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Art

# Seeking Out the Light

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When envisioning the presentation of contemporary art, the term "white cube gallery" often springs to mind. It conjures images of expansive rooms, sometimes multiple, filled with echoes of art jargon that can feel exclusionary and ambiguous. While there's typically complimentary wine on offer, the air often feels stale and suffocating. Thankfully, there exists a growing movement among artists, gallerists, and curators aiming to subvert these norms and usher in fresh perspectives.

Currently on view at Room 3557, an East Los Angeles gallery that platforms artists at various stages of their careers, often transforming their space, is Optogenetics: Controlled by Light, a group show of 10 young artists curated by Blessing Greer-Mathurin. "I thought it was important to platform people who are sensitive to their worlds," she states. At initial

glance, the exhibition might seem like just another "white cube gallery," with its entirety covered in white paint. However, as you navigate through the space and engage with the artwork, the intention behind this choice gradually becomes clear. What better way to subvert a "white cube gallery" than replicating one?

- by [Michael Anthony Hall](#)
- Photos by [Oscar Noe De Leon Robles](#) and [Evan Walsh](#)

"Innocently, I intended to create a white box to address the context in which we give art value, both monetarily and culturally. But as the show developed and through spending time with the artists and hearing their questions for me- It became clear that a part of me wanted to prove I could do something institutional. I think I wanted to not only assert the work, the artists, and myself into the canon but also justify our existence in the art world, which has left me with a lot to think about. That level of provocation was intended. I didn't realize how I am also a part of the audience I was hoping to interrogate," Greer-Mathurin expresses.

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sensitive to their worlds.



Optogenetics, in the metaphorical sense, is about manipulating light to illuminate the depths of the human experience. "I think seeking that light out will always control me, seeking it and finding ways to share it. To me, curation has always been a conceptual act- not providing interpretations but providing a space to call things to attention. Curation comes from the Latin "to take care of," but I don't think it means only art; it means to care of the way we see life," Greer-Mathurin explains.

As you step into the space, the once-pristine white floor is marred by tracks of dirt and footprints despite being painted just two weeks prior. Ceramic cockroaches, Jester Bulnes's LAS CUCARACHITAS sculptures, embellish the walls and corners of the gallery, symbolizing artists' infiltration into the art world. A cohesive curation of artwork fills the space, where each piece can breathe and draw viewers into their captivating orbit.





For many of the artists, this exhibition marks their first foray into the gallery setting, offering visitors the opportunity to experience the exhibition through May 17 by appointment. Curator Blessing Greer-Mathurin makes her solo curation debut, unveiling her keen artistic sensibilities and genuine admiration for each participating artist.

“They’re all effervescent. I have admiration for the art of how they live. How they ask questions, how they ask for help, how they treat their friends. Everyone is sensitive, sweet, and wild. They all approach art-making with such vigor, vitality, and attentiveness and somehow find a way to remain open to the world. I know they’re special. I think they will be here for a long time; I want them to be here for a long time, and I know they will. I’m a better person for the time I’ve spent with them and their work,” the young curator explains.

On view through May 17, ‘Optogenetics: Controlled by Light’ presents an immersive exploration of the young LA-based artists’ minds, delving into questions of identity, cultural investigation, and introspective musings.

Before the show’s opening, I asked each artist the same two questions regarding their practice, medium(s), and influences. Explore the interviews below.



Mushkinaz, 2024. Graphite on paper, found objects. We Are Eternal Like Our Mountains, 2024. Ceramic. Orthodox Cross 1, 2024. Ceramic. Caucasian Figure, 2023. Cyanotype on fabric. Shepherdess, 2024. Naturally dyed textile, ceramic, found object, synthetic hair. Mother's Boots, 2023. Ceramic.

Nelli Astvatsatrian

Could you share the medium(s) you typically work with and why? What materials do you find most inspiring, and how does it inform your creative process?

