



Center of Fine Arts Exhibition  
**MIFA**



Center of Fine Arts Exhibition  
**2014**



Master of Fine Arts Exhibition



Michigan State University  
College of Arts and Letters  
Department of Art, Art History, and Design

**2024 Master of Fine Arts Exhibition**

Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at  
Michigan State University

Exhibition Dates: **March 9– May 26, 2024**

Artist Talks: Wednesday, March 20, 6-8pm

Reception: Saturday, April 6, 6–8pm

———— MSU Broad Art Museum

Participating MFA Candidates

**SHIRIN ABEDINIRAD**

**GUSTAVO URIEL AYALA**

**EMILY J. BURKHEAD**

**ADELINE NEWMANN**

**PATRICK N. TAYLOR**

## INTRODUCTION

The MFA student at Michigan State University is characterized by a desire to push beyond the boundaries of existing art and design paradigms, whether focused within or across disciplines. Each person is encouraged to explore the parameters of their creative journey considering material investigation and conceptual questions. Each artist's process of discovery is unique based on their own integrative media-focused or multidisciplinary inquiry. Under the guidance of a faculty committee selected by the student, they develop a rigorous studio practice that is informed by their curiosity of the world around them. While developing their thesis exhibitions, our MFA students work with their committees, refining their artistic goals with a deeper understanding of what it means to be a contemporary practicing artist. The MSU Department of Art, Art History, and Design celebrates the creative research of Shirin Abedinirad, Gustavo Uriel Ayala, Emily J. Burkhead, Adeline Newmann, and Patrick N. Taylor as evidence of their achievement and continuing artistic, scholarly, and professional promise.

**Teresa Dunn**

Director of Graduate Studies/Department of Art, Art History, and Design



## SHIRIN ABEDINIRAD

Through her minimalist interventions in the landscape, Shirin Abedinirad harnesses the power and beauty of nature in works of land art that become sites for reflection—both external and internal. The Iranian artist typically uses mirrors—sometimes in juxtaposition with commonplace domestic objects like doors, a Persian carpet, a bird cage—situated in remote vistas of mountains, sea, and desert, and documented in photography and video. The simple yet convincing illusions she creates play with perspective and scale and ripple with metaphoric implications.

Born in Tabriz, a city in northwest Iran, the 37-year-old artist moved to Tehran when she was very young with her family that always encouraged her artistic inclinations. When she drew all over the walls of their home, expecting to be punished, her parents were silent and instead began sending her paintings to competitions. In school, Abedinirad focused on graphic design, then switched to fashion design which she studied for four years at university in Iran. During a residency in India, she was exposed to performance, video, and land art for the first time.

Back home she became well-known locally for playful and provocative performances she did in the streets and subways (which went viral on YouTube) interacting with the public and confronting issues of gender, sexuality, and human compassion.

Abedinirad's work shifted from identity oriented to land based after a transformative experience in the Iranian desert in 2013. There, she experimented with placing more than a dozen round mirrors in the dunes, which reflected the brilliant blue of the sky. In her photographs, her trail of circles, glistening like jewels or pools in the sand, brings a mirage of water to the arid landscape. Over the last decade, the artist has continued to explore light, movement, and illusion in her outdoor gestures with reflective surfaces that have suggested the broken centerline of a roadway, stairs, ziggurats and towers, staged for international biennials and festivals.

Now, for her thesis exhibition titled *Reflective Journey* in the MSU Broad Art Museum, Abedinirad adapts a work installed waterside last year at the Commagene Land and River Art Biennale in Turkey for an indoor space.

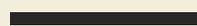
In the gallery, visitors encounter a large accordion-like structure with three full-scale wooden doors, alternating at right angles with three equal-sized mirror panels. Looking at the piece from one vantage point, the three opaque doorways converge visually in a row as solid wall. With the viewers' movement, the doors, doubled in the mirrors, appear to open until the three reflective surfaces align optically as a single continuous view. People will see themselves, and others, shifting amid a large video projection of a coastline—mirrored within the space, fractured then coalescing—that the artist shot at the Caspian Sea in Iran, with the repetitive motion of gentle waves suggestive of resilience and renewal. (Abedinirad has also designed a virtual reality walk-through of the installation that can be accessed through an online portal.)

