

DIASPORA PAVILION 2, LONDON – A RETURN TO BRIXTON

JESSICA TAYLOR

The 2023 iteration of **Diaspora Pavilion 2: London** features two new, site-specific, solo installations by artists Sonia E Barrett and Kashif Nadim Chaudry. Both artists work primarily with sculpture and sculptural installation and have brought together new and existing works for this exhibition. They have carefully and intentionally chosen to work with materials that speak to their personal diasporic experiences, while creating narrative connections to deep historical research, cross-cultural and generational exchanges, and diverse art and architectural influences. Through their respective installations, Barrett and Chaudry offer distinct and nuanced commentaries on class. They also actively reveal the complexity and erasure inherent in different social structures / relations, such as religion and patriarchy for Chaudry and industry and humanity for Barrett.

The exhibition is the final iteration of ICF's Diaspora Pavilion 2 (DP2) project, which has included a series of peripatetic events delivered between 2019 and 2023. This trans-national, collaborative project advances ICF's engagement with diaspora as a critical concept following the first Diaspora Pavilion during the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017. DP2 interrogates and complicates the term diaspora across curatorial formats as part of a mapping of the rich and complex material cultures, mythologies, alternative histories and re-imagined landscapes that are born from the distinct and yet shared reality of belonging to a diaspora.

Diaspora Pavilion began as a theoretical challenge to the inaccessibility of mega-exhibitions like the Venice Biennale through the act of opening up a space for Black and Brown artists and curators and those from diasporic backgrounds to gather and discuss contemporary creative practice.

In reflecting upon the 2017 Pavilion with my co-curator David A Bailey, I recognised that the framework of a large-scale exhibition as 'pavilion' was not able to disrupt the power dynamics that sustain the Biennale. It felt essential that the next phase of the project attempt to address more deeply and directly the inaccessibility, financial inequity and Euro-centric framing of these art spaces. We sought to develop a second iteration of the project which refused the stasis of the 2017 Pavilion and quite literally decentralised Venice, through an unfolding programme of new commissions presented around the world in dialogue with local partners.

Since 2019 we have formed a network of international partners to showcase work by thirteen artists across four exhibitions. The first was a group exhibition in Sydney held at Campbelltown Arts Centre in 2021, developed in partnership with 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art and featured new

and existing works by UK-based artists Kashif Nadim Chaudry and Zadie Xa, Australia-based artists Abdul-Rahman Abdullah, Leyla Stevens and Lindy Lee, and Caribbean-based artist Daniela Yohannes. In Venice, during the 2022 Biennale, we inhabited a theatre in a public park in Cannaregio, a lively, residential area known for its Jewish quarter in collaboration with a local partner, VeniceArtFactory. Rather than presenting a large-scale exhibition for the duration of the Biennale, we presented a live, four-day performance commission by Shiraz Bayjoo with Siyabonga Mthembu and Nicolas Faubert. And for both London iterations (a previous duet exhibition in 2022 with Andrew Pierre Hart and Mohammad Barrangi, and this iteration with Sonia E Barrett and Kashif Nadim Chaudry) we have collaborated with Block 336, a small project space in Brixton, an area of historical and cultural significance for Afro-Caribbean and other diasporic communities.

These strategic decisions regarding place, practice and curatorial approach were rooted in ICF's long-term commitment to community, to gathering and making space for layered historical and cultural entanglements. DP2 has been designed as an unfolding, sustained and evolving dialogue that seeks to provide multiple personal and relational perspectives on the vast and nuanced histories that the term diaspora may signal. Fundamental to this, has been staging the project in different locations with connections to diasporic communities, and employing curatorial decisions that enable the participating artists to trial new ways of working that support the development of their practices. At the core of DP2 is an investment in multiple, site-specific platforms that foster connections on the artists' own terms. My personal and collaborative curatorial methodology has been open-ended and aimed at enabling the participating artists to shape the different manifestations of the project, rather than simply respond to set curatorial hypotheses.

International Curators Forum (ICF) was founded by artists and curators in 2007 to offer a programme of commissions, exhibitions, projects, publications and events that respond to the material conditions and cultural contexts impacting creative practitioners today. ICF provides tools and platforms for professional development and facilitate an open peer-to-peer network inviting participants to be part of a generative ecology of skills and knowledge sharing. Across all of our work, both critically and practically, we are committed to challenging the barriers to equality and inclusivity within our industry.

