

UCLA New Wight Biennial

*Between the Self
and its True Home*

expressions of displacement and uprootedness

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and its True Home*
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Curated by:
Farshid Bazmandegan and
Rachel Hakimian Emenaker

*“Exile is strangely
compelling to think about
but terrible to experience.
It is the unhealable rift
forced between a human
being and a native place,
**between the self
and its true home:**
its essential sadness can
never be surmounted.”*

–Edward Said, Reflections on Exile

The 2022 New Wight Biennial exhibition, *Between the Self and its True Home* curated by UCLA Art Department MFA candidates, Farshid Bazmandegan and Rachel Hakimian Emenaker, was a timely and extraordinary exploration of migration and immigration. This exhibition of work by 27 artists from across the globe, all MFA students and many of them currently studying in the United States, included a wide range of practices including installation, video, photography, and performance. The work in the exhibition was a profound exploration of the territories of identity and borders and the challenges faced due to race, ethnicity, gender, religion, war, and persecution. I want to thank all the artists for their participation and for sharing their voices with the broader community. I am deeply grateful to Farshid and Rachel for taking on this challenge and curating an exhibition that was deeply engaging for the audience.

Professor Catherine Opie
UCLA Department of Art
The Lynda and Stewart Resnick Endowed Chair of Art





Julie Avetisyan
Katayoun Bahrami
Eva Balayan
Jackie Castillo
Gabrielle Constantine
Katherine Yaochen Du
Katrin Fallah
Anvar Hassanpour
Yulia Gasio
Elisheva Gavra
Wei Han Jiang
Tehan Ketema
Sophie Kovel
Christine Yerie Lee
Alberto Lule
Laïla Mestari
Maya Nguyen
Chinaedu E. Nwadibia
Aquilah Ohemeng
Sammaneh Pourshafighi
Mehregan Pezeshki
Mohammad Sabir SABIR
Araks Sahakyan
Zelikha Zohra Shoja
Chanell Stone
Vivian Vivas
Rebecca Wakim

Julie Avetisyan

1996, California, USA



The Mountains Look Different (2022). Paper/oil pastel/window screen/wool yarn/acrylic paint. 36" x 90"

After decades of familial displacement following the Armenian Genocide, Julie Avetisyan was born in San Francisco, but her search for home is ongoing. As the great grandchild of Armenian Genocide survivors, Avetisyan became an active member of the Armenian community in the Bay Area and later in Los Angeles, to inherit cultural traditions and to learn the Armenian language while living in the diaspora.

Avetisyan's work is a culmination of mark-making and gestures that confronts the complexities of a constructed identity as an Armenian-American. She investigates modes of embodied nostalgia and makes work from the context of the Armenian Diaspora. Exploring ideas of land, ancestry, archive and the use of textiles as language informs her practice as a multidisciplinary artist. Research and oral history drive her curiosity about her relationship to an Armenian-American identity that is not place-bound, but place-conscious.



Please Transliterate (2021). Acrylic yarn on a blend of cotton cloth, carpet adhesive. 40" x 32" x 22"

Katayoun Bahrami

1981, Tehran, Iran



The Weight of the Wall (2022). Forty crocheted 4" x 2" x 8" cement bricks with cotton and metallic yarn, dried borage, old china bowl, video projection. Dimensions variable

Katayoun Bahrami is an Iranian multidisciplinary artist living and working in Los Angeles. Her artistic interest focuses on the interaction between women's bodies as targets and performers, and on how boundaries act as catalysts between the two. Bahrami employs photographs, videos, textiles, installations and mixed media works to express her ideas.

The Weight of the Wall conceptualizes the connection between the present and the past, referencing the profound cultural and political significance of suffering caused by exile and separation, the longing for home, confinement of the female body, and violence through suppression. The pile of cement bricks, a familiar construction material in Iran, suggests a wall that draws the borders between inside and outside, but this wall has fallen. It has become undefined, creating a sense of crossing from one world to another interchangeably.



The Weight of the Wall (detail)

Eva Balayan

1991, Yerevan, Armenia



Many Arms that Cannot Reach (2022). Booklet (documentation of a mixed-media installation) + AR with a QR code/video. 8.5" x 11" (booklet), 8 mins (video)

Eva Balayan, along with her mother and brother, left Armenia fifteen years ago and received refugee status in Austria. With her mother a part of the Assyrian diaspora and her father an Armenian from Artsakh, Eva has never felt at home anywhere. Currently she lives, works and studies in Vienna, Austria.

