

# HYPERALLERGIC

FEATURE

## The Sun Is Shining on Saif Azzuz

Across galleries, museums, and outdoor sculpture, he connects Indigenous land practices in California, the Hudson Valley, and beyond.



**Max Blue**

June 3, 2026 — 6 min read



Saif Azzuz, who requested that his face not appear in this article, holding a painting in his studio (all photos Max Blue/*Hyperallergic* unless otherwise noted)

SAN FRANCISCO — “I’ve been in the studio maybe two days in the last month,” Saif Azzuz told me when I arrived at his airy, industrial studio space in San Francisco’s Hunter’s Point neighborhood.

His absence can be blamed on recent success. Lately, the Bay Area-based artist has been exhibiting around the world, from his first solo museum show at the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston last year to his first solo gallery show in West Asia earlier this year. He’s showing no signs of slowing down.



Installation view of *Saif Azzuz: Aiy-ye-kwee'* at Anthony Meier Fine Arts

Azzuz’s second solo exhibition at Anthony Meier Fine Arts in Mill Valley, California, on view through June 26, boasts a batch of brand-new work and coincides with the release of his first monograph, published by Sming Sming Books. He also has an installation combining a painting with a sculpture of a cattle gate on view in a show about Indigenous fire work at the Oakland Museum of California, which the museum recently acquired, as well as a temporary

outdoor sculpture commission recently unveiled at Storm King Art Center in Mountainville, New York.

The speed of Azzuz's recent professional life contrasts with the slowness of his process, which cultivates introspection and examines ancestral knowledge. Of Libyan descent and a registered member of the California Yurok Tribe, Azzuz highlights Indigenous traditions of land stewardship in communities across the world through paintings and sculptures. When making work about Northern California, where he was born and raised, he often incorporates foraged plant matter and reference photos taken by his mother Elizabeth, director of traditional fire at Cultural Fire, a group that carries on the Indigenous tradition of performing controlled burns to help preserve regional ecology. Elizabeth's work documenting Indigenous fire practices also features prominently in the show at the Oakland Museum.



Saif Azzuz holding a sculpture in his studio

When he travels elsewhere, Azzuz shifts his perspective to engage with local histories and landscapes.

“I’m not specifically thinking of myself as a regional artist,” he said. “With any artist, where you’re making your work is going to impact the way you’re perceiving it. We’re all having unique responses to our direct ecosystem. When I’m making work here, I’m thinking about specific native ecologies in this area and where my family is, but when the work travels I’m thinking about the histories of that area. The throughline of all of those is ecologies and what’s been done to the land. The global history of where we’re at with climate change is outside of one region — it spans everywhere.”

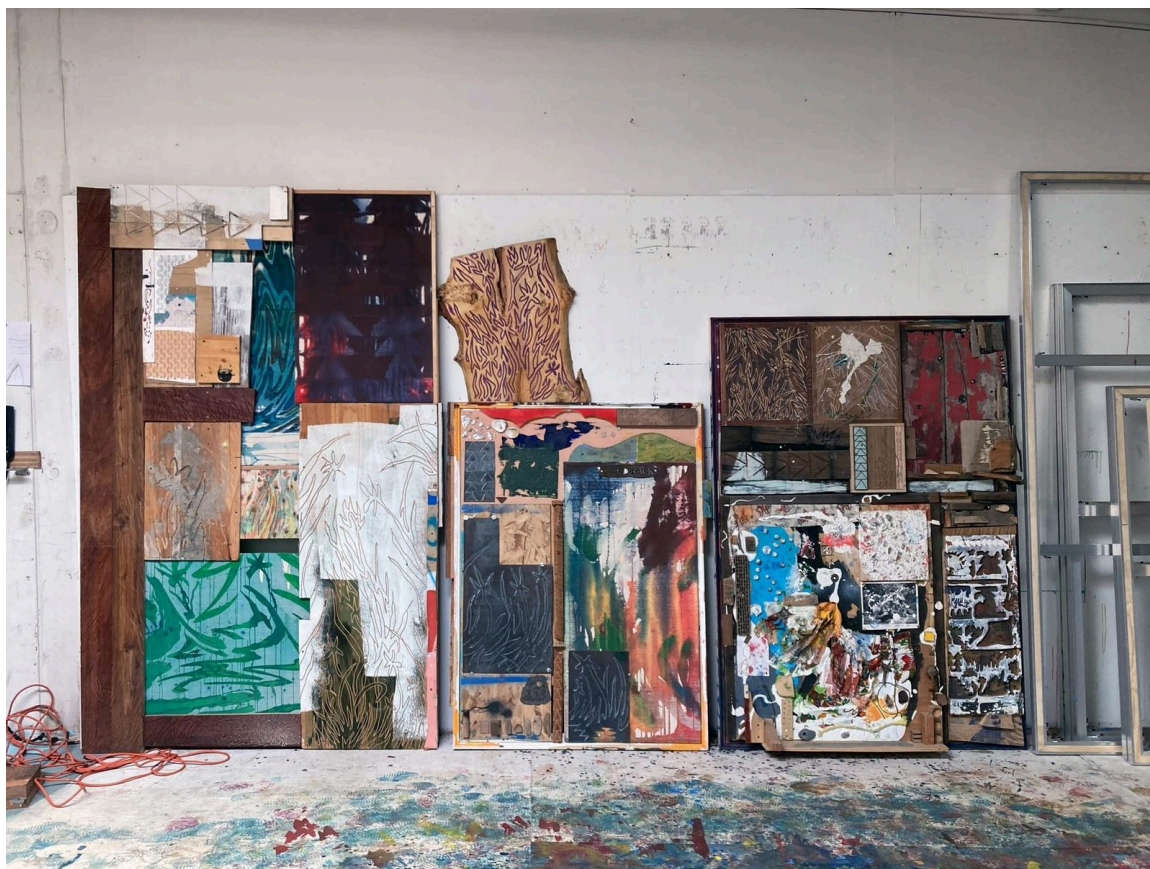
The work in Azzuz’s recent solo exhibition *Invisible Fish*, at Lawrie Shabibi in Dubai, was inspired by local ecology and traditional fishing practices indigenous to the Arabian Peninsula, predating the capitalist metropolis that has come to define the area. Those histories hit home for Azzuz, whose Yurok family in Northern California has a history with fish as “first foods,” or traditional, culturally significant food sources.



