

# Open dialogue



COURTESY PAUL PHUNG

Opposite page:  
Farshid Moussavi,  
photographed by  
Paul Phung

**This year, for the first time in its history, the RA Summer Exhibition is co-ordinated by an architect, Farshid Moussavi RA. She tells Priya Khanchandani about her new vision for presenting the show**

On an unusually bright London afternoon, the sky an uninterrupted blue, I pass a lively green by Shoreditch Church, walk through the red brick of Calvert Avenue and arrive at Arnold Circus, circled by tenements that once housed Britain's first council estate. From the top-floor window of a former school building, a voice calls me in. Looking up, I'm met by the hand of Farshid Moussavi RA waving, blossom hanging from trees all around.

Once inside the building, I enter an airy space lined with windows and filled with the hum of Moussavi's small but dedicated team, who are in the final stages of delivering the Ismaili Centre in Houston (render; page 58), the practice's second significant cultural project in the US after the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Cleveland. Now, she is taking on the mantle of the RA's Summer Exhibition, the first edition to be co-ordinated by an architect in the exhibition's 257-year history. 'It's hard to believe,' she says, 'but yes.' Alongside this year's hanging committee of fellow Academicians – Tom Emerson and Stephanie Macdonald, Vanessa Jackson, Christopher Le Brun, Helen Sear, Caragh Thuring and Richard Wilson – chaired by RA President Rebecca Salter, she has taken on her task as co-ordinator by rethinking the fundamentals of how the exhibition is structured – beginning, naturally, with architecture.

The exhibition has long had a dedicated room for architecture, which has often felt like an anomaly among the art in the rest of the show. Moussavi is set to change this. 'The first thing I thought was: we need to take architecture out of its own confined space,' she explains. 'We should not be saying different categories of art – sculpture, painting, printmaking – are all mixed up as art,

and then architecture goes in a separate room. I've always been uncomfortable with the fact that you walk around the galleries and then get to the architecture room, and it becomes very professional.' There will be other breaks with convention, including white walls throughout, and a change in the usual route that visitors take through the exhibition.

Moussavi's chosen theme for this year's show is 'dialogues', meaning both the dialogue between art and architecture and the capacity of art to open up conversation. It also serves as an interpretation tool for organising the exhibition. 'In a normal exhibition, there's a curator who very carefully, over an extended period of time, selects works and puts them next to each other,' she explains. 'In the Summer Exhibition, that rarely happens.' Work is generally hung in a more spontaneous manner, as the hanging committee assesses the submitted works. Moussavi seems capable of injecting a refreshing attitude into establishment chambers. In devising a concept for the show, she was keen to invite artists to dismantle received ideas. Her call for entries asked for works that prompt conversation, and invited not only finished artworks but also process material – or, as she puts it, works that 'emerge through the artistic process' – allowing the exhibition to delve into the messy process of making art and design.

It is a distinct characteristic of the Summer Exhibition that anyone can submit their work. The mammoth task of reviewing this year's 18,000 entries is still underway when I visit, but the works that will act as thematic anchors, from the artists Moussavi and her fellow committee members have invited to participate, have been chosen. She shows me some images. They include a series of scraps of »





‘In her architectural and curatorial work Farshid Moussavi seeks spaces which push us to see things in new ways and afford exchange’

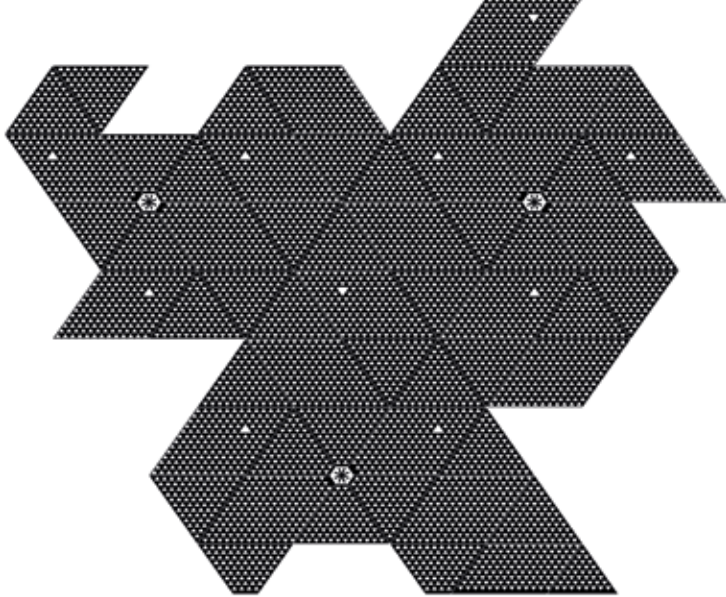
» clothing recovered from beaches by artist Mandy Barker, captured as cyanotypes in a style inspired by 19th-century seaweed archives. The point is to engage us with the urgent issue of over-consumption and the consequences of fast fashion. Moussavi practises what she preaches in terms of sustainability, with the smaller sculptural and 3D work in the exhibition to be displayed on plinths made from hemp that can be returned to the supplier afterwards.

