

Exhibit of emerging UC Berkeley artists' work opens May 10 at BAMPFA

By **AJ Fox** | MAY 8, 2023

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Master of Fine Arts student Irma Yuliana Barbosa has created a sculpture in the form of a religious grotto using materials colored with a traditional pre-Colombian dyeing method that was appropriated by colonizers for Christian holy garments. (BAMPFA photo by Daria Lugina)

It's a Tuesday morning at the **Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA)**, and Samuel Wildman is covering the wall of an art gallery with night-lights. At a glance, these objects could be mistaken for mass-produced lights from the local hardware store, the sort you might find installed in a child's bedroom to ward off bedtime anxiety.

But take a closer look, and you'll notice that each light is covered in a porcelain flame that seems more ominous than comforting. The sense of unease deepens when you step back and notice the lights are arranged in a pattern that unmistakably resembles a map of California wildfires, the type of diagram that tends to circulate across the internet during each of the state's ever-lengthening fire seasons.

Wildman is one of seven emerging artists who will graduate this spring from UC Berkeley's nationally-distinguished Master of Fine Arts (MFA) program, which dates back to the founding of the school's **Department of Art Practice** in the 1930s and has produced many graduates, including Jay DeFeo, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Shirin Neshat, Alicia McCarthy and Brontez Purnell, who became famous in the art world.

Much has changed in the artistic and cultural life of the campus since the program began, most notably with the establishment of BAMPFA in 1970 as Berkeley's premier visual arts center. Since then, BAMPFA — initially known simply as the University Art Museum — has held an annual exhibition that celebrates that year's graduating class of MFA students, providing what is for many of these young artists their first opportunity to showcase their work in a museum setting. **This year's exhibit opens on Wednesday, May 10.**



Samuel Wildman's installation of porcelain-covered, flame-shaped lights is an expression of "the affective experience of climate change," he says. "I'm trying to figure out how to express the experience of sitting in an apartment with your 6-year-old, not being able to go outside, trying to explain why smoke is slowly moving in from under the door." (BAMPFA photo by Daria Lugina)

Just as each generation's artists tend to draw on the preoccupations of their era, the annual MFA exhibition often serves as an illuminating microcosm of that year's most pressing intellectual and artistic concerns. Wildman's interest in the topic of climate change echoes a broader trend shared by the members of his cohort, who are using their unique artistic practices to explore how we live in the 21st century. They are tackling weighty themes including identity, technology, trauma, historical memory and the relationship between humans and the natural world.

The form that these explorations take are as diverse and distinctive as this year's seven graduating artists, varying widely across different artistic mediums and aesthetic approaches. For Fei Pan, that means harnessing digital and physical tools to create haunting images that begin as computer-generated illustrations of built and natural landscapes. These renderings form the basis of handmade paintings that capture the tension between the material and the immaterial, between natural and virtual reality.

Pan's interest in the built environment is shared by her fellow graduate Juniper Harrower, whose work is likewise preoccupied with the interactions between human and nature. For the MFA exhibition, she has created a painting of the concretized Los Angeles River, in which the bustling Southern California metropolis has been visually distorted to accommodate the river's explosion of natural dynamism.

In this year's MFA cohort, water likewise serves as a creative inspiration for two other artists for whom water is closely tied to questions of identity and cultural heritage. For Tiare Ribeaux, water is a central theme of her practice as a moving image artist of Indigenous Hawaiian ancestry. Her short film, *Pō'ele Wai (As The Water Darkens)*, revolves around an Indigenous weaver who slowly realizes she is being poisoned by her drinking water after a recent fuel spill.



The 53rd Annual Master of Fine Arts Exhibition opens May 10 at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA) and runs through July 23. (Photo courtesy BAMPFA)

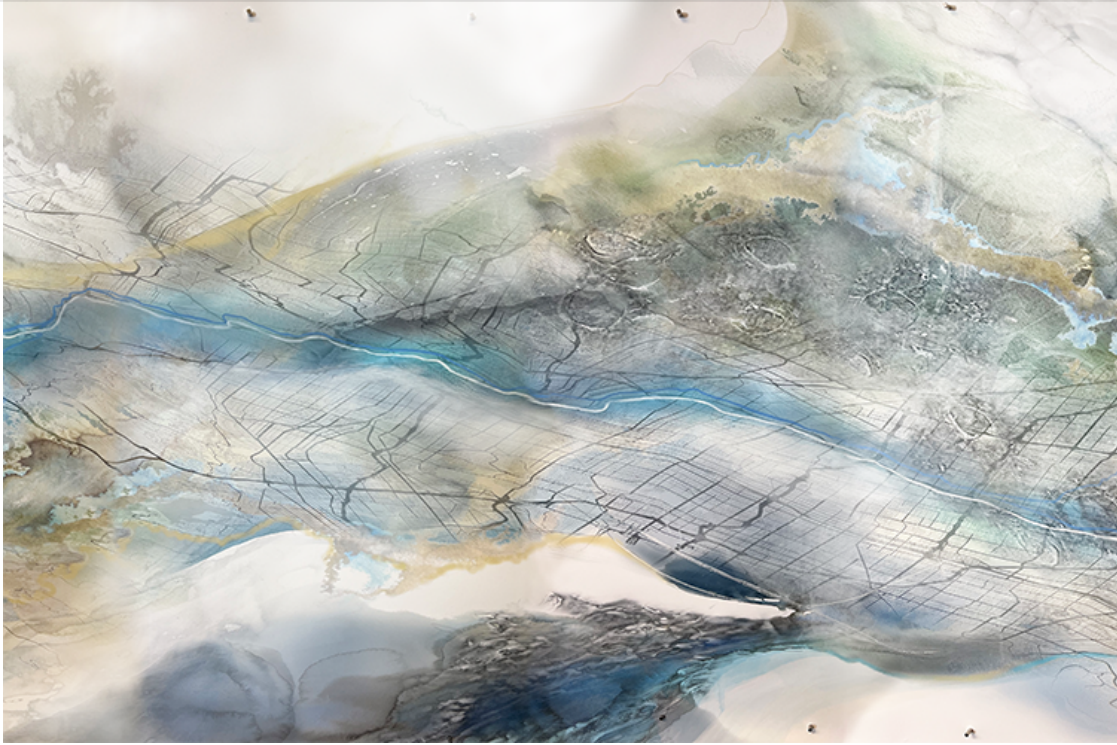
In a similar vein, Eniola Fakile includes references to water in the titles of all her works, which range from sculpture to photography to clothing design. The mutability of water, for Fakile, is a powerful metaphor for reclamation, regeneration and coping — themes that inform her experience of moving through the world as a Black artist.

