

# Sophia-Layla Afsar, Alex Billingham

...as we gathered on the shards of a  
fallen mirror ball

Floor 4

26 January — 7 July 2024



Exhibition guide

As you approach the gallery space on Floor 4, you encounter an unexpected androgynous being: an intrepid space explorer meets a fabulous disco mirror ball. Its backdrop reveals prisms of colour that constantly transform in reaction to changing levels of light and weather. As you then enter the immersive gallery space, painted in a rich orange, you can be prepared for, as the artist Sophia-Layla Afsar says, 'a spectrum of emotions and experiences.'

Belonging is the weight of a boulder  
Belonging is the texture of bloodstains  
Belonging is seeing myself in every victim  
Belonging is hearing my name when  
    mourners beg their sister to wake up  
Belonging is shared grief  
Belonging is the absence of an obituary  
Belonging is the silence of friends  
Belonging is the glee of trolls  
Belonging is helplessness  
Belonging is being forgotten  
Belonging is disbelonging

The exhibition is titled *...as we gathered on the shards of a fallen mirror ball*, which evokes ideas of coming together, gathering, making space and community, even in times of duress and struggle. It brings together works by Sophia-Layla Afsar and Alex Billingham in a collaboratively developed environment, where both artists present commissioned films which interplay with each other.

Layla's film *The Wandering Gaze* is split into three acts and presented on analogue monitors on low plinths with headphones. You are invited to sit on bean bags to view these films or to download and view them using QR codes. Shot on a mobile phone, these works are raw in their aesthetic and invite an intimate engagement with the viewer. In the first act, we witness the artist tracing their life over the last two years, as a trans neurodivergent person moving through the city of Karachi, exploring how her ADHD may limit, or open up other ways of viewing for her. Following a breathtakingly progressive movement for trans rights in Pakistan, with the passage of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act in 2018, there has now been a pushback and a resurgence of moral panic amongst the middle classes within Pakistan. The resultant toxicity on social media and the ways it has spread through cultural and social spheres has been particularly harmful for trans persons, including

Layla. In the second act, Layla splices some of those social media clips with her own daily life – both ordinary and unusual, suggesting the deep impact of this discourse on her mind and body. The final act documents the artist's own eviction from their home to due to transphobia, which while sobering and full of grief, also evokes moments of love of community as people rally to help her move and resettle.

Alex Billingham's richly layered and sumptuously produced film *Transuranic Elements*, both visually and sonically, allows the viewer to travel through otherworldly landscapes and universes. Alex has mapped the trans experience on to the lunar cycle, thinking about the ebbs and flows of planetary movements and tides. As she embarks on the next stage of her transition, her journey is inextricably linked with the cyclic and powerful forces of nature. Alex acknowledges the privilege of legal protections in the UK for trans and queer folks whilst also recognising the daily impact of oppression and discrimination. How does one make sense of the multitudes of holding space for all these experiences? A large-scale banner and a floor-based sculpture, perhaps in the form of a shrine, hold the scale of the gallery space, and testify to the development of this powerful body of work and the commitment with which it has been made.



In addition to the presentation of individual works, the artists have collaborated to create an immersive environment, using sculpture, props, costume, text and playful interventions. A recurring motif is the eye, a metaphor for the gaze – of both looking and being looked at. It also encourages the viewer to observe, and change their own perspective as it were, as there is much to see and “micro-surprises” to discover.

I hope that the exhibition will ignite curiosity and understanding and everyone will find a sense of comfort and belonging within the space. There is some opacity – some things are revealed, others not. The final takeaway then, is one of letting go, and not of finding answers, but being open to multitudes of experiences, emotions and realities – very much what embodies trans life.

**Aziz Sohail, co-curator**



*as we gathered on the shards of a fallen mirror ball* has evolved from a two-year collaboration between The New Art Gallery Walsall, Aziz Sohail, Indus Valley School of Art & Architecture, Karachi (IVS) and the artists, with generous support from the British Council, Art Fund and The Charles Wallace Pakistan Trust.



The wider project, *Belonging/Disbelonging* connects queer and trans artists in the UK and Pakistan. This has involved three-month

residences for Afsar and Billingham to develop their practice (October 2022 – January 2023) and an exhibition at IVS Gallery entitled *...as we play beneath the warmth of an alien sun* (9-23 February 2023). Following the exhibition at IVS, both

artists were commissioned to make new film work for this exhibition, which reflects the long-term dialogue between all parties.

In addition from March 2023 – February 2024, *Belonging/Disbelonging* further supported five emerging artists from Pakistan. Asad Ali Zulfiqar, Layl Ali, Rumisa Lakhani, Rayhan Muqadam and Zahabia Khozema developed their practice over a year in dialogue with each other, specially identified mentors and the curators, culminating in an exhibition at IVS Gallery entitled *Life is Resistance* from 20 Feb to 1 March, 2024.

We are grateful to Sadia Khatri, Sabba Khan, Charan Singh, Anushka Rustomji, Sa'dia Rehman, Vishal Jugdeo and Vqueeram Aditya Sahai for providing mentorship to these artists during their residency.

## THANKS

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Layla would like to thank Surhan for being their partner-in-grief and partner-in-rage.



## Art Fund\_



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