Exhibition Essay

SAIF AZZUZ

KEET HEGEHLPA'
(the water is rising)

Blaffer Art Museum

June 7, 2025—December 20, 2025

Saif Azzuz, *Huem-chor O' weych-pues (Welcome to where the rivers meet)*. Installation view. Image courtesy of Anthony Meier

Building Barriers for Seeing

essay by Laura Phipps

Even through an only somewhat stable FaceTime connection Saif Azzuz's studio buzzes with energy that is both cacophonous and surprisingly tranquil. Within this studio, colorful paintings and drawings stretch from ceiling to floor, accumulations of sculptures hang in clusters on the wall and on tables and benches, and metal and wood works in various stages of welding and carving are visible across the room. Detritus from the surrounding Hunter's Point neighborhood lives in various corners–all potential works of art. Importantly, there are also a number of projects by his children strewn around and the explorations of materials and content in their work is not dissimilar to Azzuz's own. In this space, the exchange between work by others, future work, and finished projects feels purposeful and powerful–confirmation that creating is a process and made strong through collaboration. The jumbled accumulation and wide variety of materials lend a chaotic spirit to the space but the continuity of pattern and color across the work, not to mention Azzuz's own calm demeanor, tempers the potential for chaos into a high-key serenity. The discordance of the studio's emissions grows out of Azzuz's understanding of art which has been formed by a childhood surrounded by both Libyan (and broader Arab and Islamic) and Yurok (and broader Native American) artistic traditions that emphasize the act of making, as well as the power of geometry and abstraction. Azzuz has also absorbed, and is absorbed by, the histories and lessons of colonization and displacement that Libyan and Yurok cultures share. Through his work Azzuz considers the power dynamics of land use and ownership–making direct lines between the dispossession of Yurok land in the 19th century to the contemporary phenomenon of gentrifications in the Bay Area[1]. Speaking to Indigenous audiences while working within a predominantly white, Euro-American art world, Azzuz is interested in how art can be an instrument for return, regeneration and a tool against the mechanisms of imperial power.

Outside of the studio, Azzuz has used his work to interrupt traditional fine art spaces and social structures to encourage a recognition of the relationships humans have with the natural world and to the societal structures that threaten it. Azzuz's interventions have taken a number of physical forms: painted murals of foliage creeping around walls and metal work on windows, wood carved salmon navigating cattle gates with a gallery, hand painted fencing encompassing and hiding additional sculptures at an art fair, and most recently channeling light to project flora within a museum and working with his family to install gardens outside the gallery walls.[2] Many of these interventions have in common the use of physical and conceptual barriers–but Azzuz is not interested in creating barriers to seeing, but instead to point out those that exist and are often unacknowledged. Azzuz instead is "building barriers *for* seeing" in the service of communicating his ideas about the functions of art.

Beyond using physical structures, like fencing, Azzuz's painting process employs conceptual barriers for seeing that include various levels of abstraction and paint handling. The paintings often stem from a desire to interpret memories of his own lived experiences and of land and place, as well as encompassing different histories of both Native American and Western art history. Azzuz has been surrounded by examples of aesthetic histories and of histories of production that influence his own output. He recalls time spent with Libyan relatives in homes filled with maximalist North African and Islamic art, like tapestries, and with Yurok relatives where making and craft was ubiquitous. Growing up geographically closer to his Yurok family, Azzuz was surrounded by family members not only weaving baskets and creating beadwork in the home, by also working collectively in nature, in ceremony, and in community–all tenets of collaboration that carry forward and continue to expand in his own practice.

Brian Tripp (Karuk). *Woodpecker*, 1982. Image courtesy of the Denver Art Museum. Gift of Loren G. Lipson, M.D.

Many of the artistic traditions that Azzuz gravitated toward as he studied art also included ad hoc or collaborative working styles–those of skateboarding culture, graffiti,and 'zines, and gathering materials from his surroundings. Azzuz's earliest work was influenced by the first "capital A" artist he was exposed to, Brian Tripp (Karuk).[3] Tripp's use of vibrant color and expressionist lines in his paintings and assemblages cite Karuk ceremonial design and basket weaving, as well as graffiti. Azzuz also saw much of the work of the early 1990s Mission School movement of the Bay Area art scene, that included artists such as Barry McGee, Ruby Neri, Chris Johanson, and Alicia McCarthy. He was particularly attuned to McCarthy's punk approach to unorthodox materials and abstraction, as well as the way that a mentor like Cliff Hengst combined underground comics and folk art with his thrift store aesthetic. Azzuz was often pulling from popular culture, using cartoons to question and reclaim racist tropes of Arab and Native American identity. While the direct use of cartoon imagery rarely appears in his work now, Azzuz began to see the reclamation of representation and the rematriation of land as related ideas. These conceptions percolate in his work as important strategies to imagine new futures.