Saif Azzuz, "The fabric of this country" (2026), Tapestry: abalone, Dentalium, beads, synthetic feathers, wood beads, steel, acrylic, shop rags, drop cloth, artificial sinew, charcoal, deer hide, fabric, and grommets

“On my Libyan side, I grew up with my aunts talking about plants they would gather and cook with and their medicinal value, which is very similar to Yurok traditions,” Azzuz said. “Those specific regional knowledges expand everywhere. They exist in the United States but are very much erased to fit in with White supremacy.”

While that erasure is more prevalent in some communities than others who have managed to preserve their traditions, imperialism and extractive capitalism have global impacts. That also means that the conversation about solutions is something everyone has a say in.



Works leaning against the wall in Saif Azzuz's studio

“We’re all dealing with how ecologies have changed,” Azzuz said, “how that’s affecting the climate and how extractive capitalism is furthering all of these things. Water is something we all need. Within global Indigenous communities there’s attunement and knowledge to the land which I feel like you can highlight anywhere.”

The installation at Storm King also touches on shared traditions around water and fishing, in this case between Indigenous American tribes.



Installation view of Saif Azzuz, "weych - pues / tàkhòne (where the rivers meet)" (2026) at Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, New York (photo Jeffrey Jenkins, courtesy the artist, Anthony Meier, and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery)

The nearly 25-foot-long assemblage, installed as part of the center's *Outlooks* series of large-scale, outdoor sculptures, is made from salvaged car parts from the Hudson Valley and natural materials from the Bay Area. Material choice isn't the only way the work bridges the distance between both regions — the sturgeon itself is significant to the Indigenous people of both Northern California and the Hudson Valley. The ancient and endangered species inhabits both the Hudson and the Klamath Rivers, the latter running through the Yurok reservation in Northern California where Azzuz's mother lives.

"Sturgeon are as old as dinosaurs," Azzuz said. "They've seen all our iterations and how we got to be where we are. They're also an endangered species and exist

today because of people advocating for the land and water.”



Saif Azzuz in his studio

The sturgeon’s resilience is reflected in the steel body of his sculpture, which also features etchings of native plants, Yurok motifs, and text made in collaboration with Azzuz’s family, friends, and Storm King staff members. The piece will ultimately be recycled or scrapped, embodying the very natural cycles the work addresses.

Programming is another way Azzuz uses his art to educate the public about ecology, share the histories and practices of Indigenous groups, and open up broader dialogues. The installation at Storm King will set the stage for a public talk about conservation efforts and traditions on the Klamath and Hudson Rivers.

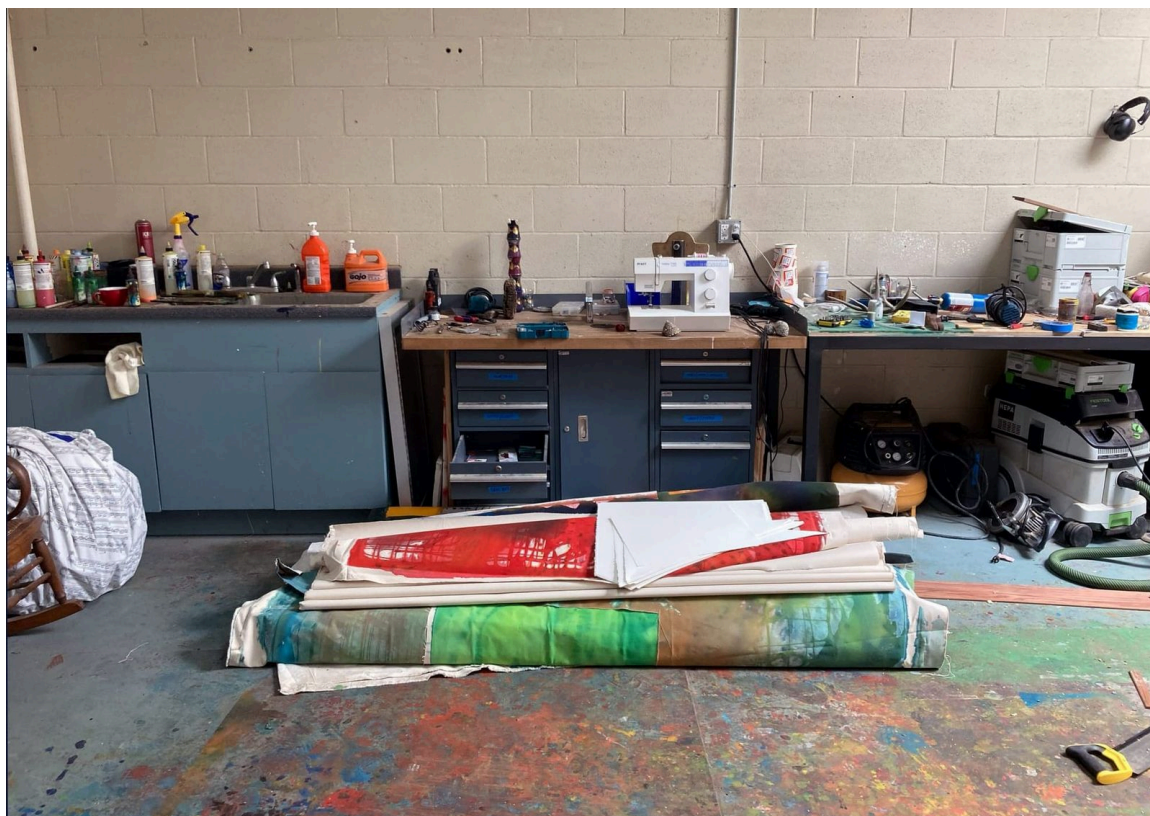
“Working outdoors, I’m thinking about the mountains and the trees as opposed to battling the white-walled space,” Azzuz said. “There’s a different connection to community when the work is out in space versus the very specific socio-economic class that goes to view a show in a gallery.”