In September 2020, the 30-year-old conflict between Artsakh and Azerbaijan awakened once again and brought destruction and disappointment for everyone who ever lived in Armenia. Attempts by many to engage in solving the conflict resulted in ineffectual chaos that ultimately only weakened or suppressed voices. Balayan's work is about the experience of despair despite all apparent possibilities. The many arms, eyes and mouths stand for attempts toward far-reaching places, but they are entangled and uncontrolled.



Jackie Castillo

1990, California, USA



Lessons in Failure (2022). Archival pigment print, wood. 45" x 34"

Jackie Castillo was born in Orange County, California, is a Mexican National, and is currently a Los Angeles-based artist working in installation, photography, printmaking, sculpture and drawing. Castillo's practice is rooted in investigating the relationship

between infrastructure, collective memory and the isolation and anxiety felt by working class immigrants. She typically turns to the Southern California suburban and urban landscapes to expose scenes and objects that call into question these pathos. Utilizing the visual vernacular of surface, material and ruins, she creates installations using images of the built environment to examine how an internalized loss of identity may render the self as unreal, estranged and in various states of invisibility.

Gabrielle Constantine

1994, Pennsylvania, USA

Gabrielle Constantine was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and grew up in an Armenian community. Through the reflection of her Armenian and queer body, Constantine creates work that investigates how people perform, mask and transcend class, race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality through the adornment and modification of their surroundings and person. This landscape, that is a table, that is a mountain, leads oppressors to their pinnacle only to fall to a graveyard of bottles soaking up bloodshed. In this work, she ponders the cocktail of inheriting generational trauma, exposure of a physical body to violence in real time and the vices used to cope.



Mountains Move Like Money Under a Mattress (2021). Persian rug, trophy figurines, wax, wax candles, wall-to-wall carpet, wood, rit dye, found ashtray, pile of crystals. 96" x 30" x 12"



Mountains Move Like Money Under a Mattress (detail)

Katherine Yaochen Du

1992, Colorado, USA



The Robert Browne (2022). Fabric dye, charcoal, thread, linen, and steel. 78" x 96" x 168", 48" x 420" (painting)

Katherine Yaochen Du is an artist and educator whose work across painting, text, and installation addresses archival erasure and violence in collective and personal Asian American histories.

In 1852, aboard a Connecticut ship, the Robert Browne, four hundred Chinese men revolted. Duped by promises of being brought to California, they fought to prevent their certain deaths in the guano mines of Peru. The story bears the indelible marks of archival violence: the only names that remain are those of their white captors. In this installation, I adopt the formats of the nineteenth century American cyclorama and the Chinese handscroll painting to create a walk-in narrative container for the experiences of the men aboard the Robert Browne. I ask: through what ethics could I reanimate the dignity of those who, according to history as written, do not exist?



The Robert Browne (detail)

Katrin Fallah

1976, Shiraz, Iran



Katrin Fallah is an interdisciplinary artist who, growing up in post-revolution Iran, experienced firsthand persecution as a woman, an artist, and a member of a religious minority. Her work and practice consider how to give voice to the voiceless. She does this through sharing her artistic and cultural projects as well as teaching art classes.

Home in Fire is a video installation based on a personal narrative of when the houses of the Baha'i, a targeted religious minority in the city of Shiraz, Iran, were burned down. The work was created to shed light on one event in a long history of systematic harassment and persecution of marginalized religious minorities who have had to leave their country and find a new home in exile, because their homes are no longer safe. Despite the difficulties of leaving and their love for their homelands, they were forced to flee in search of justice and human rights.

Home in Fire (2020). Video. 5:48 mins

Anvar Hassanpour

1983, Mahabad, Iran



Hejar (2021). Video. 19:50 mins

Anvar Hassanpour is a filmmaker from the land of captive dreams, failed loves, endless nightmares, surrender, resistance and struggle; a filmmaker from the land of prisons, mountains, blood, fire, dust and stories that have never had a chance to be told. He has lived through all the stories that he wants to tell, either in reality or in his nightmares. In his turbulent way of narrating, for many years, he has believed that literature was the only way to tell his stories. It seems now that our small world does not pay much attention to the stories that are always under the heavy rubble of history written by oppressors. Although literature has always been his only breathing space, it is certainly not the only powerful tool of our time, and this bitter reality drew him to the magical world of cinema.

With his films, he tries to open a window to the world of the forgotten and the oppressed, those who are born unknown and die unknown. In Hassanpour's eyes, cinema is the art of presenting both the beauties and ugliness of our world; and, showing hope for the future is as beautiful as showing the frustration of those who see nothing but darkness.