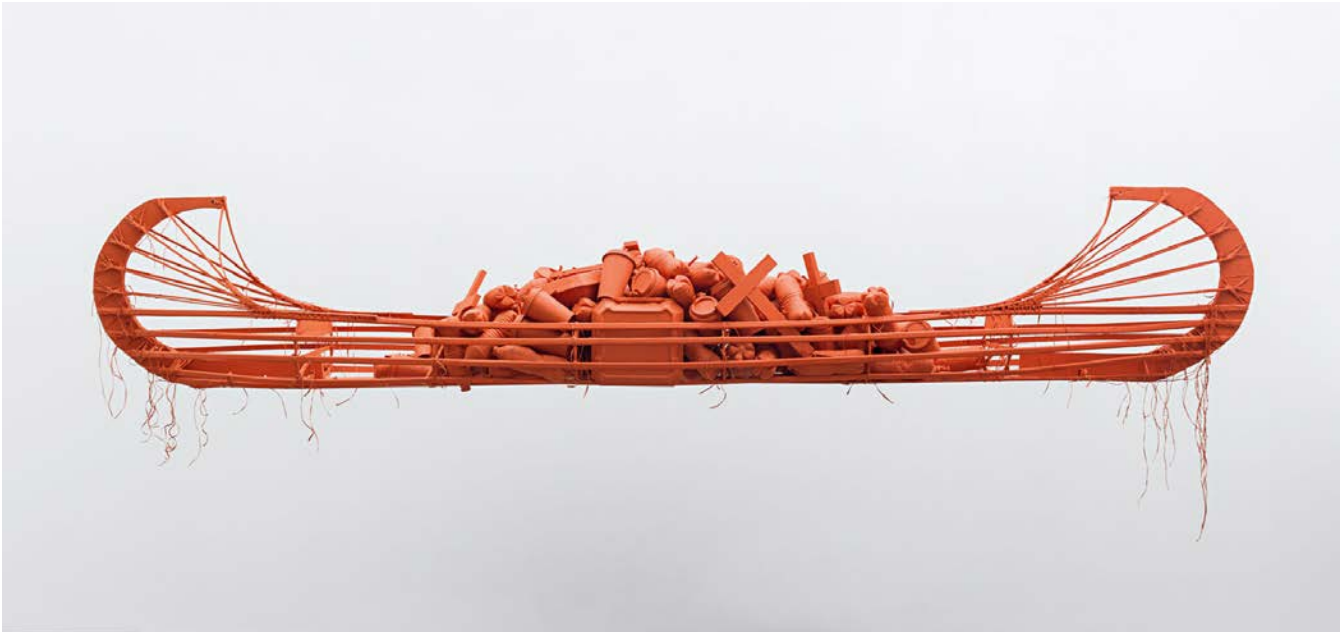
Throughout his painting practice Azzuz has explored a variety of ways to express the sense of being immersed in nature, of understanding a specific place and of accessing memories related to place. Painting functions within Azzuz's practice as an important way to ground (pun intended) himself and his audience in land. The subject of his paintings and drawings derive from landscapes recalled by himself and his family members. There are some parallels with Azzuz's way of conjuring an experience of nature and Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Bird's abstract *Neuf* paintings. Though lesser known than Heap of Bird's text and conceptual works, they began as a daily practice in the early 1980s as a way to remember and connect to the wooded canyon of his homeland in Oklahoma. A form of meditation, Heap of Bird's has also referred to the *Neufs* as being "about sovereignty and landscape, and they speak to the issues of homeland and beauty."[4]

