

# OCULA

## EXPO CHICAGO 2022: Artist Highlights

Reporting from Chicago, Ocula Magazine explores the practices of just some of the artists who stood out among the 140 galleries at EXPO CHICAGO (7–10 April 2022).

Stephanie Bailey | Chicago | 18 April 2022



Exhibition view: Shulamit Nazarian, EXPO CHICAGO (7–10 April 2022). Courtesy Shulamit Nazarian.

### Cammie Staros at Shulamit Nazarian

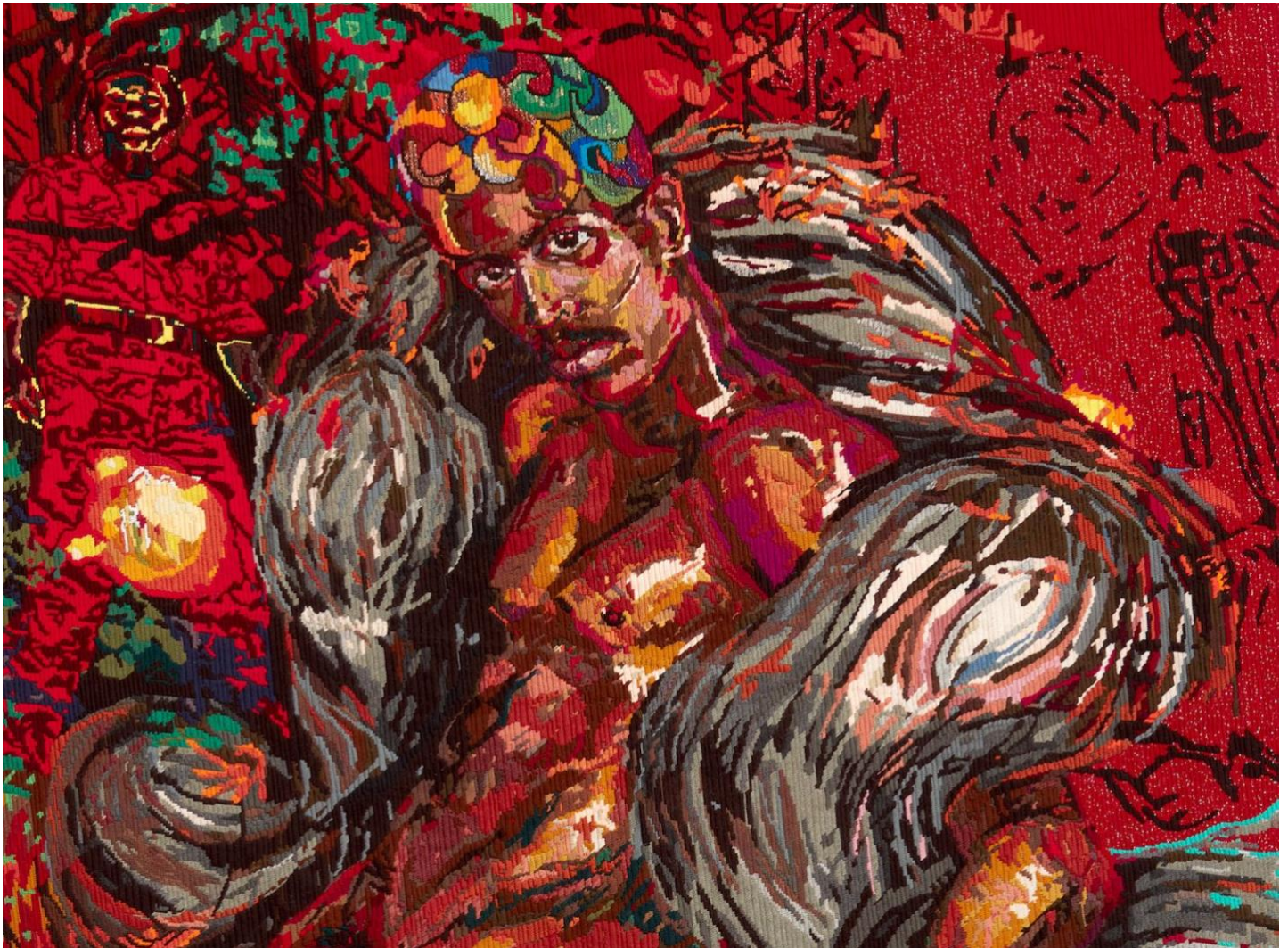
Of Greek origin, Cammie Staros is drawn to the materials and forms of the ancient world, which can act as shorthand for the compression and instrumentalisation of time.