He sees the images of his films as the words of his stories, and uses them carefully as he wants to guide his viewer in seeing what he sees, what he experiences and what he feels. We can be people from different worlds; however, the story of the joys and sorrows of all the people on the earth is one. Cinema knows no boundaries in telling the story of our eternal suffering; as we all know, it all started with the first self-image over the walls of our oldest home: the cave.

Hejar tells the story of a Kurdish immigrant in the U.S. and a family man who has to live with the consequences of assuming the identity of Adam, his dead cousin, when he fled war-torn Kurdistan/Northern Iraq decades ago as a child.

Yulia Gasio

1983, Luhansk, Ukraine



Donbas 2014 till the Present (2019). Mixed Media and oil on canvas. 5' x 6'

Yulia Gasio is a Ukrainian-born artist and educator who lives and works in California. In her paintings and drawings she depicts the trauma of an ongoing war through the experiences of her immediate family living in the war zone of Eastern Ukraine. She interprets the nightmarish events using figuration, symbolism and iconography. Acts of violence against civilians are frequently symbolized in her work as the focal point of this series. Gasio finds it challenging to depict horror in color, which often reduces the severity of the content to an illustration, rather than capturing the tragic reality of the situation. She portrays the transformation of Ukrainian society enduring intense violence and ethnic cleansing.



Donbas 2014 till the Present (2019). Mixed Media and oil on canvas. 9' x 4'

Elisheva Gavra

1992, Rehovot, Israel



Swallow (2022). Inkjet prints and linoleum cut on archival paper, studio soundboard. 70" x 71"

Elisheva Gavra lives in New York. She received a B.A. in art history from Tel Aviv University. Her practice centers on photography as a negotiation between self and reality. Informed by her experience of leaving the Hasidic community she grew up in, she draws on vision and perception as mechanisms of indoctrination and emancipation.

Gavra's installation is an experiment in photographic iteration, wherein every element exists as a precondition for the other. Visual elements are presented and represented; subjects appear as seen as well as seeing. The visual gaps between the layered images contain speculations regarding the artist's personal history, and the shifts in subjectivity enabled by looking, revealing and obscuring.



Hold Your Face (2021). Inkjet prints and linoleum cut on archival paper, studio soundboard. 62" x 44"

Weihan Jiang

1997, Chongqing, China

Weihan Jiang is interested in issues around the land, and the practices that emerge and disappear from it. He likes to think about the power, and the violence, of language.

His video connects eucalyptus trees in San Diego to the ghostly presence of a factory town in China. In the process of tracing their remotely parallel histories, the work initiates inquiries about the movement, locality and emergence (and precarity) of new identities. What impact is the formation and breaking of a time bubble silently making on its surroundings, and what narratives are we extracting from it?



Rooted (2019). Video. 10:07 mins

Tehan Ketema

1996, California, USA



Untitled (□□□□) (2022). Video. 6:26 mins

Tehan Ketema is an artist and educator from the Bay Area, CA. She is interested in exploring the formation of new media archives and their impact on understanding history, territory and identity. For her work and research, she pulls from the intersections of her experiences as an Eritrean-American.

As a first-generation Eritrean-American, Ketema is compelled to generate work that questions the relationship and interconnected experiences between the United States and Eritrea. Utilizing a non-traditional living archive found on social media, *Untitled* (□□□□) is a single-channel video piece that focuses on the inaccessibility of language through technology. The digital sphere fragments language and exposes the limitations of software. These newly formed characters become symbols of refusal, denying access through translation. This work aims to reclaim and validate Eritrean subjectivity, refuse the hegemonic gaze of the Western/Eurocentric perspective and interrogate the legibility of language and its translations.



Untitled (□□□□) (video still)

Sophie Kovel

1996, California, USA



Untitled (Welcome) (2018-21). Flocked coir, carpeted rubber-backed and waterhog doormats. 24" x 36" x 1", 18" x 30" x 1", overall dimensions variable

Sophie Kovel is a conceptual artist based in New York. Gleaning and undermining iconographies of fascism, white supremacy, profit-motive and denial that often take banal and overlooked forms—on flagpoles, doormats, postcards, floral wrapping paper, in real estate holdings, and in current work, about the 2017 court case *United States of America v. Reality Leigh Winner*—Kovel reckons with the surfaces and structures that hold up American ideology. Hudson River School idealism, at-your-doorstep Americana and kitsch, polarizing wealth accrual, property dispossession, displacement and the politics of dis/information connect a swath of research interests.

Committed to debunking advertising and the neutrality of information systems and surveillance, and underscoring state control using historical technologies, Kovel deregulates and catalogs the written and visual scripts and syntaxes of US nationalism and authoritarianism. Balancing a collecting impulse with a minimalist one, at times poetic, absurdist, or comedic, she tracks the circulation, persistence, and meaning of these signs, phrases and the racialized ideologies that undergird them.