Installation view of *Saif Azzuz: Aiy-ye-kwee'* at Anthony Meier Fine Arts

His current solo show at Anthony Meier, *Aiy-ye-kwee'*, navigates the traditional gallery space in unconventional ways as well. The sculptures and paintings on view are complemented by wall murals — a forest scene, an Apache helicopter, the word “stop” in Arabic script. A small, wooden carving reading “chinga la migre” (fuck ICE) rests on the floor beside a bench. Artworks and found objects are unexpectedly tucked into the rafters.

Azzuz's spirit of collaboration once again extends beyond research. The show includes sculptures by his wife Lulu Thrower, beadwork by extended family members and facsimile leaves by fellow Bay Area artists [Libby Black](#) and [Sean McFarland](#), demonstrating an attitude toward community and interconnectedness that reflects his ecological concerns.



Works piled on the floor of Saif Azzuz's studio

In a similar spirit, Azzuz's most recent work also aims for a limited ecological footprint. Alongside his new paintings, a large, wall-mounted assemblage in *Aiy-ye-kwee* points in a new direction of sustainable art-making. Pieces of dollar-store dream catchers are sewn into a ragged quilt of fabric patterns, including a few sporting pulpy, Wild West illustrations of cowboy and Indian characters. While the piece itself encourages re-use, it also speaks to the way racism and cultural illiteracy have become part of the fabric of ecological

disaster. In both context and practice, *Aiy-ye-kwee* exemplifies Azzuz's aim to raise awareness about ecology, land stewardship, and the dangers of climate change, while addressing the systems of colonialism and white supremacy that have global, damaging impacts.

“I’m using ecology as a gateway to addressing more political themes,” Azzuz said. “I’m aiming for people to have empathy for ecologies, and also advocating for ideas of [landback](#) and allowing for more regional Indigenous stewardship of land to help us push to a healthier place. Hopefully, it can become a conduit for talking about the interconnectedness of all things.”



## News

# Get lost in time—and devour a prehistoric feast—at Storm King’s new exhibitions

The outdoor art center’s three new summer installations are worth the trip to the Hudson Valley.


**Written by Tolly Wright**

Friday May 22 2026



Share



 Photo by Jeffrey Jenkins | Liz Glynn, Open House (detail), 2026. Installation view at Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, NY.

There's nothing like a sweltering heat wave to awaken a desire to get out of the city, and there are few day trips more beautiful and rewarding than a visit to the Hudson Valley's Storm King Art Center. The outdoor museum boasts 500 acres of rolling hills, wide-open blue skies and massive sculptures by celebrated contemporary artists.

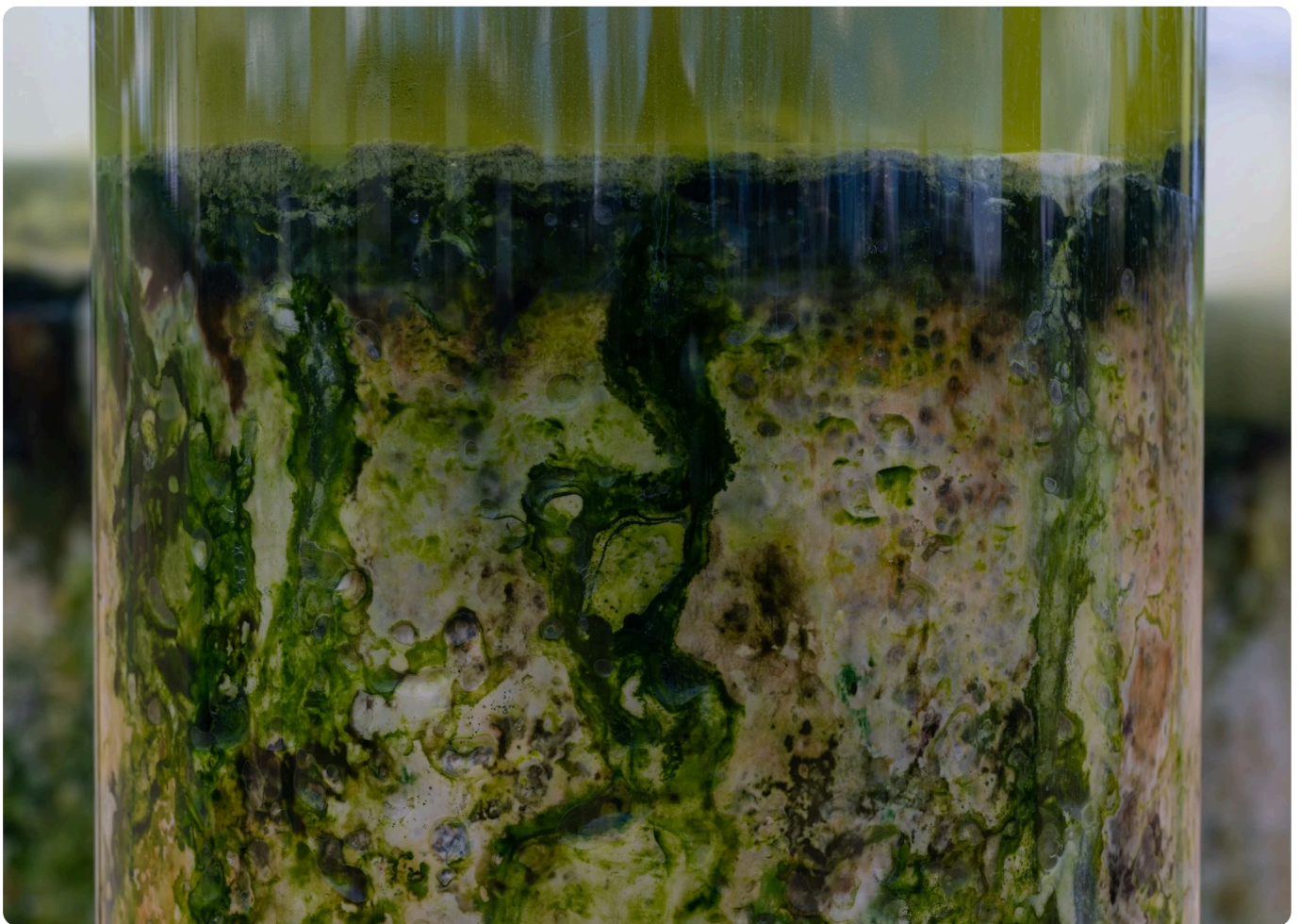
This season, three new thoughtful special exhibitions join the renowned landscape, offering meditations on history and nature that play with the ways the past brushes against both our present and future.

