Notes on the 2025 MFA Exhibition

Photograph by Nicholas Lea Bruno.

VOLUME 10

By
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"The idea of a 'thesis' evokes a certain kind of finality, at least in terms of defending one's own specific argument and methodology. But in my own experience, and as my peers in this show demonstrate, our arguments are never conclusive; rather, they shift, rupture, and reconstitute [...]. If there is a shared thesis to be found, it is these artists' collective commitment to vulnerability, experimentation, the labor of world-building under uncertain conditions, and to each other."

As part of California College of the Arts' annual spring rituals celebrating the work of graduating students, the MFA class of 2025 opened their thesis exhibition on May 1st, on view until May 16th, 2025. Split up across the Novack Gallery, the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art, and the second-floor courtyard, the show features twenty artists working across painting, sculpture, photography, installation, textile, video, and performance. These artists include: Gabrielle Anderman, Amanda Bristow, Isaiah Brownstein, Chloe Cortez, Leyla Dualeh, Nasib Elahimehr, J-P Herdeg, Angela Jin, Chloe King, Nagi Lee, Rosemary McDermott, Marilyn Montúfar, Molly Rapp, Jonah Reenders, Yelyzaveta Rudenok, Zedekiah Gonsalves Schild, Elaine Sheen, Ashley Spencer, Badri Valian, and Krista Wright, with the opening reception featuring notable performances by Valian and Rudenok, respectively. Taken altogether, the works reflect a range of material strategies, critical engagements, and conceptual investments as filtered through two years in graduate school.

As an MA student in the parallel yet fairly isolated Visual and Critical Studies program, graduating alongside this cohort, my relationship to the show is slightly closer than to other exhibitions on campus. For the last two years, I've moved in close proximity to many of these artists, one of the reasons I chose to attend an art school. Some of them in a number of classroom discussions, others in passing, at events, or in the silent camaraderie of navigating this sometimes silly school—without necessarily getting a chance to know most of them as well as I maybe should.

Still, I feel a sense of identification, recognition, and quiet admiration. I sometimes think this is just one instance of the "art world" as it begins: in critique, on borrowed time (and money), over wine in plastic cups, and under fluorescent track lights. Watching these practices emerge and cohere—or in some cases, resist coherence—is both familiar and instructive. There's a bittersweetness in the awareness that these are my peers, colleagues, certainly my future collaborators, and in the reminder of the structural, aesthetic, and personal negotiations we've all signed up for in order to participate in the ambitious world of contemporary art.

Though the show presents wide-ranging and diverse artistic approaches, as Fine Arts faculty Glen Helfand states in the show's official press release, there are a number of shared themes and artistic concerns that connect this group, including but not limited to, "community, contemporary life, social media, emotional perspectives, ecological concerns, political reverberations, and exuberant queer theatricality."

Queer theatricality—and perhaps even queer animality—certainly comes through in works like Chloe King's, whose maximalist acrylic and airbrush painting on unstretched canvas, *Dancing Myself Clean* (2025) hangs in the Novack. In this technicolor work, King, who describes their practice as drawing from "histories of photography, film, and Black science fiction," conjures an alternative realm that exists somewhere between the setting of an '80s horror movie and the coolest club you've ever been to.

Draped over a steel rod and secured with a steel chain, the piece features a color-changing ultraviolet bulb that subtly alters one's perceptive experience. Bursting with furry, shimmery, smoky, and sweaty textures, the figures King evokes—half-human, half creature—morph in and out of recognition, their bodies blurred, distorted, unknowable. Being familiar with their broader practice, including as a dual degree Visual and Critical Studies student, there's a campy sincerity that King wields generously, a refusal to distinguish one part of oneself from another.

This kind of exuberance also emanates from Krista Wright's "sculptural performance," which appears reminiscent of the practical backdrop of a theater or film set. A practicing drag performer, Wright paints life-size versions of nine of their collaborators on wood, clad in

Krista Wright talking about their "sculptural performance," *Animal Farm – History Repeating* (2025) on the second floor courtyard. Photograph by Nicholas Lea Bruno.

bright colored costumes, makeup, and masks for *Animal Farm 2 – History Repeating* (2025), who announce their presence boisterously in the outdoor courtyard.

With exaggerated gestures and expressions, the ensemble suggests a kind of chaotic utopia, one where queer folks are liberated from normative constraints and allowed to be hilarious, messy, sexy, strange, and non-human all at once. In this way, Wright's Orwellian reference feels both literal and playful, as they use the logic of parody and collective performance to stage what could be read as a carnivalesque critique of capitalist power.

While some artists' works gesture outward, others turn inward, centering the body as a site of inquiry: an archive, a laboring mechanism, a political subject in flux and in formation. Chloe Cortez's nude self-portraits, *La Llorona*, *Como la Flor*, and *Volver Volver* (all works 2025), titled after songs by Mexican/Mexican-American artists, feel like intimate explorations of race, gender, desire, and melancholia. Inserting herself into pop-cultural references, Cortez—who also comes across as knowledgeable in art history—both personalizes and complicates how identity is constructed and mythologized.

One of the most interesting installation choices in the show, Cortez transforms the corner of the Wattis into an immersive space with deep rose-red walls, a floor stamped with symbols from Mexican-American tattoo culture. Between the shot glasses, faux limes, salt, and interactive CD players corresponding to each painting, there's a kitschy edge to the work, but it feels referential, lived-in, and precise.

Like Cortez, Amanda Bristow also uses self-portraiture as a means of embodied reflection. In works like *The View from Potrero Hill* (2024), Bristow paints herself as a human giant, her signature hot-pink hair emerging from the Bay, staring out over the neighborhood's train tracks and apartment blocks. Capturing allusions to both the area's long industrial history and its current gentrification, Bristow's figure appears almost out of place as it both dominates and becomes overwhelmed by the space she inhabits, evoking a tension between belonging and alienation.

Bristow also presents work from a new series in progress: individual paintings of her close friends and fellow cohort

Marilyn Montúfar's multi-part textile installation, Deborah and Kenneth Novack Gallery.
Photograph by Nicholas Lea Bruno.

members, Cortez, Nasib Elahimehr, Marilyn Montúfar, and Elaine Sheen, smiling and surrounded by elements of their own artwork. In an endearing contrast, these portraits soften the feeling of solitude of Bristow's earlier works, reflecting the support that emerges through building a creative and caring community.

Nearby, Zedekiah Gonsalves Schild meditates on questions of labor, disability, and their ecological entanglements, re-contextualizing a found chair—embellished with "bodily annotations and redactions" in the form of monotype relief prints—into a wheelchair. Below, a video component, featuring the image of a moving wheel superimposed onto footage of bodies of water and twitching insects, completes the transformation.

The work's title, *We Have Nothing To Bargain With But Our Bodies* (2025), speaks to the cruel intimacy between survival and depletion, where to remain in motion—productive, visible, intelligible—is also to submit to the slow violences of debilitation and demand.

In drawing connections between bodily exhaustion and ecological collapse (re-appearing in other works in this presentation), Gonsalves Schild blurs the boundaries between flesh and landscape, suggesting that both are rendered vulnerable by the same extractive logics, made to bear the weight of contamination, or accumulation without repair.

Several other artists in the show hone in on social and political issues by tending to archives and questions of

collective memory; for instance, Marilyn Montúfar's multi-part textile installation excavates underrepresented episodes of Mexican-American history in California: the state-led deportations during the Mexican Repatriation of the 1930s, the Zoot Suit Riots of the '40s, and the arrests of Brown Beret members in the '60s.

Transferring archival images onto hand-dyed textiles and kiln-glass, Montúfar not only lifts these moments and faces out of institutional neglect, but encapsulates them in forms that require slower and more tactile engagement. Natural pigments made from cochineal, oak gall, and marigold infuse the works with an earthy residue, as substances with their own histories of extraction, labor, trade, and protection.