Untitled (Welcome) (detail)

Christine Yerie Lee

1988, Tennessee, USA



LIVING THREADS (2020). Video. 6:12 mins

Christine Yerie Lee is an interdisciplinary artist working in video and sculpture. Raised in the American South by immigrant parents from South Korea, her practice explores performativity and identity-formation through video and sculpture.

LIVING THREADS is composed of two videoworks exploring the role of tradition and ritual as cultural carriers and how traditions are preserved through reinvention. In *slayin' demons*, Lee and her mother, a traditional Korean dancer, perform the "salpuri" dance in Chickasaw Heritage Park (Memphis), where ceremonial mounds were excavated for artillery storage during the Civil War. In *HEADROOM*, a hybrid translation of Korean/English for "headbang," they perform a shared intergenerational heirloom.

Alberto Lule

1978, California, USA

Alberto Lule uses readymades, mixed media installations, video, performances and tools used by agencies of authority to examine and critique the prison industrial complex in the United States, particularly the California carceral state. He uses his own experience of being incarcerated to explore the roles of institutions as gatekeepers of knowledge, authorities of culture, and administrators of discipline and punishment.

Alien Vs. Predator focuses on the relationship between the artist and the artist's illegal immigrant father. When Lule was growing up there was a culture clash that happened between his father and him. Growing up the child of illegal aliens was full of very uncomfortable experiences and friction between cultures. As an adult he realized how similar their lives truly were when under the gaze of authority and systems of power that designate identity for all.



Alien Vs. Predator #1 (2019). Mixed media. 38" x 50"

Laila Mesteri

1992, Casablanca, Morocco



A Bridge (2022). Video installation (wood, fabric and video projection). 60" x 67" x 4", 11:22 mins

Laila Mesteri's interdisciplinary practice examines issues around cultural hybridity, diasporic identity and belonging. Anchored in the compositional logic of collage and assemblage, Mesteri investigates the contrapuntal culture in which the Maghrebi diaspora dwells across continents, and explores her capacity to inhabit multiple worlds at once. In *A Bridge*, the symbolic function of the bridge as a structure positioned in between places reflects her own position between North African and North American cultures. This work stems from her need to make a home in the image.

Maya Nguyen

1996, Moscow, Russia



Running Out of Hand (2021). Digital jacquard weaving (wool, cotton).
17" x 26"

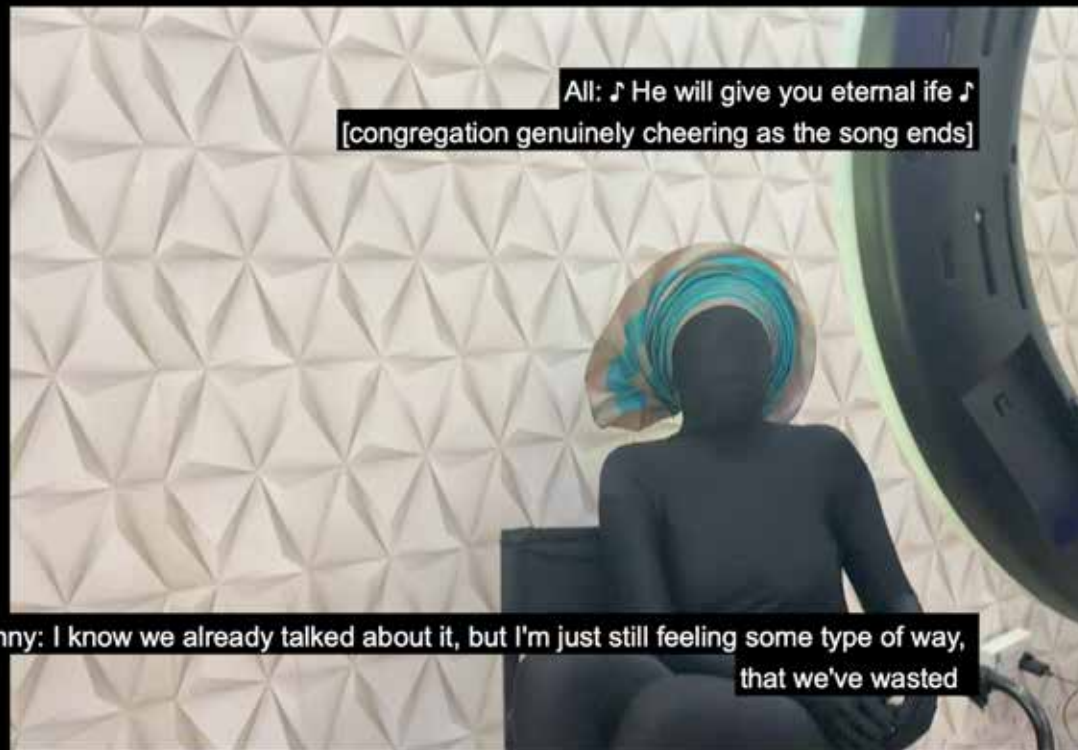
Maya Nguyen is a Vietnamese-Russian interdisciplinary artist working at the boundaries of sound, image and the body. In her practice—be it in archival war photography woven into fabric, soft gray wool knotted into barbed wire fences, or videos juxtaposing image and sound—she works with subtle displacements of the senses. At the core of her work is the belief that by pushing our embodied senses to the edge we can, once again, become sensitive to the power dynamics that structure our environments. For Nguyen, these power dynamics become most explicit at the boundary zone between entities, rather than in the entities themselves. Hence partitions, juxtapositions and borders feature prominently in her work as ambiguous zones of interaction.