Barriers and borders assume personal significance for the artist. After participating in the 2023 film *Critical Zone*, in which she removed her hijab at the Imam Khomeini Airport while screaming in an act of defiance, Abedinirad cannot return to her country for now without reprisal.

*“Reflective Journey*, for me, is a symbol of a time you feel the doors are closed to you, there is no way out,” says Abedinirad, inspired in part by the 13th-century poems of Rumi, who writes of polishing the mirror of our hearts as a road to enlightenment. *“But if you gradually change your perspective, you will see opportunities coming to you and at the end a horizon opening.”*

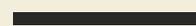


## Reflective Journey

Photography  24"x36" ● 2023



## Reflective Journey

Photography  24"x36" ● 2023

## GUSTAVO URIEL AYALA

In paintings that mine the arena of competitive wrestling, Gustavo Uriel Ayala presents pairs of male athletes locked in intense physical contact. These couplets, recognizable from professional sports and high school gymnasiums across America, are rendered less familiar through Ayala's heightened palette and tight cropping, their bodies barely contained in his large-scale canvases. Isolating charged moments between men—at once aggressive and intimate, legible and ambiguous—the artist invites reflection on the performance of masculinity in all its dimensions.

The 31-year-old artist was born in Mexico and moved as a young child to the U.S., where his family eventually settled in the small town of Vincennes, Indiana. He describes a conscious feeling of being an outsider developing in middle school, when he began to be aware of his attraction to boys as well as of his family's mixed legal status.

"I think about every effort I made to speak clearly, learn the language, hide all of the things that made me and my family's experience different, just pass as normal," says Ayala, who has been part of the DACA program since 2012. "It's the same sort of passing if you're in the closet." In high school art classes, he discovered his love and facility for skill-intensive figurative painting and went on to study at the Heron School of Art + Design in Indianapolis, when he also came out as gay.

Using found images as source material since undergrad to explore ideas of self-construction and desire, Ayala first recontextualized wrestling motifs plucked from the internet when he started as a grad student at Michigan State University. He designed and sewed varsity patches, typically displayed on letterman jackets, that included simplified interlocking silhouettes stitched together from old towels—a material alluding to locker rooms and sweat.

These fabric experiments became the springboard for the vibrant canvases in his thesis show, in which the trope of the varsity jock has proved to be a fruitful vessel to embody tensions about gender norms, conformity and assimilation, longing and belonging.

Ayala's dynamic competitors summon archetypal figures from antiquity, from the Hellenistic sculpture of Laocoön, writhing in battle with serpents, to the silhouettes of athletes ringing Greek and Roman vases. Each of his duets flickers between an image of force and embrace, made all the more difficult to read clearly by the obscured faces and the intensity of the fluorescent tones, both seductive and lurid. In *Leg Lace*, the two figures are modeled in saturated hues of cadmium red, which optically vibrates against a flat ground of lemon yellow. One hovering above the other, the men are almost balletic in their entwining.