Anicka Yi's *Message from the Mud* brings visitors to a fictional archaeological dig site, where tall, acrylic columns filled with organic materials emerge from a shallow pool, like an ecological monument left by an unknown society.



Photo by Jeffrey Jenkins | Anicka Yi, *Message from the Mud*, 2026. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery. Installation view at Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, NY.

Using a soil science technique developed in the 1880s, Yi combined soil with water from the museum's South Ponds within the pillars to create habitats for algae and microbial colonies to grow. The result is verdant layers of rich greens and browns that will change over the course of the exhibition's run as they are exposed to the sun and elements. As you walk around the site, be sure to look beneath your feet to find more evidence of Yi's "biofiction": concrete engravings of imagined technological fossils inspired by the artist's [Precambrian Panels](#) (2024).



📷 Photo by Jeffrey Jenkins | Anicka Yi, *Message from the Mud* (detail), 2026. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery. Installation view at Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, NY.

Yi's fascination with the distant past, both real and imagined, is further crystallized in *Before Skeletons, Before Teeth*, a "prehistoric culinary experience" conceived by the artist in collaboration with Care of Chan that will be open to the public for one day only on June 27. The centerpiece of the menu is the Stone Altar, a banquet table covered with lush canapés of cascading rocks and pebbles that are actually chocolate, decadent butter mounds covered in edible flowers, cheeses that resemble (delicious) fungi, and jars of layered trifles that mirror the columns in Yi's installation. I had a chance to preview the experience at the season's opening celebration, and I found the altar's bounty to be as sumptuous as it was splendid. The rich, pleasantly salty, earthy food also pairs perfectly with the sharp, bright tartness of the "Pond Water" cocktail, which combines ramp-infused spirits with celery juice, maple syrup and apple cider vinegar.



Photo by Jeffrey Jenkins | Liz Glynn, *Open House* (detail), 2026. Installation view at Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, NY.

In another field, artist Liz Glynn drew from a much more terrestrial—and urban—historical inspiration. Glynn used photos of the Gilded Age financier William C. Whitney’s Fifth Avenue mansion to reconstruct the home’s ornate ballroom furniture in concrete for *Open House*. Glynn rendered the intricate details of the Louis XIV–style pieces so faithfully that, from a distance, the armchairs and footstools almost look as if they are made from a softer, more luxurious material, but, alas, the concrete is hard to sit on (which you are invited to try for yourself). It feels a bit surreal to step through the massive, arched windows and trudge through the grass past a flock of geese to lounge on the couches, but is it really any more absurd than the staggering wealth inequality that led to the original ballroom’s existence?



Photo by Jeffrey Jenkins | Saif Azzuz, weych - pues / tàkhòne (where the rivers meet), 2026. Courtesy the artist, Anthony Meier, and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery. Installation view at Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, NY.

Lastly, an ancient fish-out-of-water is placed just right on Museum Hill with Saif Azzuz's *weych-pues / tàkhòne (where the rivers meet)*, which is part of Storm King's Outlooks series spotlighting emerging and mid-career artists. Using steel, aluminum and salvaged car parts from the Hudson Valley, Azzuz created a large sculpture of a sturgeon, a fish that is significant in the diets and traditions of various Native American tribes, including the Lenape, who were forcibly removed from the area. Azzuz, a member of the Yurok tribe, drew inspiration from his own culture and history for this work. If you closely examine the sturgeon, you'll find text and images from nature—flying birds, fir trees and native plants—etched into the side, offering a bigger story to explore and consider.

If we continue to get more extreme swings in weather this spring, don't fret. All three exhibitions are on view through November 7, so there should be time to book it up north before then.

