Kate Newby in Sharjah Biennial 16: to carry

An interview with Contemporary HUM

by

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Kate Newby, *Cold Water*, 2025. Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation with the support of Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa. Installation view: Sharjah Biennial 16, Kalba Ice Factory, Kalba. Courtesy the artist and Art : Concept, Paris. Image courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation. Photo: Ivan Erofeev.



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Yhonnie Scarce, Kate Newby, Megan Tamati-Quenell and May Alqaydi, Camel Rock, Mleiha Desert, Sharjah.



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Kate Newby, *Cold Water* (detail), 2025, glass, rope (salvaged and new), dimensions variable. Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation with the support of Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa.Courtesy the artist and Art : Concept, Paris. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



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In February 2025, Contemporary HUM was on the ground at the opening week of Sharjah Biennial 16: to carry*, speaking with the Aotearoa artists who were present.*

Here, HUM speaks to Kate Newby, who discusses her new site-specific commission Cold Water *(2025), exhibited on the facade of the Kalba Ice Factory, and the challenges and opportunities presented by the location of Sharjah. For Newby,* Cold Water *was a chance for her to focus on the interplay between the elements made manifest by the site —the sun, the water and the desert—and to stage an invitation to herself and others to be attentive to its environment.*

This interview has been supported by individual donors and Creative New Zealand. With generous thanks to Sharjah Art Foundation for the press invitation to Sharjah, which enabled HUM to cover this significant event for Aotearoa artists.

CONTEMPORARY HUM How did Megan Tamati-Quenell, one of the five co-curators of the Biennial, initially approach you for this project? Your work, *Cold Water*, is a new commission. Was it informed by the theme of the Biennial, "to carry," or were there other conversations that were already informing the concept for the work?

KATE NEWBY Megan mentioned it to me a couple of years ago, and I had just worked with her at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery

(Ngāmotu New Plymouth) on an exhibition called *Swallowing Geography* that had Ana Iti (also participating in SB16) in it as well. We'd just worked together and then I saw her in Wellington, perhaps around the start of 2022. She mentioned the Sharjah Biennial and that kind of started things. She said, “You need to do a site visit.” So I came out here and met her last April, which is when I really learned about the other artists and the theme.

HUM What did you discover when you came on your site visit, and how did you end up choosing the Kalba Ice Factory, on the Eastern coast of the Emirate of Sharjah, as the venue for your work?

KN I walked around a lot of the venues with Megan, like the ones around Calligraphy Square and Al Hamriyah Studios. Megan had some ideas and we went through them and looked around. I was maybe here for four or five days.

I had never been to the United Arab Emirates, and I basically didn't want to rush into anything. We went out to Kalba because another one of Megan's artists, Yhonnie Scarce, was exhibiting out there and we were looking at her space. We'd also gone to see some local pottery studios on the way out, because I'm always interested in looking at production, but nothing was sticking. We went to the Ice Factory and just had a quick look around and left. Then I went home and I remember being in the hotel going, “I don't want to make a work that could just be anywhere.” I also didn't want to come to Sharjah without going to the desert. So the next day we all bundled into a dune buggy and explored the desert around Camel Rock. It was then that I decided I wanted to go back to Kalba to take a second look. There was something about how you had to drive through the desert and mountains to arrive at the Ice Factory that really had an impact on me.

I think what brought me back there was the starkness of it; how you had the ocean, the mountains, the desert, the wind and the sun all at the same time. I remember being totally blinded as I looked around the outside of the building because of how bright it was. It piqued my interest, especially the facade of the building that had

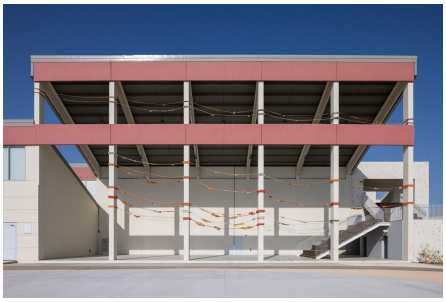
these extremely tall columns that were creating very stark shadows. Megan was like, “Kate, are you sure? It’s just so big!” I’m always trying to include my work into different parts of architecture, and it felt like an opportunity to do that.

HUM The Ice Factory is on the seaside, in the town of Kalba, which is about a two-hour drive from Sharjah and a much quieter setting. What struck me about the work is that the rope that you've used to link between the different columns of the building and weave around the glass pieces you’ve made looks like it could have been there already. Can you say where the materials you have used are from?

KN When I was developing the project, I was trying to think about how to use light. And at the same time, I'm always trying to work locally, and while I tried to hunt around for some glass and clay and bronze, nothing really stood out. Although glass is sand, I couldn't find a glass workshop. What I was interested in, and what I really didn’t expect before I visited, was how much water there was in Sharjah.