Through all aspects of our programme we engage with the concept of diaspora as a critical framework through which we can address and complicate notions of identity, test and explore new innovative curatorial models, and create space for artistic and discursive interventions into historical narratives and systems of representation.

Block 336 is an artist-run project space, studio provider and UK registered charity that was founded in 2011. Its core purpose is to support artists by providing time, space and support to develop ambitious projects. Block 336 encourages artists to make new, site-specific work that they may not be able to realise elsewhere. It offers artists the freedom to experiment and push the limits of their studio practice and delivers a public programme of talks, workshops, performances and tours, aiming to expand creative exchange and dialogue around contemporary art.

Since 2012, Block 336 has worked with local organisations focused on disability, mental health and young people, hosting collaborative educational projects and events for their staff, service users and the general public. They have developed partnerships with Artquest, BCA, Black Thrive, Brixton Inclusive, Carers' Hub Lambeth, Certitude, Creative Future, Lambeth College, Lambeth & Southwark Mind and the South London & Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust.

ICF BLOCK 336



Supported using public funding by
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SONIA E BARRETT

Here Tell, Quantum Black (2023) by Sonia E Barrett consists of a new, sculptural installation and moving image work addressing the material histories of flint, the black sedimentary rock used in Britain to construct tools, property and weaponry.

Found in abundance in the fields around the artist's home in the South of England, flint is a material Barrett has been collecting for years while walking to and from her residence. She has gradually assembled hundreds of fragments of field flint – which she has carefully selected, cleaned and cared for – to create a suspended installation of hand-gathered, hand-painted flintstones in the centre of Gallery 1. Barrett has painted the flint using a variety of brown inks to mirror skin tones, giving the shards a fleshy appearance.

In the lead-up to the exhibition, Barrett invited members of the support service Carers' Hub to paint pieces of the flint with her in the gallery, contributing to a growing constellation which will continue to expand throughout the show. For Barrett, this process enables different communities to gather and contribute to a monument to those who were lost through the mining and weaponisation of this material in the name of empire. She is fostering space for communities to meet, co-create and contemplate a celestial, quantum black.

From afar, Barrett's arrangement of hanging stones appears like a galaxy of organic matter, very much in contrast with the industrial nature of the scaffolding it is suspended from. Through her use of this aluminium structure Barrett is referencing the ways in which Britain's mining and manufacturing industries touch all aspects of our built environment. Barrett also likens the floating cluster of flint

ICF'S DIASPORA PAVILION 2: LONDON

presented in partnership with
Block 336

Featuring
Sonia E. Barrett
and
Kashif Nadim Chaudry

10 March – 10 June 2023
Thursday – Sunday
12PM – 5PM



Sonia E Barrett,
We The Extracted (2023),
video still. Image by
Gennaro Ambrosino.

to the dust that filled the air in the mines and accumulated in the miners' lungs, leading to the first industrial disease in Britain, knapper's lung. Against the fleshy appearance of the flint, the nylon from which it hangs starts to resemble sutures, alluding to the act of restoration or repair that Barrett is enacting in the creation of this work.

Barrett is addressing themes such as property, extraction, violence, and humanity through her engagement with flint. She is drawing narrative connections between white, working-class miners in Britain tasked with mining flint in treacherous conditions and the inhumane expansion of the British empire using flint powered weaponry. Elsewhere in the gallery Barrett has created a small, wall-based work which shows an assemblage of gun flints, the warfare product created using the dense, black mass at the centre of the nearby sedimentary rocks.

Barrett is drawing our attention to the systems of oppression and colonial histories associated with certain materials and forms. With the footprint of the scaffolding, she has created an irregular, elongated grid, denying the strategic uniformity of mapping systems used to divide and colonise land. Barrett's engagement with un-mapping or re-mapping can also be seen in another work installed in the ceiling in Gallery 1 – a piece from her **Map-lective Series** produced by shredding and then braiding maps in collaboration with a group of Black and Brown women. Through this communal work, Barrett is rendering the maps unreadable and instead visibilising the inability to disentangle the interrelations between Europe, the Americas and Africa.