*Storm King Art Center is open Wednesday through Monday from 10am to 6pm and admission costs \$25, seniors \$22, youth (5-17) and students \$15. You can get there from Manhattan via [round-trip Coach USA bus rides](#) from Port Authority, or by taking a rideshare from Beacon via the Metro North train or from Salisbury Mills-Cornwall via NJ Transit train.*

TEN GALLERY  
**SAIF AZZUZ:**  
BIG FISH

A series of firsts marks artist Saif Azzuz's latest work, which serves as both a tribute to his Indigenous heritage and a stark reminder to preserve natural resources.



Instagram: @saifazzuz / adqjbb

Artwork SAIF AZZUZ  
Photographer CHRIS GRUNDER  
Text ADNAN QIBLAWI

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TEN USA / SPRING-SUMMER 2025

Saif Azzuz in his studio, 2025

# NICELLE BEAUCHENE GALLERY



# NICELLE BEAUCHENE GALLERY



428  
TEN USA / SPRING SUMMER 2020

PHOTOGRAPHER DAVID SCHULZE

*Accare poses near his commission for Storm King Art Center, in the fabrication workshop of the David R. Collins Building in the Hudson Valley*

# NICELLE BEAUCHENE GALLERY

## TEN GALLERY

**“My own idea of what artists do is to try to imagine a different world. How do you put those little bits of care and community back into things?”**

Storm King Art Center has been showcasing monumental sculptures for more than 65 years, with abstract forms in steel and stone rising from the Hudson Valley landscape. But nothing is quite like what's on the horizon. The outdoor public art space's next major installation will depict a living creature for the first time. Debuting this spring, Yurok-Libyan artist Saif Azzuz is presenting a nearly 25-foot sculpture of a steel sturgeon that will rest outside the center's main building, pointing toward Moodna Creek at the base of Storm King Mountain. For Azzuz, whose practice bridges his Indigenous Yurok and Libyan heritage with contemporary concerns about land stewardship and cultural memory, the sturgeon represents something urgent: a foreshadowing of what we stand to lose.

Azzuz came to know the park's 500 acres and its surroundings during a month-long residency at the arts center in June 2024. His wife and two young children joined him, each working in their own studios. The 37-year-old Pacific, California-based artist has shown at the Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco, the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, and elsewhere since earning his BFA from the California College of the Arts in 2013. In 2022, he was one of 30 Bay Area artists whose work was acquired by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. His recent exhibition, *All that is between them*, at the Nicelle Beauchene Gallery in Tribeca featured work by his wife and children—a collaboration which reflects his belief that art is never truly a solo endeavor.

The Storm King commission marks both a technical challenge and a philosophical evolution for the artist. “This is my first outdoor work,” he says. “So it's a whole different set of parameters and ways of thinking, to think about how it's placed into the land and how it's going to shift over time, versus in a white wall space.”

During his residency, Azzuz explored the center's landscape with Indigenous first foods in mind. “Cow is the major industry food now, but it was never a food historically [in the Hudson area],” he explains. “The traditional foods were deer, sturgeon, and other fish.”

The choice of sturgeon is deeply personal. On the Klamath River in Northern California, where Azzuz's Yurok family lives, the fish was one of the tribe's first foods—a traditional staple that sustained communities for millennia. The prehistoric fish has remained unchanged for 200 million years; it is vulnerable and resilient, endangered yet enduring, and also the source of caviar. The Hudson River hosts one of the largest sturgeon populations in the world, while those in the Klamath River face conservation challenges. “Thinking about the efforts to bring back the sturgeon population, how that relates to water quality and health, and then how those things are also connected to us as people, has been the thread that I'm exploring through this work,” Azzuz says.

The sculpture incorporates multiple layers of generational knowledge, such as the traditional sturgeon back pattern—a recurring motif in Yurok basketry and art—along its sides. “I've seen the pattern show up in a lot of different Indigenous art, such as in Libyan tapestries and in the works of Ruth Asawa and Anni Albers. It's a theme that holds meaning in different places for different things. For [the Yurok], it represents a connection to all things as a part of our cultural inheritance and what we're passing down.” The piece will also feature a sonic element: cut steel and abalone shells placed inside that will create a “gentle song” as wind passes through—a nod both to how scientists monitor sturgeon populations using sonar and the role of sound in Yurok healing ceremonies.

Rather than pristine steel, Azzuz plans to clad the frame in a sail-like patchwork pattern of salvaged car doors. “I'm going to gather car doors from different pick and pull areas, and then I'm going to cut out the painted areas and prep them for welding,” he explains. “It's a conversation about industrialization—the automobile—and how that relates to caring for the land, and maybe the opposite of that.”

Azzuz's creation will bear marks made by Storm King staff, his family, and community members through saltwater etching, an ancient engraving technique particularly apt for a brackish fish. Participants will be invited to etch their own marks into the sculpture, leaving their personal imprint of care.

His practice extends a long lineage of Yurok object-making. “[The Yurok] very much have sculptural objects, not like capital A art, it wasn't used in that way. I think the difference is that all of these things were functional for us,” he says, pointing to woven fishing baskets for eeling, 25-foot carved redwood canoes, and intricate basket patterns. “There are very interesting sculptural qualities to these materials and forms, but then they also have practical applications.”

The timing feels particularly resonant. The Trump administration has recently rolled back protections for endangered species. “Sturgeon has been removed from the endangered species list,” he says. “There was a lot of momentum around preserving them. But as budgets are cut and lists change, inevitably, all of those things are going to be impacted.”