Running Out of Hand is a series of fiber works based on portraits of refugee families from the photographic archive of the Second Indochina War (1955-75), otherwise known as the Vietnam War. Archival photographs are condensed down to the grip of multiple bodies in flight, whether it be a grip to protect, to reach out, to carry or to be carried. Through this specific physical gesture, *Running Out of Hand* presents history as it is embedded in the body—not just the individual body, but bodies holding onto one another.



Chinaedu E. Nwadibia

1986, Missouri, USA



When Blessings Call (2021). Video. 5:49 mins

Chinaedu Nwadibia firmly believes in the functions of portraiture, storytelling and the supernatural. The orality of her Nigerian and African American heritage nurtured a keen observational ear that guides her visual work. Using photography, sculpture and performance, she advocates for herself and others, illuminating the spaces just out of view and prompting a further investigation into how one perceives their surroundings.

When Blessings Call is one installment in Nwadibia's efforts to maintain a dialogue with her ancestors across the various "present moments" that we all inhabit.

Nwadibia reflects: *I look Black I am Black. I'm grounded and proud; still, for years I waged a war for balance internally. African side is never African enough and American side is too African. Living two culturally different lives in the same skin. One time my African American friend was irate with me because I kept saying that "I am African." I used to shift and hide and change myself, but now they're gonna get whatever comes out of this bonnet.*

I realized that it was me who lost in the end, I'd only grown more flimsy and malleable, bending however The World told me I should. A form of self-inflicted exile, robbing myself of both cultures, my birthright. Never that feeling again, please. These days whenever I run into The World, I don't even have to tell her, she knows.

Aquilah Ohemeng

1998, Pennsylvania, USA

Aquilah Ohemeng is an interdisciplinary female artist who, in layering movement and filmmaking work, seeks hidden transgenerational truths and traumas within a cishet Black body. She received her formal dance education from Spelman College, earning a B.A. in Dance Performance & Choreography. Having taught dance technique and theory at prominent institutions such as Syracuse University (formerly as adjunct faculty), Spelman College and the Boston Conservatory at Berklee, Ohemeng continues to work as a bicoastal movement artist and director for both on- and off-screen creative projects.

Through archival and improvisational exploration, *Caged Bird* confronts the painful residue of Africa's

westernization, Aquilah's ancestors' forced exile and its iniquities. This work questions: Can a once oppressive space redefine liberation? Can those polarities coexist? The excerpt's tree parallels the fate of pre- and post-colonial Africans who were uprooted and displaced throughout the diaspora. Now gone, footage of this historical tree proves it once existed; looking back, another reclamation act.



Caged Bird (2020). Dance performance/choreography/2D video.
4:01 mins

Sammaneh Pourshafighi

1982, Tehran, Iran



Reconnected to the Self and the Ancestors Through the Act of Washing My Body (2021). Digital photographic print. 36" x 48"

Sammaneh Pourshafighi is a Queer genderfluid Muslim who arrived in Australia as a refugee after the Iranian Revolution and grew up in the problematic paradise of the Gold Coast. Her ancestral tribes originate from Oureh, Gilan and Kurdistan. Pourshafighi is a hereditary witch, producer, writer and multidisciplinary artist. Her work plays with identity, ritual, the Body, diaspora, Middle Eastern and Western histories and comedy as a way to address trauma.

Converging in her parents' garden following six months of COVID-19 lockdowns spent apart, Pourshafighi (the photographer) is captured in an Islamic-style ritual as her maternal aunt and mother tenderly wash her body. Equal parts celebration, act of love and spiritual cleansing, the ritual marks a powerful reconnection of physical community ties in a post-pandemic world.

Mehregan Pezeshki

1986, Tehran, Iran



Drowned Dream (2019). Photography (silver gelatin prints). 12" x 18" (each of 5 photographs)

Mehregan Pezeshki is an Iranian American multidisciplinary artist. Her artwork is often autobiographical, unraveling the traumatic memories of her youth while growing up in Iran. Pezeshki uses photography to uncover hidden behavior affecting our daily lives. She employs an unconventional angle that challenges viewers to step out of their comfort zone and observe human behaviors from a new perspective.

Through a series of photographs, Pezeshki distills the repressive atmosphere and struggle that she faced growing up in a strict and controlling religious society to the visceral struggle for life of someone under water who is unable to move freely or breathe while being pulled down with a black Chador (Hijab). The uncanny is portrayed in high contrast black-and-white.



Drowned Dream (1 of 5 in series)

Mohammad Sabir SABIR

1991, Kabul, Afghanistan



Hazara Genocide in Afghanistan (2022). Oil on bandages.
Dimensions variable

Mohammad Sabir SABIR is an artist and educator born and raised in Kabul, Afghanistan. He began practicing art in 2001 and left Afghanistan in the fall of 2021. He moved to London, United Kingdom where he currently studies and resides. SABIR's work sheds light on the largely unknown genocide in Afghanistan of the Hazara people, an ethnic minority of which he is a member, through the use of traditional Hazara embroidery motifs. He uses traditional painting materials such as oil with less traditional materials such as bandages.

Araks Sahakyan

1990, Hrazdan, Armenia



ingenocide (2014, new sound editing 2017). Video. 8:50 mins

Araks Sahakyan is a visual artist, performer and translator. A Spanish-Armenian artist who moves between several languages, she makes translation the central process of a transdisciplinary approach combining drawing, video and performance. She plays with the boundaries between reality and fiction and develops a practice where geopolitical and aesthetic issues related to displacement, uprooting and identity intersect.

What is collective memory? What is personal memory? Who determines the heritage of trauma? *ingenocide* is an audio-visual project composed of images taken at the frontier between Armenia and Turkey, representing a journey many Armenians embark upon by bus or car to visit ancient Armenian cities now in Turkish territory. Sahakyan introduces strange elements that reflect geographical signs of a fragmented history. The potential and task of a language is reflected upon in relation to political conflict, and the voice of the artist tells a story in an invented language.



ingenocide (video still)

Zelikha Zohra Shoja

1990, Virginia, USA

Zelikha Zohra Shoja is a moving image artist based on Onondaga land (Central New York). Her artistic practice is engaged in communal storytelling in the Afghan diaspora and post-memory, or the transmission of memory.

In response to being unable to shoot a short film last summer due to U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and Taliban rule, a rehearsal unfolds in front of backdrops of the artist's maternal home of three generations in Kabul. These portable backdrops become alternative spaces of transplanting, remembering and becoming a home. Small movements, shadows from the sky, improvised dialogue and occasional laughter towards the camera set the stage for memory-making and domestic ritual.



The Rehearsal #1: We Deliver the Clouds (2022). Dual-channel digital video. 20:41 mins

The Rehearsal #1: We Deliver the Clouds (video still)

Chanell Stone

1992, California, USA



Untitled (Mississippi) (2021). Archival pigment print. 16" x 20"

Chanell Stone is an artist living and working in Southern California. Through self-portraiture, collage and poetry Stone investigates the Black body's intersectional states of being and connection to the natural world. Moving fluidly between sitter, seer and imaginative space, she de-centers the gaze of the other while forging new formations for Black female subjectivity. Stone negotiates these potentialities for redefinition in tandem with the upending of Black historical and ancestral memories buried within the American landscape.

As I hit Mississippi soil something inside me quakes
I am struck by the surreality of the return;
A return to the place my ancestors were enslaved, lynched and raped
I feel myself instantaneously embodying my ancestors'
Memory and sight

As I peer out of the car window
arrested by the state's unexpected beauty
I stare, transfixed by the endless sea of green pines
wrapped in spring's wisteria and cradled by evening's twilight
The evocative allure of the land does not quell but only quickens
my pulse heightened by the omnipresence duality
standing before me

A sight of such beauty is steeped in Black blood
Extracted from centuries' long genocide,
terror and mutilation of countless Black bodies;
Robbed of life, robbed of justice.

— *Marrow* by Chanell Stone

Marrow (poem) (2021). Archival pigment print. 16" x 20"

Vivian Vivas

1987, Cali, Colombia



Elision (2022). Video. 8:03 mins

Vivian Vivas is a visual artist who fuses moving image, sound, photography, performance, unchoreographed dance and installation. Their work challenges boundaries in contemporary issues, raising questions about migration, notions of identity and climate collapse. Through their practice, they strive to open the door to the unconscious mind for a full-bodied, conceptual experience, inviting the audience to

participate and actively engage in conversations that can individually and collectively transform reality within a constructed world. Vivas' artistic sensibility and practice, grounded in nature and the natural world, were heavily influenced by their experience growing up in the mountains of Colombia and their formative school years during which they studied both art and ecology.

ELISION is a visceral reaction to our toxic relationship with the environment. Shot in the cenotes of the Mayan Riviera—waters that were traditionally used for burials and later as mass graves by the colonialists—the video magnifies our confrontation with historical spaces and the aftermath of violent immigration. It raises questions about voice, agency and historical accounts, as well as our dependency on the ecosystem.

Rebecca Wakim

1998, Maryland, USA



Everyday's Fortune (2020). Ceramics (porcelain, glaze, decal). 2" x 2"

Rebecca Wakim is a Lebanese interdisciplinary visual artist. She received her B.A. in Studio Arts from the American University of Beirut in 2019, where her main focus has since been on the unjust political system in Lebanon and its repercussions.

Wakim's practice embodies the symbolism excavated from domestic objects, where she explores the meaning, history and use of these objects that shape her environment. Working with traditional Lebanese coffee cups derives from the ancient tradition, sprinkled with hope and optimism, of reading fortunes through coffee residue. In *Everyday's Fortune*, Wakim explores the hopelessness experienced from the October 17, 2019 revolution that swept Lebanon. The political fiasco spurred an economic collapse. Phrases from conversations held with co-patriots were turned into decals and placed inside to represent the bad fortune experienced.



Panel Discussions

**Panel #1:
Hrag Vartanian
Friday, September 30th**

Araks Sahakyan and Gabrielle Constantine in conversation with Hrag Vartanian via Zoom with a Q&A between curators Farshid Bazmandegan and Rachel Hakimian Emenaker



**Panel #2:
Rodrigo Valenzuela
Saturday, October 1st**

Jackie Castillo, Alberto Lule, and Chanell Stone in conversation with Rodrigo Valenzuela - In-person at UCLA New Wight Gallery



**Panel #3:
Gelare Khoshgozaran
Thursday, October 6th**

Mehregan Pezeshki, Sammaneh Pourshafighi, and Zelikha Zohra Shoja in conversation with Gelare Khoshgozaran - In-person at UCLA New Wight Gallery





Installation Image - UCLA New Wight Gallery



The New Wight Biennial was founded in the nineties at the University of California, Los Angeles. While now an ostensibly progressive institution in a relatively progressive state, UCLA as a land-grant institution was created through Indigenous land dispossession in the name of US settler colonial economic and military advancement. Similarly complex and conflicted interrelationships among bodies and labor, homes, lands, races, beliefs, nations and critical art practices found wide-ranging, present-day articulations in *Between the Self and its True Home*, the 2022 New Wight Biennial curated by UCLA MFA candidates Farshid Bazmandegan and Rachel Hakimian Emenaker.

Upon entering the New Wight Gallery on the UCLA campus, exhibition visitors were flanked by works of four women artists that centered women's bodies—their own and others'—as storytellers and subjects. These artists—born in Iran, the US to Afghan parents, Israel, and Ukraine, but living at the time of the show in a different nation or state—reflected the diasporic diversity of the show's artists as a whole: twenty-three of the twenty-seven artists identified as women or nonbinary, and many, while born across the globe, were at the time of the show based in the US, Australia or Western Europe. In developing their show concept, both curators felt urgency around convening voices, particularly women's, on diverse but parallel experiences of diaspora and exile; while they had not previously worked together, the curators realized their personal backgrounds were linked to political and social conflicts in countries closely situated with respect to geography.

While Western nations' economic and political agendas shaped the original conditions of exile for many, including SWANA, nations, chronically deficient Western public awareness of and interest in these regions and histories re-exile the exiled. This recursive in-betweenness of

exile—between exploitation and neglect—is not one protected by and within its surroundings, but rather one chronically unsettled by internal or external forces of seizure, surveillance, suppression or annihilation. In his essay, *Reflections on Exile*, from which the curators took their show's title, Edward Said identified the dialectical or mutually constitutive relationship between nationality and exile, where the promise of belonging to a nation creates the possibility of exclusion from it, and where the excluded form groups from which further exclusion is possible. "Perhaps this is the most extraordinary of exile's fates," Said remarked, "to have been exiled by exiles—to relive the actual process of up-rooting at the hands of exiles." Among the voices the curators took care to highlight in the show are those of the "minorities of minorities"—exiled by exiles—who experience displacement and ostracism in underrepresented ways.

