

For Immediate Release

Mercer Union and Toronto Biennial of Art co-present Rouzbeh Akhbari's first major international commission

Of Wool and Diesel examines informal cross-border trade networks along the critical International North-South Transport Corridor

August 12, 2026 (TORONTO, O.N.) — Mercer Union (MU) presents *Of Wool and Diesel*, a solo exhibition by **Rouzbeh Akhbari**, in collaboration with the **Toronto Biennial of Art (TBA)** from **26 September 2026 to 23 January 2027**. The exhibition features the artist's first major international production, a film set in Portugal, Oman, Iran, and Azerbaijan. *Of Wool and Diesel* reflects on informal cross-border trade networks by following the present-day smuggling of sheep and connecting it with broader histories of maritime securitization and control. Co-commissioned by the National Gallery of Canada, the work will be Akhbari's first to enter its collection.

"Intricately composed and deeply nuanced, *Of Wool and Diesel* is a patient study that brings a hidden world into view without betraying it through exposure," says **Aamna Muzaffar**, Curator & Head of Exhibitions at MU, and the exhibition's co-curator with TBA 2026 Curator, **Allison Glenn**. "While a war currently runs through the very routes Rouzbeh has spent years tracing, his project reminds us that the Strait of Hormuz has been, for centuries, a theatre of tenuous choreographies, where every passage is negotiated, and routes vanish overnight only to be quietly reshaped by necessity." **Theresa Wang**, Director & Curator at MU adds, "The range of partners Rouzbeh's project has brought together speaks to the timeliness of its questions about borders, trade, and movement. We are thrilled that it will find a permanent home at the National Gallery of Canada, an important milestone for the artist, Mercer Union, and our co-commissioners."

Of Wool and Diesel (2026) was filmed in Portugal and on the pasturelands and coastal waters of Oman, Iran, and Azerbaijan. The West Asian sites lie within the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a network of land and sea trade routes linking India, Iran, the Caucasus, and Russia. In 2021, during a personal visit to a money changer in Canada, Akhbari encountered a consequence of the sanctions that restrict Iran's access to global financial systems. Simple transactions for receiving payments abroad can require indirect arrangements: the teller explained that Akhbari's transfer would be cleared "in exchange for livestock in Kuwait." Over the next four years, Akhbari followed sheep and the people who moved them from steppes to seaports, from the Caspian basin through the Strait of Hormuz, encountering herders, dockworkers, drivers, money changers, and sailors.

Akhbari's experimental short film considers how transnational movement and informal trade persist despite constraint, tracing systems of securitization and the practices that sustain circulation outside official channels. His archival research into the seas around Hormuz, long cast as lawless, also informs the film. The main hall of the Lisbon Geographic Society, a Portuguese colonial era lobby group and museum, is reimaged through spatial mapping as the main deck of a vessel adrift between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. The Society's founder notably chronicled the historical account of the fall of Portuguese rule over Hormuz in the 17th century.

Informed by extensive research and fieldwork, Akhbari's boundary-blurring film features original footage, animated sequences, and the use of archival materials. Across four acts set in various geographies and centuries, multiple characters voice stories of survival and risk, desire and longing; they include a smuggler, a shepherd, a historian, an underwriter, and a pair of lovers. The shepherd, played by Portuguese soprano **Filipa Portela**, performs an original aria written by Akhbari in *Sabir*, the forgotten lingua franca of Mediterranean sailors, and set to music by Lisbon-based composer **Francisco Lima da Silva**. In the gallery at Mercer Union, sequenced lights keep rhythm with the projection of the film and illuminate a series of drawings that form a horizon line around the room. Grounding the installation is a series of unique handcrafted floor coverings made of pressed wool. The colours and motifs in each work reference the visual code of maritime navigation signals, and the raw wool is sourced through the same informal trade channels studied by the artist.

Of Wool and Diesel is the thirteenth project developed through Mercer Union's *Artist First* commissioning platform and Rouzbeh Akhbari's first institutional solo exhibition in Canada.

Rouzbeh Akhbari is an artist, filmmaker, and geographer based in Toronto and Lisbon. Working across film and installation, his practice investigates the political and ecological entanglements of trade, infrastructure, and human geography. Akhbari's solo projects and collaborations with Felix Kalmenson as Pejvak have been exhibited internationally at institutions such as Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai; M HKA Museum of Contemporary Art, Antwerp; and The Power Plant, Toronto. Festival presentations include FIDMarseille; Media City Film Festival; and Sao Paulo International Film Festival. Akhbari holds an MFA in Visual Studies from the University of Toronto and is a PhD candidate there in the Department of Geography and Planning.

Of Wool and Diesel is organized by Mercer Union, Toronto, and co-presented with the Toronto Biennial of Art. The exhibition is curated by Aamna Muzaffar, Curator & Head of Exhibitions, Mercer Union, and Allison Glenn, 2026 Curator, Toronto Biennial of Art.

TORONTO BIENNIAL OF ART

Of Wool and Diesel is co-commissioned by Mercer Union, Toronto; the Toronto Biennial of Art; HANGAR Centro de Investigação Artística, Lisbon; and the National Gallery of Canada's National Engagement Initiative.

Of Wool and Diesel is made possible with Leading Support from TD Bank Group and the Canada Council for the Arts.



Conseil des arts
du Canada

Canada Council
for the Arts

With additional support from the Consulado-Geral de Portugal, Toronto, and the Camões - Portuguese Language Centre, Toronto.

TD Communications & Engagement Assistant is made possible with Leading Support from TD Bank Group.

Of Wool and Diesel is presented as part of *Artist First*, a Mercer Union commissioning platform. Learn more at mercerunion.org/artistfirst

artistfirst

The artist would like to acknowledge support from Partners in Art, the Ontario Arts Council, the Alserkal Arts Foundation, and the Canada Council for the Arts.

Public Programs

Opening Reception

Friday, 2 October 2026 at 7pm

Mercer Union, 1286 Bloor Street West

Join us at the gallery for the opening reception of Rouzbeh Akhbari's new exhibition, *Of Wool and Diesel*. Light refreshments will be provided, and the artist will be in attendance.

About Mercer Union

Mercer Union is a non-profit, artist-run centre dedicated to commissioning and producing new works of contemporary art, and providing an engaging program that encourages critical inquiry and conversation. We champion ambitious exhibitions that empower diverse Canadian and international artists in formative and established stages of their practice.

Social media

Instagram: [@mercerunion](https://www.instagram.com/mercerunion)

Facebook: [@mercerunion](https://www.facebook.com/mercerunion)

LinkedIn: [@mercerunion](https://www.linkedin.com/company/mercerunion)

Press kit and photos

bit.ly/rouzbeh_akhbari

Press Contact

Tatum Dooley, Art Forecast

tatum@artforecast.info