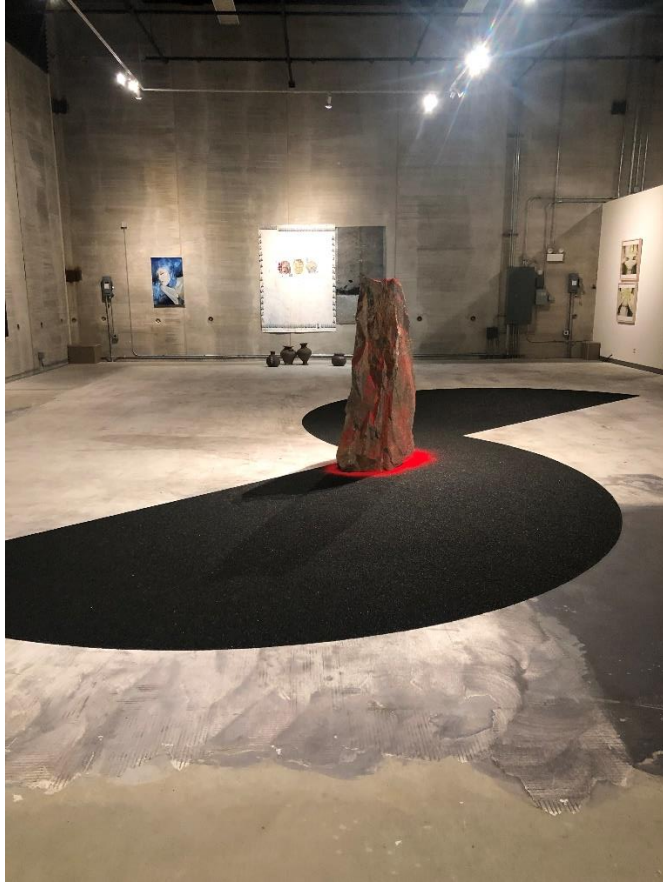


[WM | whitehot magazine of contemporary art | EXPO CHICAGO 2023: Build Community, Celebrate Diversity](#)      **APRIL 2023**

WHITEHOTMAGAZINE.COM "THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

## **EXPO CHICAGO 2023: Build Community, Celebrate Diversity**



*Lita Albuquerque, Site specific installation, dimensions variable, Rock, black salt, red pigment.*

**By JAN GARDEN CASTRO, April 2023**

[EXPO CHICAGO](#) '23 is a city-wide staging of culturally-diverse arts—as celebratory as “We Are the World,” Stevie Wonder’s 1985 USA for Africa sing along. From Derrick Adams’ uber-monumental art projections on Chicago’s Merchandise Mart façade on the Chicago River to Theaster Gates’ remarkable Rebuild South Side art-music-culture-gardens scene, Chicago is framing and honoring ethnic and gender diversity.

*Art in Common*, my first stop in Chicago, is the dream child of its co-founders —LA-based Zoe Lukov and Chicago-based Abby Pucker. This is their third iteration, after Miami and

LA, of the “Boil Toil Trouble” Macbeth witches theme, and water issues are featured in stellar work by a range of artists from known superstars Wangechi Mutu (3 stunning pieces), Maya Lin, and Bruce Nauman to Nicolette Mishkan, whose *The Protection Circle*, 2022 features a 48” x 60” oil on canvas mermaid who may be pregnant, and Lita Albuquerque’s striking large site specific work composed from red pigment, black salt, and rock plinths. Zoe told me, “I’ve always had this feeling that, at their best, artists are witches or channels. They’re storytellers. They help us make sense of the world. I put their magic-making, healing, and channeling under this umbrella term witch—the vilified woman who in the past was hunted down is a healer for the community. The show can help us heal as a culture and help us think about climate in a different way. Since I discovered surfing, I have a personal relationship to water. It has helped me to develop a spiritual practice. Also, think about the alchemy of water.”