To see the Parthenon overlooking the city of Athens, for example, surrounded by costly equipment for its ambitious re-construction at the height of the Greek economic crisis, was enough for some to prompt a serious meditation on the fetishisation of history and culture.

Accordingly, Staros' work challenges the hegemony of man-made time, at once formal and critical. After all, a terracotta vessel may break, but its materials will always find their way back to the earth, as suggested by the artist's first solo exhibition with Shulamit Nazarian, *What Will Have Being* (16 January–6 March 2021), in which terracotta vessels were turned into habitats for working fish tanks.



Among the three deconstructed ceramic amphorae paired beautifully with a duo of turquoise paintings by Summer Wheat at EXPO, was Fictile ficticium (2020). The terracotta sculpture resembles a coiled shell or the inside of an ear, and marks a continuation of the artist's 2020 Guggenheim Fellowship research, soon to be followed with a solo exhibition at the Pitzer College in September 2022.



Athi-Patra Ruga, *Jacob About to Wrestle an Angel* (2021) (detail). Wool and thread on tapestry canvas. 149 x 198 cm.  
Courtesy WHATIFTHEWORLD.

### **Athi-Patra Ruga at WHATIFTHEWORLD**

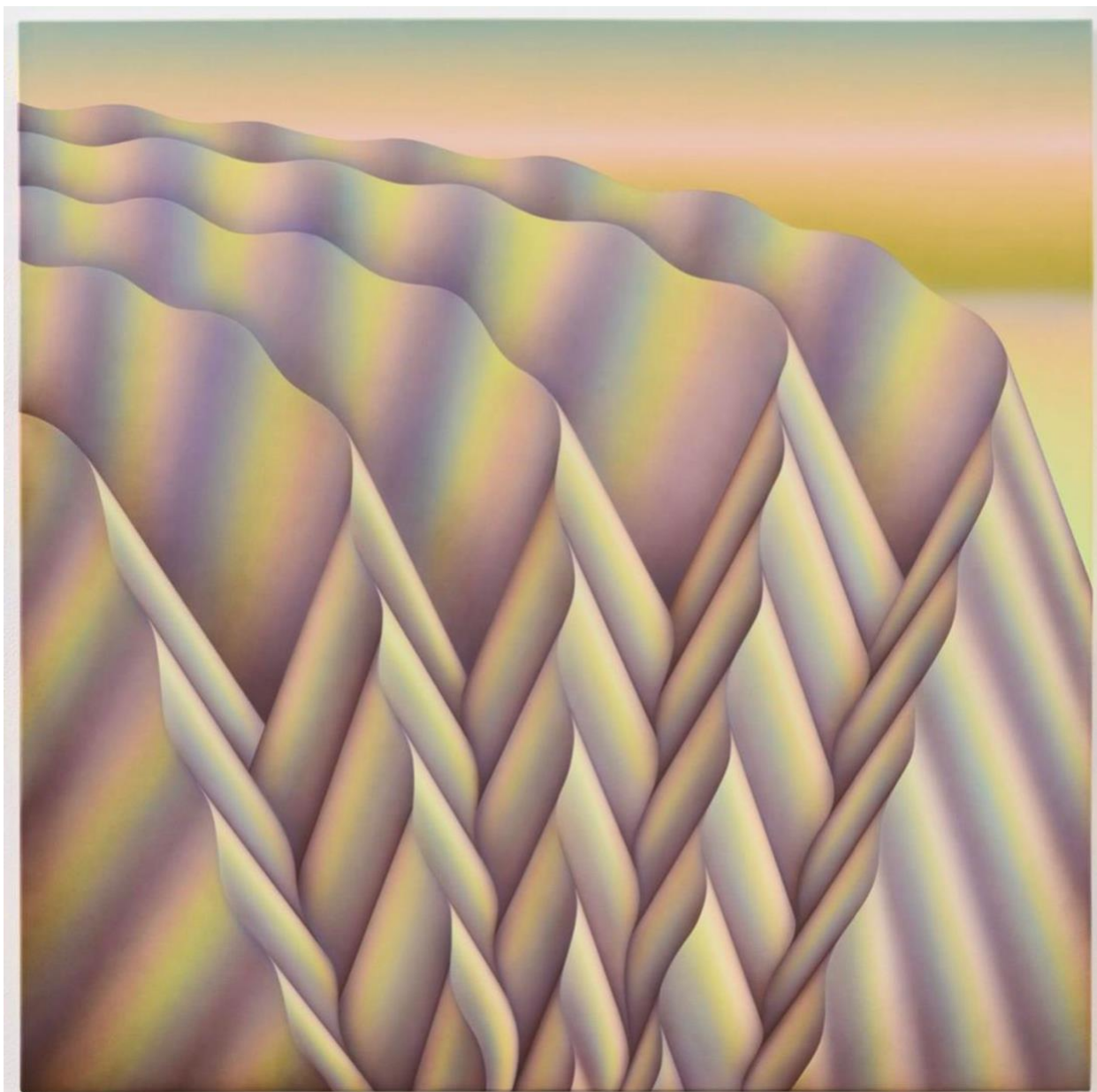
There is an arresting sense of high drama in Athi-Patra Ruga's unrelenting palette of red warps and wefts composing the artist's tapestry at EXPO, *Jacob About to Wrestle an Angel* (2021).

Depicted standing and naked against an opulent background whose markings suggest vegetation, Ruga carries a voluminous grey form on his shoulders like fresh kill. The tapestry's dense build contrasts with the lightness of some stitches with 'strokes' evoking the quick-fire hand of an expressionist, with the image's sharpest point being the artist's gaze.

Alongside the tapestry at EXPO were three oil stick and pastel portraits of African women that invoke a bygone aesthetic and era. The latter were included in *Act One ...In Travesti*, Ruga's first solo show with Eva Presenhuber (6 November–18 December 2021), which introduced audiences to the mythical place that Ruga's characters inhabit: Azania, the name given to pre-colonial South Africa and a rallying symbol for the Anti-Apartheid Movement.



More recently, Ruga completed a residency at the University of Cape Town Irma Stern Museum, followed by an exhibition that put his practice in dialogue with Irma Stern's, a white, female South African artist whose mid-20th-century expeditions to central Africa informed Ruga's iconic tapestries.



Molly Greene, *Shear* (2022). Acrylic on canvas. 121.92 x 121.92 cm. Courtesy Richard Heller Gallery.

### **Molly Greene at Richard Heller Gallery**

There really is no substitution for seeing a painting in person, especially when it's doing what Molly Greene's *Shear* (2022) is doing.

The flat, acrylic on canvas landscape undulates with fine lines and strokes that build dynamic, opalescent colour gradations between chartreuse and lilac across the frame, as four valleys—or plaits—descend towards the bottom centre.

Greene's luminous palettes evoke the oily, rainbow edges of iridescent seashell interiors. The seashell form is repeated three times in a column, each tucked between mountains, or cheeks, in the dusk-filtered acrylic on canvas *Catenary* (2022), on view in *The Entelechians at Ruschman in Chicago* (8 April–14 May 2022), alongside artists like Nadia Ayari and Yuli Yamagata.

There is an undeniable hypnotism to Greene's floral fractals, as with *Insinuator*, a print created in 2021 to support the New York charity City Harvest, which shows eight tulip stems with blubs on either end, forming a figure eight—there is no beginning nor end for the eye to stop.



Paige Taul, *7-7-94 For my babe* (2018) (film still). 16mm transfer, 3:22 min, colour. Courtesy the artist and Chicago Artists Coalition.

### Paige Taul at Chicago Artists Coalition

At its core, *7-7-94 For my babe* (2018) is an intimate archaeology—or as the artist describes, 'experimental cinematography'—of the camera, the gaze, and how the two come together to form not only an image, but a representation of a life.

On a lone wall leading to a small booth screening room, a polaroid from the 1990s shows Taul's dad dressed handsomely in white and kneeling—an image he took and sent to the artist's mother before entering federal prison. Common practice in those analogue days, Taul explained.

Nearby, a short, 16mm film portrait of a young Black man dressed in white 'emulates without imitating' the artist's father, drawing out a connection between now and then through portraiture's evergreen affect.

At the fair, Taul acknowledged how some will instantly recognise the prison polaroid genre, while others won't, and this doesn't faze her. As a study of photographic portraiture, there are many ways to engage with these images, but the connecting charge across the spectrum in Taul's project are the textures of vulnerability and intimacy that the artist draws out.



Theodora Allen, *Infinitude, No. 3* (2022). Oil on linen. 101.6 x 86.4 cm. Courtesy Kasmin.

### **Theodora Allen at Kasmin**

Theodora Allen is known for delicate oil and watercolour on linen paintings composed of esoteric motifs—the moon, flowers, stars—connected by geometric grids and frames.

Like tablets from the frescoed walls of temples and churches, whether in Herculaneum or Hollywood, build-ups of gesso and layers of paint scraped off the surface create an image plane that seems to illuminate the picture from within.

In 2021, Kunsthall Aarhus in Denmark hosted Allen's first institutional solo, *Saturnine* (14 May–18 July 2021), which followed with the launch of a corresponding monograph in February 2022, edited and authored by EXPO CHICAGO's artistic director Stephanie Cristello, during the artist's third solo show with Blum & Poe.

Cristello also curated Allen's first solo museum presentation in the U.S., which opened at the Driehaus Museum in Chicago ahead of EXPO Art Week, during which a miniature pair of Allen's paintings presented by Chicago Manual Style were on view at the cute and manageable Barely Fair, a one-room art fair where a scaled-down model of booths became the stage for the actual event.





Zorah Opoku, *'I am Great of Magic, with the knife that came forth from Seth. My feet belong to me forever. I am present in glory and I am mighty through this Eye that raised up my heart after weariness. One transfigured in heaven, mighty on earth, I have flown as a falcon.'* (2022). Screenprint on linen, thread. 203.2 x 185.4 cm. Courtesy Mariane Ibrahim.

### Zorah Opoku at Mariane Ibrahim

It was in Athens, Greece, that I first came across the work of Zorah Opoku among the exhibitors at the 7th Athens Biennale (24 September–28 November 2021), co-curated by Larry Ossei-Mensah and Omsk Social Club as a rejection of the white universal, hence the title: ECLIPSE.

Installed in one room in the stone and dust architectural shell of the former Santaroza Courthouse was video documentation of a performance staged in 1978 by Victoria Santa Cruz, *Me gritaron negra* (They shouted black at me), in which Cruz fiercely rejects the racism she has been forced to endure, and proclaims 'Soy Negra!' in a process of deep catharsis.

Facing this powerful work was a 2020 monotype on canvas by Opoku, whose title begins with the proclamation, 'I have my mouth to speak.' Drawing on hieroglyphics from the Egyptian Book Of The Dead (50 BCE), the mostly greyscale image, save for three blue hands and golden accents, is composed of body parts screenprinted over leaves and masks, with outlines accentuated by black and grey stitches.

The work is from Opoku's series 'The Myths of Eternal Life', a coherent reflection on healing, transformation, death, and the afterlife, Mariane Ibrahim displayed both at the EXPO booth and the gallery, where Opoku staged her second solo exhibition, *I have arisen...* (8 April–14 May 2022).



Exhibition view: Elian Almeida, Nara Roesler, EXPO CHICAGO (7–10 April 2022). Courtesy Nara Roesler.

### **Elian Almeida at Nara Roesler**

Many of the paintings by the young, Brazilian painter Elian Almeida at EXPO were included in the artist's recent solo show with Nara Roesler, Before – now – what is yet to come (1 September–23 October 2021).

Curated by Luis Pérez-Oramas, the exhibition showcased Almeida's 'Vogue' series, commenced in 2018. Almeida says the project 'synthesises the core elements of [his] production'—notably, the notion of 'archaeology of historical memory' and 'questioning the absence and erasure of Black feminine figures'.

Painted with soft, thick brushstrokes so that bodies and forms become rich distributions of paint, 16 portraits of Black Brazilian women of note—among them Conceição Evaristo, whose words gave Almeida's show its title—were shown in Rio de Janeiro alongside a wall of Vogue issues, each covered in a mess of black paint.

To incorporate Vogue's title into these paintings hijacks the magazine's iconic status to highlight a saturation of absence, such that Almeida's 'Vogue' paintings went on to illustrate *Enciclopédia negra* (2021), a publication aimed at recovering Black historical figures from Brazilian history by anthropologist Lilia M. Schwarcz, historian Flávio dos Santos Gomes, and artist Jaime Lauriano.



Exhibition view: Chelsea Culprit, Susurro Sibila, Revolver Galería, Buenos Aires (22 April–15 August 2021). Courtesy Revolver Galería.

### **Chelsea Culprit at Revolver Galería**

It's always nice to walk into a gallery booth at an art fair and feel like you are walking into something composed—and not just the moveable equivalent of a summer group show with the gallery's biggest names.

That's how it felt wandering through EXPO's PROFILE sector, which focuses on thematic exhibitions, and seeing Chelsea Culprit's work at Revolver Galería's booth.

Hung from the ceiling, suspended front and centre, was a trio of sculptures composed from coloured, plexiglass slats cut into outlines of body parts to create an abstracted figure. Their shadows and hued reflections hit the walls, with two hosting a charcoal on canvas rendering of similar overlapping bodily lines.

The body of work tells the story of sibyls, prophetesses from Greek mythology who were placed in a state of trance before offering predictions, making these coloured sculptures a kind of Platonian diagram of shadows dancing, us looking.





