

carla

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Olga Balema, *Loop 53* (2023).
Polycarbonate sheeting, acrylic paint, and solvent,
36.5 × 28 × 22 inches. Image courtesy of the artist
and Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles.
Photo: Paul Salveson.

Olga Balema at Hannah Hoffman Gallery

April 8–May 20, 2023

Olga Balema's second solo show at Hannah Hoffman Gallery, *Loon*, inspired an almost immediate sense of suspicion. The gallery contained the usual trappings: gallery assistant at the front desk, press release and checklist available—so far, so good. Though, after that, things became a little complicated. Save several pedestals, the gallery appeared empty at first glance. But soon, 16 pieces of plastic scattered throughout the space came into focus, emerging almost as if out of thin air. (To be precise, the show contained 16 sculptures fabricated from polycarbonate sheeting, acrylic paint, and solvent, each bearing similar, vague names like *Loop 17* or *Loop 135* [all works 2023].) Suspicion, however, was not the endpoint for Balema's exhibition, only the start of the aesthetic experience. Though viewing this exhibition began with a dubious feeling, Balema successfully leveraged this wariness to force a sustained encounter with her sculpture. Without the suspicion, the viewer might have lost the sense of intrigue and the incentive to move beyond first impressions to truly engage with the works.

The unease of this viewing experience will not be completely unexpected for those familiar with Balema's practice. Her sculptures often occupy a space that barely registers as art—they are made of

anonymous industrial materials, shaped into nondescript forms, and frequently strewn loosely across the gallery floor. They are minimalist in the original sense of the term, coined by British philosopher Richard Wollheim in 1965 to characterize the then-nascent artistic movement which centered around cold, simple, almost featureless structures that were either “to an extreme degree undifferentiated in themselves and therefore [possessed] very low content of any kind, or else the differentiation they [did] exhibit...[came] not from the artist but from a nonartistic source, like nature or the factory.”¹ Put simply, art of this kind privileged generic form and industrial materiality at the cost of the traditional hallmark of an artwork's quality: the trace of the artist's hand. Balema centers her work around similar concerns, relinquishing her own touch in pursuit of materials, forms, and installation strategies with a “minimal art-content.”²

Take, for example, Balema's 2019 exhibition *brain damage* at Bridget Donahue in New York. From waist height up, there was nothing in the gallery. Instead, intricate networks of elastic bands were stretched tautly into grids that hovered above the ground or slumped in slack lines on the floor. Since the artwork consisted solely of the elastic's skeletal contours carving out space, instead of a substantive material body, the viewer's gaze was always filled more prominently with the typically overlooked interstitial areas of the gallery (especially the floor) than with the work itself. Consequently, this installation, like much of

Balema's output, produced a strange oscillation in the relationship between both figure and ground and art object and negative space—a gesture that simultaneously delineated the limits of sculpture while opening up its possibilities.

The wispy plastic forms in *Loon* elicited a similar feeling. These sculptures are rendered bare and stripped to their most basic parts. Each piece is almost easier to describe as what it is not, rather than what it is. This is in large part due to the material: The clear polycarbonate, like all transparent objects, can only be seen as a result of its interaction with the surrounding environment. Balema expertly accentuated this quality through her installation: The artworks were de-emphasized in the gallery, which almost appeared to be displaying its emptiness—the pedestals drew the eye more than any of the individual works. Each of the sculptures, too, seemed bent on denying its value. *Loop 70*, for example, leaned crumpled against its plinth as if it had fallen off and wasn't worth replacing, while *Loop 112* brought to mind the cellophane wrapper of a pack of cigarettes littered on the floor. Contributing to this paucity was the fungibility between every work, as each piece was made from the same set of materials and looked nearly identical to every other, save for variations in scale and shape.

And yet, something *does* delineate these sculptures, giving them form and allowing the viewer to identify them as distinct entities. Impressions of Balema's labor are evident in the shape of the plastic sheets, their heat-induced

discolorations, and scars from the solvent. These were seen most clearly in *Loop 92*, a collapsed mass perched atop a pedestal, whose numerous folds and wrinkles refracted the gallery lights to produce bright highlights that drew the eye, while a long dark trapezium streak and several burnt umber smudges stained the surface. The very thing that seemed initially to be lacking from the sculptures—the artist’s hand and effort—ultimately is the precondition for their recognition. What one then notices is not the collection of artwork itself, but the interruptions scarring each piece’s surface, the marks made by the artist’s action.

