ARASH NASIRI

AT CHISENHALE

Arash Nassiri
A Bug's Life

17 January – 22 March 2026

For his first institutional solo exhibition, Berlin-based artist Arash Nassiri presents *A Bug's Life*, a major new moving-image and sculptural installation. The commission centres on an opulent mansion in Beverly Hills, built in the 1980s by Iranian émigrés. It is one of the last remaining examples of a once-distinctive architectural micro-movement, conceived by architect Hamid Omrani, that emerged in the decades following the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Combining local American Modernist proportions with grandiose, French-Rococo-inspired aesthetics, this architectural style was later banned by the city of Los Angeles in 2004.

A Bug's Life follows its protagonist – a hand-carved wooden puppet in the shape of an insect – who slinks through the palatial home, drawn to its glossy surfaces and gold-tinged décor. Creeping through hallways and lingering in shadowed rooms, the puppet intruder becomes our guide through a private world thick with memory, power, and selective erasure. Along the way, fragments of story surface through glimpses of glossy magazines, an eavesdropped phone call, and snippets of conversations that echo through corridors, drawing the audience into a voyeuristic encounter that reveals how architecture can entrench aspiration, exclusion, and cultural displacement.

Nassiri's practice draws on the visual languages of music videos, television, and cinema, reworking familiar formats into speculative, allegorical forms. His work investigates how built environments absorb and reflect histories of migration, displacement, and cultural hybridity. In *A Bug's Life*, Nassiri examines a domestic space suspended between lived reality and distortion, where personal and architectural histories intersect.

Presented at Chisenhale Gallery in a translucent architectural shell, *A Bug's Life* is a meditation on the fragile systems through which some histories are kept alive and others are buried. Weaving oral testimonies from the home's inhabitants with voices from communities further afield, Nassiri asks what our spaces remember long after we have left them, and what traces of social, cultural, and political life linger in their walls.

Biography

Arash Nassiri lives and works in Berlin. Selected exhibitions include: *Half-Light*, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2024; *Rayon Jouets*, Hangar Y, Paris, 2024; *GRIS NARDO*, Octo Productions, Marseille, 2023; *Barbe a Papa*, CAPC Bordeaux, 2022; *Metabolic Rift (Berlin Atonal)*, Kraftwerk Berlin, 2021.

List of Works

A Bug's Life
Single channel video with 4.1 sound
21 min, loop

Untitled
UV lamp, fan, wooden marionette, 3D printed parts, custom pcb, custom software

All works 2026

Video Credits

Writer & director:	Arash Nassiri
Puppeteer :	Soledad Zarate
Head of production:	Olivia Aherne
Assistant producer:	Oscar Abdulla
Director of photography:	Manuel Branáa
Camera assistant:	Kevin Ulibarri
Grip:	Ryan Culbertson
Runner:	Arash Nassiri
Sound:	Nicolas Becker & Andrea Ferrara
Composer:	Hesam Abedini
Foley:	Heikki Kossi & Janne Laine
Mix:	Andrea Ferrara
Puppet conception:	Soledad Zarate & Arash Nassiri
Puppet maker:	Çağrı Yılmaz
Additional puppet design:	Samantha Lake
Puppet consultant:	Kahbia Sada
Animatronic artist:	Jason Cook
Puppet rehearsal:	Georg Jenisch
Homeowner:	Siavash Shirani & Afsaneh Mansouri
Architect & consultants:	Hamid Omrani, Greg Goldin, Hamed Khosravi

Talks and Events

As part of the commissioning process, a programme of talks and events has been devised in collaboration with Arash Nassiri, spanning the duration of the exhibition.

In Conversation

Wednesday 21 January,
7–8:30pm

An in-depth conversation between artist Arash Nassiri and curator, writer, and academic Dr. Róisín Tapponi exploring Nassiri's new commission.

Curator's Introduction

Saturday 7 February,
11am–12pm

A morning walkthrough of *A Bug's Life* led by Curator Olivia Aherne and Assistant Curator Oscar Abdulla, accompanied by coffee, tea, and pastries.

Live Programme

Thursday 19 February,
7–8:30pm

Thursday 5 March,
7–8:30pm

Thursday 19 March,
7–8:30pm

Three nights curated by writer, researcher, and radio host Nihal El Aasar in response to Nassiri's new commission. London-based contributors will join Nihal for an exploration of memory and political resonance through words and sound. Details to be announced online.

