ACAF

Talking Peers: Tea as Vessel

Curatorial Statement | Asia Contemporary Art Forum (ACAF)

Talking Peers

Tea as Vessel

Asia Contemporary Art Forum (ACAF)
May 16, 2026

Curatorial Statement

Tea as Vessel

An Activation Curated by Leeza Ahmady as part of *Damask Rose: A Gathering by Behar Behbahani* Commissioned by Governors Island

This iteration of **ACAF Talking Peers** unfolded as a lightly facilitated activation where tea functioned as both medium and method. Taking place within Behbahani's woven textile environment, the session began with ACAF curator **Leeza Ahmady** offering a grounding meditation to attune participants to the installation's Persian garden–inspired setting, establishing a shared space of presence and orientation. From this opening, the gathering moved into a collective field of attention, where tea became an embodied thread connecting gesture, story, and relation.

At the center of the activation was the vessel—primarily thermoses—gathered as a collective assemblage. Participants were invited to bring their own, filled with preferred teas, extending relational space through personal histories of taste, migration, and ritual. The thermos emerged as a resonant object, carrying warmth across movement, labor, and displacement while reflecting contemporary conditions of individualized consumption. In this tension, the vessel held intimacy and distance, shared care and private use, continuity and transformation.

ACAF Talking Peers: *Tea as Vessel* activation by Leeza Ahmady, as part of *Damask Rose: A Gathering by Bahar Behbahani* at Governors Island. Photos by Jonas Bauer.

Click to Watch Program Video

ACAF Talking Peers: *Tea as Vessel* activation by Leeza Ahmady. As part of *Damask Rose: A Gathering by Bahar Behbahani*. Photos by Neha Gautam, commissioned by Governors Island Arts.

Across the gathering, ACAF's diasporic artist network, including **Roya Ghiasy**, **Zolaykha Sherzad**, **Emilio Rojas**, **Dara Hartley**, ACAF curator **Leeza Ahmady**, and ACAF Fellow **Tanasia LaBrew**, prepared and served tea, offering stories, performances, and subtle rituals that created moments of stillness and connection. These exchanges became gestures of care, pause, and relational awareness, opening space for release and renewal—an easing of internal and coll.ective congestion and a making of space for presence and regeneration.

Held within Behbahani's *Damask Rose* installation, Talking Peers: *Tea as Vessel* formed an ephemeral field of shared practices and diasporic knowledge, where hospitality became a method of artistic and relational inquiry, and where even the simplest ritual opened onto transformation.

A scene from *Damask Rose: A Gathering by Bahar Behbahani* at Governors Island. Photo by Roya Ghiasy.

Click to Watch Program Video

ACAF Talking Peers: *Tea as Vessel* activation by Leeza Ahmady. As part of *Damask Rose: A Gathering by Bahar Behbahani*.
Photos by Neha Gautam, commissioned by Governors Island Arts.

EMILIO ROJAS

Among the most resonant moments of the activation, Emilio Rojas's performance drew from Mexican traditions of limpia—rituals of spiritual cleansing and renewal that employ herbs, plants, and healing essences. Inviting participants into an intimate reflection on migration and the body, Rojas asked each person to consider what they might be carrying within themselves—particularly within parts of the body where experiences of displacement, resettlement, adaptation, longing, and separation may quietly reside. Participants were invited to identify where they felt this accumulation or stagnation in that moment and to consider what it might mean to release it.

Through the simple yet charged gesture of pouring herbal tea onto the artist's garment at the corresponding place on his body, participants entered both an individual and collective act of release. In transferring their intentions onto the artist's body, the performance created a temporary space in which personal experiences of migration, memory, and healing could be witnessed and transformed through shared ritual. The tea became both offering and conduit, carrying vulnerability, care, and the possibility of renewal.

Emilio Rojas, *Release* 2026. Performance. As part of ACAF Talking Peers: *Tea as Vessel* activation by Leeza Ahmady. As part of *Damask Rose: A Gathering by Bahar Behbahani* at Governors Island. Photo by Jonas Bauer.

Emilio Rojas, *Release* 2026. Performance. As part of ACAF Talking Peers: *Tea as Vessel* activation by Leeza Ahmady. As part of *Damask Rose: A Gathering by Bahar Behbahani* at Governors Island. Photo by Roya Gihasy.

Emilio Rojas, *Release* 2026. Performance. As part of ACAF Talking Peers: *Tea as Vessel* activation by Leeza Ahmady. As part of *Damask Rose: A Gathering by Bahar Behbahani* at Governors Island. Photos by Jonas Bauer.

