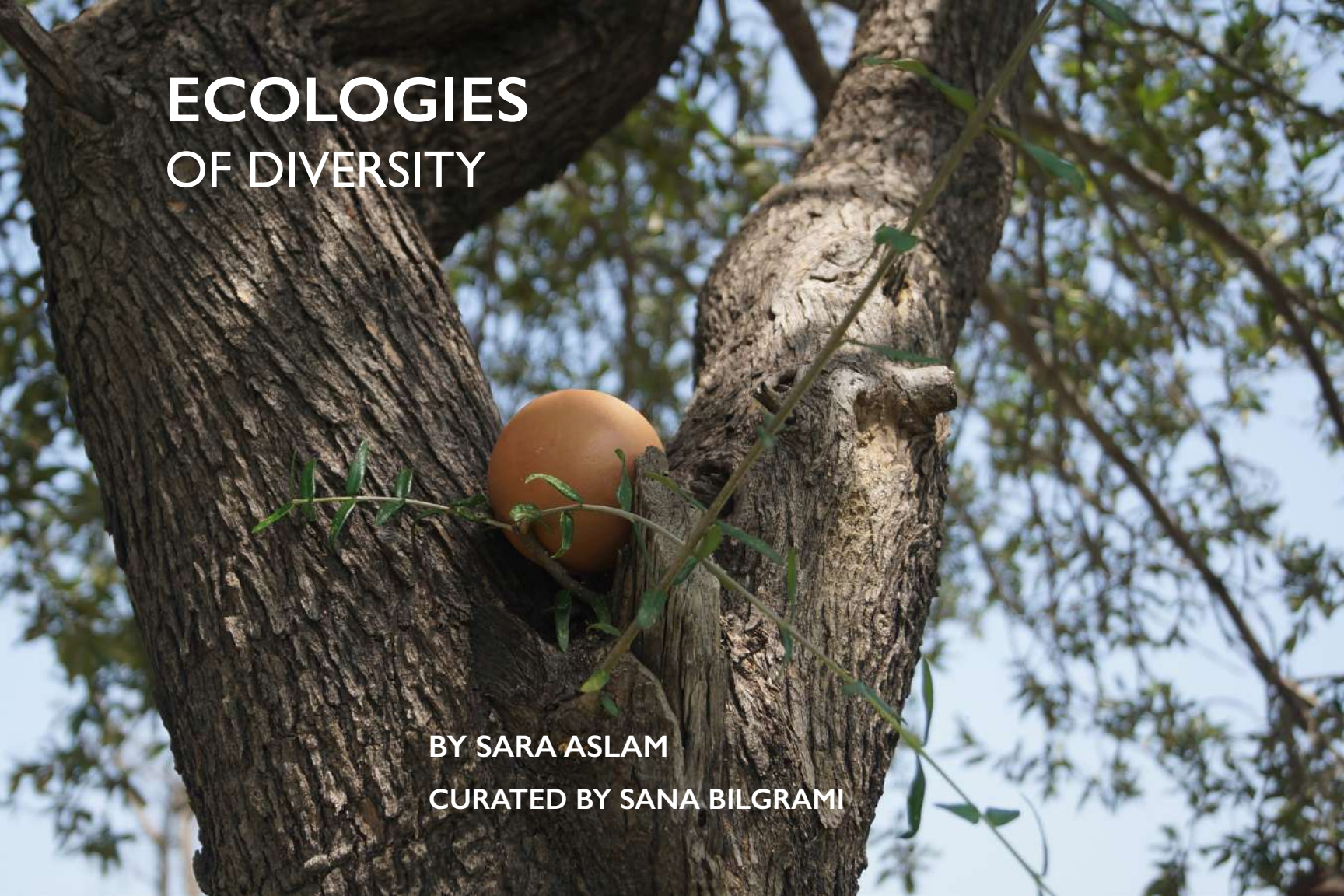


A photograph of a brown egg nestled in a hollow of a tree trunk. The tree bark is rough and textured, and green leaves are visible in the background. The egg is positioned in the center-left of the frame, partially obscured by a thin branch.

# ECOLOGIES OF DIVERSITY

BY SARA ASLAM

CURATED BY SANA BILGRAMI

# ECOLOGIES OF DIVERSITY

## PLANTS, ART, FILM

This exhibition is the culmination of **Ecologies of Diversity: Plants, Art, Film**, a year-long hybrid visual arts residency, held in-person at Gumchi Bagh in Tumair, Islamabad, in September 2024, and the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, Scotland, in October 2024. Curated by filmmaker Sana Bilgrami, the project is a collaboration between Koel Gallery, the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE), and Edinburgh Napier University's School of Arts and Creative Industries (ENU SACI), and is supported by British Council Pakistan.

