

Sunshowers

A.I.R.

2023 A.I.R. National Members Exhibition

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Flitting between figuration and abstraction, the works by the eighteen artists in *Sunshowers*, the 2023 National Members Exhibition at A.I.R. Gallery, suggest portals to an elsewhere or cross-sections of a here, whether a particular place or a body. These artists of the A.I.R. National Artists Program reflect on mixed conditions, layered histories and emotions. Several of their works have a ghostly presence enhanced by their visual ambiguity. Though they differ in approach—including process-based meditations on materials, conceptual gestures, and cultural critiques—many of the pieces mourn for or invite something lost, or grasp for something yet unattained or unattainable.

One gallery brings together a grouping of works that use repetition and patterning to conjure another presence or a larger idea. Somber in tone and palette, these works also present an opening: a mythical or mystical dimension.

Martha Sedgwick's *Black Circle, Yellow Edge* (2022) depicts a black circle edged in gold, hovering above a modulated blue ground. Rendered in paint and sumi ink, the image might initially suggest a formal exercise in creating the perfect symmetry of a circle, given the layers of mark-making involved. Yet the form might also read as a moon, an egg, or a halo, something coming into being. **Holly Wong's** *Shadow Body 1* (2023) more explicitly uses repeated form to conjure a life. The five-foot piece is made up of hundreds of squares of tulle fabric sewn and pinned to the wall to resemble the gown or cloak of a figure. The sheer material, reflective thread, and visual subtlety of the swatches suggest this form is between worlds, about to either vanish or materialize. It is also literally between dimensions, as the flat elements become sculptural once layered. With this piece and its larger series, Wong pays homage to her mother, who worked as a seamstress and passed away when the artist was a teenager.

Katherine Tzu-Lan Mann's *Cloud Ceiling 2* (2022) is similarly scaled to Wong's piece. This work on paper is made of collaged, painted, and inked elements that meld into a swarm of colors and shapes: white botanical outlines, starry expanses of white pinpricks, brown-black marbled swirls. At times the repetition of these motifs hints at digital patterning processes, but the work also recalls physical fabrics and organic material. Hybridity is important to Mann in both an aesthetic and cultural sense—she draws on the traditions of Chinese and Western landscape painting to allude to her own identity as an Asian-American. Her work thus points to her individual history as well as larger social and art histories.

A related constellation of works moves further from abstraction into representation, more directly incorporating linguistic or figurative elements. Here the works are more vibrant in palette, as well as visually dense or emphatically collaged. They are specifically about layering; these artists are interested in how physical buildup over time can index a complex process or be a means of yielding or obscuring further meaning.

Diane Cionni's *Disco Rice Ambrosia* (2015) might initially appear to be a collage on paper, but it is in fact a single print. Cionni devised a multistep process whereby she inked or painted various vellum stencils and etching plates, as well as materials such as cardboard and string, and then layered these on top of a sheet of paper—with some elements blocking others—to run through an etching press. The source imagery for some of the stencils and plates includes forms and structures borrowed from nature and scientific diagrams, but the resulting composite image is unstructured, a surprise to the artist as much as the viewer. Rather than planning to create a specific image or feeling, Cionni is interested in generating “a screen for others to dream onto.”

A nearby video by **Hend Al-Mansour** similarly involves a process of building up complex imagery, but here the result is literally animated into

life in a dreamlike scene. In *I Am a Line* (2023), over the course of several minutes, we watch an artist seated at a desk begin to draw a symmetrical design evoking a mandala with floral forms, which fills the screen. This mandala seems to come alive, bringing us further into another world where a woman sits on a carpet that is a saturated version of the mandala. In this frame, we see a similar person writing on a sheet of paper, suggesting that the act of creating words or images might continue to transport us into still other dimensions, just as mandalas have historically evoked a connection to God. This second female figure may represent Hafsah Bint Omer, whose version of the Qur'an was vital to early Islamic history, and whose story has interested Al-Mansour given her investment in the artistic traditions of Islamic art, having grown up in Saudi Arabia.

In **Joo Yeon Woo's** cut paper works *Boom v2* and *Our Neighbor v2* (both 2023), the artist similarly draws on the culture and imagery of her childhood, in South Korea, and of her adult life, in the United States. These works are part of a larger series titled *Do Not Draw a Red Star*, where the artist revisits that titular prohibition from her youth in the anti-communist era of the 1980s. Red stars are scattered across these pieces like confetti—the works read as celebratory, even including the greeting “You are our neighbor; welcome” in *Our Neighbor v2*, despite the red color suggesting emergency or danger, as further emphasized by the fiery imagery of *Boom v2*. Together, the two pieces capture some of the dynamics that immigrants often experience and hint at the geopolitical and sociopolitical tensions of both South Korea and the United States.