Still, Azzuz remains measured about art's capacity for direct political change. “I go back and forth thinking about my feelings on how much art can impact change in the larger world,” he admits. But he's clear about art's other functions: to imagine alternatives, mark what's happening, and assert care in the face of systems that don't. “My own idea of what artists do is to try to imagine a different world,” he says. “How do you put those little bits of care and community back into things? That feels really important to me.” ●



PHOTOGRAPHER: JSP ART PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND NICELLE BEAUCHENE GALLERY

Clockwise, from top left: 'As I Recall' (18), 'As I Recall' (2), 'As I Recall' (31), and 'As I Recall' (15), all 2025

# The New York Times



An installation view of the artist Saif Azzuz's exhibition "Keet Hegehlpá (the water is rising)," with his wall-size canvas "Take it all in," at the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston. *via the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston; photo by Francisco Ramos*

October 18, 2025

By Emily Wilson

For Saif Azzuz, art is never just an individual effort.

A 37-year-old artist who lives in Pacifica, Calif., just south of San Francisco, Azzuz has his first major solo exhibition, "Keet Hegehlpá (the water is rising)," running at the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston through Dec. 20.

However, the show, which has a bilingual Yurok and English title, also features work by others. Azzuz, who is Yurok and Libyan, often includes family members' art in his exhibitions. The Blaffer show has pieces by his mother, Elizabeth Azzuz; his wife, Lulu Thrower; their children, Viola and Moya Azzuz; and a cousin, Colleen Colegrove.

"If you look at someone's solo show at a gallery, there's never just one person," he said in an interview at his San Francisco studio. "There are the people at the gallery, the people that install it, the people that packed and shipped the work. It's like an album, and sometimes you have featured artists, and it still can be a single project and a collaboration."

Azzuz is no stranger to the gallery world. Since getting his B.F.A. from the California College of the Arts in 2013, he has been shown at the Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco; the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, N.Y.; and elsewhere. In 2022, he was one of 30 Bay Area



In a household in which everyone makes art, Azzuz's daughter, Viola, 9, has displayed photographs of the family, each decorated with pistachios, atop the dining table. *Gabriela Hasbun for The New York Times*

artists whose work was acquired by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco with a \$1 million grant from the Svane Family Foundation.

This year, his strong convictions about land – that it is something that needs care and protection – are front and center in both the exhibition in Houston and in an upcoming group show at the Oakland Museum of California, "Good Fire: Tending Native Lands," opening on Nov. 7 and running through May 31. His mother, who does traditional burns – small, controlled fires to promote healthy ecosystems on Indigenous territory – will be part of that exhibition, too.

For the show at the Blaffer, Azzuz also talked to ecological organizations in Houston, such as Bayou City Waterkeeper and West Street Recovery, which were introduced to him by the show's curator, Erika Mei Chua Holum, a native of the city. In addition to meeting with them when he went to Houston in the spring, Azzuz researched the area's history and climate data.

In a telephone interview, Holum said that visitors expected the show to focus mainly on oil and gas, but that Azzuz thought in terms of thousands of years. His artworks, which fill the entire top floor of the museum, spilling down hallways and around corners, include native plants, oak trees, acorns, gates, political pins and propane tanks, with pieces by his wife, his children and his mother, as well as a community mural, interspersed. Throughout, the show poses thorny questions about colonialism, cattle farming and racism, and how land and water have evolved from public goods to private property. Holum called it a conversation between the Bayou and the Bay Area.

"Saif's truly unique perspective broadened the conversation and aims to form alliances and solidarities with people who share the same land and are fighting for land-back movements,"



Saif Azzuz with his wife, Lulu Thrower, and their children, Moya, left, and Viola, at home in Pacifica, Calif. *Gabriela Hasbun for The New York Times*

Holum said, referring to the efforts of Indigenous people to have authority over their ancestral territory. "He's constantly thinking about what the community is doing and how people are organizing."

Azzuz also researched the siblings John and Augustus Allen, called the founders of Houston after they bought more than 6,600 acres of land in the area in 1836 and then placed advertisements marketing it in several Texas newspapers.

In the Blaffer show, "Before there were so many walls" (2025), Azzuz's abstracted depiction of one of the Allen brothers' advertisements, hangs on a gallery wall more than 10 feet behind another work, "Liberties were taken." That piece incorporates a tall, chain-link fence that sprouts from the floor and has within its links an oversize mosaic bald eagle.

"The Allen brothers made a postcard they would send east to try to convince folks in Louisiana and other states to move to Houston," Azzuz said, "and it presented it as this idyllic Mediterranean space, with hills and water, but Houston was a swamp and it's flat, so none of that was true.

"I wanted to juxtapose that behind the fence, thinking about the border and who's allowed to settle and whose bodies are being forced into the carceral system, and who's being subjugated to ICE raids now," he noted, referring to Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the larger structure around jails and prisons.

"All those things felt connected to the inherent racism that exists within those policies," he continued. "Then the eagle is this symbol of freedom in America, but also appears on the flag in Mexico, so I was thinking about that connection. When I make art, it's all over the place. I like to pull these connections together."

Azzuz said he always wanted museums to be accessible. One of the reasons he involved his family was so that more people could see themselves in the Houston show.

Thrower, Azzuz's wife, agreed that the inclusion made the show more inviting. She created a sculpture of recycled wire hangers, titled "Tale as old as time" (2025), and wove a basket, "We hold us" (2025), from the same material. Both refer to reproductive rights. In the basket she placed wooden acorns she made.

"People can feel like these spaces aren't for us," said Thrower, who teaches art part time, "and Saif wanted to intentionally combat that by including the kids, by including his family, who



Lulu Thrower's "Tale as old as time," a sculpture made from recycled coat hangers, is part of Azzuz's show in Houston. *Via the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston; photo by Francisco Ramos*

aren't quote-unquote professional artists. I hope that people who come see the show feel that energy."

