

# NICELLE BEAUCHENE GALLERY

**Saif Azzuz**

*Says who*

February 24 - March 25, 2023

Opening reception Friday, February 24 6–8 PM

Nicelle Beauchene Gallery is pleased to present *Says who*, the first New York solo exhibition by Bay Area-artist Saif Azzuz, and his first with the gallery. This site-responsive installation interweaves the breadth of Azzuz's mixed media practice, comprising large-scale painting, wood assemblage, and metalwork.

In *Says who*, Azzuz excavates the colonial history of Collect Pond Park, a public park located two blocks southeast of the gallery on Leonard between Lafayette and Centre. Over 400 years ago—prior to the Dutch colonization of Mannahatta—a large, freshwater pond fed by multiple underground springs was situated here: a deep pool that sustained the surrounding Lenape village of Werpoes.

By the 1630s, the Dutch had begun walling off the pond from the larger watershed of which it was a part, kicking off centuries-long processes of Indigenous displacement by settler powers including the British and nascent United States. In the early 1800s, the city of New York filled in the pond after decades of its use as a communal sewer. The memory of Collect Pond reveals relentless campaigns to privatize and monetize land and natural resources once stewarded by the Lenape.

As an exhibition, *Says who* reifies broad histories of U.S. settler colonialism; Azzuz asserts an Indigenous historical narrative by subverting the colonial logics of space rooted in the history of Collect Pond Park. With the gallery's proximity to the site of the pond, Azzuz figures the space itself as a site in which these colonial logics manifest, staging an intervention by creating pathways via a system of metal sculptures-as-barriers to control movement throughout the exhibition.

Extending along the gallery's longest wall, a sequence of twelve acrylic on canvas paintings represent land's resiliency and destruction, a serial recollection of land and life erased by the westward expansion of Manifest Destiny. Compositionally dense, these paintings register immense space and color in Azzuz's distinct language of abstraction. In *Closest thing to hell* and *Sick Fuckers (325 buffalo left)* (both 2022), raw, unprimed canvas peeks through vibrant washes of pigment and more dense, gestural markings.

Salvaged wood assemblages, metal sculptures, and works on paper materially accentuate and expand upon the adjacent paintings. Here Azzuz employs tools like routers and welding torches as mark making devices, adding and subtracting to surfaces in a process akin to scarification. Nearby, an appropriated steel prison toilet-sink (*Full of Kwech*, 2022) gives life to various plant species native to the area. In conjunction with other carceral motifs throughout the exhibition (such as repurposed metal bars and handcuffs), Azzuz nods to the multiple jails and courthouses that currently occupy the blocks surrounding Collect Pond Park, underscoring that the expropriation of Indigenous land is directly constitutive to the institution of mass incarceration.

Azzuz's work recalls both the debris of colonization and the resiliency of Indigenous life ways to make do with what is salvageable from the perpetual wake of colonization. This dual-meaning is embodied by a monumental diptych that fills the gallery's back wall. In *Under the willow tree (let the earth stabilize your postcolonial insecure jitters)* (2022), the artist renders a pre-colonial vision of Collect Pond, a view of lush green thickets and rolling hills that enclose a fervently blue body of water. As though a window

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through time, the diptych exemplifies Azzuz's deep reverence for ecosystems that continue to sustain life in spite of ongoing defacement, and in laying bare colonial histories, Azzuz underscores our entanglement with land, synthesizing the interconnection between oral history and personal memory.

**Saif Azzuz** (b. 1987, Eureka, CA) is a Libyan-Yurok artist who lives and works in Pacifica, CA. He received a BFA in Painting and Drawing from California College of the Arts in 2013. Recent solo exhibitions include Anthony Meier Fine Arts, Mill Valley, CA; Rule Gallery, Denver, CO; and Pt.2 Gallery, Oakland, CA. Group exhibitions include Pt.2 Gallery, Oakland, CA; Ever God San Francisco, CA; and NIAD, Richmond, CA. Work by Azzuz can be found in numerous public collections including the Renni Museum, Vancouver; de Young Museum - Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; and the North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh.