

**The Jewish Museum**

***Overflow, Afterglow: New Work in Chromatic Figuration***

**STOP LIST**

100. Director's Welcome
101. Introduction
102. Sara Issakharian, *Her Twinkle in Their Eyes*, 2023
103. Sula Bermúdez-Silverman, *Repository I: Mother*, 2021
104. Austin Martin White, *(last)Bacchanal(pity party) after B. Thompson*, 2022
105. Rosha Yaghmai, *Afterimage, Past Skies*, 2023
106. Ilana Savdie, *Cow*, 2023
107. Chella Man, *Autonomy*, 2024
108. Sasha Gordon, *Ferment*, 2022

## 100. Director's Welcome

**JAMES SNYDER:** I'm James Snyder, Helen Goldsmith Menschel Director of the Jewish Museum and I'm here to welcome you to the exhibition *Overflow, Afterglow: New Work in Chromatic Figuration*.

Beginning in the late 1950s with the pioneering exhibition *Artists of the New York School: Second Generation*—and continuing into the early 1960s when then-director Alan Solomon gave Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg their first solo museum exhibitions—the Jewish Museum has been a home for artists on the cutting edge of contemporary art. In 1966 the landmark exhibition *Primary Structures* introduced minimalist sculptors to a broader public. And *Software*, the 1970 exhibition exploring the potential of technology and interactive art, was years ahead of its time. Over subsequent decades, through both solo and group exhibitions, the Jewish Museum has continued to foreground contemporary art as an integral part of its mission.

*Overflow, Afterglow* brings together a diverse group of contemporary artists who are forging new paths in dynamic and highly personal ways. They do so with surreal palettes, an uncanny glow, and complex portrayals of the figure—all informed by their own identities. Several of these artists are Jewish, and some are responding to these precarious times of environmental deterioration and information overload. Through painting, sculpture, and installation, their works undermine cultural norms while reflecting each artist's experience in today's world.

Throughout this audio tour, we invite you to experience these vibrant and thought-provoking works, to hear from the artists themselves about their practices, and to experience the next chapter in our exploration of the new visual vocabularies that are informing contemporary art today.

## 101. Introduction

**LIZ MUNSELL:** I'm Liz Munsell, the Barnett & Annalee Newman Curator of Contemporary Art here at the Jewish Museum.

**KRISTINA PARSONS:** And I'm Kristina Parsons, the Leon Levy Assistant Curator.

**LIZ MUNSELL:** So, when I began working at the Jewish Museum, I felt really excited to follow in the footsteps of many contemporary curators who have really been articulating what contemporary art is and putting it on an institutional stage in real-time. I had been noticing a return to surrealism, and the unreal in contemporary practice more broadly, and I also saw contemporary artists making an explosive presence through color.

**KRISTINA PARSONS:** Part of what we wanted to encompass with *Overflow, Afterglow*, is this exuberance, and often it's this abundance of color, and of techniques, and of expressions that are sometimes grotesque, sometimes psychologically fraught and uncanny, that really unsettle our assumptions that the figure is absolute, fixed, or unchanging.

**LIZ MUNSELL:** We chose a title that would speak to the feeling of being uncontainable whether as a person, or as an artist, or even as an art form, overflowing categories on all fronts imaginable.

"Afterglow" is often associated with the setting sun, when an entire landscape can take on an almost unnatural hue. For this group of artists, many of whom are making their museum debut, what the future looks like has a big question mark on it.

**KRISTINA PARSONS:** There's not one set path through this exhibition. Each artist is given their own section that really offers a portal into their own world, it's a unique space that still puts them in dialogue with one another without suggesting a hierarchy.

**LIZ MUNSELL:** Taken as a group, these artists use color to disorient the figure and create perceptual experiences that help evade reductive interpretations of their work. In doing so, they visualize today's experience of frenzied too-muchness and all-at-onceness, embracing expansiveness over any fixed notions of the self, and ultimately conveying interlinked experiences across many spectrums.

**102. Sara Issakharian, *Her Twinkle in Their Eyes*, 2023**

**SARA ISSAKHARIAN:** I'm Sara Issakharian, and I'm a painter. I was around four or five when they started bombing Tehran. We used to hide under the table. I would just draw until the sound would go away and they would say it's safe to come out. So that's where the drawing started.