Lingering with the *Loops* reaped rewards as initial appearances began to dissolve and a more complex understanding took shape. By deflating their sense of material importance, the sculptures in *Loon* forego a simple encounter between object and viewer to instead bring into focus the artist’s labor. One is left not with a fully realized artwork separated from its making, but instead a strange specimen in which process and form are always bound together and simultaneously experienced. This, too, recalls minimalist works like Robert Morris’ *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961), a small wooden cube fitted with a speaker inside that plays a 3.5-hour recording of Morris fabricating the piece. But while process and duration are similarly highlighted here, they remain obfuscated by the pristine, opaque cube which appears as a standalone object. Balema instead leverages the qualities

of the material—here, the clarity of the polycarbonate—to produce a truly transparent artwork that harnesses its context to activate both the viewer and the environment, visualizing the actions and processes that brought them into being.

1. Richard Wollheim, “Minimal Art,” in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968), 387.

2. Wollheim, “Minimal Art,” 387.

Anthony Olubunmi Akinbola at Night Gallery

March 25–April 29, 2023

I still see durags in Anthony Olubunmi Akinbola’s work. Durags, of course, have been a prime medium for the artist. Heck, one writer even warily christened Akinbola “The Durag Guy.”¹ (For the record, he’s not.) Getting this interpolation out of the way: There were durags aplenty in Akinbola’s solo exhibition, *Sweet Tooth*, at Night Gallery. In the show, 12 artworks were replete with the material we’ve come to associate with Akinbola. But there was something else at play—a material involution, or shrinkage. In Akinbola’s recent work, including the pieces in this show, durags often appeared simply as strips of fabric; quilt-like assemblages offering up abstract patterns reminiscent of puzzles. These patterned tapestries show no clear mark of their original material form. Still...I see durags.

What happens when the durag is cut up, flattened and stripped of its signifying force? How does this affect our associations with the

material? Toni Morrison raised similar concerns, expressing pause toward painful stories that are simplified into “picture[s]” we tell others, running the risk of narratives getting “straightened out,” stretched in a way that makes the memories more “palatable to those who [are]... in a position to alleviate it.” The *it* here is the realities of Black life in the Americas. The *who* Morrison implies are the abolitionists who took up these slave autobiographical narratives as reason to end the enslavement of Black people. Morrison suggests that the downside of these “straightened” narratives is that the “emotional display” and depth of Black life gets forgotten—we make space for others at the expense of the “feelings that accompany the picture.”² I sensed a semblance of this flattened aesthetic in Akinbola’s manipulation of the durag in *Sweet Tooth*. The artist’s turn away from the overt use of his signature material is a move toward abstraction and color. I’m curious about this shift, which is to say, like Morrison, I wonder who this move is for. And, what feelings and memories within the durag are lost (or gained) in this otherwise straightened advance?

Across the exhibition, I felt a sense of Akinbola’s courage in works like *Jesus Forgive Me* and *I’m a Thot* (all works 2023). Both are monochromatic, as many of Akinbola’s previous works have been. But the Twitter-blue durags in *Jesus Forgive Me* exhibit a tailored finish. Gone are the trailing durag ties we have come to expect in Akinbola’s oeuvre. Instead, he went minimal, stitching

smaller strips of durags into a uniform, undulating grid. The same striped motif populates *I'm a Thot*, this time in shimmery white polyester. And although they are distinct works, in *Sweet Tooth*, Akinbola installed *Jesus Forgive Me* and *I'm a Thot* side-by-side, touching to form a rolling, 30-foot-wide landscape that venerated post-minimalist abstraction. Stripped of any material signifiers of the durag, one could argue that Akinbola resolutely dragged the headwraps from the beauty supply store to a fine arts realm.

Initially, the artist took up the durag as a type of camouflage, a material experiment in concealing what he saw as his “Africanness” for a “Black American” sensibility—he maintained that when wearing the durag, people would “assume [he is] a certain type of Black person based on what they’ve seen in movies or music videos.”³ At the same time, Akinbola identified the double-edged sword of this camouflage: the loss of identity. Wearing the durag opened him up to the “stereotypical threat” of criminalization.⁴ (Case in point: A charter school in Massachusetts banned durags, accusing the accessory of promoting the “school to prison pipeline” and “gang culture.”⁵) It seems Akinbola’s choice to reveal or conceal the material in his newer work points back to this double-edged reality. In previous bodies of work, notably *CAMOUFLAGE* (2016–present), intact durags were quilted together so that lineaments and visible tails identified them for the viewer. For example, in *CAMOUFLAGE #074 (Pink Panther)* (2021), Akinbola

flattened several Pink Oil-toned durags into a grid, tying each set of tails into a series of bows. But what happens when the camouflaged durag approaches abstraction that feels harmonious with painters like Sean Scully, Peter Halley, or Agnes Martin? That’s what’s at stake in *Sweet Tooth*.