Artist, Sara Aslam, was unanimously selected for the residency, from a large number of applicants, by a panel of reviewers. She

has worked closely with Professor Kerstin Stutterheim, visual artist and filmmaker at ENU SACI, who mentored Sara in developing a diverse body of work that artistically and cinematically maps the indigenous and cultivated plant diversity at Gumchi Bagh.

The residency at Gumchi Bagh included a workshop at the farm with schoolgirls from Azm e Nau, a school in Tumair. The students collected and pressed plant samples and seeds from the grounds in Gumchi Bagh and learned about the significance of plant diversity. Sara and Kerstin also held a talk on biodiversity and Sara's artistic research and practice with a group of students and faculty at National College of Art, Rawalpindi.

In Edinburgh, Sara's residency included research in the extensive botanical collections, library and archive of RBGE, allowing her to draw connections between these collections and the indigenous plants and seeds in Pakistan. Sara was particularly inspired by her discovery of a collection in the archives of beautiful botanical illustrations by an anonymous female 19th century artist in India. Sara's visit coincided with a week-long 'Plants on Paper' workshop at RBGE supported by the Getty Foundation. The workshop, featuring talks and sessions with artists and curators, focused on botanical techniques, conservation and curation, and specifically on the decolonisation of collections of scientific prints and drawings.

The residency and exhibition have been steered in Pakistan by Project Consultant and owner of Koel Gallery, Noorjehan Bilgrami, herself an artist, curator and renowned textile designer. The project has also been supported in Edinburgh by Professor Olwen Grace, Deputy Director of Science (Collections) and Curator of the Herbarium at RBGE, whose research focuses on biodiversity in a changing world.

The project was enabled by the indispensable knowledge and support of Akmal, Akhlaq, Abid and Fida, at Gumchi Bagh, and by Azmeena Alladin, Gallery Manager, and Amadia Arif, Graphic Designer, at Koel Gallery.

The Ecologies of Diversity: Plants, Art, Film exhibition will travel to the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh in June 2025, where the exhibition will continue in the Science Building for five weeks. The residency, exhibitions, and any further developments to the project will be documented at [www.ecologies.uk/diversity](http://www.ecologies.uk/diversity).



Sara Aslam is a visual artist and an educator working at Lahore. She earned her BFA (2016) and MA ADS (2020), with distinction from Beaconhouse National University (BNU). She has participated in various notable events, projects and exhibitions. Her creative practice revolves around an expanded notion of home, a space-in-progress and is often explored through an ecological viewpoint while questioning the living condition within an urban environment. She works with diverse mediums such as plantation, earthwork, installation, sculpture, mix-media drawing, and audio-visual works to bring together various possibilities of conceiving an individual and a collective utopia. Aslam is currently teaching as Assistant Professor at Mariam Dawood School of Visual Arts & Design, BNU.



# SARA ASLAM

## ARTIST STATEMENT

To me, home embodies the act of venturing beyond the present to form an imaginary place, setting or situation that an individual yearns for. Imagining an ecotopia, I connect mundane visuals, systems and ideas to reflect upon the influence of various spaces: imagined and realized; ephemeral and eternal; natural and built environments that shapes mind to a state of rigidity or malleability. As I form and re-form an abstract sense of such spaces,

I delve into the process of collecting botanical readings, plants and various organic materials such as soil, stones, crop fibres, plants which are either manipulated, preserved or arranged. As the process also involves collage, sculpture, drawing, earth works, research, fieldwork, audio-video works and documentation therefore a multimedia installation is used to bring together various possibilities of self-sufficient living.

# CURATORIAL NOTE

In the face of global climate catastrophe, and the international currents of violence, denial, fear, hostility, suspicion, and the inclination to avert or look away, the necessity to become resilient, to question, speak out and resist, has never been more urgent. Embracing diversity in all its forms, and the accompanying qualities of empathy, tolerance and love, points to a radical path of resistance and resilience. Ecological and botanical diversity offers a potent promise for the survival of humaneness, humanity and nature.