Working with color pencils and charcoals, are the things that maybe get me much closer to that kid growing up, because with color pencil, you are very free.

The paintings usually start with a story. And the characters are mostly animals, mostly female. There's always a female character that is going through all this transformation. Maybe it's affected by the Women's Movement in Iran. But maybe I'm thinking more about the human experience in general, all the conflicts, always this desire to be free. But then, the story goes away. The form takes over and painting takes over and somehow, towards the end of the process, then you find the story again.

**LIZ MUNSELL:** Within these scenes of battle and struggle, Issakharian combines disparate visual vocabularies, from tales of epic poetry told through Persian miniatures, and the Disney and Japanese cartoons she watched as a child, to the grand mythological and allegorical subjects of Old Masters paintings in the European tradition.

**SARA ISSAKHARIAN:** In *Her Twinkle in Their Eyes*, there's a lot of pushing, pulling, and characters that are being carried. You see that a lot in works of Rubens, this kind of push and pull between the characters. In this piece, for example, the hands were very important. I was trying to point with the hands, some sort of formal direction. If you want to zoom in, then you find a lot of details. But when you zoom out, it's something about to burst.

**LIZ MUNSELL:** In Issakharian's new works, human hands are intertwined with wings and animal limbs as they meld together, becoming obscured.

**SARA ISSAKHARIAN:** During the revolution a lot of people were fleeing, and this is what we've been told, that they covered themselves with sheep skin. There's always this idea of hiding behind something. You always want to hide yourself, parts of you. At home, we were Jewish. And outside, I couldn't be Jewish. So, I think that a lot of these conflicts within that now is coming out in the art came from these two worlds that I was living.

103. Sula Bermúdez-Silverman, *Repository I: Mother*, 2021

**SULA BERMÚDEZ-SILVERMAN:** My name is Sula Bermúdez-Silverman and I'm an artist from Los Angeles, California. My work interrogates different systems of power. And I'm interested in material history and globalized trade.

**KRISTINA PARSONS:** Bermúdez-Silverman's practice begins with extensive research. She deliberately selects the substances that form each work to illuminate the role of these materials in various histories—often histories of subjugation. Her use of sugar foregrounds the Haitian legend of the zombie that actually predates the cannibalistic monster of Hollywood lore. In this original tale, the dead body of a slave or laborer could be resurrected to continue working on the island's colonial plantations As the legend goes:

**SULA BERMÚDEZ-SILVERMAN:** There's a poison which makes a person's heart rate so slow that they're pronounced dead. People have come back 10, 20 years later and have said that they were buried alive and then dug up and sent to work on sugar plantations. Salt is the antidote. So, on these plantations, they're said not to give a zombie salt, because that will awaken the zombie.

**KRISTINA PARSONS:** In *Repository I: Mother*, Bermúdez-Silverman incorporates both sugar and salt to create an eerily luminescent sculpture in the very familiar form of a miniature house.

**SULA BERMÚDEZ-SILVERMAN:** The dollhouse was my childhood dollhouse. I took apart the dollhouse and created silicone molds of each of these pieces, poured the hot sugar into these molds and then put those pieces back together. There's a ring on the floor, which is powdered Himalayan salt, which kind of looks like snow. The sugar has become cloudy over time and gone from a transparent to a translucent quality. I'm interested in translucency as a metaphor for illuminating hidden histories and hidden parts of our societal architecture.

Sugar first was for a very privileged minority. People had sugar locked in sugar cabinets with a key. And now, obviously, sugar is in everything that we eat. And that is exactly how dollhouses changed over time. They were basically just for very wealthy people to show off their own homes in miniature. Children didn't even play with them.

**KRISTINA PARSONS:** With this work, the artist is illuminating how our relationship to materials changes over time.

**104. Austin Martin White, *(last)Bacchanal(pity party) after B. Thompson, 2022***

**LIZ MUNSELL:** In Austin Martin White's paintings, vibrant—even fluorescent—color literally bursts from the canvas through an interesting process employed by White.