The Art in Common 10,000 square foot temporary site on N. Peoria St., an out-of-the-way neighborhood, features over 100 pieces. Some are monumental, such as Radcliffe Bailey’s black sea composed from 1000 piano keys (refers to Middle Passage) across from a white Maya Lin wall sculpture *The Deglaciation of the Laurentide*, 2018. On opening night, a super-loud DJ and plenty of guests enjoyed drinks and Chicago barbeque as they rocked out.

That afternoon, LA-based Debra Scacco, whose silvery water *Channel*, 2022, lit up the exhibition entrance hall, was retouching *Colorado*, 2023, a cold neon representation of how this river’s course was changing and worsening. “As you know, there’s a water crisis in California,” she told me. “This is the dissolution of the system in many ways. We’re facing the worst ecological crisis of our time. These three lines are the three aqueducts that feed Southern California ... Water forces us to face what we’ve done ecologically.” Scacco organized programs for the LA iteration of Art in Common. “I always make works about boundaries; lines guide how we live and the access we have or do not have. My Dad is from Sicily, and I lived in England for a long time, so that started from my experience as an immigrant. Visas and passports were always a part of my life—and then thinking about what those lines mean ecologically—it means

who has access to clean water, clean air?... Aqueducts concretize the water that is keeping us alive. Also, people are investing in water. It's our life and our survival."

Erol Scott Harris' mixed media work *Aqueous*, 2023, uses water from Lake Michigan with pigment to create work that lets in light as it's arranged on the glass windows; the forms speak to bodies and water as they remember the artist's cousin who drowned in Lake Michigan. Cannupa Hanska Luger's works included mirror shields used to perform a sacred water serpent dance in North Dakota. As I left, Nathan, the lighting specialist, was busy "creating drama while maintaining the visibility of the pieces to add tension and storytelling to the lighting."

At the central EXPO CHICAGO exhibition and performance/discourse spaces at Chicago's Navy Pier, the atmosphere was lights and glam. Over 170 galleries and nonprofit organizations from Zimbabwe, Capetown, Berlin, LA, New York, and more celebrated diversity. Free shuttles took art lovers to other nearby art institutions. Ruinart champagne was pricey but La Crema wines offered free tastings and Audi offered its patrons free shuttles.

Three of my stops featured monumental works by women artists. Thanks to a savvy friend, my first stop was SF-based Catharine Clark's gallery where Marie Watt's *Tethered and Unbound*, 2023 reshaped a long gallery wall. This flag-like wall sculpture formed from satin blanket bindings and ceremonial Seneca jingles addresses the challenges indigenous women face. All women today are tethered and unbound, but this paradox runs especially deep for indigenous women. Marie Watt's work was also at the Marc Straus Gallery booth (NYC) and a couple of others.

Suchitra Mattai's art was a strong presence in Chicago. The artist participated in the Art Expo Forecast Forum, and her monumental work created from everyday women's saris was featured at the fair, at the MCA (Museum of Contemporary Art), and at Kavi Gupta Gallery. Born in Guyana and living in Los Angeles, this Indo-Caribbean multi-disciplinary artist uses collage, fibers, drawing, film, installation, and video to give worn domestic cultural artifacts new values and settings. Her visually-engaging art unravels colonial narratives to valorize women's bodies, work, and lives. Mattai has a solo show in July at Roberts Projects, Los Angeles.

Lily Kwong was at the NRDC booth—one of my favorite earth-saving organizations. I haven't yet seen the highly praised orchid show she curated for the New York Botanical Gardens—it closes April 23. Her piece was a stand of columns of tall slender burnt-out tree trunks with a new plant nested on top of each—a great way to show the paradoxes of deforestation and regeneration.