Azzuz said their daughter, Viola, 9, and their son, Moya, 6, always had a hand in his work, whether that meant gluing things onto sculptures or making marks on paintings. Their pieces in the Blaffer exhibition are Viola's painting and collage, "Peace is Everything" (2025), and Moya's redesigned water barrel, "The unknown water source" (2025), which is equipped with a pump so the fluid replenishes itself.

Recently, Azzuz's family went to the Yurok Reservation by the Klamath River, where his mother lives, to participate in a healing ceremony, the Brush Dance. Seeing her grandchildren's work in the museum seems natural to her, Elizabeth Azzuz said later, in a phone interview.

"It really reminded me of being at home," she said, "because our family just came out of ceremony with three to five generations at a time together, dancing and praying and wearing our traditional regalia. Knowing that my grandchildren are fully immersed in their life is quite heartwarming for me."

Azzuz and his mother collaborated on a piece in the Blaffer show, with beaded bronze branches. She also beaded an acorn in Thrower's basket.

A director of traditional fire, as well as the treasurer, for Cultural Fire, an organization that does controlled burns – an Indigenous practice for centuries – Elizabeth Azzuz often sends photos of burns to her son, who makes paintings based on them. She also sent him charcoal from a burn



Azzuz and Thrower, who teaches art part time and sometimes contributes to his exhibitions, on the Linda Mar Beach in Pacifica, Calif. *Gabriela Hasbun for The New York Times*



Elizabeth Azzuz, Saif Azzuz's mother, who does traditional burns on Indigenous lands. Saif sometimes incorporates images of those controlled fires into his work. *Kiliii Yuyan*

by the Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas, which he used to create the community mural in the Blaffer that runs down the hallway in the exhibition.

When Azzuz showed with the gallery that represents him, Anthony Meier, at Frieze Los Angeles in February, his work got a lot of attention. Several critics called it one of the best booths at the fair, and one wrote that land stewardship was the core of Azzuz's practice. When painting a landscape, Azzuz thinks of it as a portrait.

"People feel land is this thing to be conquered, rather than this thing we're in constant symbiosis with," he said. "I very much think of these as portraits of people or places and a living being, rather than this thing that's outside of us."

The feeling that land is like a relative to care for also runs through "Good Fire." The Oakland museum's curator of natural science, Ryder Diaz, said he had wanted to do a show like this since coming to the museum six years ago. He organized it with Native fire practitioners (like Elizabeth Azzuz), ecologists and cultural leaders.

In "Good Fire," Azzuz will have a painting (an abstract work based on one of his mother's photos, suggesting plants and sky) and a gate symbolizing the privatization of land. He said he was grateful to be involved with residents of the Yurok reservation and Indigenous people around Northern California who use fire to care for the land.



In the Houston show, Throwing's coiled-wire sculpture "We hold us" contains wooden acorns, one of which has a band beaded by her mother-in-law. *Via the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston; Photo by Francisco Ramos*

The community element was important to him in the Houston show as well. It includes the mural he started with charcoal from the tribe in Texas and then invited museum staff to make additions. It also comprises a climate-justice reading group that Holum leads, using books donated by AK Press, and a garden outside the museum with medicinal and native plants. Azzuz hopes people will gather there when things are hard.

"It became a way to tie some of the things in the show to work that people are doing," he said. "I like to think that the art isn't existing in its own bubble and should be tied to community and conversations."



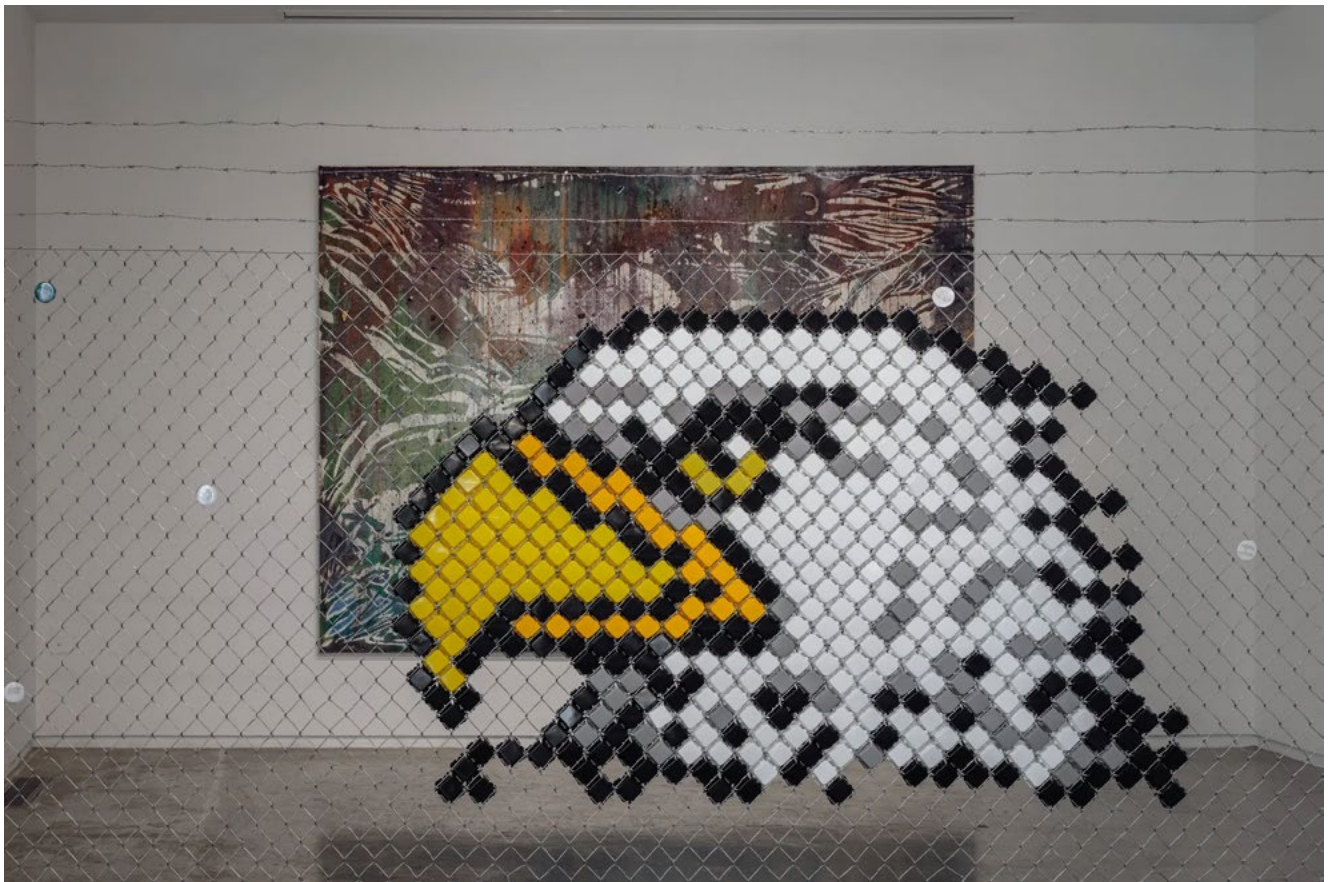
At the Blaffer, a detail of Saif Azzuz's "Persistence isn't always safe, but it's often necessary," a sculpture of plasma-cut steel with designs of plants and wildlife from the bayou. *Via the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston' photo by Francisco Ramos*