In the second half of the exhibition, several artists explore means of relaying bodily experiences, specifically related to care and healing, which they approach from alternately earnest, remedial, insistent, and comical angles. This section brings together different modes of representation: some pieces are quite visceral, suggesting actual flesh and its manipulation, while others allude to the body through indexical traces.

Kathryn Hart's *Lost in a White Tangle* (2021) is a monoprint that may initially read as an airy line drawing but was created using inked horse hair. Delicate and staticky, these hairs index the presence of a human or animal body, and formally capture a sense of entanglement. For Hart, horses are symbols of both strength and fragility, health and flight. This piece, with its deep, cloudy background and lightning-like striations, conveys the emotional tenor of her relationship with her partner as he navigates a terminal illness; in that context, the lines might also read as the neural pathways of the brain.

In *Apothecary: Grapes* (2023), **Marlana Stoddard Hayes** likewise uses the imprints of organic matter—here, grape tendrils and spores—to reflect the role of care in her own life; she is using related materials to aid her health while managing cancer. The roughly book-size paper diptych, punctuated by the rhythmic horizontal lines of those materials, resembles a recipe book or manual, something one might consult in the kitchen or apothecary. The coloring of the piece, achieved via grape water, gives the work an aged veneer, as if it contains valuable formulas that have been used for centuries.

Robin Dintiman's work *Thin as Our Skin: Azure Button* (2022) was in fact inspired by a book held in the artist's family for several generations, written by Dintiman's grandfather, titled *A Laboratory Manual for First Course in Botany*. That book included a section on the use of sugar solutions activated by yeast, which became a fruitful path for the artist's material explorations. The skin-like substance in the work on view is one result of those trials, though it may seem to be derived from an animal, perhaps emphasizing the interconnectivity or material kinship of different life forms. Within a mahogany frame, different items are pressed into this organic "leather," including a lily, a kid glove, and several buttons. The combination suggests that the material might have been buried and excavated, or that these elements together might activate some new potential.

More visceral and forensic in appearance is **Nicole Havekost's** *Skin 1* (2022), a sculpture that resembles a cutout section of skin and muscle. Made of felt, beeswax, and pastels, and pinned surgically to the wall with upholstery needles, the object appears aged, perhaps in a stage of molting or growing. The wrinkles and valleys of the surface, nearly topological, enhance the sense that this matter has survived different forces over time. Age and specifically the process of aging is a central concern of Havekost's recent work, as she observes the ways in which her body comes to look, feel, and sound like the bodies of her mother and grandmother. In this sense, the work acts as a disclosure of what the artist's body has become, and perhaps a way for her to more closely study how her body continues to change.

Nearby is **Nancy Daly's** *An Ode to #PolishMountain* (2019–2020), which also records a durational process of a body changing over time, but in a more absurd realm. Inspired by a YouTube trend where people paint their fingernails with one-hundred layers of polish (which they then remove), Daly's sculpture realistically renders two white hands from the knuckles up, as if the fingers were emerging from the pedestal, with an emphasis on the heavy chunks of layered polish that decorate all of the fingernails. These form a plasticky rainbow gradient from the side that contrasts with the more muted, traditional-looking styling of the plaster fingers. In adopting that recognized style to concretize a fad, Daly seems to ironically memorialize this trend, which is usually an ephemeral act seen only in digital space, not worn in the physical world. But the fingers also seem burdened by the weight of this beautyproduct, as if struggling to avoid sinking into the pedestal. Perhaps a critique of the excesses of the self-care industry or of influencer culture, the piece also indexes the time Daly spent making the work, suggesting a meditation on mundane bodily labor.

The motif of hands and theme of control are echoed in **Ellyn Weiss's** *I Bite* (2022), a bold painting dominated by bright pink and deep purple hues in spray paint, oil, and ink. Here Weiss conveys the feeling of urgency

and violation that comes from not having full agency in one's own body. Weiss created this piece, and others in the series *Rage Births Riot*, after the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*. Two outstretched hands, rendered in white, seem to grasp at something toward the center of the composition, which, at five feet, is roughly the height of an adult body. Other forms on the raw canvas suggest a ribcage, a fetus, a head and spine, or abstract pulses of energy and expression.

Legacies of violence, particularly as they shape landscapes and our relationships to them, thread through the final set of works on view. Here, water is represented as a source of harm, a tool for healing, and a realm of the unknown. Some works in this gallery are more abstract, without ties to a specific landscape or historical event. But they all evoke nature in distinct ways, and their meanings are complicated by the works that surround them.

