



Changing Shape in Taking Flight

Mark Amery on There Is No Other Home but This.

Zoroastrianism is one of the world's oldest continuously practised faiths, predating Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Originating in ancient Persia, it was the state religion of vast Iranian empires for millennia, until seventh-century Muslim conquest. Zoroastrians were eventually forced to flee to the Indian state of Gujarat. Here, legend says, the local ruler presented a bowl filled to the brim with milk to a Zoroastrian priest, who managed to slowly stir in a spoonful of sugar without the milk overflowing. This has become a symbol of the way Parsis, as they are known, have assimilated into and sweetened a dominant culture, while quietly holding their own.

Right now, that's a simple, powerful image of resilience we need—the layers of diasporic complexity in our ethnic makeup, the sweetness of our plurality. But, really, how welcome are refugees? Within our collective bowl, there are unsettling forces (good and bad) affecting our notions of 'settlement'. Yet, as curator Zara Stanhope's exhibition title opens out to all, poetically and positively, *There Is No Other Home but This*.

Astutely paired at Ngāmotu New Plymouth's Govett-Brewster Art Gallery (5 March–19 June 2022), the textile works of Areez Katki and Khadim Ali suggest new ways to settle while staying fluid. The artists share Persian ancestry and synthesise past and present forms, bringing out rich, distinctive voices from the margins. Their stories are as urgent as the perilous journey of Ali's three large, glorious new tapestries from Kandahar—concealed from the Taliban—to the Gallery. This art literally and metaphorically takes flight. Home, here, is a collective

movement, shifting form across time and space. Indeed, Katki uses the word 'murmuration'—referring to flocking starlings—in one series title.

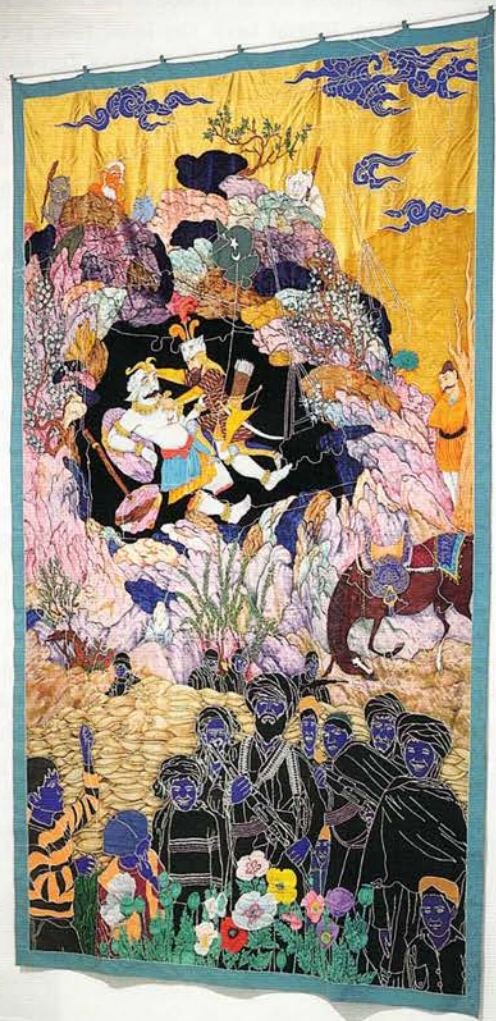
Ali and Katki speak Farsi (Persian) and are inspired by ancient texts: Sufi poet Farid ud-Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* (which describes how birds find a new collective form) and the origin stories of Ferdowsi's epic poem *Shahnama*. This binds the exhibition at its roots, while the artists retain different approaches.

Areez Katki was born in the Dadar Parsi colony of Mumbai. He continues to spend extensive periods there, living in an apartment that has been in his family for four generations. He brings new life to precious scraps of fabric from his family's embroidery cupboard, ranging from 200-year-old prayer mats to handkerchiefs. He keeps the home fires burning—ahi kā, as Māori say.

Katki was ordained into the Zoroastrian priesthood young, but questioned its traditions early. When he was ten, his family moved to East Auckland, where about 2,000 Parsis now live close together. His work is deeply engaged with the culture, but opens it out to contemporary life, questioning patriarchal conformity from a queer perspective. He learnt embroidery through the maternal side of his family, and has gone on to research Parsi histories and artefacts widely. In each work, it's as if a culture's motifs have sprung from the table to dance in the air, like in Disney's *Fantasia*. As a poet, Katki values the roots of words and objects, but extends them, creating a personal iconography, stitching audaciously into the open space of these heirlooms, as if to say: I am made of this material but must write my own story on it.