All events are free to attend and open to all. To book, please visit our website or talk to a member of staff. We are committed to ensuring our events are accessible for all. Please contact mail@chisenhale.org.uk to discuss any access needs. We will endeavour to meet all requests where possible. Please be advised that requests should be made two weeks in advance of the event.

Chisenhale Interviews: Arash Nassiri

Olivia Aherne: Can you describe how a Beverly Hills mansion became the centre of your new commission, *A Bug's Life*? What about its architecture or history drew you to it?

Arash Nassiri: In the 1980s and 90s, large villas built by Iranian émigrés began to appear in Beverly Hills. They were often – sometimes dismissively – referred to as 'Persian Palaces.' What intrigued me at first was the question of how Iranian ornament and interior design motifs could be articulated within an American-style mansion – I began to imagine my own version of this. In the beginning, I was simply interested in visiting; it was difficult to understand what actually defined these houses from photographs alone. Even though their contexts, owners, and locations were identifiable, visually they resisted easy categorisation. The research became about entering them – quite literally, getting the door open was the hardest part. What began with me knocking on doors eventually became guided tours from the architect himself, Hamid Omrani, who opened up the houses and took me through them. The distance between my understanding of the houses, gained from afar, and the material reality of encountering them became the beginnings of this new work. That gap became the site from which this new commission began.

OA: The interiors of these mansions and their overall design are highly stylised, part of a distinctive, hybrid architectural movement that fused many different aesthetics. How would you describe its defining qualities, and which particular features of Omrani's architecture made it a key reference for the project?

AN: One of the defining things, in my view, was how these houses were perceived by the city – as socially unacceptable or excessive – as well as their actual architectural language. When you look closely, many of the ornaments and motifs mirror Western references from France, Italy, or Greece. This aesthetic was already in circulation in Tehran at the time, and can be traced back to the eighteenth century, before it travelled to California when people migrated from Iran.

Once transplanted into Los Angeles, those references were reshaped again through real estate, the US economy, and different magnitudes of wealth. Proportions were exaggerated and everything was maximised, pushed almost to excess. What interested me wasn't the germination of the style in Tehran itself, but this transportation of aesthetic taste. In that sense, the architecture feels like a form of proto-globalisation, shaped by trade routes, taste, and aspiration long before the language of contemporary globalisation became common.

The home sits precisely within this distance: between how the style of architecture was described in the US media or by neighbours, and the home's material reality, which carries a more complex and layered history. Rather than trying to describe this objectively, the work became about creating a situation in which that distance – between perception and lived form – could be experienced.

OA: These mansions were built in a period shaped by shifting relations between Iran and the United States. How did that political backdrop inform your understanding of the house and the way it appears in the film?

AN: These houses were widely criticised in Los Angeles. First by their immediate neighbours, whose opinions then got picked up by the media and sensationalised. The mansions were seen as excessive, ostentatious, or simply as bringing something unfamiliar into the city. The media coverage

then led to this style being indirectly banned through changes in Los Angeles planning guidelines. That response says a lot about how belonging operates, about what kinds of architectural expression are allowed to exist in public view and which are pushed out. For me, there is a certain irony in this. The houses speak to a desire to belong – perhaps even to over-perform that belonging – through the very display of wealth and aspiration that ultimately inspired their local disparagement, backfiring completely. I find that tension strangely touching. Rather than exercising judgements of taste, *A Bug's Life* tries to shift these spaces' aesthetic register, to see how they might be read differently when removed from the frameworks that initially dismissed them.

OA: The mansion was designed to project wealth and aspiration, yet its history is tied to exclusion and social boundaries. How does *A Bug's Life* engage with these dynamics, and how do they shape your understanding of domestic spaces as sites of political and cultural meaning?

AN: For me, it was important to bring both success and failure into the work, to hold them together. Alongside the geographical movements associated with these spaces, I wanted to think about sociological movements. These homes are utilising representations of wealth and power in order to establish themselves as part of the neighbourhood. Communities are sites where different forms of wealth, power, and taste collide, and this is where frictions form and tensions surface. Part of the work is asking why these houses carry such a strong desire to project one's own societal position and subjective taste so visibly. What does it mean to want to perform belonging, prosperity, or success so intensely?