To be fair, this tauter use of the durag was evident in older bodies of work. But in *Sweet Tooth*, Akinbola has stretched the material to an imperceptible level. *Rumspringa*, for instance, is a rainbow explosion of rectangular durag strips. Those unfamiliar with the durag might mistake the fabric for pantyhose. Discernment reveals that Akinbola has turned the durag inside out, exposing the center seam. Each durag strip is joined at this seam, producing puckered lines across the gridded canvas. Appearing as such, the durag can’t provide Akinbola with the aforementioned camouflage. In an interview in late 2022, Akinbola said that his work had “stopped becoming durags and it started becoming painting. It became more.”⁶ I’m taken by Akinbola’s formulation of becoming—how it repeats itself, changes tense, and abandons one organizing principle for another. Still, the durag iterates across motif, material, and identity.

I get the sense Akinbola is less concerned with the visual materializations of camouflage than what the process of *becoming* might resemble. The artist’s newfound interest in abstraction harkens to writer and art historian Darby English’s argument that abstraction “disrupts and expands our purview of ‘black culture’ precisely by breaking

it up, making it harder to survey.”⁷ I could see how Akinbola’s gradual disavowal of the durag speaks to this avoidance of surveillance. By breaking up the material, Blackness becomes illegible—expansive, even. If the durag is a kind of camouflage, abstraction is a disruptive means for Akinbola to break from those “stereotypical threats” and move toward a more ambiguous mode of image-making. Perhaps this is a different kind of camouflage that Akinbola is embracing—one that expansively welcomes any attendant feelings, whether they are artificially straightened out for the sake of palatability or displaying the vagaries of Black life.

1. Jesse Dorris, “Anthony Olubunmi Akinbola Wields Simple Yet Loaded Materials,” *Surface*, March 27, 2023, <https://www.surfacemag.com/articles/anthony-olubunmi-akinbola-durags-night-gallery>.

2. Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 83–102.

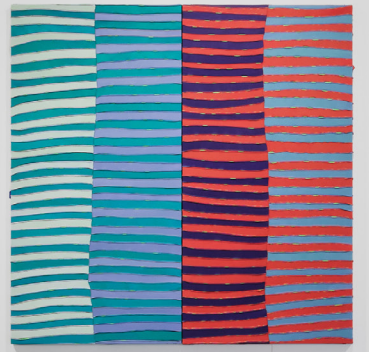
3. Akinbola adopted the durag given the “history and utility of the object,” as well as his personal relationship to the assimilationist agenda within the material. See Dorris, “Simple Yet Loaded Materials”; Folasade Ologundudu, “Anthony Akinbola’s Durag Paintings Ponder How Objects Become Status Symbols—Or Can Be Easily Fetishized,” *ARTnews*, December 13, 2022, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/anthony-akinbola-durag-paintings-interview-1234649721>.

4. Dorris, “Simple Yet Loaded Materials”; Brian Josephs, “Who Criminalized the Durag?” *GQ*, March 2, 2017, <https://www.gq.com/story/who-criminalized-the-durag>.

5. Gayla Cawley, “A Lynn charter school has banned do-rags, and students are fighting back,” *Itemlive*, March 7, 2018, <https://www.itemlive.com/2018/03/07/lynn-charter-school-banned-rags-students-fighting-back/>.

6. Ologundudu, “How Objects Become Status Symbols.”

7. Darby English, *1971: A Year in the Life of Color* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 30.





Anthony Olubunmi Akinbola, *Sweet Tooth*
(installation view) (2023). Image courtesy
of the artist and Night Gallery, Los Angeles.
Photo: Marten Elder.



Top: Paz G, *Secretos De Familia* (installation view) (2019). Ceramic and glaze. Craft Contemporary, Los Angeles, 2023. Image courtesy of the artist and Craft Contemporary, Los Angeles. Photo: Ian Byers-Gamber.

Bottom: Sam Shoemaker, *Sand Pump* (installation view) (2022). Craft Contemporary, Los Angeles, 2023. Image courtesy of the artist and Craft Contemporary, Los Angeles. Photo: Ian Byers-Gamber.

Wayfinding at Craft Contemporary

May 28–
September 10, 2023

Long, *long* before Peter Voulkos and other California-based artists exploded conventional understandings of clay, humans used the material to negotiate their coordinates in time and space. Ancient Egyptian mythology, for instance, held that the god Khnum fashioned human babies from clay before placing them in their mother's womb. This pattern appears in a multitude of creation stories: The first humans are fashioned from earth and water by a creator, maybe dried in the sun, and then animated with life. In Craft Contemporary's third clay biennial, aptly titled *Wayfinding*, contentious dialogues pitting art against craft are left behind in favor of more primal concerns: Here, clay is presented as a material point of connection between humans, ancestors, and land, tapping into existential questions around lineage and survival.