Emilio Rojas is a multidisciplinary artist working primarily with the body in performance using video, photography, installation, public interventions, and sculpture. As a queer, Latinx immigrant with Indigenous heritage, it is essential to his practice to engage in the postcolonial ethical imperative to uncover, investigate, and make visible and audible undervalued or disparaged sites of knowledge, narratives, and individuals. He utilizes his body in a political and critical way, as an instrument to unearth removed traumas, embodied forms of decolonization, migration, and poetics of space. His research-based practice is heavily influenced by queer and feminist archives, border politics, botanical colonialism, and defaced monuments. Besides his artistic practice, he is also a translator, community activist, yoga teacher, and anti-oppression facilitator with queer, migrant, and refugee youth. He holds an M.F.A. in Performance from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a B.F.A. in Film from Emily Carr University in Vancouver, Canada.

Emilio Rojas, *Release* 2026. Performance. As part of ACAF Talking Peers: *Tea as Vessel* activation by Leeza Ahmady.
As part of *Damask Rose: A Gathering by Bahar Behbahani*. Photos by Neha Gautam, commissioned by Governors Island Arts.

ROYA GHIASY

In a parallel gesture of sensory attunement, Roya Ghiasy extended the activation through rose water, drawing participants into the atmosphere of Bahar Behbahani's *Damask Rose*. During Leeza Ahmady's grounding meditation, Ghiasy moved among participants, gently spraying rose water onto their hands, transforming the body into a temporary carrier of scent and memory, leaving behind an invisible trace of beauty, care, and encounter. Echoing the gathering's broader reflections on tea, hospitality, and transmission, Ghiasy's intervention expanded the notion of what might be held, exchanged, and remembered. Rather than residing in a fixed object, the work unfolded through fragrance, presence, and sensation—qualities that linger in memory while resisting conventional forms of preservation and collection. Within Behbahani's imagined garden, rose water became part of a shared sensory landscape, subtly weaving participants into an experience that endured long after the scent itself had faded.

Roya Ghiasy, *Daily Anointment* 2026. Offering. As part of ACAF Talking Peers: *Tea as Vessel* activation by Leeza Ahmady. As part of *Damask Rose: A Gathering by Bahar Behbahani* at Governors Island. Photos by Jonas Bauer.

Roya Ghiasy is a multidisciplinary visual artist based between Delft and New York, with a foundation in cultural anthropology. In 2001, she entered the 49th Venice Biennale through a side door, not as a visitor, but as a country, creating the first Afghan Pavilion, "Welcome the Minister of Culture of Afghanistan", without an official invitation. This act became both artwork and inquiry, questioning systems of visibility, legitimacy, and cultural power. Moving across mediums, histories, and social environments, Ghiasy weaves personal memory with collective history, examining the subtle ways power settles into behavior, ritual, memory, and perception, and shapes how we understand the world before we recognize it.

Roya Ghiasy, *Daily Anointment* 2026. Offering. As part of ACAF Talking Peers: *Tea as Vessel* activation by Leeza Ahmady. As part of *Damask Rose: A Gathering by Bahar Behbahani*. Photo by Neha Gautam, commissioned by Governors Island Arts.

Roya Ghiasy, *Daily Anointment* 2026. Offering. As part of ACAF Talking Peers: *Tea as Vessel* activation by Leeza Ahmady.
As part of *Damask Rose: A Gathering by Bahar Behbahani* at Governors Island. Photo by Jonas Bauer.

Roya Ghiasy, *Daily Anointment* 2026. Offering. As part of ACAF Talking Peers: *Tea as Vessel* activation by Leeza Ahmady.
As part of *Damask Rose: A Gathering by Bahar Behbahani*. Photos by Neha Gautam, commissioned by Governors Island Arts.

ZOLAYKHA SHERZAD

Engaging themes of textile, labor, and hospitality, Zolaykha Sherzad shared glimpses from her ongoing work at Zarif Design, her Kabul-based atelier, while restitching a deconstructed ikat silk and cotton jacket. Her reflections situated tea not simply as a beverage, but as a social and cultural medium woven into the rhythms of everyday life—where craftsmanship, creativity, and belonging intersect. Within the atelier, tea accompanies the daily interactions between artisans, tailors, designers, and visitors, creating moments of pause and conversation amidst the labor of making.

Through photographs of tailors and artisans at work, Sherzad illuminated how care, dignity, and human connection are sustained through the ordinary yet profound acts of making and sharing. Tea emerged as an essential vessel of hospitality—one that nourishes relationships, supports collective creativity, and reinforces a sense of belonging across generations. In bringing these stories from Kabul into the shared garden of Governors Island, Sherzad revealed how tea can carry forms of care across distance, extending the social fabric of the atelier into a new space of gathering and relation.