Sara Aslam's artistic vision takes in the cycles of life and fertility, and the recurring forms we find in nature. She keeps returning to the circular form. It holds promise and hope and creates a temporal continuum moving between the present, past and

future. This is juxtaposed with an acknowledgement of human intervention through our urban structures and our traditional, historical, cultural and spiritual engagement with exploiting and cultivating plants in the service of medicinal, culinary and holistic needs.

Sara's work specifically responds to the botanical diversity and nature, both indigenous and cultivated, at Gumchi Bagh, in Tumair, Islamabad, where she spent periods of time immersing herself and creatively responding to the farm environment. Alongside field research at Gumchi Bagh, Sara carried out research in RBGE's extensive archives that included South Asian plant and seed collections and botanical illustrations, photographs and maps. Her research also draws on indigenous cultural, herbal and medicinal knowledge, to inform her interdisciplinary practice.

The exhibition at Koel Gallery is a large-scale installation of sculpture, film, botanical drawings, investigations, and artefacts. Through her work, Sara directs our attention to the rich possibilities offered by a diversity of cultivated and wild plant-life with its ecological, metaphysical, temporal, historical and cultural significances. She creates subtle and powerful artistic interventions that aesthetically and temporally shift our perceptions. She asks us to slow down, observe, immerse, question, and re-learn. These are all acts of resistance. Her interventions seek to preserve and pursue ecological diversity as a powerful vision for the future.

**SANA BILGRAMI**



SANA BILGRAMI

## BIOGRAPHY

Sana Bilgrami, born in Pakistan, is an award-winning documentary director and Film lecturer at Edinburgh Napier University. Her research interests span the use of archive, 8mm film and personal voice, the interrogation of identity, and the interstices of historical, geographical and fictive spaces in documentary practice. Her broadcast credits include 'Across the Waters' (2004), shortlisted for a Satyajit Ray Award, BAFTA-nominated 'Tree Fellers'

(2004), and 'New Ten Commandments' (2008). 'Fragments of A Love Story' (2013) was exhibited at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. She works with visual artists to curate international artist residencies and exhibitions: 'Landscape of Memory' (2020), 'Ecologies of Displacement' (2022), and 'Ecologies of Diversity' (2024). She is currently developing a feature-length documentary film, 'The Album'.

*Time Capsules – Preserving past in present for the future*  
Dimensions Variable  
Terracotta and Soil  
2025





## KERSTIN STUTTERHEIM

### BIOGRAPHY

Kerstin Stutterheim is a filmmaker, dramaturg, visual artist and elected member of the German Film Academy. Since 2021, she serves as Professor in Creative Practice at the School of Arts and Creative Industries at Edinburgh Napier University. Before, she was the Rektor (principal) of the Academy of Media Arts (KHM), Professor at Bournemouth University and at Film University Konrad Wolf. As visiting professor, she has been invited to Australia, Brazil, Canada, Bangladesh, China and more.

Most relevant publications: Film Dramaturgy: A Practice and a Tool for Researchers. (Chapter 36, open access) in: The Palgrave Handbook of Screenwriting Studies (978-3-031-20768-6 / 2023); Modern Film Dramaturgy – An Introduction. (2019); Teaching Documentary for the 21st Century, 2023; her most recent short film A Summer Sunday Afternoon (2025) is about to be premiered. For more detailed information, please see her Orcid profile 0000-0002-5243-616X.



*Time Capsules – Preserving past in present for the future*  
Dimensions Variable  
Terracotta and Soil  
2025



# NOORJEHAN BILGRAMI

## BIOGRAPHY

Noorjehan Bilgrami, a visual artist, curator, researcher, author of four books and an educationist. She is the Principal Curator, Pakistan Pavilion at Expo 2025, Osaka, Kansai, Japan. She was the curator for the Silver Award winning Pakistan Pavilion at Expo 2020, Dubai. In 2024, she designed the installation 'Nir Kahani - Indigo Story' at 'Manzar: Art and Architecture from Pakistan' at the National Museum of Qatar. In 1978, Noorjehan established KOEL and pioneered the revival of hand-block printing, weaving, and natural dyes. Gallery KOEL since 1990 has been a vibrant platform for new and emerging artists.

Noorjehan is a Founder member of the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture (IVS). She was the first Executive Director 1991-1995. In 2017, she was the artist in residence at the Islamic Museum of Art, Design and Culture, Shangrila, Doris Duke Foundation, Honolulu, Hawaii, USA. Her artwork of the solo exhibition held at the Islamic Gallery, Honolulu Museum of Art, was acquired by the Museum. In 2023, she was awarded 'Tamgha-e-Imtiaz' by the President of Pakistan in recognition of her outstanding services in the field of Arts and Crafts.



