. Maybe I'm being naïve considering everything that I've just said, but the reality is that there are many artists, curators and art workers desiring to do things differently. Organising for me is so much about harnessing the power of desire to will something into existence, so it's now really up to us to mobilise and demand art institutions to provide the conditions that are needed for change to happen in meaningful ways. Otherwise, they take the real risk of being left behind.



Eliel Jones speaking at the opening ceremony of the Brent Biennial 2022, In the House of my Love, at the Brent Civic Centre, Wembley, London, 8th of July 2022. Image by Kes-tchaas Eccleston

*About the Author*

Eliel Jones is an independent curator, writer and organiser based in London. Prior to the Brent Biennial, he has held curatorial positions at organisations including Cell Project Space and Chisenhale Gallery (both in London), where he has worked towards realising commissions of new work by emerging artists. Other curatorial projects include: *Queer Correspondence*, a worldwide mail-art initiative; *Do You Host?*, Ujazdowski Centre for Contemporary Art, Warsaw; *Acts of Translation*, Mohammed and Mahera Abu Ghazaleh Foundation, Amman, Jordan; and *Experiments on Public Space*, Dallas Museum of Art, Texas. He regularly writes on contemporary art and performance for various international publications, and is a visiting lecturer in Fine Art and Curating courses in the UK. Forthcoming, Jones is curating the first solo exhibition in the UK by Iranian Los Angeles-based artist and filmmaker Gelare Khosghozaran, at Delfina Foundation, London (22 June – 6 August 2023).

---

*About ArtNow Essays*

Commissioned by the Aotearoa Public Gallery Directors' Network (APGDN) and published on ArtNow.NZ with support from Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa New Zealand and member galleries of the network. For more information about Essays [click here](#).

---

Copyright 2022 ArtNow.NZ, the author and the artists.

All rights reserved. Except for reasonable purposes of fair review, no part may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted by any means without prior written consent of the publisher.