Installed across the museum's three floors, the works on view range from large-scale floor and wall-mounted installations to diminutive tabletop sculptures. Unlike the two previous clay biennials held at the museum, in this iteration, every participating artist lives and works in California, a curatorial choice underlining the show's focus on connection to place. And, while concern and care for the natural world are

undoubtedly present in the exhibition, what emerges is the assertion of clay as a powerful medium for reconsidering the human cosmological position. If the white male god complex of extractive colonial capitalism has led humanity astray from our terrestrial context, the works in *Wayfinding* suggest that perhaps, like the creators in our legends, we might mix earth and water to help rebuild connections to land and lineage in a process of co-creation, not dominance.

Many of *Wayfinding's* artists find significance in this centering of collaboration over control, either by using clay to channel spiritual and ancestral connections or engaging directly with other living organisms. The latter approach is most readily apparent in five medium-sized sculptures by artist and mycologist Sam Shoemaker. Within these ceramic structures, Shoemaker has expertly cultivated varieties of real-life reishi mushrooms (*Ganoderma lingzhi*) that grow upwards and outwards. *Tony Hawk Pro Skater* (2022), the most architectonic of the works, bears a strong resemblance to the stacked, softly-edged rectangles, staggered windows, and protruding supports of a Hopi adobe house. Glistening shoots of reishi grow from its "roof," "windows," and other orifices, prompting open-ended questions about authorship, coexistence, and unknown outcomes. It's hard to tell if Shoemaker, his ceramic structure, or the mushroom itself is most in control of the final composition.

One of *Wayfinding's* most captivating series is by Lizette

Hernández, comprising seven wall-mounted abstractions that are roughly symmetrical and hung side-by-side at eye level. Each work builds off of a flat slab construction, erupting into dimensional ruffles and folds that curl around their central flat planes of clay. Pressed by fingers in configurations shaped like rib cages, some are pierced to the wall with small steel nails in similar vertebral columns. Each has been Raku fired, a process with roots in ancient Japan; in the Western version of this method, works are removed from the kiln while still hot, surrounded by flammable, organic material like sawdust, and repeatedly starved of oxygen. The resulting surface effects are unpredictable, with colors ranging from deep blue to copper and gold, all speckled with metallic luminosity. The firing method gives each piece the feeling of being burnt, magical, and alive—making each feel like an indestructible relic of Earth itself. By relinquishing control of her creative process, Hernández engages not only with her material but with Earth's own natural "logic," a wild collaboration between artist and nature.

If Shoemaker and Hernández are in direct dialogue with the unpredictability of organic processes, a multitude of *Wayfinding's* artists use clay as a way of simultaneously speaking to—and with—land and ancestral inheritance. Paz G uses the surface of their vessels as emotionally charged sketchbooks. Bearing drawings, portraits, and handwritten text in English and Spanish, the works collectively memorialize the artist's ancestors and land of origin, Chile.

La Sangre Roja Del Copihue (2020), is a handbuilt matte black glazed form with three protruding handles that features a portrait of the artist's grandmother and the text "Maria Ines Jacques / El poder de intención," or "the power of intention." Playing with the idea of the container, this vessel serves to "carry" the memory of the artist's ancestor into the present. In this way, G invokes their grandmother as a collaborator in both the most specific and broadest senses: first as a person who literally created the conditions of the artist's existence, and secondly as a presence who is materially and spiritually integral to the work itself.

Wayfinding asserts clay as not only a relevant medium in contemporary art but perhaps the one best suited to addressing intersections of identity and ecology, themes that have emerged as increasingly vital cultural touchstones within contemporary art in recent years. The process of working with clay involves direct interaction with the elements of life—earth and water—and, as one of the most ancient modes of expression, it is already in implicit dialogue with humankind's origins. Alternately dismissed throughout Western art history as utilitarian, decorative, "too earthy," or simply not of-the-moment, clay seems to have been right here waiting for an audience ready to talk—without any coyness or sheen of irony—about human belonging on Earth as a process of co-creation among the land, the living, and the lives before us. What feels most exciting is the suggestion that we *cannot* talk about clay

without talking about the very stuff of life: earth and water, yes, but also our origins, myths, memories, and the ongoing collaborative process of survival.

Chase Biado at The Pit Los Angeles

April 22–May 27, 2023

In *Liquid Night*, Chase Biado's first solo exhibition at The Pit Los Angeles, the L.A.-based artist opens a portal into the underworld of the everyday. By infusing his paintings with mythological elements and nonhuman creatures such as golems, demons, and fairies, Biado engages in "play-logic,"¹ a term that Biado and collaborator Antonia Pinter use to describe the hybridization of fantasy and reality in their project *A History of Frogs* (AHOF). While it might be easy to assume this approach is a form of escapism, Biado employs play-logic to do the exact opposite. By playfully ushering his work into the realm of fantasy—or "arresting strangeness,"² as J.R.R. Tolkien described it—he nudges his viewers to expand their assumptions about their everyday experiences, making room for other ways of being.