I am a drawing and figure drawing teacher and my background is in 2D figurative work, which is what you will see in the show. For the past few years, I have taken from numerous mediums, including drawing, to create installation-based pieces as well. I fell in love with quilts in particular not only because their function in history meshes with my conceptual framework but also because their hybrid form allows for the convergence of many materials and techniques: through printmaking, airbrush, photo transfer, ceramic pieces and found object assemblage, I assemble quilts that materialize trans-generational narratives. The figure, often an imagined female ancestor, is still present in my pieces, even if it is only implied by the objects surrounding it. My work honors stories of displaced Armenian mothers and daughters, whom I adorn with objects that may have followed them to their graves. In the face of displacement still today, the quilts act as handmade textile documents that can be passed down through generations.

How do your external surroundings, archives, and consumed media influence your art practice?

I moved to the States from Yerevan at a young age and grew up in Glendale- being Armenian was always a big part of my identity. I was raised with Armenian folk music, poetry, food, and soviet television alongside American culture, characterized by a fascination with 70s rock and coming-of-age movies set in the Midwest. And then there are the weird dolls, miniatures, old objects, sunsets, things I incorporate in my art and always liked growing up that can't be easily attributed to either. Maybe the obsession with nostalgic things and imagery has something to do with missing out on a past in both cultures as a part of a newer, hybrid culture- maybe not. All to say that sometimes a cultural element is more legible in my work than other times, and I love that the hybridity of the multi-medium quilt allows the expression of a unique, composite, and complicated experience.





LAS CUCARACHITAS (7 of 10) Glazed stoneware.

Lester Bulnes

Could you share the medium(s) you typically work with and why? What materials do you find most inspiring, and how does it inform your creative process?

Photography is probably the medium I have been working in for the longest. I strictly shoot film because of its material quality. In a way, it feels much more tangible than digital photography; it's physical and tactile and allows for me to slow down my process because of the time it actually takes to see the photos. I usually go to a lab for processing, but then I either scan or print the photos myself, which allows me to spend even more time with the work.

I also often work in ceramics, painting, sculpture, and performance. I think certain ideas lend themselves to specific materials. A lot of my work is rooted in intuition, abstraction, and feeling—and for that reason, I try not to close myself off from any medium, but at the same time, I am very intentional when I do choose to work with any given medium and choose materials that feel reflective of that. Right now, I find myself really returning to photography and trying to find ways to incorporate other mediums within my photo practice, whether that be through directly what I am photographing or rather how I go about creating the photos to exist in the world, such as thinking about different printing surfaces and I am starting to make my own frames.

I think I feel most inspired by materials with a history—a personal history. I am really interested in found objects and have started to dive into my own archive of materials and think about the ways in which I can start to incorporate these things that I have kept with me for so long or that I see continuously showing up in my life, such as wig caps and lace, within my art practice. Materials exist for me as a code, a secret language.

How do your external surroundings, archives, and consumed media influence your art practice?

I think most of my work, if not all, is informed in some way by my external surroundings. I think it's quite the special hybrid of curated media I allow myself to spend time with, infused with me, that blends into each other and becomes my work. As someone who grew up in LA, this city has most definitely influenced my practice. There is so much culture here, textures, and grittiness that I find myself constantly returning to. I try to reference my own archive more than anything. For me it's important to take in these outside sources and to feel inspired, but I always have to embed myself into the work in some way.



Tsunami, 2024. Watercolor on Watercolor Paper  
Zekkeraya El-magharbel

Could you share the medium(s) you typically work with and why? What materials do you find most inspiring, and how does it inform your creative process?

I'm a composer, so typically I work with sound, and physical material has only factored into my practice insofar as it serves this aim. For my recent work, I've been interested in painting that skews towards ink, trying to find the sweet spot between writing and drawing. I'm very inspired by Islamic Calligraphy and Hieroglyphics as of late, so finding a material that can evoke both but still hold its own has led me to gouache. I like gouache too because I think it's a crowd-pleaser; I haven't met anyone so far who has said they don't like it. To me, using gouache is like throwing a bone to the audience like, "Hey! I appreciate you taking the time to check out my work!" hahaha

How do your external surroundings, archives, and consumed media influence your art practice?