Zolaykha Sherzad, *Restitching* 2026. Reflection. As part of ACAF Talking Peers: *Tea as Vessel* activation by Leeza Ahmady. As Part of *Damask Rose: A Gathering by Bahar Behbahani* at Governors Island. Photo by Jonas Bauer.

Zolaykha Sherzad, *Restitching* 2026. Reflection. As part of ACAF Talking Peers: *Tea as Vessel* activation by Leeza Ahmady. As part of *Damask Rose: A Gathering by Bahar Behbahani* at Governors Island. Photos, left by Roya Ghiasy right by Jonas Bauer.

Zolaykha Sherzad is an Afghan-born designer and architect working at the intersection of cultural preservation and contemporary fashion. She is the director of the renowned Zarif Design, a socially engaged fashion label that revives Afghan textile traditions through modern design, working with a group of 50 artisans in Kabul. Forced to flee Kabul at age 10, she became a political refugee in Switzerland and later earned a degree in architecture from the University of Lausanne in 1994. Sherzad has worked as an architect in Switzerland, Japan, and New York, and taught at Pratt Institute's School of Architecture (1998 to 2004). In 2014, she was named Afghanistan's Official Haute Couture Representative by the World Fashion Week Board. Sherzad's sculptural installations like Hawa-ye Azad (Open Air), has been showcased at major international venues such as the 2009 Venice Biennale, dOCUMENTA 13 in Kassel, and exhibitions in Paris and Marseille. Recent highlights include the Atelier Jolie Residency in New York (March–April 2025) focused on sustainable fashion, "Afghanistan, Tisser l'horizon à l'infini" in Arles (2023–2024), and "Art of the Thread" in Venice (September 2024), all underscoring her commitment to contemporary design while reimagining Afghan heritage on a global stage.

DARA HARTLEY

Dara Hartley shared an offering rooted in Mongolian tea traditions, presenting participants with her own 3D-printed miniature teacups containing single servings of instant *Suutei Tsai* (Mongolian salty milk tea), alongside a handmade accordion zine. Drawing from her travels in Mongolia as a student, she reflected on moments of encounter and hospitality, recalling how tea often served as a bridge between strangers and an entry point into unfamiliar worlds.

Through the miniature teacups and portable publication, Hartley explored the ways cultural knowledge is carried, not only through objects and stories, but through the heart. Reflecting her broader practice of speculative writing and world-making, the offering blurred the boundaries between memory, narrative, and lived experience. As she shared her story, suutei tsai emerged as a living thread connecting memory and place, preserving traces of encounter while imagining new possibilities for relation long after a journey has ended.

Dara Hartley is a New York City–based multidisciplinary artist and designer whose work blends technology, craft, and storytelling rooted in Afrofuturism. Combining digital tools and traditional craft techniques, she creates travel posters, textiles, and mixed-media works that envision new futures while drawing inspiration from history, literature, and the African diaspora. Her practice centers joy, self-expression, and radical imagination, celebrating Black joy, beauty, and presence across time and imagination. Outside the studio, she can often be found exploring museums, tending her garden, experimenting with microgreens, or geeking out over Star Trek.

Dara Hartley, *Suutei Tsai* 2026. Offering. As part of ACAF Talking Peers: *Tea as Vessel* activation by Leeza Ahmady. As part of *Damask Rose: A Gathering by Bahar Behbahani* at Governors Island. Photos by Jonas Bauer.

Dara Hartley, *Suutei Tsai* 2026. Offering. As part of ACAF Talking Peers: *Tea as Vessel* activation by Leeza Ahmady. As part of *Damask Rose: A Gathering by Bahar Behbahani*. Video stills from footage by Elana Engelman, commissioned by Governors Island Arts.

A scene from *Damask Rose: A Gathering by Bahar Behbahani*. Photos by Neha Gautam, courtesy of Governors Island Arts.

ACAF Asia Contemporary Art Forum

Asia Contemporary Art Forum (ACAF), formerly Asia Contemporary Art Week (ACAW), connects Asia-based and Asian diaspora artists, curators, and cultural practitioners across the United States and worldwide. Through curatorial and educational initiatives, ACAF brings Asia's artistic practices, histories, and knowledge traditions into dialogue across cultures, disciplines, and geographies.

Copyright © 2026 · All Rights Reserved · Asia Contemporary Art Forum (ACAF)
No part of this publication, including its texts & images, may be reproduced, distributed, or shared in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of Leeza Ahmady and Asia Contemporary Art Forum (ACAF).