Next, she shows me a set of photographs by Zed Nelson capturing a genre of artificially created space such as a zoo, a tropical resort or an aquarium, where humans interact with animals as if the setting is genuine. ‘It shows how we surround ourselves with idealised ideas about the natural world,’ says Moussavi. Artist Alice Channer will exhibit a striking sculpture in the RA’s Central Hall that could have been lifted from a car wash but subtly draws attention to our dependence on nature (*Body Shop*; page 61). ‘She found that in the car industry, the vehicle body goes through a cleaning system which uses the feathers of female ostriches

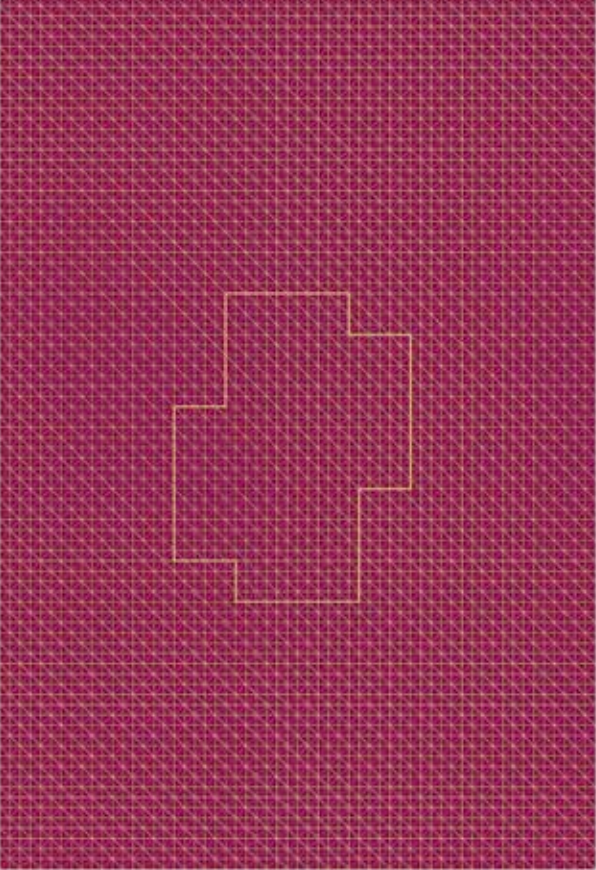
Above:  
A rendering of the Ismaili  
Centre in Houston, Texas,  
designed by  
Farshid Moussavi  
Architecture

to remove dust between coats of paint,’ Moussavi says. ‘It’s interesting that the car industry, which appears to be highly mechanised and artificial, relies on the feathers of birds.’

In the grand space of Gallery III, where the floor needs to be kept clear for events taking place during the show, Moussavi plans to create a suspended hang of three-dimensional works, along with 2D works on the walls. One of the hanging works will be a series of sculptural carcasses by Tamara Kostianovsky made from found materials and hung from meat hooks (*Growth*; page 60). ‘They look quite gruesome from a distance, but they’re quite delicate,’ Moussavi says. ‘Tamara says they fuse cruelty and beauty, and when I see them, they make me think about the ethics of eating meat.’ In the same space will be a new sculptural work by Cornelia Parker RA comprising a string of convex mirrors once used to paint landscapes, subverted and hung from the gallery ceiling, so that visitors can look up at the distorted images of themselves. This questioning of perspective, and the chance to see yourself »



**ABOVE AND RIGHT**  
**Architecture and abstraction**  
*Past and Future* (above) and *Sacred and Profane* (right), two prints submitted to the show by Moussavi, show that buildings, while concrete, establish dialogues with broader and less tangible concepts