I've been deep in research about tuning systems throughout North Africa and the Sahara, so I've come to virtually (in the virtual sense) surround myself with recordings from wherever I can find them. I don't have a cassette player, but I wish I did, and with that, some old cassettes from the regions I'm looking at that I end up listening to after they've been digitized and uploaded to youtube. Ok, this is interesting; being based in

Detroit has influenced my sense of structure as a musician and, thereby, my sense of composition as a visual artist. Detroit music is so structured, much more than what I became used to coming up in Los Angeles. Whether it's jazz standards, techno, or R&B, the harmonic and rhythmic structures are built upon, built up, like a gearbox or something. That has definitely done a lot for me, so shout out to Detroit!



Bacadle; Hargeisa, Somaliland, 2023. Framed C-print under museum glass.  
Leeban Farah

Could you share the medium(s) you typically work with and why? What materials do you find most inspiring, and how does it inform your creative process?

I work in photography and video direction. Although I think there's a great deal of gear that could be useful, I definitely have to fight the urge of placing too much weight on the tools I use because I think it could easily be a distraction. For instance, I have a single camera, and I've employed a similar lighting rig for the past five years. That being said, specific materials have undoubtedly influenced my workflow.

I started taking photos around 2016, initially drawn to the mechanics of 35mm photography. It really seemed like an insane and archaic process of making images that I found interesting, so I purchased my first camera, which was an Olympus OM-10. For the next few years I shot photos in a very exploratory manner, following whatever compulsion that drew me. Later, I decided to transition to using the Mamiya RZ67 for specific reasons that align with my approach to photography. The substantial nature of the RZ67, combined with its limited frame count of 10 images per roll, intensifies my creative process. It's really heavy and slow, which pushes me to be even more deliberate and thoughtful with each shot.

I like to think this ultimately is all in service of the story that I'm trying to tell. While I appreciate the tactile experience of film photography and the tools I use, I care about creating photos that resonate with me personally and convey certain emotional narratives that I experience.

## How do your external surroundings, archives, and consumed media influence your art practice?

There are a few things in my life that are as significant as my relationship with work that I deeply resonate with. I feel infinitely fortunate to interact with art that speaks to my experiences and emotions in a way that not only profoundly connects me with the respective artist but also helps me understand myself to a deeper level.

I find inspiration in the works of select individuals who are able to convey a sense of empathy and insight, creating stories that speak to the human experience and our longing for connection. I constantly feel like I'm on this journey to discover more artists/work that operate within this certain frequency.

I was reading this book on Eggleston and I think this quote gets at a lot of the themes I'm interested in. "In many instances, the subject was unaware of being photographed, [making] these images have a distinct, voyeuristic quality reminiscent of the paintings of the American artist Edward Hopper. Like Hopper, in this early period, Eggleston gave a sense of the individual being enveloped by urbanization and development but alien to it. People are shown not in the artist's studio but in the context of their surroundings. They appear in semi-public places like diners, petrol stations, phone booths, and markets; they are surprised, caught at awkward moments, or lost in thought." Ultimately, I am drawn to works, whether in music, photography, or film, that delve into themes that I feel deeply impacted by.



Cerro Lonquén, 2024. Cotton, wool, terra cotta, copper, non-human collaborators (chia seeds, agents of decay).

Diego Borgsdorf Fuenzalida

Could you share the medium(s) you typically work with and why? What materials do you find most inspiring, and how does it inform your creative process?

I am a textile artist, and my main medium is weaving. I also work with embroidery, quilting, sewing, felting, ceramics, and installation.

I am interested in the potential of theorizing with wool. As a diasporic Chilean, I feel a strong resonance with materials and technologies that are part of my ancestry, and I sense that these materials can activate alternative and reparative politics and histories. As such, I work primarily with sheep's wool — a traditional South American weaving fiber — and I work on Chilean-style frame looms. I also work with other natural materials such as cotton, ollá/terra cotta, and copper. All of these materials index Andean lifeways, and I consider them agentic collaborators in my projects.

How do your external surroundings, archives, and consumed media influence your art practice?