I was also interested in how European architectural motifs circulate through Eastern territories and then become transposed again. Through this lens, wealth, affluence, and taste became materials to work with –

not to judge, but in which to create another perspective, another cut through the space. That crossing point where aspiration, excess, aesthetics, and vulnerability meet, became an important layer within the film.

OA: In the work, an insect puppet moves through a space that seems both familiar and uncanny. How did you conceive of the puppet as a protagonist, and what does its perspective allow you to explore?

AN: We began with the question of scale – how to experience these vast, private homes from a perspective that could move through them differently. The insect puppet emerged as the right figure to embody this viewpoint, allowing the camera and audience to navigate the space in ways that feel intimate and exploratory.

I first encountered puppeteer Soledad Zarate's work in London; it was a moment of magic to unexpectedly come across her hand-made marionettes in a play I went to see. I was struck by their abstraction: bare-bone figures, almost on the brink of collapse, yet full of presence. Those forms stayed with me, and when thinking about the Chisenhale project, they resurfaced in my mind. Bringing not only the puppet, but also Soledad's performance to the house in LA was incredible – I simply needed the camera to capture the magic I had first encountered, preserving the immediacy of her presence.

The work was produced onsite in the home in Beverly Hills over a few days, and the exhibition presents a document of the puppet performance that took place there. While high-resolution cameras give us a sense of presence, the special effects function more like theatrical devices, removing the puppeteer just as they would be hidden in a live play.

I was drawn to the insect as a figure because it is universally familiar: everyone has encountered domestic pests in their homes, whether mosquitoes or rodents,

yet these small, overlooked creatures also carry certain historical and cultural resonances. Its size also allowed me to intensify the monumentality of the architecture, the same way the camera can shrink and amplify, creating new ways of experiencing space. For me, the work always starts with what is already present, and the joy is in misusing and transforming subjects rather than imposing something entirely new.

OA: Over the course of the film, we come to feel empathy for the insect, who is often quite funny. A strong relationship develops with the protagonist, yet you're constantly aware that it's an unwanted guest, an intruder. There's a real tension between caring for it and recognising its encroachment.

AN: The relationship with the puppet was tricky. I usually avoid over-characterising figures, but empathy was essential: without it, nothing is at stake. We worked to create that through its movements, through the mise-en-scène, and through its interaction with the objects in the home. I identified areas or moments where the puppet could activate the space or where something could go wrong. The contrast between the home's ostentation and the marionette's size also helped produce empathy. Ultimately, it was Soledad's sensitivity and her hands – like a painter at work – that brought the puppet to life, making its presence immediate. Immediacy is crucial for me.

We followed Soledad's design blueprint closely, but we modified the head and added animatronics to literally light the space. We amplified this by leaning into all of the light reflections – created by the insect's glowing eyes – on surfaces: the marble, mirrors, and glossy varnished materials used in the interior created a second layer of visual language. If the puppet lights the space, it also lights the camera, revealing the house itself. In a way, this was about making things explicit – showing the environment through the puppet's presence. The reflections make the space unstable, constantly returning our attention to

surfaces and to the puppet itself. Mirrors function both conceptually and materially – they situate and shift the viewer's perspective, but also reflect the ways Western-inspired architecture transplanted from Tehran to the West Coast, becomes distorted and reframed. These houses ultimately mirrored an unflattering vision of the city's own relationship to desire, power, and wealth back to itself, for which they earned outsized disapprobation.

The film's goal was to create a space in which to reconsider taste: how aesthetics are judged as good or bad, desirable or repellent. My responsibility was to start from an open place, attempting to approach the space neutrally rather than subjectively, and to let the puppet, along with the reflections and shifting light, reveal the house and its atmospheres on its own terms. Beyond the question of where motives or cultural values come from, the puppet allows a reflection on how social taste is encoded. In an art institution, these codes are highly structured, almost like looking through a microscope. At the same time, the work tries to hide something within that X-ray, to subvert or cheat the framework, to play with judgment and to transform it. At least, that was the intention.