**BELOW**  
**Craft and industry**  
In works such as *Storm in a Teacup*, Antonio Tarsis uses discarded matchbox papers to create fragile, hanging skins, sparking conversations about materiality and transformation



FARSHID MOUSSAVI ARCHITECTURE. IMAGE © ANTONIO TARSIS 2025. COURTESY THE ARTIST; CARLOS/ISHIKAWA, LONDON; AND FORTES D'ALCÁIA & GABRIEL, BRAZIL. PHOTO: DAMIAN GRIFFITHS





**THIS PAGE, LEFT  
Tradition and the contemporary**

In Richard Malone's *peaks on streets, pleats on tarp (or the start of an embrace)* the artist employs time-honoured textile skills learnt from his grandmother

**THIS PAGE, BELOW LEFT  
Cruelty and beauty**

Tamara Kostianovsky transmutes a fleshy carcass into a textile work, *Growth*, that hangs from the ceiling in Gallery III

**OPPOSITE PAGE  
Nature and machine**

Alice Channer explores the interconnectedness of nature and industry in *Body Shop*, an installation work using the ostrich feather discs which dust car body parts between spray painting



» reflected back differently, seems neatly to encapsulate Moussavi's curatorial approach. 'I'm interested in provoking conversations between ourselves – or just within ourselves,' she adds.

The most direct manifestation of this ambition is perhaps Ryan Gander RA's piece for the Annenberg Courtyard in front of Burlington House. He is installing large black inflatable balls with white text posing questions that children ask adults (*Do ghosts have teeth?*; page 62). 'The work represents the inquisitiveness of children asking things grown-up minds often dismiss as nonsensical or illogical,' she says. 'Most of them are really difficult questions. They provoke. They make you think. And I think this is the power of a good exhibition.'

Moussavi's interest in dialogue, and her willingness to challenge, extends from ideas in her architectural work: visiting the MOCA Cleveland, the building appears like an ice block that has just landed, with its reflective steel skin and angles that force you to view the city from differing perspectives. In her most recent book on her practice, Moussavi describes the building as being 'in dialogue with its ever-changing urban context and with the sky'. She tells me her current project, the Houston Ismaili Centre, includes large atriums and verandas that were not in the brief. 'You can come in, hang around, meet people and leave,' she says. 'These are the kind of unprogrammed, non-exclusive spaces that define the building.' Whether architectural or curatorial, her work offers spaces which push us to see things in new ways and afford exchange – something that the RA Summer Exhibition, as a social experience, lends itself to well, in comparison to most other art shows.

Although her own vision breathes through her work, Moussavi is conscious of the role the artists who submit »

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST. COURTESY OF SLAG&RX AND THE ARTIST



COURTESY KONRAD FISCHER GALLERY. PHOTOGRAPHY: ROMAN MARZ





» work play in defining the Summer Exhibition specifically. Critics are sometimes scathing about this aspect. ‘There’s a lot of birds, a lot of dogs and a lot of trees – and it’s true,’ she says with candour, ‘but it would be bad not to reciprocate the generosity that the public shows by sending in this work. It takes time to create and submit an artwork, and I think many times the reviews miss this side of it.’ She points out that works are for sale and a portion of the proceeds helps fund the RA Schools, to keep the education it offers free.

What does she hope visitors will take away from it this year? She is reluctant to agree that the exhibition will be more provocative than it generally is. ‘We’ll see,’ she replies. ‘I hope people will see the dialogues – between works, between spaces, between themselves and the art. I hope it makes them pause. Think a little differently.’

Before I leave, we look out over Arnold Circus and the neighbouring estate. ‘I would love to do social housing in future,’ she says. ‘Not of the kind that is just about fitting the regulations into a box – but truly thinking about how people live.’ There are few boxes Moussavi squeezes into, rather finding expression in the spaces she herself creates.