A detail of Saif Azzuz's "What grows in a world where the soil is watered in blood?," a sculpture in the Houston show that is made of rusted steel with a flower growing from its surface. *Via the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston; photo by Francisco Ramos*



Saif Azzuz's "Who says," a gate incorporating a steel framework and stickers, ink, bungee cord and chains. It will also be in the Oakland show. Saif Azzuz, via Anthony Meier, Mill Valley



Foreground, Saif Azzuz's "Liberties were taken," which incorporates a chain-link fence and a mosaic bald eagle, and, behind it, his canvas "Before there were so many walls." Via the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston; photo by Francisco Ramos



Azzuz often puts objects like political buttons into his work. Attached to mesh wiring, they cascade down a staircase in his exhibition at the Blaffer. *Via the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston; photo by Francisco Ramos*

# 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](http://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

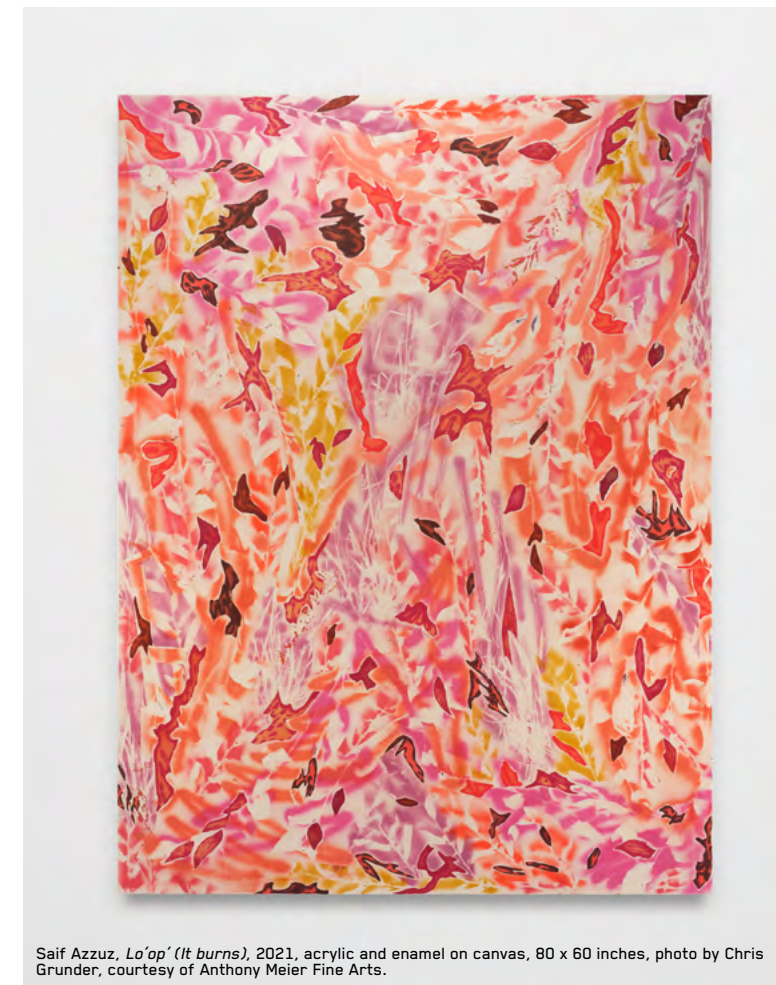
Saif Azzuz's "Huem-chor O' weych-pues" (Welcome to where the rivers meet) is currently on view at Anthony Meier Fine Arts in San Francisco through April 22. The exhibition includes a series of new paintings, ceramics, wood sculptures, beading, and metalwork, exploring the imagery, craft, and landscape 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.*

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**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.

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## 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. ■