*Exhibition view: Hilma's Ghost, Carrie Secrist Gallery, EXPO CHICAGO (7–10 April 2022). Courtesy Carrie Secrist Gallery.*

### **Hilma's Ghost at Carrie Secrist Gallery**

The pandemic pull for tarot, crystals, and guidance expands into the art market with this collaboration between artists Dannielle Tegeder and Sharmistha Ray as the feminist artist collective Hilma's Ghost.

To make the original ABSTRACT FUTURES TAROT deck in 2021, the artists worked on the deck for over 400 hours, drawing and drafting the designs that would eventually compose the 78 cards, with images that recall the likes of Lissitzky, Kandinsky, and Malevich.

For EXPO CHICAGO—where a gorgeous entry to the Carrie Secrist booth was created by enlarging a beautiful, floral garland collage by Stephen Eichhorn—Hilma's Ghost invited tarot reader Sarah Potter to give visitors readings in a partitioned section amid a new suite of paintings, with pigments infused with crushed gemstones.

To make these works, the artists worked with Potter to pull a series of readings with channelled meanings, which were then translated visually. The result is a multi-layered exhibition proposal: tarot reading as exhibition performance, not entirely unaffordable tarot deck for sale, artworks for collectors.



Exhibition view: NOME, EXPO CHICAGO (7–10 April 2022). Courtesy NOME.

### Paolo Cirio and Dread Scott at NOME

Dread Scott and Paolo Cirio are known for unflinchingly confronting the social injustices of extractive technologies. Unrelenting in raising the crimes of slavery, Scott's *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* (2019), documented in photographs at NOME's booth, re-enacts the largest rebellion of enslaved people in American history in 1811.

Scott recently mentioned *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* during an Art Basel Hong Kong conversation in relation to his NFT project *White Man for Sale* (2019), showing a white man standing on an auction block on a Brooklyn sidewalk, which was sold at Christie's New York—a confrontation with the NFT medium and the financialisation culture from which it descends.

In a similar confrontation, Paolo Cirio's 'Property, White House' series (2019–2021) consists of historical photographs of U.S. presidents printed out and pinned to the wall, to highlight the fact that Getty Images still licenses and sells pictures from the public domain.

Cirio coined the term 'internet photography' to include the context of the internet itself when reflecting on the production and dissemination of images online: 'Capturing the internet photographically means to position the camera inside its databases, algorithms, screens, feeds, and networks,' the artist wrote.





Sara Cwynar, *Encyclopedia Grids (Women Demonstrating Technology)* (2021). Archival pigment print mounted to Dibond. 101.6 x 76.2 cm. Edition 3 of 3 + 2 AP. Courtesy Foxy Production, New York.

### Sara Cwynar at Foxy Production

Despite its visual dispersion, there is something so direct about *Encyclopedia Grids (Women Demonstrating Technology)* (2021), a large print showing the artist pointing an index finger to women using technology in 37 black-and-white photographs on a piece of overlapping red sheet.

The work is part of Cwynar's 'Encyclopedia Grids' series (2014–2021), for which the artist finds the same entry in different print encyclopaedias and arranges them into a kind of material taxonomy, as was the case with the Acropolis edition.

Cwynar's photographic work sits somewhere along that taxonomical ridge, but only due to its conceptual maximalism, where distant objectivity gives way to proximate and a palpably energetic curiosity.

Cwynar started out as a graphic designer, and was working at The New York Times when she made one of her first art project. *Kitsch Encyclopedia* (2014) is a publication organising photos with essays by theorists like Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard and her own writing, to play with the associations from each letter of the alphabet.



Exhibition view: Margaret Wharton, Jean Albano Gallery, EXPO CHICAGO (7–10 April 2022). Courtesy Jean Albano Gallery.

### **Margaret Wharton at Jean Albano Gallery**

Having studied advertising, Margaret Wharton's introduction to art-making was through a steel welding course she took in 1967 at Moravian College in Pennsylvania, after becoming enthralled by the steelyards she walked past on the way to work.

After Wharton started a family, she continued to weld, but it was only after moving to Chicago that she resumed her education at the School of the Art Institute, where she helped found the all-women's Artemisia Gallery in 1972, and by the time she graduated in 1975, she settled on her next material of choice: the chair. 'For the following 15 years I focused on transforming wooden chairs into sculpture,' Wharton wrote in a statement explaining how 'they were available, economical, easy to manipulate, incorporated the human activity of destruction and reconstruction'.

These chair sculptures—a brilliant cast of characters like the Lissitzky-esque Proun figure *Singles Game* (2011), in which chair parts combined with tennis and golf objects form the lines of a side-skipping man—were just one highlight in this packed homage at EXPO. Another being Wharton's 1990s photo of a banana bound to a piece of wood with two white bandages. Who knew Cattelan had kind of been done? —[O]