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Samuel Akintaju

*Untitled*

2025

Acrylic, printed paper on canvas

Courtesy of the artist.

*“This piece deals with the negotiation and reclamation of identity. Which is centered on the Benin Bronzes that were looted during the late 19th century and are still held in European and American museums. This piece engages with theories of visual decolonization and archival reinterpretation. The piece employs a contemporary approach, experimenting with various conceptual models to outline its subject matter. To present an abstract piece that embodies the inside of a stolen African mask as an entry point for a personal dialogue between the viewer and the piece about what it means to wear and take on the veil, uncovering the hidden parts of one’s ancestral history.”*

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Ellen S. Bayas

*Mira, Nuestro Patio*

2025

Mixed media

Courtesy of the artist.

*“The current political climate in Ecuador involves natives deep in the Amazon, being displaced and pushed out of their land and homes so that the Ecuadorian government can have access to the Amazonian oil. Ecuadorian Indigenous communities are protesting the expansion of oil exploration in the Amazon, arguing that it violates the government’s longstanding commitment to halt drilling. Indigenous groups and environmental advocates argue that these plans threaten ancestral territories without their prior and informed consent. Using collage and photography, Bayas put together an activist canvas featuring a traditional Ecuadorian Aya Huma (devil) mask, a mask worn to ward off evil spirits. Together these works demonstrate that the consistency of injustice does not justify its acceptance, the fight must continue, **viva Ecuador!**”*

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Rayshell Goff

*Connecting to:*

2025

Mixed media

Courtesy of the artist.

*“My work is rooted in ancestry, memory, and lived experience. Anchored through the photographic and archival practice of Laylah Amatullah Barryan, I approach image-making as a form of preservation. A way to honor personal and collective histories that are often overlooked or erased. In my final Heritage piece, I explore my identity as Cherokee Afro-American, weaving together cultural fragments, symbolism, and visual storytelling to reflect both resilience and survival. I am drawn to work that feels intimate, imperfect, and emotionally honest. Whether through my own personal photographed photos handed down to me from my elders or my family members, saved household items, mixed media, or tattooing, I see my practice as a dialogue between past and present, a reclaiming of space, body, and voice. My process is intuitive and layered, allowing ancestral memory and personal narrative to guide the work. Ultimately, my art serves as a vessel for healing, remembrance, and self-definition.”*

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Diana Jimenez

*El Mamey*

2025

Acrylic on canvas

Courtesy of the artist.

*“My paintings mainly depict things that inspire me in life. I experiment with various paints, such as watercolor and oil, but acrylic on canvas is my primary medium. I often use references to achieve accuracy while exploring my personal interpretation. Through healing and growth, I create pieces that explore acceptance, identity, humanity, beauty, and nature, including my painting “El Mamey.”*

*I based this piece on a landscape photo from my last trip to El Mamey, La Vega, in the Dominican Republic, a place where my mom grew up, symbolizing my heritage. Although I was born in the United States, my Dominican roots and that region have influenced how I speak Spanish, the traditional food I eat, and some of my customs and beliefs. I’ve visited the Dominican Republic only three times. I visited at age two, then at 17 and 18. During the gap of not traveling to the Dominican Republic till 17, I imagined what it felt like to be there. I envisioned orange houses because I would hear my family talk about El Mamey, which my family also uses the word mamey to describe something orange. That made me paint the houses that color, symbolizing the area’s name. Most importantly, I wanted to connect to my Dominican heritage.*

*There is a stigma surrounding rural backgrounds, and I wanted to reject that by embracing and appreciating the beauty of the area where many of my family members come from, along with the influence and contributions of people from the countryside of the Dominican Republic. Nature is a major theme in my work, from its aesthetic that celebrates its beauty to its physiological aspects. Connecting life events, whether positive or negative, with nature has helped me see the beauty in them or the beauty that follows.”*

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Michell Jimenez

*La Casita: Blended Bodies, Unfinished Stories*

2025

Mixed media

Courtesy of the artist.

*“La Casita is a mixed-media painting that honors my Dominican family, cultural memory, and the ongoing formation of identity across generations. Created using cardboard, air-dry clay, colorful pipe cleaners, markers, colored pencil, acrylic paint, and Posca markers, the work layers texture and color to reflect the complexity of home.*

*At the top of the composition, my great-grandparents appear in the sky with detailed faces. Their stories are complete and rooted in memory, representing ancestors who continue to watch over us. In contrast, the living members of my family are depicted without facial features, an homage to las muñecas sin rostro, reflecting blended identity and lives still unfolding. I depict myself wearing a traditional Dominican dress as a marker of cultural pride and continuity.*

*The scene captures everyday rituals such as dancing, playing dominoes, picking guavas, and getting hair done. References to La Niña, La Pinta, and La Santa María acknowledge colonization and its lasting impact, while subtle depictions of modern technology emphasize that family, presence, and shared experience remain central.”*

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Israel “Izzy” Antonio Rodriguez

*Reclaimed Judgement*

2025

Watercolor on canvas

Courtesy of the artist.

