

HYPERALLERGIC

Art

What to See in New York This March

Your list of must-see, fun, insightful, and very New York art events this month, including Hew Locke, Saif Azzuz, Miyoko Ito, Shona McAndrew, and more.

Saif Azzuz: Says Who



Saif Azzuz is a Bay Area-based Libyan-Yurok artist who certainly deserves more attention. In his first solo exhibition in New York, he looks into the colonial history of Lower Manhattan's Collect Pond Park, located just two blocks from the gallery. Lushly painted acrylics evoke a freshwater pond in the park that once sustained the nearby Lenape village of Werpoes. Other works, including an arabesque made from police handcuffs and a prison toilet turned into a planter, address the carceral system that White colonialism constructed on Indigenous land. —HB

Nicelle Beauchene Gallery (nicellebeauchene.com)

7 Franklin Place, Tribeca, Manhattan

Through March 25

TO WATCH



Portrait by Adrian Martinez.

Tapping into indigenous cultural knowledge, while finding in beauty the warning signs.

By Katy Donoghue

Saif Azzuz’s “Huem-chor O’ weych-pues” (Welcome to where the rivers meet) is currently on view at Anthony Meier Fine Arts in San Francisco through April 22. The exhibition includes a series of new paintings, ceramics, wood sculptures, beading, and metalwork, exploring the imagery, craft, and landscape of his Yurok heritage. Growing up between two cultures—Yurok on his maternal side and Libyan on his paternal—Azzuz has always investigated that dynamic in his practice, and how it’s viewed through the lens of an American eye.

Recently, he has been looking more directly at his own relationship with the communities he’s from. His paintings are full of vibrant colors and movement, created by spraying paints and dyes pulled from a palette of California’s wildfire and drought maps—bright yellows, oranges, reds, and purples that serve as a warning. Using native and invasive plants to create shapes and patterns, he references indigenous cultural knowledge.

A few months before the solo show opened, *Whitewall* spoke with Azzuz about the dualities of life, landscape, and art.

WHITEWALL: *What will be on view in the exhibition at Anthony Meier?*

SAIF AZZUZ: The title of the show, “Huem-chor O’ weych-pues,” which I’m butchering because I’m still learning Yurok, means “Where the rivers meet.” That’s where I grew, up on and off, and that’s where I grew up,



Saif Azzuz, *Lo’op’ (It burns)*, 2021, acrylic and enamel on canvas, 80 x 60 inches, photo by Chris Grunder, courtesy of Anthony Meier Fine Arts.

on and off, and that’s where my mom lives and where my family lives. It’s on the Yurok Reservation. This show is largely about that area and all the many dualities of living there—both appreciating the land and how the inaccessibility to certain space has affected the land and water over time, and how people in the community are working to restore that.

I’m going to divide up the space with a cattle gate that would be used where my mom lives. There’s going to be some mixes of woodworking, painting, metalwork, and some other things. With the cattle gate, you don’t have access to a certain part of the space. There’s going to be work behind there that you can see but you’re not going to be able to get to.

WW: *Why did you want to divide the space?*

SA: That tension was a big thing for me. There is that inaccessibility to ancestral space back home, especially when you are trying to care for it or gather, that you can feel. And I wanted that to be in the show.

I’m going to have 13 ceramic salmon on one wall of the gallery, and they are going to be the only thing that crosses the space in between what everyone is able to access and the area that’s gated off. I picked 13, acknowledging the lunar calendar and how it would normally function within our community.

WW: *What will they look like?*

SA: I’m going to really try to stick to replicating fish, and I’m going to see how many ways I can do it. When you’re fishing up there, my mom’s area, or interacting with the fish you see, there are so many different ways nature has affected them. By the time they make it upstream, whatever is in there, the algae and aspects of their journey, has impacted them.