OA: The insect also encounters moments of risk or jeopardy, repeatedly slipping or falling, which keeps you on edge as a viewer.

AN: Yes, the puppet is constantly on the brink of collapsing. I think the empathy and tension come from the relationship between the homes' almost temple-like walls and the puppet's body – this disarticulated, fragile figure. These associations intuitively guided why the puppet made sense in these homes: its body hovers on the threshold of recognition, almost on the verge of disappearing.

Finding that threshold was central to the performance. We explored it through Soledad's work, during both the on-site performance and the editing process. The

smallest details, such as the joints of the knees and elbows, became crucial. It took four puppets and three rounds of adjustments to arrive at the right physicality. It was like casting the right actor. Once built, we also had to develop its character, how it moved around the space and what kind of body language it should have on screen. The process was as much about observation and experimentation as it was about choreography, and through that careful, iterative work, the puppet achieved the precarious, empathetic presence we were looking for.

OA: The work carries both a coolness and atmospheric thickness – a dense, almost suspended quality that shapes how we move through the house. How and why did you develop this particular atmosphere on screen?

AN: It started quite intuitively. I had watched *The Wild Robot* (2024), an animated film that stars a raccoon whose eyes glow in the dark. This is an image that's ubiquitous in digital culture, present throughout memes and on the internet. It's something almost everyone recognises. That image stayed with me, not as a reference in itself, but as a way into a certain mise-en-scène. Once that decision was made, everything else began to fall into place: the time of day, the relationship between the insect and the absent figures in the house, and the overall sense of suspension.

Shooting in LA allowed us to play with older cinematic techniques, like day-for-night, and combining this with the puppet pushed the atmosphere further. The glowing eyes became a simple but strong structure for the work – almost a square with two circles – bringing repetition and clarity. If you blur your eyes, the image is nearly abstract. Working at night, reducing forms to surfaces and letting light heighten everything, was part of this process. Reduction was key: reducing the colour spectrum, reducing the amount of information, creating gaps on the surface of the image, but also how this blurred surface leaves room for interpretation. The puppet's eyes literally

light the walls and floors, activating the space through the camera sensor and the viewer's perception.

Using animatronics, circuits, 3D-printed parts, and embedded electronics alongside an old wooden puppet created a collision of eras and technologies that was a kind of bricolage. It wasn't just about the final image, but about producing the work in a way that felt experimental and drew on many different techniques and fields.

OA: Sound plays a crucial role in shaping the atmosphere of *A Bug's Life* too, from original score to the bespoke texture of the puppet's movements. Could you speak about how you developed the film's sonic world while working with composer and sound designer Nicolas Becker?

AN: Sound design also began with the question of scale. If the image represents a space outside the gallery, then sound can introduce another architecture – an acoustic space that deliberately mismatches the acoustics of the gallery itself. That incoherence was important, as it could produce a sense of displacement. We also used sound to create a mood that leans toward familiar horror tropes, something atmospheric and slightly menacing. A lot of the collaboration with Nicolas focused on using reverberation, distance, acoustics, and scale to shape space physically, engaging the body as much as the image does. We followed echoes, travelled through openings sonically, and let the camera respond to these acoustics. This created shifts, junctions, and discontinuities that contribute to a sense of disorientation. The aim was to unsettle perception, to blur scope and orientation, and to create an experience closer to moving through a labyrinth or reading Lewis Carroll – an altered state where spatial logic loosens and the senses take over.

Working with a foley artist brought a tactile, bodily element to the puppet's movements. This was also a way of addressing cultural and political questions indirectly

– through image, sound, and proprioception rather than illustration. The piano became another key element. It's a classical instrument, but also deeply tied to the history of cinema, especially before synchronised sound. The grand piano is also a recurring symbol in these homes, a status symbol and almost a sculptural object, so it naturally becomes another character in the film.

OA: The film is presented within a large, translucent architectural structure. How did you conceive of this sculptural element, and what role does it play in shaping how the film is encountered?

AN: The starting point was to build an exhibition, not a projection room. I wanted to bring the film back to its most fundamental element, which is light. The structure is less a wall than a kind of shell – translucent, frosted, and ghostly. It allows the image to glow outward, so the film is no longer contained within a frame. In this way, the architecture becomes an abstracted extension of the film itself.

