

Art **Reviews**

The Power of Community at UCLA's Graduate Open Studios

UCLA's MFA students come across as decidedly extroverted in their interests, looking out into their communities for inspiration, rather than solely within.



Jennifer Remenchik June 11, 2023



Works by Salim Green (all photos Jennifer Remenchik/Hyperallergic)

LOS ANGELES — It was a busy night at UCLA's consistently buzz-worthy annual **Graduate Open Studios** event on June 3. From vivid paintings derived from comic books to a research project about a series of police

raids that took place in the early 20th century, a lot of artistic ground was covered in the halls of the Margo Leavin Graduate Studios.

Regardless of the formal variety of the open studios, certain themes in content emerge each year, with this year's MFAs placing an overarching importance on identity. One such example is the visually striking and technically impressive work of **Nehemiah Cisneros**, whose paintings merge the graphic traditions of street art and comic books with narratives about violence, struggle, and inequality stemming back to childhood experiences growing up in Inglewood, California, during the Rodney King riots. Another artist, **Samar Al Summary**, blends fiction with memoir in her video work, an account of her experiences growing up in Arizona, where her family relocated after leaving her home country of Saudi Arabia when she was 12.

In her studio across the hallway, multidisciplinary artist **Amie Sillah** showcased a series of recent photographs depicting people she knows, and sometimes herself, in varying states of intimacy, ranging from the delicate intertwining of bedmates embracing each other to the easygoing smiles and laughter of partygoers. The work has a half-staged, half-candid quality reminiscent of *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1986), the seminal photo work by Nan Goldin that captured Goldin's close-knit friend group of chosen family as they lived and loved together in New York City before the spread of AIDS changed all their lives. When I spoke with Sillah about what united her group of new MFA students, she replied that while highly individualized many of her cohort are heavily influenced by institutional critique.

Other impressive studios included that of **Jarvis Boyland**, whose figurative paintings and drawings of mostly gay Black men contain a poignant balance of respectful dignity and poetic tenderness. Artist and witch **Jamie Ross** also housed an impressive display of ephemera from his multidisciplinary art project "Neptune's Closet" (2023), which the artist described on his Instagram as a "symposium of music, sculpture, rare books, and lectures," resulting from his and writer Liz Brown's research into 1914 Long Beach vice raids that culminated in the arrests of 31 people at private clubs where men purportedly cross-dressed and had sex.

Overall, this year's Graduate Open Studios showcased a number of artists heavily invested in depicting their respective communities, both past and present. The influence of social practice could be seen throughout, even in the relatively traditional paintings of artists such as Boyland or Cisneros. Whereas some, like Summary, took a more narrative approach and others, such as Sillah, concentrated on portraiture, the students of UCLA come across as decidedly extroverted in their interests, looking out into their communities for inspiration, rather than solely within.



Amie Sillah



Saskia Baden



Samar Al Summary



Jamie Ross



Nehemiah Cisneros



Jarvis Boyland

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