Surprisingly, the more that Biado augments his scenes with elements of the fantastic, the more the worlds of his subjects seem to resonate with our own. Though the ears of his figures are long, pointy, and distinctly elven, for instance, there's always a sense of familiarity in their postures, which register emotions like pain, loneliness, and awe. Gazing into an elf's sparse, moonlit living room

in *An Ant in the Valves of a Seashell* (all works 2023), for instance, I felt close to the figure curled in a ball at its center, not distant. Not unlike the flora in my own home, an under-watered monstera wilts in one corner of the room, while palm trees shiver just outside the arched window. With the small Pierrot clown perched in the center of the carpet and the ominous shadow lingering in the doorway, it's clear this is a non-human realm. And yet the moody, beet-toned scene still feels like a polaroid of an L.A. bungalow. In this way, although Biado's work employs play-logic to explore the farthest reaches of imaginary, alternative worlds, walking through *Liquid Night*, I felt perfectly at home.

Color also plays an important role in heightening the mythological worlds imagined within Biado's elaborate *mise en scènes*. Each work is richly saturated and almost invariably monochromatic, with colors like moss green, midnight blue, and blood red drenching each painting from top to bottom. Like a filmmaker who uses color to reinforce a feeling or idea, Biado transmutes emotions like shame, aimlessness, and fear into scarlet, indigo, and emerald, drawing his viewers into the complex interior states of his figures.

The background of *Wrote Nothing*, for example, is painted almost exclusively using an ominously dark blue. The nude figure in the foreground, whose eyes are gently shut in contemplation, appears absorbed into the wall behind it—a powerful visual representation of the way emotions can warp our experience of time and



Chase Biado, *Little Hope* (detail) (2023).
Oil on canvas, 60 × 48 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and The Pit.
Photo: Ed Mumford.



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Lauren Halsey, *the eastside of south central los angeles hieroglyph prototype architecture (I)* (installation views) (2022).
 The Roof Garden Commission at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, 2023. © Lauren Halsey. Images courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles/New York.
 Photos: Hyla Skopitz/The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

space. With their insistence on monochromatic palettes, Biado's paintings act as portals into psychological states of being that are otherwise often unseen.

In *Little Hope*, another nude elven figure, this time with merlot skin, sits on the edge of a brick wall. Beside the elf rests an empty green bottle and a tiny clown who frowns and slouches. Accentuated by a melancholic red sky above, the entire painting is drunk with sadness—the hills beyond barren, the flowers wilting—and all of it weighs on the elf's arched shoulders. The figure's listlessness is tangible. While there are many ways to visualize melancholy, Biado's dramatic use of color and fantasy open a door for the viewer to fully empathize with the figures in his work. Especially because the appearance of these fictional figures transcends signifiers like race, class and, in most cases, gender, the magical realm of Biado's paintings represents a universal entry point into the expanse of human emotion.

In *The Right Now That's Ever Changing*, a plain elven figure seems trapped in the lonely glow of a ceiling light, an island in the otherwise pale subway corridor—their arms are locked at their side, their eyes blank. Though there are two other figures in the painting, Biado captures the precise feeling of being utterly alone. Of course, light blue isn't exclusively the color of loneliness, but Biado's specific use of a cold, lifeless blue accented by an almost-garish neon green sharpens the figure's apparent aimlessness. As these emotional cues resonate, the strangeness of Biado's

fantasies dissolves and the distance between his figures and myself closes. I am absorbed by his work.

Even while many of the paintings in *Liquid Night* pressed into the extremes of the emotional register—dejection, despair—others investigated the quiet moments that fill the rest of our lives. The woman-elf in *Night Red* hovers in the doorway of a candy-red bathroom, clutching her towel to her breast. The crimson walls and her startled posture suggest fear, rather than melancholy. Her eyes smolder milky white as she gazes out toward the viewer—and, it seems, she notices you noticing her, as if you were the apparition, not her. On the surface, there is nothing sublime or otherworldly about this moment, and yet, Biado has represented the unsettling feeling of being alone in an empty house.

This is the magic of Chase Biado's work: not, per se, his imaginative holograms of strangely familiar realms but the fruit of his explorations into the often uncomfortable depths of the mind. For Biado, dramatic, mythological symbolism and play-logic are means to a distinctive end, tools he uses to mine the ups and downs of the human experience, however mundane those moments can seem.

1. Antonia Pinter and Chase Biado, "A History of Frogs," accessed June 11, 2023, <https://a-history-of-frogs.com/>.

2. J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," Andrew Lang Lecture, University of St. Andrews, Scotland, March 8, 1939. Published in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, ed. C.S. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947).