OLWEN GRACE

## BIOGRAPHY

Professor Olwen Grace is Deputy Director of Science (Collections) at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, where she is responsible for the Preserved Collections comprising the Herbarium, Library and Archive. Her research investigates the evolutionary processes underlying the extraordinary adaptations and ecological success of succulent plants, using the charismatic genus *Aloe* (Asphodelaceae) as a model system.

As a curator, she is interested in the role of digital collections in accelerating specimen identification in natural history collections, providing new data for managing biodiversity, and interdisciplinary study of collections to further our understanding of their value and histories.

Photo credits: Julie Howden

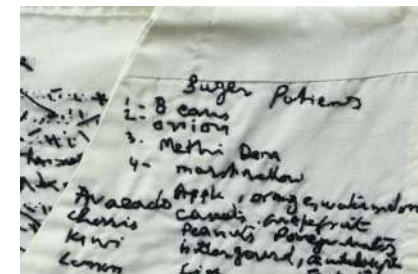
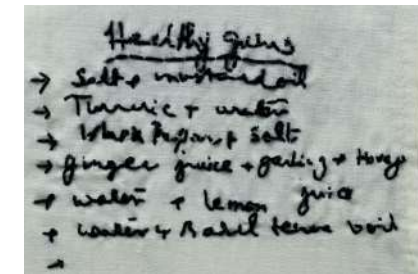
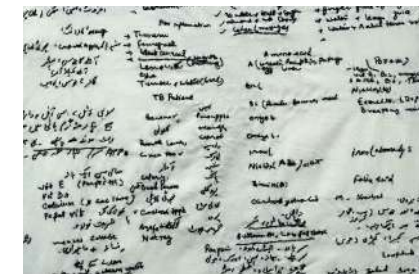
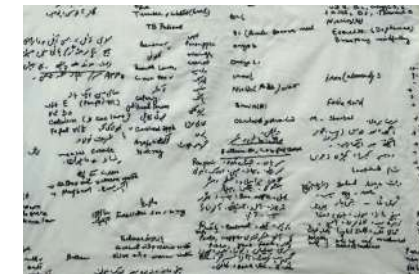
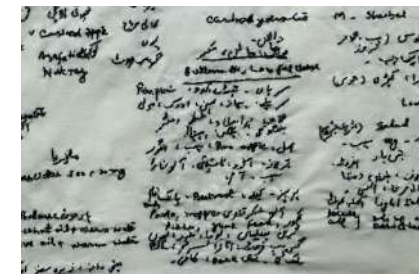
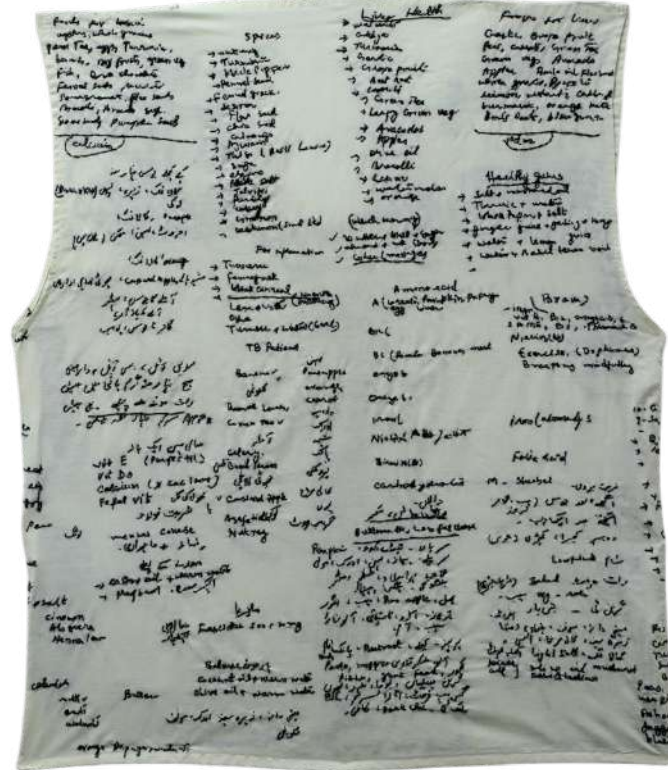
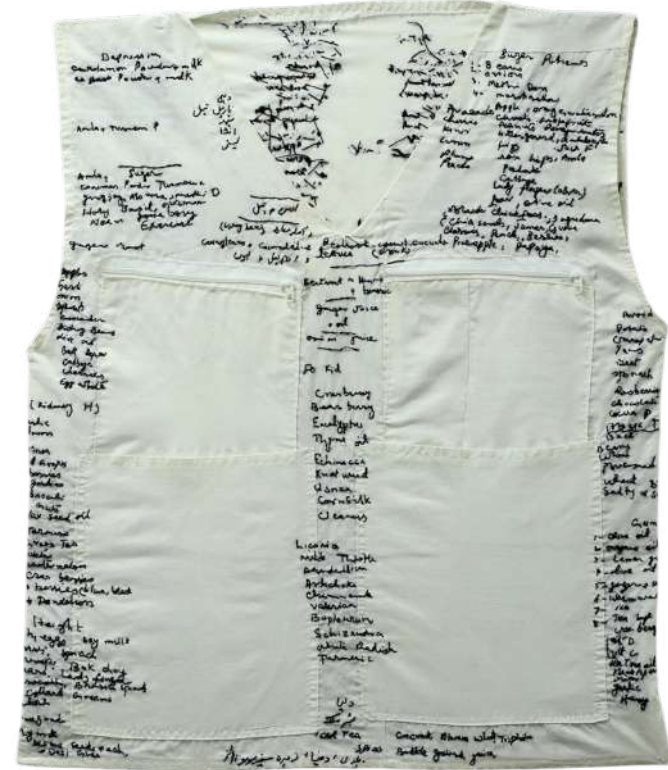
*Island – conceiving Ecotopia*