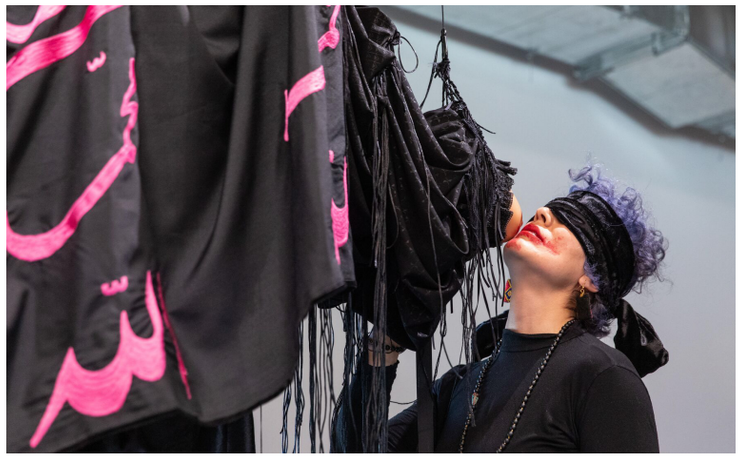
Leylah Dualeh showing their work to a young visitor, Novack Gallery. Photograph by Nicholas Lea Bruno.

Montúfar, who came to CCA as a seasoned photographer and arts educator, honed in on her interest in textiles and dyeing processes during her time in the program. What began as a formal curiosity has since expanded to collaborations outside of the school, carrying this research-based and community-driven ethos with her.

Arguably, the most emotionally haunting and spellbinding works in the show are Ashley Spencer's multimedia installations, including works like *"I will catch you,"* and *Heavy is the Head* (both 2025), demonstrating a resonant engagement with theories of Black hauntology. Made primarily from hand-braided hair, hand-glazed ceramics, sticks, and "magic," among other materials, Spencer's labor-intensive works carry the weight of ancestral memory, as each talismanic object seems to whisper from beyond time. Their tactile presence—equal parts fragile and monumental—feel imbued with a spiritual logic, beckoning viewers into a space where past, present, and future coalesce.

Down the hallway in the Wattis, Badri Valian presents her recent sculpture *The Prophet* (2025). The work is made from black fabric used for hijabs—sourced from the artist's home country of Iran, where a controversial law requires its mandatory use—paradoxically powered by several vibrators, and culminating in a singular exposed breast. Activating the work on opening night, she engaged in a bold and visually arresting performance that evoked commentary on women's sexual freedom, state control, and religious symbolism. As I am—necessarily so—vigilant of the ways diasporic critique can become flattened or co-opted by Western liberal frameworks, I did find myself wondering: who is this provocation for? What kind of spectatorship does it solicit?

And still, that line of questioning may be part of Valian's point, as she navigates the complex terrain of global arts ecosystems, where personal, political, and cultural narratives are often translated for institutional legibility. Rather than offer a neatly packaged critique or easy resolutions, her performance seems to court the discomfort of its own reception, reminding us that the act of looking is implicational, especially when bodies and beliefs are so unevenly read across geopolitical lines. Whether it succeeds in fully resisting the gaze it risks attracting is uncertain, but perhaps that ambiguity is the most honest place for the work to live.



Badri Valian activating *The Prophet* (2025) at the opening night reception on May 1st, Wattis Institute. Photograph by Nicholas Lea Bruno.

Perhaps my only real gripes with the show are logistical: my lack of time and space to write about more artists (immediately, Dualeh, Elahimehr, Rudenok, and Andermann's work all comes to the front of my mind) and the lack of publicly available artist statements accompanying the works, except for a couple of artists who added QR codes to their labels. In contrast to last year, this show did not feature a catalogue essay or curatorial statement (though there was a press release announcing and describing the show). While I am unsure to what extent these choices were made by the students themselves, faculty, or the college, or if the work is all supposed to "speak for itself," as folks say, for me, this always feels like a missed opportunity for more critical and unequivocal understanding.

Yelyzaveta Rudenok activating her own works at the opening night reception, Wattis Institute.
Photograph by Nicholas Lea Bruno.

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Moment from opening night reception, Wattis Institute. Photograph by Nicholas Lea Bruno.

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