The concept of practicing sovereignty through painting resonates in Azzuz's approach, this reference hidden in plain sight through his process. His paintings are made through a number of methods from spray paint, to staining and stamping and rubbing and much of this work happens on the back of the final painting–the full labor of the making invisible to the viewer. When Azzuz uses spray paint on the back, this can create an area of resistance where the paint builds up in layers and shows up in ways that aren't visible from the front. In fact, Azzuz says, the "majority of the painting is happening on the back" of the canvas and the work happens as the canvas is flipped back and forth.[5] While there are certainly other histories of artists who paint from the reverse–seen in the the work of some Chicago Imagists like Jim Nutt and Barbara Rossi who painted on the backside glass or acrylic to achieve a smooth, strokeless finish–Azzuz's inspiration for this approach is the unseen labor of land stewardship, particularly that of fire work undertaken by his own family. The pristine landscape of Northern California may be taken for granted by those that visit and even many that live there, but Azzuz and his family have a deep understanding of the work of Indigenous stewardship that nurtures the

Saif Senussi Azzuz. *Aiken's crick (Lulu)*. Acrylic, enamel, spray paint, and oil stick on canvas, 2019. Image courtesy of part 2 gallery.

land. Spending time throughout his life on Yurok land, Azzuz has seen first-hand the importance of cultural fire and collective rematriation in bringing back native plants. Through his style of abstraction, Azzuz is depicting indigenous plants that continue to exist or are returning because of this stewardship: grasses, willow, fern, monkeyflower, as well as that which encourages their growth. In addition to including these thriving native plants, Azzuz also uses spray paint to "eradicate" invasive plants–in some paintings the pigments are washing over the foliage that chokes and kills the native flora. Perhaps one would need to intimately know the world around them, their hyper local biosphere, to understand the specificity of these gestures and implication of the plant choices Azzuz is making but anyone can access the feeling of being in nature from the paintings. The sense of growth and movement in the paintings comes from not only the exuberant hand Azzuz uses in laying down his compositions or the illusion that light is streaming through the foliage but also in the implication of physicality that the washes and stains bring to the surface, reminiscent of artists like Helen Frankenthaler or Sam Gilliam that were similarly interested in challenging the static assumptions of painting.

The palettes of Azzuz's paintings are striking, changing as the reference points shift, and deployed as protective or adaptive as the occasion calls for. Natural dyes, enamels, and inks in vibrant purples, blues, and greens imbue paintings from late 2019 with dizzying, tapestry-like surfaces, while in paintings from 2022 the magentas, reds, oranges, and blues were pulled from fire and drought maps that rely on the artificiality of computer and phone screens to convey information. In some more recent paintings the palette of greens and yellows, even browns, reflects the history of the place they were shown–the Dogpatch neighborhood in San Francisco.



Jaune Quick-to-See Smith and Neal Ambrose-Smith. *Trade Canoe: Making Medicine*, 2018. Image courtesy of the Whitney Museum of Amerian Art

Using tones that call up the salt marshes that existed along the bay before they were backfilled and built up, Azzuz is signaling not only history but a proposal for future revitalization.

The paintings work in concert with individual sculptures and with the accumulation of sculptural objects to give voice to issues of importance to Azzuz and give rise to that palpable buzz of high-key serenity. Installed in intimate groupings at museums and galleries, as in his studio, are sculptural objects made from meaningful materials such as Redwood or burnt charcoal and those made meaningful by the people who forged them like his partner, children, mother, and grandfather. These talismanic objects point to the importance of both Azzuz's personal studio practice and larger community involvement and have been presented on shelves, creating an intimate setting, and on walls, creating an approximation of the studio. Some wall-based sculptures include assemblages of found and altered objects like wood scraps, hardware, and fencing that are carved, painted, and manipulated by Azzuz into small tableaux of remembered or imagined landscapes. An accumulation of small sculptures in a gallery show from 2022 illustrates the variety of Azzuz's inspiration: his children's drawings, rubbings from traffic barricades near Weitchpec made with his mother Elizabeth Azzuz, bits and bobs of wood, a beaded bingo marker, protest posters, and ballcaps. Azzuz's approach to assemblage has been impacted by important precedents set by artists like Betye Saar, who's interest in pushing back against racist stereotypes led to her collection and integration of offensive commercial objects like Aunt Jemima bottles into her work, and Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (citizen of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Nation), who filled carved canoes with the aftereffects generations of colonialism (fast food wrappers, Christian crosses, syringes) in cheeky attempts to "give it back" to the colonizers. Throughout Azzuz's sculptural practice, the material dictates his approach: at times it asks for minimal intervention, in say a piece of Redwood burl, and at times for the touch of others' hands, as in works that incorporate beadwork by his mother. The materials—whether wood found around the artist's studio or charcoal and wood from controlled burns managed by Cultural Fire Management Council—lend their own histories that Azzuz then shapes into reappraisals of issues like forced displacement, private land ownership, and the deleterious effects of big industry (in Northern California, this means timber and cattle).[6]