*Island – conceiving Ecotopia*







Detailed Shots

Life Kit – portable essentials  
50 cm by 59 cm  
Hand Embroidery on Cotton Vest  
2025



*Life Kit – portable essentials*  
(Diptych- 1st Panel)  
66 cm by 98.5 cm  
Herbs, glass bottles, Canvas  
2025





*Life Kit – portable essentials*  
 (Diptych- 2nd Panel)  
 64 cm by 97 cm  
 Herbs, glass bottles, Canvas  
 2025





### Detailed Shots



*Anonymous Travelogue – Poetics of Flora & Fauna I*  
 25.4 cm by 32.4 cm  
 Water color & graphite on Wasli  
 2025



*Anonymous Travelogue – Poetics of Flora & Fauna II*  
 25.4 cm by 32.4 cm  
 Water color & graphite on Wasli  
 2025



*Anonymous Travelogue – Poetics of Flora & Fauna III*  
 25.4 cm by 32.4 cm  
 Water color & graphite on Wasli  
 2025



*Anonymous Travelogue – Poetics of Flora & Fauna IV*  
 25.4 cm by 32.4 cm  
 Water color & graphite on Wasli  
 2025



*Anonymous Travelogue – Poetics of Flora & Fauna V*  
 25.4 cm by 32.4 cm  
 Water color & graphite on Wasli  
 2025



*Anonymous Travelogue – Poetics of Flora & Fauna VI*  
 25.4 cm by 32.4 cm  
 Water color & graphite on Wasli  
 2025



*Anonymous Travelogue – Poetics of Flora & Fauna VII*  
 25.4 cm by 32.4 cm  
 Water color & graphite on Wasli  
 2025



*Anonymous Travelogue – Poetics of Flora & Fauna VIII*  
 25.4 cm by 32.4 cm  
 Water color & graphite on Wasli  
 2025



*Anonymous Travelogue – Poetics of Flora & Fauna IX*

25.4 cm by 32.4 cm

Water color & graphite on Wasli

2025







*Art, Art, Art,..... - Voicing Creative Freedom*  
Dimensions variable  
Multi-media Installation  
2025



*Art, Art, Art,..... - Voicing Creative Freedom*  
Dimensions variable  
Multi-media Installation  
2025



*Ecologies of Diversity (collaborative work)*  
Duration: 10-12 mins  
Film  
2025



*Ecologies of Diversity (collaborative work)*  
Duration: 10-12 mins  
Film  
2025



*Ecologies of Diversity (collaborative work)*

Duration: 10-12 mins

Film

2025



*Ecologies of Diversity (collaborative work)*

Duration: 10-12 mins

Film

2025



*Ecologies of Diversity (collaborative work)*  
Duration: 10-12 mins  
Film  
2025



*Ecologies of Diversity (collaborative work)*  
Duration: 10-12 mins  
Film  
2025