The curators' personal histories compelled their interest in honoring and magnifying the specificity of each artist's narrative. Hakimian Emenaker was born to Armenian American parents and lived alternately between Suriname and Russia before eventually moving to the US as a young adult. Numerous experiences profoundly affected Hakimian Emenaker and underscored for her the importance of giving voice to those in states of exile that are relatively invisible to the world at large. Bazmandegan was born in Iran a few years after the Iranian Islamic Revolution to a family of Bahá'í faith (the largest minority religion in Iran). Forced to leave Iran in his early twenties, he came to the US alone as a refugee and has not been able to return since.

Upon being selected by the Department of Art to helm the Biennial, the curators made extensive international efforts to reach MFA students and those who had just graduated with their open call; they ultimately fielded over 240

submissions from which they selected twenty-seven artists. Born across twelve countries between 1976 and 1998, the invited artists were based at the time of the show in four overseas countries and seven US states. Their selected works employed an array of mediums and processes including video, photography, painting, assemblage, crochet, sewing, digital weaving, writing, performance and dance, and in subject matter ranged from deeply personal—centered on themselves and their families—to historical and archival. The works were installed in the gallery to activate dialogue among them, and to guide visitors from embodied women-centered works at the entrance to more abstract works in final rooms.

In his essay, Said observed that “the need to reassemble an identity out of the refractions and discontinuities of exile...give[s] rise to investigations of the self.... [T]here is a self-consciousness in an individual trying to understand why...in spite of oppression and the threat of extinction a particular ethos remains alive in exile.” The call or impulse to survive—spiritually, emotionally, physically, narratively, communally, historically—through self-reflective artmaking is a manifestation of the courage of this ethos. Through *Between the Self and its True Home*, artists resourcefully shared distinctly personal realities and possibilities for survival of “self” and “home” vis-à-vis kindred notions of exile; their expressions ranged from candidly and starkly despairing to reclaiming, recombinatory and inventive. Similar motifs and metaphors appeared in pieces by geographically disparate artists; rugs and/or mothers, for example, appeared in several pieces. A screenshot Bazmandegan took of one of his last conversations with his mother and a Persian rug she wove for, but ultimately could not send, him became the graphic image of the show; poetically altered to evoke waves, the image alludes

to diaspora, (dis)connections between family members across oceans and episodes of melancholy, displacement and deep reflection.

Three public-facing in-person or virtual panels featuring a total of eight artists facilitated deeper discussions of, respectively, SWANA-related issues overlooked in Western contexts, photography as a vehicle for exploring Latinx and African American diasporic experiences, and challenges faced by women from Iran and Afghanistan. Hrag Vartanian, founder of Hyperallergic and born in Syria to an Armenian family, moderated the first panel, while UCLA Art professor Rodrigo Valenzuela, born in Chile, moderated the second and LA-based artist and writer Gelare Khoshgozaran, born in Iran, moderated the third. Unexpected resonances among the curators, artists, panel moderators and UCLA faculty with whom the curators had discussions while developing the show created special moments of validation and healing.

For the curators, these highly specific moments of emotional resonance and recognition and the opportunity to collectively acknowledge and contemplate typically neglected issues and voices contributed to the show’s overall success and potential legacy. The curators hope that conversations among the artists will continue and that the show will evolve into new formats, so that its dynamic and inclusive in-betweenness—as a hub-like home—remains alive, not only for the artists, but wider audiences as well, as all humans experience, the curators note, at some point and to some degree, the loss of some form of home.

Essay by Jennie E. Park

Acknowledgments

The New Wight Biennial 2022

Between the Self and its True Home
expressions of displacement and uprootedness

September 22, 2022 - October 6, 2022

UCLA New Wight Gallery
Broad Art Center, Suite 1100
Los Angeles, CA 90095

Curated by:
Farshid Bazmandegan and Rachel Hakimian Emenaker

With gratitude to
The artists for their participation

Department of Art

Catherine Opie
Ben Evans
Owen Kydd
Else Henry
Erin Kermanikian
Ed Beller
Christian Salazar
Chris Bassett
Joseph Kim

Panelists

Hrag Vartanian
Rodrigo Valenzuela
Gelare Khoshgozaran

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*Between the Self
and its True Home*
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School of the Arts and Architecture