In the neighbouring gallery Barrett presents a new film titled **We The Extracted** (2023). Through this contextual work Barrett is seeking to foster trans-national narrative connections between the animal and plant life (that predates

human history now crystallised in the flints), the fatalities of working-class people in Britain's flint mining industries, and the deaths across the British Empire. The film brings together archival materials documenting sites like Grime's Graves, a large Neolithic flint mining complex in Norfolk, England and the process of flint knapping to create gun flints, alongside aerial footage of her collecting field flint near her home. Barrett positions the fossilised crustaceans and marine flora that are preserved inside the flint as the storytellers in this film.

KASHIF NADIM CHAUDRY

The title of Kashif Nadim Chaudry's multi-work installation **Char Bagh** refers to the Persian and Indo-Persian garden design based on the four gardens of heaven mentioned in the Quran. This particular design reached its apotheosis with the Mughal empire on the Indian subcontinent in the 16th and 17th centuries. These gardens symbolised paradise on Earth, and as well as being used for monumental tombs, were also designed for pleasure.

In Gallery 2, Chaudry brings together new and existing sculptural works to stage his first solo presentation in London. Made over thirteen years, these works showcase Chaudry's long-term engagement with the colourful and sensual fabrics of South Asia, as well as his fascination with embellishment, adornment and decoration. A family heritage in tailoring has been very influential for Chaudry's work and has focused his creativity on the importance of materiality and craftsmanship.

Chaudry's design of the exhibition reveals the influence of art and architectural histories on his practice; while some of the references he relays are the result of a growing awareness of the intersections of his own identity, which has brought him to this particular point in his practice. Negotiating his sexuality as a gay man within different cultural and religious spheres has been a fertile ground from which Chaudry's practice has taken root and continuously draws inspiration.

With each work in the exhibition Chaudry celebrates beauty and splendour, while provoking allusions to what lies beneath these glamorous surfaces. His introduction of architectural and kinetic elements enables him to play with scale, movement and light in new ways, and he employs humour to subvert traditional associations with the materials and forms he uses.

Chaudry's interests in the grand narratives of religion and ceremony, and beauty of adornment and decoration, manifest in the kinetic sculpture **Cabal** (2020). The conical shape of the work is inspired by the whirling dervish skirt, and the surface features damask fabric with a floral pattern and layers of intricate applique elements alluding to a garden. Its motions offer a satirical enactment of the solitary dance of devotion practiced by the whirling dervish and reflect Chaudry's interest in the discomforting monotony of automata. At the sculpture's base Chaudry has fixed Ken doll legs, which appear to kick out. This playful gesture suggests that there is an exclusive celebration happening underneath the embellished surface.

Kiswah (2023), which refers to the cloth that covers the Kaaba in Mecca, features reams of black cloth hanging over a mysterious form in front of an intricate fretwork collar. Kiswah is carried to Mecca annually by pilgrims to cover the most sacred shrine in Islam. Protruding from the cloth in Chaudry's work is a hand, extending

Kashif Nadim Chaudry,
Cabal (2020), installation
view I am a heart beating in
the world: Diaspora Pavilion
2, Sydney at Campbelltown
Arts Centre in partnership
with ICF and 4A; photo:
Kai Wasikowski.



a branch from which hang colourful Ken doll heads.

In the centre of the gallery sits **Hareem** (2010), another example of Chaudry's dynamic use of form and materials, and ongoing repurposing of fabric passed down from his mother. The work presents figures in a state of arousal, cloaked in opulent fabric that covers the supine bodies and flows fluidly along the floor. Inspired by Islamic geometry, Hareem creates an eruption of colour and texture when first encountered, and then the figures slowly come into view as if being unearthed as you move around the work. The figures represent unrequited desire and Chaudry's experience of never feeling fully accepted into gay, heteronormative or Pakistani cultures.

Behind Hareem is another kinetic sculpture, **Magi** (2023). This work is about patriarchy and hubris and offers visitors a glimpse of a satirical

performance. Inspired by the Victorian bellows, this singular creature waddles in all its splendour, atop a magnificent architectural platform designed to mirror the steps of a temple.

The final work in the exhibition, **Swags & Tails** (2014), is inspired by opulent drapery and borrows its name from an interior design term. Swags & Tails is reminiscent of an oversized piece of fringing and is comprised of a spectrum of colourful yarn, with further embellishments of black, glass beads and a myriad of bird skulls. The initial splendour of this delicate trim quickly gives way to a darker, more contradictory reading of gothic beauty and death en-mass.