Saif Azzuz, *We don't want your kind here*, 2022. Steel and enamel gates. Courtesy of the artist and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery

Azzuz first used sculpture as a physical barrier in his 2022 show *Huem-chor O' weych-pues (Welcome to where the rivers meet*) at Anthony Meier gallery. There he installed a cattle fence adorned with imagery familiar from his paintings that divided the space of the gallery and had the effect of keeping viewers at a distance from many of the works in the show. This forced remove allowed Azzuz to question the assumption of access to not only his art objects, but to the ideas and the cultural knowledge embedded in his work. Importantly there is one work that spanned both sides of the fence–the salmon, carved from wood which Azzuz gave unfettered access to the viewer and to the works behind the fence. The salmon's freedom points to the inadequacy of barriers as protectors and as deterrents but is also a reminder of the consequences of land privatization–salmon populations have been deeply affected by irrigation, damming, and climate change. Azzuz's appropriation of the cattle fence came not solely because of the form's ubiquity in Northern California and its symbol as a definer of private property, but also, as Azzuz states, because these fences are metaphors for the mechanisms of capitalism and big industry[7]. Azzuz looks to disrupt some of these mechanisms by repurposing and suggesting new potential for these forms–creating barriers for seeing, but only fresh, radical ways of seeing.

Azzuz has continued to work with varying barriers and again manipulated a commercial gallery space in a 2023 show in New York.[8] There, two tall sculptures suggested fences, but contained Azzuz's expressive signature foliage and geometric patterning (here a bit spikier than in paintings), which forced viewers to navigate the space and view the paintings and additional sculptures in a particular way. The barriers bisected the installation of paintings but instead of keeping viewers perpetually at a distance, upon arriving at the end of the gallery a diligent visitor was invited to sit and take in the view of a remembered landscape. The metal fencing here was atop familiar looking railroad ties, another ubiquitous architectural language with a nod to capitalism's westward expansion. Azzuz has in common with Puerto Rican-born artist Edra Soto a fascination with recognizable forms of barriers and questions of the function of such boundaries. Soto's work often references architecture of post-war Puerto Rico, particularly the iron screens, or rejas, affixed to buildings to provide security but also necessary ventilation in the tropical

climate, and she affixes them to buildings in the United States or repurposes their form inside museums and galleries.[9] It is no surprise that artists from land so affected by European colonialism and American imperialism would both look to vernacular forms of architecture to evoke spatial history and force questions of beauty and visibility.[10]

The demarcation between art and the barrier is fluid–Azzuz has also used wooden and chain link fencing to create spaces of necessary looking and incorporated paintings and sculptures on, within, and hidden just beyond these built structures.[11] The variety of Azzuz's approaches–from the intimate drawings, to collaborations with his partner or mother, to the invitations to larger communities to create together–each meet different needs for himself and of his practice, but they also meet the moment. The barriers for seeing that Azzuz is, patiently, gently, but with tremendous power, building are necessary reminders to question the world as it is and imagine it as it can be.

About the Author

Laura Phipps is an Associate Curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art where she has recently curated *Mary Heilmann: Long Line* (2025) and *Jaune Quick-to-See Smith: Memory Map* (2023). Phipps' other projects at the Whtiney include Around Day's End: *Downtown NYC 1970-1985*, and *Virginia Overton: Sculpture Gardens* and projects with Andrea Fraser, Michele Abeles and the show *Flatlands* of emerging painters.

Footnotes

[1]More than a hundred years after the forcible removal from their ancestral lands, there have been recent developments in the return of land to the Yurok Tribe from private entities and the state of California. https://www.sfgate.com/california-parks/article/historic-yurok-land-deal-near-redwood-national-19310940.phphttps://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/parcel-size-manhattan-returned-california-tribe-20363588.php

[2]The referenced installations can be seen in the following:Denver, Rule Gallery, 2021 ; Anthony Meier, San Francisco, 2022; Art Basel Miami, Meridians, Nicelle Beauchene, 2023; Blaffer Museum, University of Houston, 2025

[3]From an email with the artist, June 27, 2025.