Archives are a very special and emotion-filled place for me. My first introduction to cultural work was in archives, and long before I began honing my art practice, I was working in archival settings. One of the most transformative experiences of my life was working as an archivist intern at the Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos in Santiago de Chile. The Museo is Chile's largest and most advanced museum, and it focuses on memorializing the victims of human rights abuses during the Pinochet dictatorship. My role was focused on investigating and archiving a collection of documents from the Casa de Chile en México, a political and cultural organization of exiled Chileans living in México during the dictatorship.

Much of the role focused on preserving documents by producing cleanliness and sanitized interfaces that could be easily stored in acid-free storage containers. While I understand and respect the importance of keeping a well-maintained archive, I felt so much resonance with the documents that were already damaged. For example, many documents I preserved were newspaper clippings that had been pasted onto sheets of paper by employees of the Casa de Chile en México. These documents were hard to preserve because they had already been physically transformed and manipulated, often without "proper" archival materials.

However, these papers were indexing the history of political violence and the Chilean exile. Even if all the text had faded away, I could still feel the labor of the exiled archivist, cutting and pasting newspaper articles, when I interacted with the documents. Their materiality was able to communicate with me through emotional intensities without and beyond the limits of language.

This experience opened the door for me to think more broadly about the agencies and potentials of materials as collaborators in the challenge and opportunity of living a post-dictatorship life. It is with this mindset that I turned to weaving. In a context where many hegemonic international actors try to quickly and unjustly resolve twentieth-century political violence, I see weaving as a way of visualizing the textures of an afterlife. The archive is a space that is often sanitized, filled with silences, and infected by fevers, but I also feel that by respectfully reframing the matter of archives as survivors, I have been able to materialize alternative histories that center healing from historical injustice.



Tourist, 2021. Parking meter, braiding hair, fan, burlap, glue.  
Salim Green

[...]



Impression of an Artist's Ladder (Vrymoed), 2023. Pigmented silicone.  
Dakota Higgins

Could you share the medium(s) you typically work with and why? What materials do you find most inspiring, and how does it inform your creative process?

I've always worked in a variety of mediums and materials, but most recently, I have been working with glitter on cardboard. I value the medium for its simplicity and accessibility—it's an "arts and crafts" project that many children are shown when they are still in grade school. (I was one of these children.) It's a world of cultural practices that appear even lower than "craft" on the supposed Arts>Craft hierarchy. I think it's because "arts and crafts" are associated with women and children making works outside of long-term, established traditions of "craft" like weaving, ceramics, woodworking, and brewing. Playing against normative notions of "value" is a bit of a cliché, having been a mainstay of contemporary art for over a century, but I think it's still an important approach to making. It's an important position to take as an artist, to align oneself and one's work with that which hegemonies undervalue or actively devalue, with what they don't take seriously.

The works in this show are from a slightly older series called "Impressions," a body of work that revolves around ladders used in artists' studios. They are slapstick odes to these devices that are essential to making art in one way or another (even if they're only ever really used to help folks screw in lightbulbs) but are uniquely marginal in their utility and the kinds of attention paid to them as objects. They're the tools most responsible for elevating artists, and so I work to elevate them.

How do your external surroundings, archives, and consumed media influence your art practice?

In ways that are as obvious as they are incomprehensible.





Gordo, 2024. Glass, stoneware and plywood.  
Marcel Monroy

Could you share the medium(s) you typically work with and why? What materials do you find most inspiring, and how does it inform your creative process?

The mediums I typically work in include but are not limited to poetry, ceramics, wood, metal, earth, wax, found objects, sculpture, performance (specifically free jazz/improvisational cello and ensemble outfits), site-specific installation, and artistic collaboration. I find them all to be of equal value and tend to lean into each of them as ideas develop and evolve naturally with my practice. As corny as it sounds, I follow my intuition, faith, and ancestors through the work, and as I am led, I allow myself to be porous – thus, the memories and thoughts that are my own and those that I am blessed with by the ones that came before me, are all shaped into a material presence which I believe honors them, myself, and the ones to come.

How do your external surroundings, archives, and consumed media influence your art practice?