There’s also going to be a beaded piece. Beading has been a big thing within my family, and I grew up watching my great-aunts and my grandfather bead, and my mom beads. They’re reflective of our basket patterns. I remember watching my grandfather before he passed doing his last beading, and it was still on a loom, so I’m going to replicate that same pattern he was doing. For me, it felt like a good way to sit with what my grandfather was working on at the end. It’s nice to be present with the beading, because it takes a lot of time and you have to sit with it in a different way than a painting or woodworking.

WW: *What role does sourcing the wood play for you?*

SA: In past instances, I’ve gotten wood that was going to be in a chipping pile or that was reclaimed. For me, it was nice to put a story back into those pieces

that would end up going into someone’s yard. Within the community back home, redwoods are really important, and it’s been so removed that it was nice to be able to spend time with these pieces of redwood.

For this show, I’m finding pieces of reclaimed wood, and I’m also working with my mom, who does cultural fire stuff up there, to take down trees that are dying in certain areas. There’s an airborne pathogen that’s taken down a lot of cedar. We’ve been going and downing those trees, and some get used for cultural stuff and some I’m milling down to try to use for certain aspects of the show, like these shelves that I’m going to create and this wooden panel.

WW: *Where do you typically start when working on a new body of work?*

SA: Family is always important for me, and the land and how it’s affected always comes up. And then traditional ecological knowledge, which is this idea that before colonization, because every area was so individualized and specialized, every individual community had the best knowledge of those areas and how to take care of them. So, rather than a blanket way of taking care of a whole state, individual communities knew best. These are things I am thinking about and are starting points for me, are ways in which ancestral knowledge and taking care of the land has been affected by the shift of colonization.

WW: *I wanted to ask you about your color choice. Your paintings are so dynamic, with colors pulled from fire maps. But the works don’t read as “danger” or warnings.*

SA: I’ve been sitting with that a lot. I think that’s also life, those dualities, where maybe you don’t always feel like there’s a constant danger. I get these really beautiful present moments with my family, but also there’s climate change things happening, and other really unfortunate things globally.

WW: *In the show, in the section that you can see but can’t access, what work will be back there?*

SA: The beaded pieces that I’m replicating from my grandfather will be back there. That’s a really intimate moment. It is a detailed thing. It pulls back to that tension of, if we talk about the dynamic of who goes to galleries, it’s a certain person socioeconomically, and they’re not used to not having access to space also. There’s something interesting about saying, “You can’t see this intimate moment.”

Everyone is so used to being able to see everyone’s intimate moments with social media. There’s something about not being able to access space that is important to me.



Installation view of Saif Azzuz’s *tye’wolak’ (I set fire to it)*, 2021, photo by Chris Grunder, courtesy of Anthony Meier Fine Arts.

STOPPING BY
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Stopping by with Saif Azzuz



During this extraordinary moment in time, we asked writers, musicians, curators, and innovators to reflect on influence, memory, language, shared spaces, and the power of poetry to bring us together.

Saif Azzuz is a Libyan-Yurok artist who resides on unceded Ramaytush Ohlone Land also known as Pacifica, CA. He received a Bachelor's Degree in Painting and Drawing from the California College of the Arts in 2013. Azzuz has exhibited widely in the Bay Area, including a solo exhibition at Anthony Meier Fine Arts in March of 2022 and has had solo exhibitions at Pt.2 Gallery, Adobe Books, Ever Gold [Projects], NIAD, Rule Gallery and 1599dt Gallery. Azzuz is a 2022 SFMOMA SECA Award finalist and has participated in the Clarion Alley Mural Project and the Facebook Artist in Residence program. Selected public collections include Renne Museum, Facebook, North Carolina Museum of Art, Stanford Health Care Art Collection and UBS Art Collection.

What is the last thing that moved you?

"A trip to Indian heaven" in the book *Ararapíkva*, which is a collection of Karuk creation stories edited by Julian Lang. I was grieving a fresh loss in my family and was feeling the hole from that loss and the urgency to feel like I needed to move on to meet the pace of capitalism. I read that book so many times, but something about this reading brought me to tears and resonated differently at such a necessary time.

