

Soft Wild Reckonings at the Wattis: The Politics of Land and Memory



By
Vanessa Perez Winder

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The reopening of California College of the Arts' (CCA) Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art has been one of the most eagerly anticipated events of the semester. For months, students, faculty, staff, and even the broader public have been anxious to see what the new space and its newly appointed Director, Daisy Nam, will offer our community.

Originally founded on CCA's campus, the Wattis relocated off-site to a space blocks away from the college's main building. It has now returned as an integral part of the newly expanded campus at 145 Hooper, finding itself in good company. Sitting across the courtyard from the new Novack teaching gallery, the Wattis is flanked by gardens, classrooms, maker spaces, MFA studios, and the Graduate Humanities homeroom. Amidst recent news that CCA faces a twenty-million-dollar deficit, the Wattis' new home feels representative of the school's push to unify its student body, elevate its public profile, and present a more financially sustainable future to its patrons.

As part of CCA's celebration of the campus expansion, which took place on the evening of October 19th, the Wattis opened its inaugural exhibition under Nam's leadership, titled *All This Soft Wild Buzzing*. Curated by Deputy Director Jeanne Gerrity and organized by Curatorial Assistant Diego Villalobos, the show is positioned as an "antidote" to capitalist and territorial representations of Western American landscapes that were popularized in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.



Saif Azzuz, *Homesteaders [cattle colonizer]* (2024). Installation view, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art. Photograph by Nicholas Lea Bruno.



Teresa Baker, *Abundant* (2024). Installation view, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art. Photograph by Nicholas Lea Bruno.

It features 17 works and a diverse grouping of nine artists, all of whom either live or have formerly lived in Northern California: Saif Azzuz, Teresa Baker, Christopher Robin Duncan, Nicki Green, Bessma Khalaf, Dionne Lee, Young Suh, Stephanie Syjuco, and Zekarias Musele Thompson. In the spirit of the Wattis' dedication to interdisciplinary research, the opening reception also included an entrancing spatial and sonic composition performed by Thompson on saxophone, seeming to respond intuitively to all the works in the show.

Upon walking into the space, viewers are greeted by a newly commissioned, wooden assemblage by Saif Azzuz. In *Separate and define* (2024), Azzuz, a Libyan and Yurok artist, invokes a number of symbols that have nourished his interdisciplinary practice over the years. Paintings and wood carvings depicting California wildlife, and repetitive geometric Yurok patterns are paired alongside emblematic, found references to American colonialism in the West. Making subtle allusions to a free Palestine, on-going struggles for land sovereignty, and interspecies relationships, Azzuz looks not only to a colonial past, but also to the potential of liberated Indigenous futures.

The legacy wrought by American cattle ranching and the overarching industry also appears as a central focus in Azzuz's work. *Separate and define* takes on the form of a fence, incorporating barbed wire—a material invented for agricultural control in the 19th century, now more synonymous with carceral and gentrifying applications. Outside, Azzuz also debuts *Homesteaders [cattle colonizer]* (2024), a stunning, towering halo of steel chain

and affixed cowbells. Together, these works—some of the strongest in the show—confront viewers with the residual impact of settler practices, linking historical extraction with contemporary forms of enclosure and dispossession.

Nearby in the gallery, Teresa Baker's work offers a quieter, but no less incisive counterpoint. Using natural and synthetic materials on AstroTurf, Baker creates abstract compositions that reference the landscape without replicating it. Drawing upon symbols and knowledge from her Mandan/Hidatsa heritage, Baker instead suggests a landscape textured by memory rather than ownership. Outside, near the gardens, Baker's *Abundant* (2024) recasts the woven basket in bronze, subverting the aesthetics of the commemorative monument to honor the lasting power of intergenerational knowledge over the fetish of dominance.

Inside, prints from Bessma Khalaf's *Burnout* series (2019-2022) line the gallery's singular hallway, transforming it into a liminal passage between the two rooms. In this series, Khalaf burns iconic photographs of the American West by Ansel Adams found in magazines and books, allowing the flames to scar parts of the image and distort their idealized visions before rephotographing them. In dialogue with other works in the show, Khalaf's prints evoke the destructive force of forest fires and the regenerative intent of controlled burns.