Some other influences are my family and friends, faggotry, Blackness and Brownness, the Dominican Republic and Haiti, the Caribbean, Latinx culture, music, transness, dreams, love in all its forms, nakedness, play and silliness, water, sexiness, sex, gay sex, anger, breathwork, aromatherapy, regular therapy, some of my exes, the natural world, the unnatural world, the supernatural, the death of empires, Taino and Arawak rituals, indigenous cultures, native medicines, weed and blunts, food, modern luxury, ancient luxury, Southern Baptist churches, gay cruising, animals being sweet to each other, stuffed animals, celibacy, boys I have a one-sided crush on, tobacco, and “truth.”



Studies for Operation Jericho: Alameda St. (Alameda Swap Meet), 2024. Blue Ballpoint ink illustration.  
[Janeth Aparicio Vazquez](#)

Could you share the medium(s) you typically work with and why? What materials do you find most inspiring, and how does it inform your creative process?

In my studio practice, blue ballpoint pen has become my primary medium, which I then combine with other mediums like wood burning and acrylic paint. I was first introduced to the ink-based medium as a child growing up in South Central with system-impacted relatives. I have great admiration and respect for all incarcerated and justice system-impacted artists, and I hope my work honors them and sheds light on their work as well. This connection is what I find most inspiring about working with the blue-inked pens. There's an inherent nostalgia embedded into the medium and its history, but I also like tapping into the hope that is there as well. The concentration it takes to make finely detailed work with blue ballpoint pen exemplifies the community-building skills and dedication all artists working with the medium (including those within the unjust, industrial justice system) can translate to and use for building more just worlds.

I'm also a muralist working with acrylic paints based in Los Angeles. Please visit my website for a portfolio of my mural works, and feel free to reach out with any projects.

How do your external surroundings, archives, and consumed media influence your art practice?

A cornerstone of my art practice is the familial photo archive that I've been stewarding over the years. This has been the crux of my art practice and an important practice for me as part of the Nahua diaspora. Not many written records of my familial history exist. It's up to me to tell our story how it should be told, and recover ancestral knowledge and tools.

Another truly integral part of my art practice is observing my external surroundings– the visuals of the ecologies and histories of South Central, Los Angeles, and Mexico. I'll be called to an external visual in my surroundings and then, in diving into its history, learn each and every time that there are connections to be made between the history of the visual, the history of the land, and the history of my community. That drives my studio practice and, of course, influences my mural practice.



Quilt I, 2024. Cotton, natural dye, wax thread, delta airlines blanket.  
[Jabari Wimbley](#)

Could you share the medium(s) you typically work with and why? What materials do you find most inspiring, and how does it inform your creative process?

I typically only work with textiles, but I'm trying to branch out with other mediums like photography. I've been working with textiles for about four years so far. Starting off with latch-hooking, weaving yarn and wool into canvas and recently exploring how to teach myself how to quilt. I'm not sure why I gravitated towards textile art, but why I continued to pursue it because it brought friendship and a way for me to leave Missouri. I wouldn't have been able to leave my hometown (Saint Louis) without pursuing this medium and challenging myself to get better with the craft.

Photography inspires me the most because of references. My early work was all references to different people or movie scenes and then turned into only wanting to reference my own photography. Only images I've taken

and reference poses from different magazines, books, or random Tumblr posts for my subject to copy or alter. Photography constantly inspires and informs me because I'm constantly looking at images all day and screenshotting nonstop.

## How do your external surroundings, archives, and consumed media influence your art practice?

Recently, going on walks around Highland Park (where I live) has influenced my quilting. Seeing random structures or random furniture outside, looking at the colors of the two. Or even tarps on the ground have made me want to display my quilts in a different format so I can eventually transition from hanging them on a wall. Looking at a medium that doesn't have anything to do with the medium I'm working on influences me more. My roommate Deshion is a big influence on me; his painting experiments with color, and he's making sculptures that motivate me every day when I wake up since sharing a workspace.

Check out scenes from the opening below and make sure to visit Optogenetics, Controlled by Light at [Room 355Z](#), running until May 17.