

The New Zealand Herald

Not waving, drowning

By [Adam Gifford](#)

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When Soren Dahlgaard was planning his work for the 2013 Venice Biennale on the effect of climate change on the Maldive Islands, high tides were covering St Mark's Square with a metre of water.

It's a topical issue for those living close to the sea, but how to turn it from a social studies project into art?

Dahlgaard's idea, which opened at Te Tuhi last week and will be at various schools and public spaces around the city for the next four months, is to get a range of artists together and present their work in a caravan.

The caravan, which has an inflatable island sitting on top, serves as metaphor for an island and the exile that lies in the future for many islanders, either because of inundation or political circumstance.

Visitors will learn that the chain of atolls in the Indian Ocean isn't just the tropical idyll where Prince William and the Duchess of Cambridge went this month to charge their batteries before the expected rigours of a New Zealand tour.

It's a precarious environment for the 300,000 non-tourists who occupy 192 of its 1192 islands. With the average land height being 1.5m above sea level, making it the world's lowest-lying nation, the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami caused huge damage, including the deaths of 102 Maldivians and six foreigners.

It's also politically fraught. A coup in 2012 returned the former British protectorate to autocratic rule after a brief period of democracy under the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) and Mohamed Nasheed, who won the first direct presidential election under a new constitution in 2008.

Politics is close to the heart of *The Maldives Exodus Caravan Show*. After graduating from the Slade art school in London, Dahlgaard moved with his wife (and fellow student) Amani Naseem to her homeland in the Indian Ocean.

The Dane worked with his father-in-law to set up a market gardening business, researching vegetables that could grow on the coral atolls where an absence of soil meant much of the islands' food is imported from India.

The work may have made an impact – Dahlgaard says imports of some of the crops he experimented with aren't increasing at the same rate as other foods.



The Maldives Exodus Caravan Show at Queen's Wharf in Auckland. Photo / Samuel Hartnett

The couple moved to Copenhagen, but kept close links with the islands.

The election of the MDP Government, which includes Naseem's father, gave Nasheed an international platform to highlight the threat of climate change to small island states, which he used to good effect at the 2009 Copenhagen climate summit.

Dahlgaard put to him the idea of curating an exhibition around the issue as the first official Maldivian entry to the Venice Biennale.

When Nasheed was deposed in the coup, Dahlgard continued curating the show – with most of the funding coming from Denmark.

He was almost derailed five weeks before the opening when a fellow curator with no Maldives connection went to the new government and gained approval to be the sole curator of the official Maldives pavilion.

The artists stuck with Dahlgaard, who did a deal with English artist James Brett to come on board The Museum of Everything, which was part of the Official Collateral Event.

The caravan went up as planned just outside the Giardini, although for the first two months of the Biennale it served as a discussion space for The Salon of Everything alongside Il Palazzo di Everything.

The artists include a mix of Maldivians and some high profile outsiders including Rirkrit Tiravanija from Thailand, Superflex from Denmark and Bik Van der Pol from the Netherlands.

Island maker Antii Laitinen represented Finland at the Biennale as well as featuring in the caravan, and Russian Alexander Ponomarev, who took a wave and a submarine to the 2007 Biennale, also contributed a video of disappearing islands.

The nature of Venice as a city built on mud seems tailor-made for the theme of submersion – New Zealanders Brett Graham and Rachel Rakena took their poetic installation on the subject, Aniwaniwa, to the 2007 Biennale.

Dahlgaard's brief to the artists was no physical objects, so it is performance, including songs and music, video and games.

Naseem went from sculpture to game-making, and is now doing a doctorate in game-making in Melbourne, where the couple now live.

"Games are a way to create something on the street involving groups of people. It's about fun and social interaction and creativity, but it is also the first seeds for independent political thinking. People say, 'We can't remember when we were last laughing.' It sounds innocent but it is a really important first step."

Dahlgard says as well as awareness of climate change and the environment, the show is part of the growing trend.

"Eco-aesthetics is a direction of art about how you live. It connects to the Land Art movement from the 1960s, Art Povera, and to The Land Foundation in Thailand. Art is about life, how you live, how

you grow your food, organic foods, it connects with the body."

Exhibition

What: *The Maldives Exodus Caravan Show*, curated by Soren Dahlgaard

Where: Te Tuhi, 13 Reeves Rd, Pakuranga, to July 13

The Maldives Exodus Caravan Show will be at Te Tuhi at the weekends and can be booked by schools and other venues during the week. In June there will be a panel discussion on issues raised by the show, featuring climate change experts, artists and a Skype contribution by Mohamed Nasheed. *The Maldives Exodus Caravan Show* caravan, which has been parked on Queen's Wharf over the past few days, can be seen at Te Tuhi from today until next Thursday; see tetuhi.org.nz for more information.

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