Themes of identity also infuse the work of Gericault De La Rose, whose multi-tiered sculptures and performance-based works reflect on the multiple layers of being that she experiences as a queer, trans and Filipinx artist.

Another artist working in a very different ancestral tradition, Irma Yuliana Barbosa has created a sculpture in the form of a religious grotto. Many of Barbosa's materials are dyed scarlet by cochineal insects that live on desert cacti, a traditional pre-Colombian dyeing method in Latin America that was appropriated by colonizers for Christian holy garments.

“I’m framing (these works), in a way, as a religious pilgrimage, where there will be three sculptural pieces leading up to the main installation,” says Barbosa, who uses the pronoun “they.” “I call them ‘milagros.’ it’s a term that means a kind of a vow or promise for a miracle, or proof that the miracle

has already happened.”



Juniper Harrower’s artwork is called “Resting and raging through histories of containment.” Materials she used include Los Angeles river water, watercolor paint, ink, graphite and California-sourced gold dust and scanning electrode imagery. (Image: Courtesy of Juniper Harrower)

Describing their practice as “intuition-based,” Barbosa says they are interested in themes of “reclamation and healing,” especially with regard to the colonial contact between European colonizers and indigenous Mexicans that has shaped their own family history. Like many of the artists in this cohort, Barbosa has shifted between multiple mediums over the course of their trajectory as an artist. They first applied to the MFA program with a portfolio that was heavily weighted toward photography and performance art, but now work primarily in mixed media and sculptural installation.

“I guess I would describe myself as an interdisciplinary artist,” says Barbosa, attributing their increasingly multimedia approach to the “really big leap in resources” afforded by Berkeley’s MFA program. “I work in all sorts of mediums,” adds Barbosa, “and the through line throughout my practice is that I like to focus on process.”

Like Barbosa, Wildman also cites the extensive resources of the MFA program as a liberating force in his art practice.

“It’s been delightful to know that this show is coming up, and to have supportive faculty come through and give really formative critical feedback,” he says. “That, coupled with access to the ceramics studio and the opportunity to work alongside the artist Ehren Tool, really opened up a new set of possibilities for me.”

Prior to enrolling in the MFA program, Wildman had worked extensively as a carpenter and handyman — a lived experience that led him to reflect on the role of the single-family home in the U.S. as an increasingly fraught space, with regard to environmentalism, consumerism and the changing climate of California. These themes emerge in another of Wildman’s works at BAMPFA: an unsettling, distended soap dish sculpture installed alongside that wall of night-lights. He says it was inspired by the subversive domesticity depicted in the iconic Belgian film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*.



This oil painting by Fei Pan, one of the seven MFA students graduating in May 2023, is called “Garden of Forking Paths: The New Landscape Project 01.” (Image: Courtesy of Fei Pan)

When the MFA exhibition opens at BAMPFA this week, it will mark the 53rd installment of this showcase for the Master of Fine Arts program — an important half-century partnership between Berkeley’s Art Practice Department and the campus’s nationally renowned visual arts center, which continues to provide a vital springboard for each year’s graduates as they emerge into the professional art world.

Each year’s exhibition comes together through close collaboration among the students, faculty and BAMPFA’s own professional staff, including a member of the museum’s curatorial team who oversees the exhibition planning process over a nearly yearlong period. This year’s installment was curated by BAMPFA’s curatorial associate Claire Frost, who has worked closely with each of the seven artists to help them bring their unique works to fruition in the museum space.

“I meet with the students one-on-one,” says Frost, “and they also have meetings with our prep crew, our registrar, marketing and communications, and the education department. The artists learn how to put up a show in a highly professional, institutional setting, as well as how to publicize their work and give artist talks.”

Frost adds that it’s an honor for the museum “to support such brilliant artists emerging from UC Berkeley and to provide a platform to share their work with the broader community. Each year, it’s truly exciting to see what the cohort of students brings to this important exhibition; the works in this show share a focus on embodiment and ecologies that has generated a cohesive, ambitious and prescient survey that speaks to Cal’s experimental and progressive legacy.”

The 53rd Annual UC Berkeley Master of Fine Arts Exhibition runs from May 10 to July 23, 2023. Visitors are invited to BAMPFA to attend a joint artists’ talk by the 2023 MFA graduates on Friday, May 12, at 5:30 p.m. For more information, visit bampfa.org.

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