What is a piece of art that changed or greatly influenced you?

Seeing the painting and sculpture of the late [Brian Tripp](#) was the first time I felt stopped in my tracks by an encounter with art. His use of material, language and mark-making felt so intimate and personal, that it stayed with me on multiple levels. The work has a connection to place and people that is intergenerational in its ability to communicate across such expansive experiences.

What is your first memory of poetry?

Making Haikus in elementary school, but to be honest, I always struggled in school and felt the stigma of that. I didn't start having a positive relationship with reading until I was in college and that's when poetry and I really connected with each other on a deeper level.

How has this last year changed you, and what is something that you learned that you will take with you into a post-pandemic world?

This last year/years have been so hard to process. It really felt like the possibility for transformative change was there, to then have that momentum transition back into this new sense of normalcy that is so much more violent than the one we were already being forced to live, is hard. It is still difficult to intake the trauma we all are asked to accept. But to answer the question, I take with me the necessity to slow down. That's not to say I have that ability to do that, but I realize the necessity of rest and reflection, none of this should be normal.

Who or what is your greatest creative influence?

Right now, it's my family, nature, and intergenerational exchange. When I was younger, it was my grandfather and great aunt; I would sit around and watch them bead or weave for hours, and that connection to the material and making as a way of processing one's life has stuck with me.

If you were to choose one poem or text to inscribe in a public place right now, what would that be? And where would you place it?

Nikichyu 'ok'w 'w-ewolek' which is in the Yurok language and translates in English to "Everything has a name." Coming from a language that relied on oral histories, I think it just needs to be spoken.

What do you see as the role of art in public life at this moment in time?

For me, the role of the artist is to make work that reimagines life and that questions all structures and frameworks that we believe to be true.

What do you want people to take away from your work?

I hope that the participant feels anything. I welcome all feelings; art is so subjective. I just hope that my work resonates in any way with the viewer. There are so many interesting conversations to be had on all sides of how or why art connects with the viewer and their lens as participants.

Are you working on anything right now that you can tell us about?

I will have work at Miami Basel with [Anthony Meier Fine Arts](#) (San Francisco) and will be showing at Frieze London with [Nicelle Beauchene Gallery](#) (New York) as we work towards my first solo show with the gallery in February 2023.

What are you hopeful for?

I have sat down to answer this question multiple times, and every time I do, so a new tragic event happens in this country or world. At this moment in my life, I'm just hopeful that we can all someday heal, get rest and know peace outside of larger violent controlling structures



Art

11 Influential Native American Artists

Sandra Hale Schulman

Nov 9, 2021 5:41PM

Saif Azzuz

B. 1987, Eureka, California. Lives and works in Pacifica, California.



Saif Azzuz
Noohl 'o le's, Chuue'hl kee menechok, 2019
pt.2
Sold



Saif Azzuz
Zahra (kaap'ehl), 2019
pt.2
Sold

Coming from two cultures that are seemingly worlds apart, Libyan-Yurok painter Saif Azzuz sees his work “as an acknowledgement and reclamation of those spaces.” Recently, Azzuz has focused his attention specifically on his Yurok heritage. Inspired by the California land and wildfires that have alarmingly ravaged the state in recent years, Azzuz takes visual cues from his mother’s work for the Cultural Fire Management Council, a community-based organization that practices the Indigenous tradition of controlled burns that lead to a healthier ecosystem.

Azzuz’s process begins with a story or journaling, then light sketching. From there, he often places invasive species directly onto the canvas, then paints back onto the plants using acrylic, natural dyes, and enamel. Through his colorful abstractions that resemble bodies of water, forest floors, and drought maps, Azzuz explores the entangled beauty and wisdom involved in these Native land management practices.

Azzuz will make his debut at Art Basel in Miami Beach in December with San Francisco-based Anthony Meier Fine Arts. He will have his first solo show with the gallery in March 2022. ■