Ropes have been a material I've worked with for a really long time. Coming off the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA Australia) project, where I had worked with all these salvaged ropes from the Sydney Harbour, it seemed like a chance to work similarly in Sharjah.

The thick red ones and yellow ones were made by a local maritime rope producer, so they were made for the project. Other ropes came from the Thursday Market, which is a market where absolutely everything from furniture to vegetables is available. I also worked with some rope makers from the Sharjah Maritime Museum who helped me splice different colored ropes together. It was really important to me that some of the work was composed and made on site. The glass was made at the Canberra Glassworks in Australia, where I had just worked with the MCA.



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Camel Rock, Mleiha Desert, Sharjah. Photo: Kate Newby.

HUM Can you explain how the glass pieces were made? Each piece is a whole form, but with these gaps in the middle. How was that achieved?

KN I worked with Canberra Glassworks and glassblowers there to make these forms. I started off by making them in clay and by asking questions about what can be possible with shapes: “How do you make glass feel like a knot?” The shapes were developed by picturing ropes getting wound and twisted together. How do you draw with rope and how do you redirect the rope through the form of the glass? This is something I've been circling around for a few years. How do you weave together these different materials that might not ordinarily be friends? The colours were based on my experiences out at Camel Rock.

HUM Your work is responding to the site it is exhibited in, which is not something many other works in the Biennial are doing. All the participating works respond in some way to this notion of “to carry,” and the five curatorial projects have brought works and artists who carry their own stories to Sharjah, but it feels like your work is also integrating something from the local setting.

Because you often work internationally, I'm curious to know what the significance is for you to show in this Biennial or in this part of the world in comparison with other places that you’ve exhibited.

KN I haven't spent any time in the UAE, and I don't want to feel like I'm imposing myself onto a space. It's really important to me that my work feels part of a place. It's sometimes a strange tension for me, because I have to make assumptions, and I think that's why I'm always interested in the less important spaces or more peripheral spaces, because [something] like a sidewalk is for everyone, right? Maybe, I'm more okay in this area where the demands are less, and I can think more quietly. I really wanted to make a work that was perhaps more about listening than it was about telling.

I also think about the generosity of art. I really like that people who weren't part of the Biennial would get to see the work on the facade, because it's on view 24 hours a day. When we were installing, we would start early in the morning at 6 or 7am and then break between 12 and 3pm because of the intensity of the sun. We'd then work into the night, and the space was always buzzing with families and kids and people spending time by the water.

The work continually changes because of the sun's movement, creating a reliance on the place where it's installed. I've set up the work, but I'm not in control of when the sun is at its brightest, when the shadows pop, and when it's cloudy and the work disappears. I've gone back to these basics of light and space. Paying attention to these things has helped me feel more connected to where I am.

HUM The Sharjah Biennial has a reputation for engaging with political subjects, and this edition is particularly focused on Indigenous stories and migratory histories. Yet there is also critique of the state imposing limitations on certain behaviour, people or communities.

Megan's curatorial concept is based around notions of hospitality, being a good host and being a good visitor, and there is a sense of the importance of respect and open mindedness. How do you approach exhibiting your work in a place like Sharjah?

KN I try to keep an open mind as a strategy, especially in places I've never been. Rather than arriving with assumptions, I wanted to come to Sharjah and take time to experience it firsthand. I live in Texas, which, like here, is often spoken about in sweeping terms. But for me, the real understanding of a place starts with the relationships I form—with the people I'm working with and collaborating with. That's where I begin.

Megan's curatorial concept of hospitality resonates with me, because I think of my work as an invitation. It's about noticing, slowing down and being responsive to the environment and the people around me. I see exhibiting here as a chance to listen, to pay

attention and to contribute something that is quietly in dialogue with the place, rather than trying to speak over it.

Biographies



Kate Newby received her Doctorate of Fine Art in 2015 from the Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland; she has shown internationally at galleries and museums. Recent institutional exhibitions include the Palais de Tokyo (2022), Adam Art Gallery Te Pataka Toi (2021), Institute of Contemporary Art Villeurbanne/Rhône-Alpes (2019), Kunsthalle Wien (2018), 21st Biennale of Sydney (2018) and the SculptureCenter (2017). In 2012 she won the Walters Prize, New Zealand's largest contemporary art prize. In 2019 Kate was awarded a Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters & Sculptors grant. She has undertaken residencies at The Chinati Foundation (2017), Artspace (2017), Fogo Island (2013), and the ISCP (2012). Kate currently lives and works in Floresville, Texas.

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