[4]For more on Edgar Heap of Birds' practice, see: https://oklahomacontemporary.org/exhibitions/current/neufs-for-oklahoma-autumn

[5]Modern Art Notes podcast, Episode No. 638, January 25, 2024. https://manpodcast.com/portfolio/no-638-saif-azzuz-maryam-taghavi/

[6]Cultural Fire Management Council (CFMC) is a community based organization with a mission to further fire use and cultural resource management. Azzuz's mother, Elizabeth Azzuz, is a leader within the organization. More information is available on CFMC's website: https://www.culturalfire.org/

[7] In conversation with artist Firelei Baez, April 11, 2022. https://www.anthonymeier.com/artists/saif-azzuz#tab:slideshow;slide:10

[8]*Says Who* at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York, 2023.

[9]Specifically, Soto has worked on a series of projects titled Graft that use the form of the iron screens in a variety of spaces and to differing ends: https://www.luisdejesus.com/artists/edra-soto/series/graft

[10]The architectural functions of the mashrabiya in Islamic architecture is similar to that of the rejas: for passive cooling and for privacy–particularly in allowing one to look out without being seen. Contemporary artists like Ghada Amer and Hayv Kahraman have referenced mashrabiya in their works, often thinking about the protection and burden of privacy from feminist perspectives.

[11]Examples of these types of works were on view at CCS Wattis in the exhibition *All This Soft Wild Buzzing*, 2024; in the Meridians section of Art Basel Miami, through Nicelle Beauchene Gallery in 2023 and in Cost of Living at the ICA San Francisco, 2024.

Saif Azzuz: Keet Hegehlpa' (the water is rising)

June 7, 2025—December 20, 2025

Saif Azzuz: Keet Hegehlpa' (the water is rising) interrogates the privatization of land, water, and natural resources within settler-colonial systems. Across a range of mediums, Saif Azzuz (b. 1987, Pacifica, California) references the myths, origin stories, and fabricated tales animating the land we now call Houston. The exhibition brings together site-specific and newly commissioned installations, paintings, and assemblage. Along with family members, Lulu Thrower, Elizabeth Azzuz, Viola Azzuz, Moya Azzuz, and Colleen Colegrove, the artists in the exhibition draw ecological knowledge to visualize histories of land stewardship and rematriation practices that gesture to Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor's notion of survivance—the conjunction between resistance and survival.

For the artist's first museum exhibition, Azzuz draws upon historicized fictions in archives and material histories. Through close examination, the artist locates seemingly unrelated historical processes that contribute to the loss of agency or autonomy in the land and body, which points to commonalities, contradictions and shared precariousness across communities. In Keet Hegehlpa', the artist employs archival references, such as Allen Brothers advertisements that circulated in the early 19th century, which depicted an idyllic hilly European hamlet known as Buffalo Bayou. These manufactured misrepresentations encouraged settlers to purchase and occupy the unceded land of the Sana, Atakapa-Ishak, Akokisa, and Karankawa peoples. Through painting and assemblage, Azzuz responds to the control of stolen land and carceral realities to discuss how privatization is enforced. Azzuz's work offers strategies of subversion against continued attempts to control or displace Indigenous communities; in so doing, the artist centers the unyielding and interconnected force of life in all beings—human and more-than-human alike.

Saif Azzuz (b. 1987, lives and works in Pacifica, CA) received a bachelor's degree in Painting and Drawing from the California College of the Arts in 2013. Azzuz has exhibited at Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco, CA; Galerie Julien Cadet, Paris, FR; ICA San Francisco, CA; Pt.2 Gallery, Oakland, CA; Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York, NY; and K Art, Buffalo, NY. Azzuz is a 2022 SFMOMA SECA Award finalist and has participated in the Clarion Alley Mural Project and the Facebook Artist in Residence program. His work is represented in numerous public collections, including Rennie Museum, de Young Museum - Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Gochman Family Collection, Facebook, North Carolina Museum of Art, University of St. Thomas, Stanford Health Care Art Collection and UBS Art Collection.


KRISTIN SALERI STUDIO