(L.A. in N.Y.) Lauren Halsey at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

April 18–October 22, 2023

Oral histories of African greatness enveloped my upbringing like a saving grace. I fondly recall elders' stories of triumphant West African kingdoms and Egyptian dynasties that, in childhood, sounded like supernatural folktales. As an adult bearing the scars of an anti-Black world, I now know that my elders were gifting me with an antidote to the dehumanization I'd surely face—a blueprint for spiritual survival. On the rooftop of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, surrounded by the familiar ethos of pro-Black language and symbolism, I find a similar celebration of Blackness in Lauren Halsey's *the eastside of south central los angeles hieroglyph prototype architecture (I)* (2022)—a sculptural "biomythography" (to borrow a term coined by Audre Lorde) where mythology, history, and biography coalesce in an eclectic monument to Black cultural heritage.¹

Created for The Met's annual Roof Garden Commission, Halsey's installation is rooted in Afrocentric family lore. The South Central native remembers her father—an avid student of pharaonic history—likening family members to Egyptian royalty.² This insistence on noble bloodlines lives on in Halsey's work, which actively centers the Black

community, both aesthetically and materially. In 2018, her ambitious Hammer Museum installation *The Crenshaw District Hieroglyph Project (Prototype Architecture)* utilized architecture as a means of community-building, reinterpreting Egyptian hieroglyphics and motifs in a sculptural tribute to Black Los Angeles. Her Summaeverythang Community Center, which launched at the height of the 2020 pandemic, has built upon the groundwork laid by the Hammer installation, responding to accelerating crises of gentrification and economic hardship by providing free organic produce to South Central households. An extension of these community-driven efforts, *the eastside of south central* blends Halsey's interest in liberatory architecture, Egyptian hieroglyphics, funk music, and Afrofuturism in an effort that nurtures Black political imagination.

The installation (which Halsey intends to house permanently in South Central following its Met installation³) draws inspiration from the Temple of Dendur, a 2,000-year-old Egyptian structure erected primarily to honor Isis, the goddess of healing and magic, now housed in The Met.⁴ The temple's sacred air is reawakened in Halsey's monument, which deifies loved ones and Black aesthetics alike. Seated atop a 2,500-square-foot tile floor, the 22-foot-tall cubic structure of fiberglass-reinforced concrete tiles is a profoundly interactive work meant to facilitate deep witnessing. With large cutouts at two of its corners, the architectural piece

invites visitors to walk freely in, out, and around the structure, the surfaces of which bear a total of 750 engravings that were carved at Halsey's South Central studio. From each corner of the edifice's four corners sprouts a freestanding column topped with carved portraits of Halsey's loved ones. A nod to Egypt's Dendera Temple to Hathor, Halsey's columns feature her cousins Damien Goodmon and Diani, her friend Barrington, and her L.A.-based artistic hero, Pasacio. Encircling the remixed pharaonic temple are four enormous sphinxes bearing the faces of more loved ones: Halsey's brother Dominic, her cousin Aujane, her mother Glenda, and her life partner Monique McWilliams, each of whom were instrumental in conceptualizing the installation.

An explosive collage of Egyptian regalia, South Central imagery, and futuristic visions, the installation's engravings are at once mythological and biographical, carving a space where fact and lore seamlessly coexist. Engravings of storefront signage from local Black businesses advertising hairstyles like braids, locs, and finger waves invoke the cool buzz of Crenshaw Boulevard alongside stylized Egyptian hieroglyphs—the concurrence of the two drawing connections between Black styles and typographies across time. A wall covered with timely political proposals reading “REPARATIONS NOW!” and “In Memory of Our Ancestors” mirrors another bearing Egyptian ankhs, symbols of eternal life. Interspersed throughout these historical and contemporary references, spirited depictions

of flying saucers, hovering pyramids, and superhuman figures invoke an Afrofuturistic lens, imagining a liberated Black future. This lively concert of atemporal symbolism collapses linear time, suggesting the interconnectedness of ancient mythologies, present struggles, and futuristic yearnings.

On the surface, *the eastside of south central* is striking by virtue of its aesthetic intricacy, its staggering silhouette, and its use of bold typefaces that are visible from Central Park below. But the installation's richer messages are subtle and energetic, speaking directly to Black viewers on what Ralph Ellison called “lower frequencies.”⁵ Using emphatically Black vernacular and symbolism as a unifying code, Halsey works to awaken feelings of pride and connection within Black viewers, specifically. These images do not merely represent Black life; rather, they are conduits of ancestral resonance, activating deep connections to shared cultural memory.