Bessma Khalaf, *Burnout [Mt. Shasta]* (2023). Installation view, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art. Photograph by Nicholas Lea Bruno.

At the very end of the second gallery is Dionne Lee's multi-channel video installation. Projected on three screens that wrap around in a semicircle, viewers are offered a moment of tranquil respite. A little over twenty minutes long, *Site Unfolding* (2023) recounts Lee's time spent in the Southwest. Instead of capturing broad, sweeping vistas, she focuses instead on the land's intimate and haunting details—scratches in the earth, shadows cast across rock. These images are paired alongside visual and literary references to the National Park System, asking us to consider what unpreserved and



Dionne Lee, *Site Unfolding* (2023). Installation view, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art. Photograph by Nicholas Lea Bruno.

scattered histories are embedded within our nation's contested and racialized geographies.

In its entirety, the show presents a selection of works and features artists of high technical and conceptual caliber (including several who have deservedly garnered increased attention in recent months) and builds upon a slightly more insular art history, successfully maintaining the Wattis' elevated 'art world' appeal. Notably, of the nine artists in the show, five are undergraduate and graduate alumni, representing both CCA's investment in its network of talent, as well as a testament to its continued influence.

The exhibition is also relatively self-aware, choosing to hone in on critical dialogue and what artists have already long been thinking, feeling, and researching, rather than setting out to make a particularly groundbreaking statement. However, measured curatorial risks and the

inclusion of a number of more political issues reaffirm the Wattis as a significant space for social engagement, even during turbulent, uncertain times. Still, at times the show's premise risks feeling somewhat unresolved. In positioning itself so close to a colonial visual canon, the exhibition seems reluctant to fully sever its ties with it.

This ambivalence finds a strange mirror in the school's own expansion project. While it's been quietly acknowledged that Double Ground has been built on land marked by Indigenous presence, we're left to sit with the paradox of claiming new space atop a complex past. Though CCA reports working with Ohlone community members, details remain opaque from an exterior perspective, leaving questions about how—or if—these collaborations will meaningfully inform the institution's ideological approach moving forward. Considering the current climate, marked by mounting calls for political solidarity and Indigenous sovereignty—from the Bay Area to Palestine—the choice to forgo deeper, more visible engagement with local organizations also feels like a missed opportunity to reckon more publicly with the exhibition's themes; though perhaps this onus should not fall solely on the Wattis.



Stephanie Syjuco, back of *Double Vision [Projection]* (2022–2024). CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art. Photograph by Nicholas Lea Bruno.

Some of these tensions crystallize in a striking moment; as viewers exit the show, they might brush up against Stephanie Syjuco's fabric curtains, hung near the entrance of the gallery. Featuring an enlarged, mirrored

chromolithographic reproduction of an Albert Bierstadt Manifest Destiny painting, the curtains magnify the theatrical and saccharine qualities of the original works. Using digital alteration, Syjuco pixelates the small areas where Indigenous people appear, a gesture that withholds as much as it reveals. Gently touching the soft, velvet-like curtains as one journeys through the gravel pathway feels like a brief disavowal of this pristine, yet artificial legacy. Yet, the work ultimately leaves certain entanglements between “the museum” and its inheritances ornamentally intact.

In the end, *All This Soft Wild Buzzing* successfully interrogates landscape as a concept deeply tied to colonial violence, but raises other questions: can the Wattis truly provide a healing and reparative “antidote” to this ailment; or does the show risk reinforcing the very narratives it aims to dismantle by reifying histories of displacement within its own walls? Moreover, how do we sustain practices of artistic, curatorial, and political imagination that are allowed to break from colonial epistemic habits? These questions serve as a reminder that the Wattis and CCA, like many cultural institutions today, are still navigating their own position within the legacy they seek to challenge.

Vanessa Perez Winder (MA Visual & Critical Studies 2025) is a writer, editor, and arts worker committed to liberatory and decolonial forms of art historical research and curatorial praxis. They are the 2024–2025 Lead Editor of *Rewind Review Respond* at CCA and the 2024–2025 Curatorial Fellow at Root Division. Their writing can be found online at *Interventions*, *Variable West*, and *RRR*.

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