*“As a lifelong resident of Jersey City, NJ and a proud Afro-Latine, I have always been aware and socially conscious of the world I was born into coming with all the good and bad baggage. With this piece my goal was to reclaim and reaffirm a piece of my identity that for centuries has been taboo and not welcome in proper spaces that being my roots as a person of African, Taino, and Maya descent and the mysticism and connection to the old gods and traditions we were beaten and forced to reject in favor of a god they could use to silence us and make us compliant.*

*This work reaches across time and the physical world and reimagines myself as a deity gazing at the audience in a judgmental almost accusatory stare with the Caribbean and Yucatan acting a foreground and background to illustrate my connection to the land and the past, while the red cloak symbolizes the blood of the people who died in the transatlantic slave trade and those indigenous people who were victims of genocide and whose blood still cries out for justice and acknowledgement. I want everyone to look at this painting and see a specter of revolution and liberation gazing and glaring at an unjust world to be uncomfortable and do something to change it.”*

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Jammie Senario

*Pinoy Pride*

2025

Archival inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist.

*“**Pinoy Pride** is a poster campaign for queer Filipinos and Filipinas — a declaration of presence. It is about being seen in spaces where we are often invisible. We exist. Our identities stretch far beyond labels; they live in our stories, our resilience, and the way we move through the world as unique individuals. Too often, we are overlooked. In places like New Jersey and New York — and beyond — I rarely see murals, posters, or public artworks that reflect Filipino lives, especially queer Filipino lives. Our absence speaks loudly. Through this work, I create what has been missing: a visible affirmation that we are here. This poster stands as both a celebration and a claim — **we exist, and we are Pinoy Pride.***

*Photography is the centerpiece of this poster. This campaign plays with gender-swapped roles, inspired by old Filipino photographs, especially classic couple poses from the 1800s to the present. I recreate these poses to place queer bodies into a history where we were rarely seen, reclaiming space in the past and the present. The color yellow represents the sun — a symbol of unity, freedom, with deep roots in Indigenous culture as a sign of power, and bravery. The black background represents the underrepresentation of the queer community, the darkness we are often placed in, and the space we are still fighting to be seen in.”*

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Benjy Shaulov

*You Can Never Come Back To This Place*

2025

Mixed media

Courtesy of the artist.

*“My art piece is about my family’s place of origin consisting of two parts. The first part is a triptych representing different parts of my family’s hometown in Nalchik Russia. I wanted the art to evoke a surreal and ephemeral feeling. Almost like you are looking into a memory frozen in time. The second part is a video; it includes an interview from my grandmother about living in Nalchik but also videos from my family in the current day. I want my grandmas accounts and my current family video to be a conversation between each other and how life is both similar yet different in both places. Overall, the piece is about the memories of a place that you left behind many years ago and the feelings and memories that the place evokes now.”*

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Leonardo Silva Serra De Paula

*Hostile*

2025

Mixed media

Courtesy of the artist.

*“My work considers immigration through architectural spaces and the ways they shape movement and behavior. I am interested in forms of hostile architecture, structures that appear neutral or functional, yet quietly influence access and direction. Transitional spaces recur in my work as environments that suggest progress while introducing subtle resistance.*

*Through restrained color, shifting perspectives, and compressed or vacant spaces, I build a sense of instability through storytelling. Light is used intentionally, often revealing tension rather than resolution. These spaces reflect the experience of living between systems, where navigation is continuous and rarely reflected. Rather than focusing on arrival, my work remains in the in-between, where belonging is an issue and the idea of home is constantly reimagined.”*

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Giovanna Simpson

*Brick City*

2025

Mixed media

Courtesy of the artist.

*“My work explores Newark’s identity as “Brick City” by focusing on the people and places that make up the city rather than just its physical structures. Using photography, paint, and collage, I think about how communities are built through layers of lived experience, memory, and presence. Influenced by Laylah Amatullah Barrayn’s approach to portraiture, particularly her emphasis on dignity and care, I treat images of Newark residents as central rather than supplemental, allowing them to stand as representations of strength and individuality. The brick wall serves as both a literal and symbolic structure, suggesting stability while also showing wear, variation, and change. By combining painted surfaces, photographic fragments, and graffiti-inspired text, the work reflects how Newark continues to evolve through the people who inhabit it. Ultimately, this piece is about visibility, connection, and the idea that a city is shaped as much by its people as by its architecture.”*

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Florence Sobanjo

*Ashabi in Culture*

2025

Mixed media

Courtesy of the artist.