White begins by using a vinyl cutting machine, creating a negative image, much like in printmaking that permeates the fabric. Then he pushes latex paint through the back of the fabric. It's sort of a reverse painting process – color spills out of the front from the back, over the neat digital outlines, pushing the images towards abstraction. And against the dark, reflective fabric, the paint seems to glow with ominous radioactivity.

White's painting *(last)Bacchanal(pity party) after B. Thompson* is one in a series of works in which his subjects are dancing on the edge of an apocalypse that is somehow still infused with potential—which is largely how this present moment feels to many of us. For paintings in this series, White, who was raised in Detroit and now lives in Philadelphia, drew from images of 1990s raves and 17th-century colonial ethnographic illustrations. The figures—some human, some seemingly not—cluster in a chaotic pile. White's process transforms historical imagery into radiant and unnerving figures of uncanny and unknowable origin.

This work is also an homage to a 1964 painting by Bob Thompson, the extraordinarily prolific Black painter of boldly colored canvases who died in 1966 tragically at the age of 28. Thompson's compositions infused Renaissance and Baroque masterworks with the avant-garde energy of free jazz, the music of his own era.

**105. Rosha Yaghmai, *Afterimage, Past Skies*, 2023**

**KRISTINA PARSONS:** Rosha Yaghmai's *Afterimage* series evokes the spots you might see after looking at the sun or a bright light—like a ghostly negative, an ocular floater. She explores the sensorial effects of intense color and the interplay of light, harnessing the reflective and refractive properties of each material to destabilize the viewer's experience of seeing.

The source imagery for each of these works is an illustration from the ancient Persian epic poem *The Shahnameh*, or *The Book of Kings*, scenes from which hung on the wall of her childhood home. For each work, the artist digitally removed the figures and abstracted the traces that remained. This digital image then became a guide to paintings she airbrushed on sheets of organza, which she layered together and rearranged, further distancing the final work from the original illustration. Through the traces of the figure that are still visible after this deliberate erasure of the body, the artist explores notions of resilience, generational inheritance and collective memory.

The layers of fabric that comprise each work create moiré patterns, which cause the composition to appear as if it is shifting when you look at it from different angles—an optical effect harkening back to the Los Angeles Light and Space artists of the 1960s and '70s. These paintings also evoke California's psychedelic visual culture as well as New Age photographic portraits of a person's aura.

**106. Ilana Savdie, Cow, 2023**

**ILANA SAVDIE:** My name is Ilana Savdie. I grew up in Colombia in Barranquilla, where the Carnival happens every year. The ethos of the Carnival is a really big part of my work. You're invited to express the most exaggerated version of yourself, invert the normal into the grotesque, tell the darkest aspects of your history through the most brightly colored, theatrical way possible.

**LIZ MUNSELL:** For Savdie, the act of painting is corporeal. She often starts with her canvas on the floor, pouring paint with a physicality that is really felt in the final product. While she has a general plan or framework for each painting, she also improvises and works with the trails and washes of paint created in that moment.

**ILANA SAVDIE:** I make fairly large-scale oil, acrylic and wax paintings that deal with theatricality and performance as modes of subversion and as rooted in the body. It's important for me to use my entire body in the making of each piece. The work addresses joints, the relationship between things, the way things meet. So, it feels imperative to the process to use my wrist, my elbow, to my shoulders, to my knees. Painting is a sort of reminder that I have a body. I always say that out loud, because it feels really important to remember. So, I work in a scale that feels like I can really do that.

One of these pieces is titled *Cow*. This piece came from an encounter I had with a Susan Rothenberg painting entitled *Mary III*, in which a human figure crouches in an almost all-fours position. I became fascinated with reclaiming the power of this posture. I used myself as a model, which I don't often do. So this piece actually ended up becoming almost a self-portrait. There was something extremely powerful about making a self-portrait and calling it *Cow*.

**LIZ MUNSELL:** Through an oversaturation of palette and density of imagery, Savdie leans into excess as a strategy to scramble figuration and make something unsettled, and entirely anew. That's accomplished by slathering on materials, in what's often a race against time.

**ILANA SAVDIE:** A key aspect of this work is my interest in materials that dry quickly. I'll do acrylic pours that will dry as the liquid travels through the surface. The painting is laying on the ground and there's very little control that I have over that. I also work with melted wax that dries as I brush it onto the canvas. The yellow, very textural area in the center, that is wax pigmented with an encaustic. Things really start to become about responding to the decisions that the material wants to make.