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*Priya Khanchandani is a writer, curator and broadcaster*  
● **Summer Exhibition 2025 Main Galleries, Royal Academy of Arts, 17 June–17 Aug. Sponsored by Insight Investment**  
● **Friends Previews** 14 June, 12–9pm; 15 June, 10am–8pm; and 16 June, 10am–6pm (booking is recommended). House Members have dedicated viewing hours 14 June, 10am–12pm (booking recommended)  
● **View and purchase works online** when the show opens at [se.royalacademy.org.uk](https://se.royalacademy.org.uk)

‘Children ask things grown-up minds often dismiss as nonsensical or illogical. Their questions make you think. And this is the power of a good exhibition’

**ABOVE**  
**Innocence and knowledge**  
In *Do ghosts have teeth?* Ryan Gander embellishes huge balloons with the sometimes absurd or inadvertently profound questions children ask adults, puncturing hierarchies of understanding

INSTALLATION VIEW: ‘GRUNTS, HOOTS, WHIMPERS, BARKS AND SCREAMS’, HELGA DE ALVEAR, CÁCERES, ES, 2024/IMAGE BY RYAN GANDER STUDIO

# Nick Grimshaw’s pick and mix

The TV and radio presenter tells *Rosanna McLaughlin* of his love of buying art at the Summer Exhibition, and selects star buys at this year’s show

‘I love all the RA’s exhibitions, but the Summer Exhibition is particularly special because it brings together all sorts of people, all sorts of art and all sorts of techniques. You get to see into so many different worlds’, Nick Grimshaw enthuses about the RA’s annual art-buying bonanza. ‘And I like the fact that it’s open to everyone, whether you’re an unknown artist or you’re Tracey Emin.’

During the 2000s, the presenter affectionately known as Grimmy shot to fame as the host of Radio 1’s *Weekend Breakfast Show*, becoming a companion to millions of British millennials in the early mornings, much-loved for his humour and easy charm. In the years since he’s become a fixture on television and radio. Grimshaw is also an art lover and collector, and this year he is presenting a series of special films for the BBC’s *The One Show*, following hopefuls as they submit their work to the Summer Exhibition.

‘I’ve been going to the Summer Exhibition for around 15 years. While I never turn up thinking “I’m going to buy art”, often something catches my eye’, he says. Included in his art collection is a black-and-white etching by Richard Galloway, bought from the RA in 2013, which hangs in pride of place in Grimshaw’s London kitchen. ‘It’s a scene of south London, and it reminds me of Grayson Perry’s tapestries, as there are lots of interconnected images that melt into each other. There are also two dogs in it, and they look exactly like mine – a white bull terrier and a little mutt.’ In 2023, he bought an oil pastel and collage work by Siphwiwe Mnguni, which hangs in his hall. ‘It’s got lots of vibrant layers of textures and marks, and it celebrates her dual Zimbabwean and British heritage. It’s pretty much the only thing in my hallway, I absolutely love it.’ A few months after buying the work he had the opportunity to meet the artist, which he said made the painting even more meaningful.

Part of the magic of the Summer Exhibition is that everyone has the potential to become a collector. There are prices to suit a range of budgets, with everything from affordable prints to works by world-famous artists (with price tags to match) on sale. As Grimshaw puts it, ‘You don’t have to be an art expert or part of the art world’ to join in. When it comes to choosing what to buy, he looks for art that has an instant impact. ‘An artwork has to grab me, it has to speak to me. I particularly love anything that feels primal, rough and ready, where I can see the human input, the imperfections. I’d rather see a scribble than a perfect Renaissance painting.’

For Grimshaw, nothing beats the thrill of seeing art in person, and when he’s not working, he can often be found strolling around the capital’s museums and galleries. ‘I still feel very spoiled by the amount of art that you can

Below:  
Nick Grimshaw  
at the mic

see on display in a city like London’, he says. ‘I’ve always been inquisitive about art, and I often feel a need to go to exhibitions and look inside someone else’s brain for a couple of hours. I’ve got an RA membership, and whenever I’m in central London with time to spare I’ll go and see what’s on, have a mooch around.’

Especially for *RA Magazine* readers, Grimshaw has selected his star buys from this year’s Summer Exhibition (pages 64–65). As this issue went to press prior to the final round of judging, which happens as the show is hung, he has chosen from the work of Royal Academicians and artists invited to participate by this year’s hanging committee. His choices span prices and mediums, and include everything from an eerie photograph by Anna Fox and musician Alison Goldfrapp, a print by Michael Craig-Martin RA – whose RA show in 2024 Grimshaw described as ‘amazing’ – to an innovative dress by the renowned fashion designer Hussein Chalayan, made from an airmail letter. »

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*Rosanna McLaughlin is Deputy Editor of RA Magazine*  
The One Show’s coverage of the Summer Exhibition 2025  
airs on BBC 1 on 6 and 9 June



HOWARD SHOOTER FOR DISH FROM WAITROSE