*“My work explores identity, culture, and memory via self-portrait photography rooted in my African heritage. I enjoy how Laylah Amatullah Barryan purposefully and sensitively records Black existence, spirituality, and lived experience. Her art is about being present, loving, and telling tales from her life.*

*I shot images of myself wearing Aso Oke, a traditional garment that people commonly wear to weddings and other cultural events, for my final project. I utilized a few African fabrics and bonded them together to generate a visual language with texture and pattern. I also added beads that my grandma made for me when I was a child. Her style made everything seem very personal and connected to the past. These things in my paintings serve as homage to heritage, remembrance, and the survival of culture.”*

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Lauren Surrency

*La Belle Meurtre*

2025

Mixed media

Courtesy of the artist.

*“With inspiration taken from her French lineage, artist Lauren Surrency attempted an elaborate and elegant take on the timeless message of feminism. Surrency uses a modernist A-line dress reminiscent of a mid-century evening gown covered in the fleur de lis; a French symbol meant to represent both royalty and purity. Each fleur de lis was pressed to the polyester satin fabric using a custom hand carved stamp. The gown itself serves to touch upon not only the obvious soiled nature of the pure white dress and its appalling nature but to also provide a visual representation of the struggles of both the modern woman of today and of the woman of French nobility during the revolution. Surrency’s use of red is bold and intentional as it appears gory and draws the audience’s attention the ruined innocence that is posed upon women in everyday life. Surrency wanted on lookers to imagine the death of innocence and physically see what happens when something beautiful is ruined and damaged by a world it is much too fragile for.”*

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Imani White

*What Is My Culture, Exactly?*

2025

Archival inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist.

*“My piece on cultural identity, “What Is My Culture, Exactly?”, is a small booklet on my feelings about the Black American culture and the knowledge of the African diaspora. I traditionally drew the line art with a pen. I took pictures of the drawings and put them on a digital art program to color. I also used digital collage by using images of prolific Black American figures and staples in Black History, such as music and Kwanzaa. The format resembles a comic book or a children's book, so the information is as simplified and condensed as I can make it. The first few pages are about how I felt bad about being so distant from my African heritage, until people started making untrue comments about how Black people “don’t have culture”. The rest of the book is me embracing my Black American culture and the Black American experience.”*

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Silvia Wiggins

*Piece by Peace*

2025

Mixed media

Courtesy of the artist.

*“This piece began as a digital sketch, which I used to plan the structure of my design before translating it onto a poster board. My final piece is constructed by hand using small reflective squares, which were each placed individually and covered with various Nigerian-inspired patterns. I chose a slow, repetitive process intentionally to represent the idea of me rebuilding myself carefully, piece by piece, instead of presenting a “perfect” version of my identity. At the bottom center of my work is an image of my younger self. I chose that as my subject because there are parts of my identity, particularly my Nigerian culture and background, that I didn’t get to fully explore when I was younger.*

*Through this piece, I am revisiting that moment and allowing my younger self to engage with a part of me that has since become more meaningful and visible. The patterns throughout the piece symbolize a connection to heritage, memory, and cultural continuity, reflecting a relationship that will continue to grow and be embraced over time. A few spots of glass are purposely left uncovered and reflective. The purpose of that is to allow me, as my present self, to look within the image of my younger one. With this piece I am emphasizing that growth does not erase the past but exists alongside it. The reflective elements are also my way of inviting the viewers into the work, ultimately encouraging them to see themselves within the piece as well and consider their own inner child. Overall, this piece is about reflection, cultural reconnection, and the ongoing process of becoming.”*

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Camilla Zarzuela

*Pa' Mi Gente*

2025

Mixed media

Courtesy of the artist.

*“My intentions for this piece in relation to Laylah Amatullah Barrayn’s work, was to explore the legacy of Dominican Americans or prominent Dominican figures with global feats in the name of celebration. Across Barrayn’s body of work it is apparent that much of her subject matter has a focus on highlighting groups of people through a truly humanistic lens. The notion of becoming an artistic subject simply due to the fact that you exist. This celebration of life and my interest in wanting to connect to my culture through the exploration of who has come before me and what people are currently doing led to the creation of this work. The use of transparent acrylic panels lent itself to the spirit of our culture through the vibrant identifying colors and the shadows casted. The structure of the piece was intended to activate the exhibition space that it would reside in”.*

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