The structure also echoes the insect – its shell, the way it sheds skin – and allows the image to exist both inside and outside the screen. As you enter the space, the film begins gradually; it's not an on–off experience, but closer to gradual immersion, almost like stepping into a bath. The architecture prepares you before the film properly starts, blurring the boundary between moving image and exhibition space. This blurring is important as the changes in light inside and outside the structure make it ambiguous where the film ends and where the gallery begins. Reducing the elements to their essentials – light, surface, glow – was a way to focus on fundamental gestures rather than spectacle.

The insect trap in the gallery emerged in a similar way to the exhibition itself, through a desire to foreground light. I first noticed one of the traps in a bakery, and it stayed with me because it carries the same hypnotic glow

as the film, despite serving a very different function. That tension, between attraction and threat, illumination and control, felt resonant. In the gallery, it acts as a sculptural counterpoint to the film, echoing its colour and rhythm while remaining separate from it. Both objects repeat and mirror the film's logic, creating points of resonance that subtly shape how the space is experienced.

OA: History, migration, and cultural hybridity are central to your practice. How does this commission extend or challenge ideas you've explored in your earlier works?

AN: It goes back to where the project began – noticing the distance between how these homes are imagined and how they actually exist in Los Angeles. They carry histories that move back and forth between places, cultures, and moments in time. That oscillation recalls forms of proto-cinema, but also early or incomplete versions of globalisation. The ornamentation in these houses also points toward something anti-modern, or at least to a moment before Modernism became fixed.

Much of my work around Tehran has involved failed, interrupted, or ongoing projects of modernisation – political, economic and industrial – and this new work continues that line of thinking. What I respect about these homes is that they completely disregard Modernist restraint: they embrace ornamentation without apology. In that sense, the film could almost have been titled *Crime and Ornament*. There's a strong sense of anachronism at play, which is echoed in the use of puppetry and throughout the layered histories of this community.

The houses' return to French Rococo and Italian Renaissance architectural references – aesthetics that were once in vogue in Tehran – was the point where the project became clear to me. That reversal, and the way it

travels through migration and time, was where I felt the work could begin, and where *A Bug's Life* both extends and sharpens concerns I've been working with for a long time.

Interviewed by Olivia Aherne, Curator, Chisenhale Gallery, on Thursday 8 January 2026.

Reading List

This reading list has been compiled by Arash Nassiri to accompany his new commission *A Bug's Life* at Chisenhale Gallery. The selection includes a variety of books, essays, and animated films. Disney cartoons explore the choreography and animation of bodies within constructed worlds, while puppet performances by String Theatre foreground liveness and performative gestures. Amir Bani-Masoud's studies, tracing evolution of contemporary Iranian architecture situate Nassiri's engagement within hybrid and historically layered spaces, while critical writing by Joanna Lazarus examines Beverly Hills' mansions as sites of cultural negotiation. Together, the list maps a terrain where built environments, storytelling, and histories intersect, offering multiple points of entry into Nassiri's exploration of space, memory, and cultural hybridity.

Bani-Masoud, Amir. *Contemporary Architecture in Iran: From 1925 to the Present.* Independently published, 2020.

Goldin, Greg. *"In Defense of the Persian Palace."* Los Angeles Times, December 17, 2006. https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2006-dec-17-tm-palaces51-story.html

Hatampour Ghiasi, Zahra. *European Architectural Effects in Qajar Architecture (19th century in Iran)*. PhD diss., Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2020.

Lazarus, Joanna. *"L.A.'s Love/Hate for 'Persian Palaces'."* The Hollywood Reporter, March 27, 2012. https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lifestyle/style/las-love-hate-persian-palaces-304355/.

Rudofsky, Bernard. *Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture.* New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1964.

String Theatre. *The Insect Circus.* Performed by String Theatre (marionette production). Norwich Puppet Theatre, Norwich, UK, October 28, 2024. Live puppetry performance.

The Old Mill. Directed by Wilfred Jackson. 1937; United States: Walt Disney Productions. Animated short film.

The Wild Robot. Directed by Chris Sanders. 2024; United States: DreamWorks Animation/ Universal Pictures. Film.

Thru the Mirror. Directed by David Hand. 1936; United States: Walt Disney Productions. Animated short film.

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