The parallels between my upbringing and Halsey's are far from coincidental. They reflect something unique about the fabric of the Black experience, a connection that *the eastside of south central* brings to the fore. Neither historically rigid nor revisionist, the exhibition inhabits the generative space *between* fact and folklore, excavating new ways to understand our cultural inheritances, and remaking our sense of time and memory in the process. Through her iconography of Black mythos, Halsey exalts the curative effects of biomythography, speaking directly to those of us who

know the life-sustaining nature of these ancestral stories. The installation's greatest feat, therefore, is not its magnitude nor its institutional prestige. Instead, it is its ability to create life in the face of so much death, to unearth pride impervious to denigration—a subversive symphony of cultural affirmations hidden in plain sight.

1. Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name: A Biomythography* (Watertown, MA: Persephone, 1982).

2. Michael Slenske, "Lauren Halsey's Monumental Moment," *W Magazine*, March 30, 2023, <https://www.wmagazine.com/culture/lauren-halsey-artist-met-museum-rooftop-installation>.

3. Slenske, "Lauren Halsey's Monumental Moment."

4. Holland Cotter, "Met's Beloved Roof Garden Draws on Ancient Egypt and South Central L.A.," *The New York Times*, April 16, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/16/arts/design/lauren-halsey-met-roof-garden-monument.html>.

5. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage International, 1995), 581.

(L.A. in London) Francesca Gabbiani at Cedric Bardawil April 6–May 20, 2023

Reddit tells me that you're only a true Los Angeles resident when you've seen seven "totems," and once you've collected them all, you can never leave the city. These notable (yet ubiquitous) sights include rollerbladers in booty shorts, a dog in a stroller, and a palm tree on fire.¹ Francesca Gabbiani's current preoccupation is this latter totem—the burning palm—a symbol that was abundant in her first solo U.K. exhibition *Hot Panoramas* at Cedric Bardawil this spring. Influenced by the climate

crises and subsequent increase of wildfires in Southern California, Gabbiani's idiosyncratic collaged paper scenes are apocalyptic. Her burning trees illuminate blackened skies, ocean shorelines glow with alluring yet dangerous phosphorescence, and abandoned swimming pools are cloaked in ash, now home only to plants that thrive in arid conditions. Though Gabbiani wields a knife when assembling these intricate compositions, her touch feels passive and dampened, much like humanity's reaction to the oncoming environmental collapse.

Hot Panoramas included 11 framed works, ranging in scale (the largest was just over 5' x 6') and organized neatly around the modest gallery space. Many were from Gabbiani's ongoing *Hot Panoramas* (2002–present) and *Mutation* (2018–present) series, which depict palm trees aflame, their charred fronds made from hundreds of minuscule slivers of paper, disintegrating like fireworks or shattered glass. *Hot Panorama (Small)* (2023) presents seven tall palms ablaze as licks of white-hot fire blow westwards into a hazy pink and gray sky. The viewer is positioned below, looking upwards at the trees towering above. Emulating a perspective that has become a ubiquitous symbol for Los Angeles in movies like *Clueless* (1995) and TV shows like *Selling Sunset* (2019–present), Gabbiani adds menace to a familiar scene. Two artists that have been influential to Gabbiani, John Baldessari, her former professor at UCLA in the mid-'90s, and Ed Ruscha, her father-in-law,

also favored this perspective—both rendered palm trees and Southern California paradigms in their works. In *Kissing Series: Simone. Palm Trees (Near)* (1975), Baldessari plays with perspective to make it appear as if a figure is kissing a tall palm tree in the distance, and in Ruscha's *Burning Gas Station* (1966–69), tendrils of flames diagonally stretch westward. Both artists use a low-angle viewpoint alongside ubiquitous L.A. iconography to suggest ominous implications. Like Ruscha and Baldessari's trade in banal imagery of gas stations and street scenes, so too are Gabbiani's apocalyptic subjects becoming woefully omnipresent.

In contrast to the peroxide yellows, warm ochres, and crimsons used in the *Mutation* series, other works in the exhibition portrayed the cool azure shades of a nighttime beach scene. *Phosfluorescence V* (2023) (the title a portmanteau of phosphorescence and fluorescence) illustrates the crest of a wave replete with otherworldly bioluminescent hues. Blotchy blooms of paint appear illuminated by a radiant low-set moon. An effect caused by naturally occurring glowing plankton, bioluminescent waves are at once a dream and a nightmare—the warming and acidification of our oceans, combined with agricultural runoff, is exacerbating the phenomenon. The enticing aesthetics of bioluminescence, much like Gabbiani's interpretation of it, masks its horrifying undertones—algal overgrowth, for instance, depletes the ocean's oxygen and can lead to large-scale die-offs of fish populations. The ocean

is an integral part of Gabbiani's L.A. experience, and with its rising sea levels and bleaching corals, it is far from immune to the effects of a warming planet. In the exhibition, the ocean acts as a cool visual tonic to the blazing works from the *Mutation* series. As Gabbiani's friend, writer Dana Goodyear, asserted in a joint interview published by *Cultured*, "fire is resolved in the ocean."² The two elements are fundamentally connected and mutually destructive; water extinguishes fire and fire boils water away to nothing.