Eileen Jeng Lynch, Director of Curatorial Programs at the Bronx Museum, told me she liked works by Helina Metaferia, Janet Biggs, Jennifer Wen Ma, and Lily Kwong, adding that they were featured in the context of climate change in *Art at a Time Like This* and the NRDC booth. Jeng Lynch participated in the Expo's Curatorial Forum, and her colleague, Klaudio Rodriguez, Executive Director of the Bronx Museum, participated in a panel featuring a new generation of museum directors and curators. Rodriguez told me, "What's wonderful is that emerging directors and a whole new generation speak to the new movement of diversity and inclusion. The panel I was on discussed initiatives we're taking as directors to move the field forward. I spoke specifically on the capital project we're embarking on now to make the space more equitable, accessible, and welcoming to our constituents—older adults, children, people of color, people who are not traditionally museum goers."



*Brooklyn Artist Jessi Reaves solo show Chicago Arts Club.*



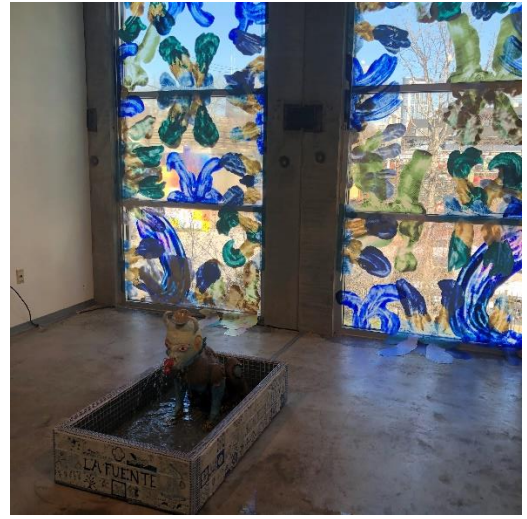
*Lalla Essaydi, Bullets Revisited #20, Chromogenic print, 21C Hotels*

I missed these talks because I spent an afternoon with Theaster Gates learning about his Rebuild programs on Chicago's South Side. Gates' art has been given solo shows at the New Museum and the Studio Museum in Harlem, and he is advisor to the President of the University of Chicago. He and a trio of women associates, including Sampada Aranke, Director of Archive Innovation Programs for Rebuild Foundation, took us to a series of buildings Rebuild has transformed into community party, artmaking, living, outdoor, and research spaces. We began our tour under a gazebo for Tamir Rice. Theaster talked about using the training of a sculptor to tackle things outside the studio and how he is investing in the place where he lives. "I'm an artist. Initially, I thought the bank would hold the everyday objects of Black people – I wanted to demonstrate that the things people had in their natural worlds could have tremendous value if those things were aggregated, cared for, if a light was put on them. We started getting these

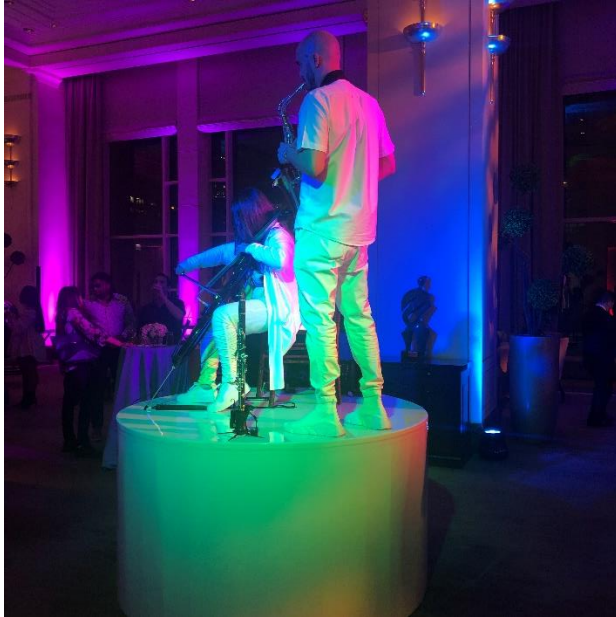
collections, and they were derogatory images of Black people, the history of Western Art, books and images from a Black publication (Ebony)...then, from the things we had, those objects become the launching pad for a whole bunch of conversations. Then Tamir Rice's mother called (from Cleveland) with a problem: people are gathering at this gazebo where (12-year old Tamir was killed by a 26-year old policeman) people pray and organize, and the police are concerned and want to tear it down. To remove the possibility of riots, the police would remove the existing symbol of Tamir's death (the gazebo). So the gazebo in Cleveland had power—I don't know how we get from prayers to a riot....I wasn't looking for objects of trauma, but I used my skills as an organizer to bring this here and to make this site sacred.”...Gates is an eloquent spokesman, and he has turned the buildings and outdoor spaces he acquires into sculptural works of art and community resources. Space doesn't permit me to take you on the full tour of the South Side projects. Miyagi Records just opened nearby, and a 40,000 square foot space is being made into artists' studios.