A central sculptural work in this gallery is *Sever* (2022), a tree stump cast in glass, from **Alice Pixley Young's** series *Notes from Deep Time*. This work, an amputated form of a tree, anchors the room in a disappearing landscape, as the semi-transparent material suggests the memorialization of this life form or its barely-there presence in a fast-approaching dystopian version of our world. The work recalls fossils preserved in amber while also evoking a relic that might be displayed in a future century's natural history museum.

A sense of decay continues in **Nicolei Buendia Gupit's** linocut prints *Waterless Archipelago 01* (2023) and *Waterless Archipelago 03* (2023). These center on recognizable imagery—a woman hunched over a bucket next to a tree stump in a plowed field, and a landscape of billowing palm trees, some seemingly falling to the ground—but are interrupted by bleeds of liquid created via ice cubes containing watercolor. In this body of work, Gupit reflects on the colonial history of one home of her diasporic family, the Philippines, particularly as it relates to water. Though it is often

represented as a source of life and vitality, water can also be a force of destruction: U.S. soldiers used it in a form of torture during the Philippine-American war, and it is also the ongoing cause of typhoons and floods in the region. Through her process and imagery, Gupit is interested in telling layered stories about the environment and the sociopolitical relations that shape and respond to it.

The Yoruba deity who governs the ocean as well as motherhood, Yemaya, is the subject of **Courtney Desiree Morris's** short film *Sopera de Yemaya* (2020–2023). This piece depicts seven rituals in which Morris considers different aspects of Yemaya's identity, including the sites she might inhabit and the ways Morris herself might carry her energy during pregnancy. A waterfall, a kitchen, a shoreline, and a bathroom are among the sites Morris chose for these rituals, in which her own body often merges visually with the environment. Home videos of Morris's family contribute a sense of intimacy, as do audio clips of singing, reading, and vocal exercises. These more soothing scenes are interspersed with clips of recent television coverage of police violence against Black people and historical footage of natural disasters, which explicitly point to possible causes of harm—and fiercer manifestations of Yemaya's force—that would require healing through rituals.

Olga Hiiva's *Bone Yard: meditation on belonging* (2021) and *Pando: meditation on the aspens* (2020) also weave together domestic materials, environmental scenes, and family narratives. Painted in oil on household fabrics (apron, tablecloth, bedspread), they loom over the viewer at roughly ten feet high. Each depicts a woman (perhaps a daughter and her mother, respectively, though the figures' identities are not given) isolated in a somewhat disconnected manner in front of an imposing scene—one a graveyard-like pile of bones, the other a stand of trees. Both works reflect on the generational trauma that the artist has experienced as a result of the persecution during World War II of her Ingrian-Finnish family, who were evacuated from Soviet Russia to Finland.

Many others of their ethnicity were imprisoned or sent to work camps. For these relatives, sewing and weaving were tools for solace and survival—for creating what the artist refers to as a “canvas for emotion.” That feeling is carried into the two portraits on view, painted on found heirloom fabrics, which seem to channel the stories of these women and their separation from family and homeland.

More enigmatic images of the environment close out the exhibition: **Vicky Tomayko**'s *The Deep* (2023) is a dreamlike monoprint populated by jellyfish-like creatures and more ambiguous shapes and markings, while **Allison Paschke**'s *#1 green with sargasso* (2021) suspends mica and cast glass in layers of resin and acrylic gels, all backed by a mirror. Both seem to capture the dynamics of light in water via their different levels of opacity, with the latter work literally offering a site of reflection. They document the material irregularities and physical variations of elements that we often reduce to abstract symbols—water, ocean life. Together, they suggest possibilities for growth and new potential in the landscape, and our role within it.

Joo Yeon Woo

Boom v2, 2023

Painted paper cutouts

30 x 30 inches

Joo Yeon Woo explores the in-between spaces, fluidity of identity, sense of belonging, displacement, and exchanges between Western and East Asian cultures. She embraces cultural differences, turning linguistic and cultural borders into an opportunity for cross-cultural dialogue. Woo received a BFA (2000) from Kyungpook National University, an MFA (2003) from Hongik University in South Korea, and later an MFA (2005) from the Pennsylvania State University after she migrated to the United States. Woo is currently an associate professor of painting and drawing at the University of South Florida, Tampa. She has exhibited widely, including at A.I.R. Gallery in Brooklyn, the Tampa Museum of Art in Tampa, the Sejong Museum of Art in Seoul, South Korea, and the Jorge B. Vargas Museum in Manila, Philippines. She has been a resident artist at the VCCA in Virginia, Ami Art Museum in Dangjin, South Korea, and the Red Gate Residency in Beijing, China. She received the AHL Contemporary Art Award in NYC, the Korean National Art Festival Award at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in South Korea, and was nominated for the 2022 Joan Mitchell Foundation Fellowship.