Gabbiani was compelled to start making the fire pieces after experiencing destructive wildfires near her home in Los Angeles. Cutting and pasting like a teenage zine-maker, Gabbiani works through her personal experience as if trying to make sense of it. And though her landscapes approach sinister themes, the papercuts have a delicate simplicity to them. Unlike the super-flat paper constructions of Thomas Demand, her collages are textural and complicated. Layers peel and curl, creating shadow and texture, and at the edges of the paper, touches of the artist's hand, like light pencil borders and pinholes, are left visible. It's easy to be seduced by the construction of these works. Encountered on a gray day in the U.K., the kaleidoscopic façade of L.A. feels a million miles away, just as our critical climate emergency does for far too many. It's all too easy to ignore, and to carry on as usual.

To return to the seven totems requisite for L.A. identity, the vision of a burning

palm tree has become an indicator of belonging or inclusion for Angelenos. And yet, many palm trees across the city are expected to die in the coming years, marking a dramatic shift in the city's classic iconography.³ In *Hot Panoramas*, Gabbiani utilizes an idealized L.A. trope to point to urgent ecological implications. However, her painstaking process and aesthetically pleasing imagery belie the grimness of the catastrophe that is climate change, mirroring the way that many of us continue to hold climate emergency at arm's length, ignoring an imminent threat in favor of pursuing beauty in the everyday.

1. (@templenameis_beyonce), "The Seven Totems of LA," 2019, r/LosAngeles, Reddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/LosAngeles/comments/ejj3y6/the_seven_totems_of_la/.

2. Rose Leadem, "Francesca Gabbiani and Dana Goodyear on Fire, Water and How Los Angeles Binds Them," *Cultured*, July 1, 2021, <https://www.culturedmag.com/article/2021/06/30/francesca-gabbiani-and-dana-goodyear-on-fire-water-and-how-los-angeles-binds-them>.

3. Lauren Toussaint, "LA's palm trees are dying and they won't be replaced," October 2, 2017, *New York Post*, <https://nypost.com/2017/10/02/las-palm-trees-are-dying-and-they-wont-be-replaced/>.



Top: Francesca Gabbiani, *Mutation XLIV* (detail) (2023). Ink, gouache, acrylic, and cut paper on paper, 35 x 40.25 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Cedric Bardawil. Photo: Daniel Browne.

Bottom: Francesca Gabbiani, *Hot Panoramas* (installation view) (2023). Image courtesy of the artist and Cedric Bardawil. Photo: Daniel Browne.

Photo Essay Contributor and Featured Artists

Paloma Dooley (b. 1993, New York, NY) lives and works in Los Angeles, where she shoots exhibition and documentary photography for artists, galleries, and museums. She earned a BA in Photography from Bard College in 2015 and completed a month-long residency at the Vermont Studio Center in 2016. Her work has been included in publications and shows at home and abroad.

iris yirei hu is a journey-based artist and educator who paints, weaves, dyes, writes, and composts her lived reality into installations, public artworks, poetry, and intercultural, generational, and geographical collaborations. Her work is driven by an investigation of both material and spiritual transformation, and is grounded by a rigorous attunement to place and its historic, economic, and ecological entanglements. She explores the fluidity and expansiveness of how we can live.

Paige Emery is an artist, gardener, and herbalist exploring ways of remembering the Earth through working with plants. Her interdisciplinary practice interweaves critical ecology and healing rituals through various mediums. Most recently, she has extended her herbalism practice into painting—she makes paint from the pigment of dried blue flowers and oils infused with plants from her garden and paints with the process of plant rituals. In this embodied way, the essences and memories of plants are interwoven throughout her work.

Gerald Clarke is an enrolled citizen of the Cahuilla Band of Indians and lives in the home his grandfather built on the Cahuilla Indian Reservation, where he oversees the Clarke family cattle ranch. He is currently a Professor of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Riverside where he teaches classes in Native American art, history, and culture.

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Donasia Tillery is an interdisciplinary artist, writer, and cultural worker whose work centers art as a mode of radical honesty, individual healing, and collective liberation. She earned her BA in Philosophy from Lehigh University and her MA in Africana Studies from New York University, and she is a recipient of MOZAIK Philanthropy's Future Art Writers Award (2022). Her writing has been featured in *Artillery*, *Curate LA*, and *Spinelli Kilcollin Journal*.

Rosa Tyhurst lives and works in the U.K. and is a curator at Gasworks, London. She has previously held curatorial and research positions at Nottingham Contemporary, Spike Island, KADIST, and the de Young Museum. Her writing has been published in *Art Monthly*, *Hyperallergic*, and elsewhere.



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