*Theaster Gates talks to journalists from Europe & USA about Tamir Rice Gazebo and Rebuild Foundation.*



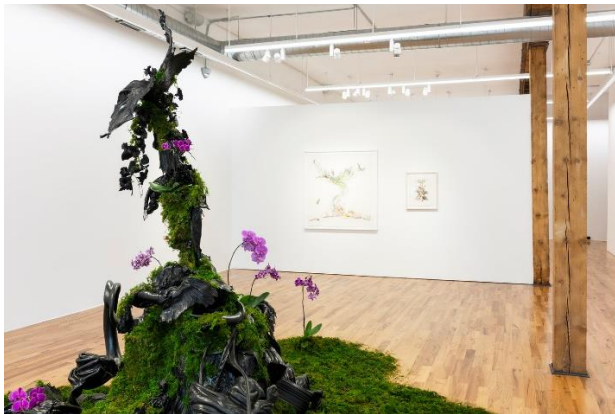
*Suchitra Mattai, 1973, an ocean's cradle, 2022 (detail). Fountain by Astrid Terrazas. Erol Scott Harris, Aqueous, 2023, Mixed Media site specific installation, Linoleum and Plastics 152 x 120"*



*Party at The Peninsula Hotel Chicago with Gio Swaby (right) and NY artist Hank Willis Thomas, EXPO CHICAGO participant (Left).*



*Anish Kapoor, Cloud Gate sculpture in Chicago's Millennium Park.*



*Regan Rosburg, Monument.*



*Detail, Suchitra Mattai.*



*Wangechi Mutu Mwotaji (The Dreamer) 2016, polished bronze, unique hand carved Carrara marble, 10 x 13 x 5.5".*



Let me close this brief EXPO CHICAGO tour with the Neo party at the Peninsula Hotel hosted by arts patron Beth Rudin DeWoody. The hotel was decked out with DeWoody's art chosen by curators Laura Dvorkin and Maynard Monrow to celebrate Chicago's contemporary galleries and their reputation for showing international artists ahead of other cities. The Who's Who crowd was mostly upscale art collectors, museum and gallery directors and artists. Ruinart champagnes and Dragonfly cocktails were without limit. Chefs in white served delectable dishes and meats from stations around the room before the deserts came around. Tall glass vases held exquisite orchids, peonies, and rare flower arrangements. A white center round platform held two young musicians in white—Lidanys Graterol from Venezuela and Vlada Dinic—performing on electric cello and sax. Thelma Golden, Director of the Studio Museum in Harlem was there. Somewhere I met Manuela Well-Off-Man, Ph.D., Chief Curator of IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts in Santa Fe. The elite hundreds were perhaps few in relation to many huge EXPO CHICAGO-related parties each night. Chicago parties are where the action is!

Just as Chicago was the home of Second City leading to Saturday Night Live and just as Chicago was an early advocate of art in public spaces, Chicago is doing its best to attract museum directors, curators, artists, and patrons worldwide and to have an inter-generational conversation to build community as it celebrates diversity. **WM**



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