## 107. Chella Man, *Autonomy*, 2024

**CHELLA MAN:** I'd consider the biggest, most grand performance of my life to be my performance as a girl, when I was like four years old to 17.

My name is Chella Man. My pronouns are they/them I am an artist, director, speaker, activist and author. I also identify as curious, determined, stubborn, hopeful and also Deaf, trans-masculine, gender-queer, Jewish and Chinese.

**KRISTINA PARSONS:** Man works across a variety of artistic media. The work presented here is their most ambitious performance installation to date. To make this clone of their nude form in silicone, Man worked with a special effects artist to create a mold of their entire body.

**CHELLA MAN:** To create *Autonomy*, I had to be stripped naked, laying on a cold floor in the middle of winter and stuck in goo [laughs] for hours, hours on end. Laying on the cold ground for five to six hours, pain begins to set in because you're just unable to move at all. It really took so much constraint for me to be liberated, and that mirrored my own trajectory in this world. It allowed me to go through that trajectory in the span of just hours. And when I emerged from the goo, I just couldn't stop laughing.

**KRISTINA PARSONS:** Man recreated each of their tattoos on this body, as well as the scars from their cochlear implants as part of a live performance.

**CHELLA MAN:** I see tattooing as a process of erosion. Every tattoo I have is my own art. When I was about 14, I gave myself my first tattoo: three small circles, which is how I signed all of my artwork at that time, because I never liked the idea of putting my name on things. All I had was a sewing needle, some Indian ink, and hand sanitizer. I did it on my right hip. And it's still there to this day.

**KRISTINA PARSONS:** Man's form now rests in this tender, illuminated space, infused with a warm afterglow. As visitors, we are welcomed into this intimate and personal environment.

**CHELLA MAN:** I think we often aren't presented with the imagery of a nude trans body, and mine happens to be penis-less, flat-chested, and I'm so proud of my body, and grateful for all of the change it has endured and the liberation that it's given me. I want to invite people to be curious, to try to understand and not judge, or actually judge, but allow themselves to lean into love.

108. Sasha Gordon, *Ferment*, 2022

**SASHA GORDON:** I'm Sasha Gordon. I'm a painter based in Brooklyn, New York.

I grew up in upstate New York. I felt very alone. I didn't know anyone who was like me and I had a very hard time feeling like I had value and I would disassociate quite a lot. And I think that's why I started painting myself, to feel more solidified.

I start with normal scenes of daily life, but I try to make them as bizarre and disorienting as I can. I try to push them to be in this whimsical and distorted realm that I create.

**LIZ MUNSELL:** Gordon's mundane yet otherworldly environments are populated by self-portraits, often multiplied to reflect her multiple selves and rendered in seductive colors, with a smooth, glossy surface that belies an emotional richness simmering beneath.

**SASHA GORDON:** I will take photo references of myself, because even though the works can be very surreal, I want the figure to be very strong and sculptural, so I need to have some photo references of the shadows and the shapes of the body.

The first layer is always really fun, 'cause I can erase things and switch things around, kind of like collaging. And then from there, it's pretty intuitive.

I do a lot of layers. I use watercolor brushes, 'cause they are a lot softer than oil paint brushes. And I do a lot of dry brushing, which is when you apply paint and then you use brushes that have no paint on them to blend it out to create like an airbrush effect. In *Ferment*, that green ring around the face is done by the dry brush technique. I also really like the watercolor brushes for detail. They can be very slim, and good for doing the little strands of hair and the glimmer on the eyeballs, little things to make them look more realistic and breathing.

**LIZ MUNSELL:** Even in a tightly focused painting like *Ferment*, the act of self-portraiture allows Gordon to embrace her own multitudes. Through her use of jewel tones and electric palette, color becomes a way for the artist to visualize inner emotional states by grafting these bold hues onto the surface of her skin.

**SASHA GORDON:** I think after making a lot of pieces that have really heavy narratives and darker concepts behind them, I do need to make pieces that just bring me joy and are just fun experiments. And I think you can tell I enjoyed making this one, which makes me very happy to look at.