

THIS IS CROYDON

OUR STORIES

Photo: Chris O'Donovan for Croydon Council.



AMEENA ROJEE & PHILIP MOREIRA-YEOELL

RURAL CROYDON

In July, the National Gallery took John Constable's 'The Cornfield' on tour around the UK. One of its stops was Thornton Heath Library, which was transformed into a gallery space. *This is Croydon* commissioned Aameena Rojee to respond to the painting with **Rural Croydon** - a photographic body of work celebrating Croydon's unseen conservation grazing projects. Animals from Vauxhall City Farm greeted visitors at the launch and a week of special events culminated in a family day. The project shone a light on an under-celebrated side of the borough and showed what is possible in an urban library – leading to extended opening times, further exhibitions and an ongoing relationship with the National Gallery.

IN NUMBERS

Rural Croydon

4-31 July 2023,
Thornton Heath Library

3 participating schools

18 sheep

2,040 visitors

We caught up with artist **Aameena Rojee** and **Philip Moreira-Yeoell**, the Senior Library Supervisor for North Croydon, to reflect on the London Borough of Culture project and on the ambitions that came out of it.

What were your aims for the project?

AMEENA: There is an interesting disconnect between the natural world and our urban town centre. So, my aim was to explore the conservation grazing efforts in Croydon and bring that knowledge to a wider audience. I wanted to create something unexpected for the people of Croydon and celebrate these amazing natural spaces we have so close by.

PHILIP: Aside from wanting to celebrate the borough's rural heritage, we wanted to take what is a very familiar space to many – Thornton Heath Library, a focus point of the community – and make it into something exciting and unexpected.

How did the project evolve?

AMEENA: It was surprisingly seamless. When they first came to me, the National Gallery's tour of the painting was all under NDA. So, they just gave me three words, and off the back of those words, I was like, "Oh, I have this amazing project about cows in my head". It worked out perfectly, because the painting was 'The Cornfield'. It has farming themes and was based on the painter's memory of his local area. It was weird how it all lined up!

Can you talk us through the research side of your project?

AMEENA: After I did my pitch, I started talking to Sean and Damien at the [Downlands Partnership](#). They introduced me to others and I also ended up working with rangers Tom and Skye at the [City Commons](#) organisation, which manages a few London sites including Farthing Downs and Kenley Common, and also Dominic North who manages Happy Valley for Croydon Council. So, I was speaking to these organisations, interviewing employees and volunteers. I went out with the volunteers once a week until the exhibition and did portraits while also taking photographs of everything else.

I also produced a [website](#), built by [31% Wool](#) and commissioned an illustrator, [Skye Baker](#), to do artwork for the main page. The website is where all the educational content is – the idea was to use it as a way to involve the community. [One of the webpages](#) shows you where you can actually go to witness the grazing.

How did it all come together for the event?

PHILIP: The library service coordinated everything: we had local schools visit and a local farm produced an impromptu petting zoo for the launch. The intention was that people could admire Ameena's work and the Constable painting, come in for a story and some activities with the National Gallery team, then go out and enjoy the petting zoo.

We tried to create a recognisable offer throughout the week, in addition to the main

exhibitions from Ameena and the National Gallery. For instance, across the road from Thornton Heath Library, we've got Scratchley Hall, the Age UK centre. So, in partnership with the museums and archive team, we did a Memory Cafe, where people came over from Age UK and interacted with Croydon artifacts. They were then able to enjoy the artwork at their leisure.

What was the community response?

AMEENA: I received so many nice comments during the launch week – particularly mentioning how incredible it was that it was happening in the library and in Thornton Heath. A few people said it'd be amazing if this could happen more often.

PHILIP: There was a noticeable buzz. We were closed on the Monday before, for the installation. So, there was this kind of, "what's going on at Thornton Heath Library?" On the day of the opening, quite a few people came in and said, "I heard about this all the way in Central Croydon", and "I don't usually come to Thornton Heath. I just had to come over and see it for myself".



AMEENA: Yeah, that "I don't usually come to Thornton Heath" was quite a big theme!

That's great that it attracted a new audience to the library! How was working in the space?

PHILIP: Thornton Heath is blessed for being a very flexible space. It's across multiple floors with lots of rooms. What was tremendous,



was that the exhibition was projected out onto the streets via Ameena's work in the windows. Once people were coaxed inside, they journeyed through, taking in lots of different parts of the library space, and the artwork displayed throughout.

Working with the National Gallery and *This is Croydon* team, we were overwhelmed by the range of expertise being marshalled towards the project. I've certainly never been involved in anything like it. It was really something rather special.

Do you have any highlights?

PHILIP: There isn't one single moment, so much as something that recurred throughout the week. The work pod, where I was generally positioned during the project, is kind of the best seat in the house - it's literally in front of the painting. It was really pleasing when you had these moments of quiet. You would turn and the library space, all of a sudden, was a gallery: people sitting, or standing with their arms behind their back, head tilted.

AMEENA: The opportunity to show artwork in a library space – such a beautiful library space – was a big highlight, as was the freedom I had to work on the project. It was such a joyous, wholesome project to work on – I think that's why people liked it. It was a really busy six weeks, but being wonderful to work on made it easy.

Were there any challenges?

AMEENA: One thing I struggled with was that I normally work with a deposit. Because of the funding structure, with initial funding coming from the National Gallery, it didn't work out that way. Luckily, I was in a good place at the time but often, for individual artists, that's not the case – working without a deposit or percentage of funding money upfront can be a barrier to the point of losing out on opportunities like this.

Do you have plans to continue something like this in the future?

AMEENA: The project is close to my heart, and something I'd love to pursue long-term.

I'm still in touch with both City Commons and the Downlands Partnership and have photographed with them a couple of times since. I plan to do more in future and potentially do a book. I'm in talks with City Commons about a formal artist residency, which I'd hope to open up to the Downlands Partnership. I just need to find some funding to make it happen!

PHILIP: We'd jump at any future opportunities. The libraries are a real cultural hub. Aside from being a place where people come to borrow books and read, we are a place where people can access culture. We hope to find opportunities to offer more visual arts events in the future.



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