Khadim Ali and Areez Katki:
There Is No Other Home but This,
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery |
Len Lye Centre, New Plymouth, 2022.
Photos: Sam Hartnett.









Katki's work prompts us to look up its sources—as distinct as his mother's shorthand (also displayed in the exhibition)—while remaining open to interpretation. At the Govett-Brewster, the bold, breezy animation of his figures is a nice match to the jazzy zing and primordial energy of Len Lye's mark making in the nearby gallery.

In contrast, Ali is in exile. Born in Pakistan and now Sydney based, he is a Hazara-Afghan refugee. A violently persecuted minority, the Hazara originate from the Hazarajat region of central Afghanistan. As a child, Ali was deeply influenced by his grandfather singing the *Shahnama* to fellow refugees who had crossed the border during the Russian invasion. The giant Buddhas in Bamiyan have long been central to Hazara, and their destruction by the Taliban in 2001 prompted Ali to return there to work with the community. In 2011, his parents' home in Quetta, Pakistan, was destroyed by a car bomb. And now, under the Taliban in Afghanistan, Hazara people find themselves under threat again.

Ali's three enormous tapestries defy hardline Islam with their bright, colourful, graphic representation of people and animals. Early in his career, he studied miniature painting and calligraphy, and you can see how both traditions inform his works, which revel in layering heavily outlined forms and in a pop-art-esque appropriation of modern illustration.

In the exhibition, the artists are given their own spaces, but remain in conversation. Older work in the two ground-floor bays informs the new work upstairs. At the top of the staircase is a gallery of Ali's earlier tapestry works. The most cohesive and royally arresting is *The Arrivals* (2017), with its clear reference to refugees and boat people. From here, we are drawn to the upper mezzanine by fifteen small Katki embroideries. They curl, flapping like sheets of paper cast into the air, with the bright notes on their musical scores thrown into fresh, chattering arrangements.

This is the *Essayer* (*Murmuration*) series, and, as that title indicates, it's an experimental visual essay. 'Essayer' in French is 'to try', and this is the opposite of flag waving—opening out new unions in colour and line. Once contained, now unfurled, outlined artefacts and turns in line suggest new social connections, with patches of multicoloured pixellation originating in Zoroastrian beadwork. It's clear how increasingly confident Katki has become. These works are freer, less framed, and less static than earlier, and are leavened by the poet's smart humour. A 2021 work title: *Sell It if You Must but Not to a Man with Blue Eyes*.

Katki's work here feels portable, free to be made into new arrangements. The stitching on the back of a mat is presented as much as that on the front. It is, as Stanhope calls it, 'space as a multi-perspectival container'. The aerial

display is grounded by *Persepolitan*, a stack of earth-and-straw adobe bricks, referring to the stepped ziggurat forms common in Persia. Still found in archaeological sites, they speak of endurance. Standing on top of the stack, five bricks are wrapped in embroidered cloth—four dedicated to the women in Katki's family, and one to himself—a matriarchal family portrait. Yet these are also portable—home can be held as a parcel of land small enough to tuck under your arm.

From here, we look out to Ali's new tapestries. They collage layers of disparate styles, as if violently competing with each other for territory. Originating as digital drawings, the designs were embroidered in Afghanistan—Ali giving control back to the community's women.

America's stain on Afghanistan is apparent in the clash of iconography throughout Ali's work. Beast figures are common, but can be both devils and angels. No one is blameless; man is not to be trusted. In two of the large

tapestries, a boy flies a kite bearing the Pakistani flag, innocent of the oppression it hides. Rather than the freedom of Katki's line, there's tension and unresolved conflict in these works.

Both men give visibility to the creative work of women. Katki deliberately reveals iconography from temples that Parsi women are not allowed to visit, while Ali elevates traditions involving women and children. Men are responsible for the war, Ali says plainly. The women left behind are the real heroes. His demons are all men.

In describing Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*, Sholeh Wolpé writes, 'Like the birds of this story, we may take flight together, but the journey itself will be different for each of us. Attar tells us that truth is not static, and that we each tread a path according to our own capacity. It evolves as we do.' This epitomises the strength of these artists' work now. Like the murmuration, home may constantly be held, but always be moving.