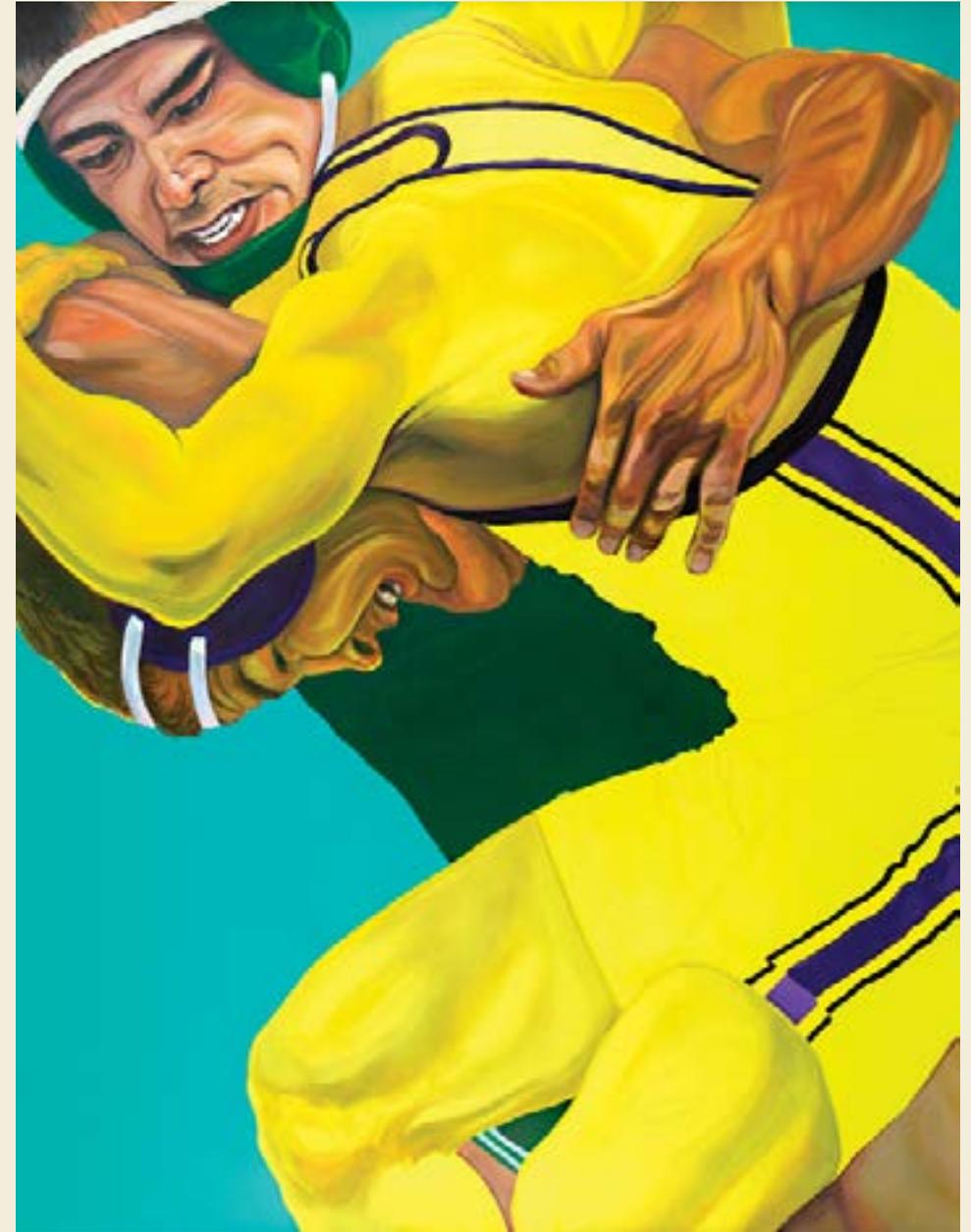
It's hard to decipher who is dominant and where exactly one ends and the other begins with the fluidity of the luscious monochromatic tones, which amps up both the eroticism and the abstraction. In *Stranglehold*, one figure is decisively victorious over the other yet their faces appear almost twinlike—two sides of the same coin—obfuscating the binary between strength and vulnerability.

"I lean on contradiction," says Ayala, of his depictions of struggle, personal and age-old. "I liked this subject matter because it opened it up to anyone, within and beyond the queer community."



## Leg Lace

Oil and acrylic on canvas ————— 66"x42" ● 2023



## Stranglehold

Oil and acrylic on canvas ————— 54"x42" ● 2023

## EMILY J. BURKHEAD

As an artist working in mixed media installation, Emily Burkhead plumbs a surfeit of cultural artifacts and trends from her youth in an investigation of gender, sexuality, and non-conformity. “The research question is, how do my childhood experiences impact my sensory processing as an adult?,” poses Burkhead, a queer, neurodivergent 25-year-old woman who grew up in Memphis and first explored her identity in experimental film and video as an undergraduate at Rhodes College in her hometown.

Now, in *Trigger/Glimmer/Something Else*, her thesis exhibition as an MFA student at Michigan State University, Burkhead orchestrates an immersive barrage of color, texture, and text to draw viewers into her personal worldview. Taking a cue from the scrapbooking she did as a child with her mother, one of several female quilters in Burkhead's family, the artist here leans into crafting—traditionally the realm of women's work—as she reckons with what it means to be “feminine enough.”

She chose a hyper-girly, hot-pink faux fur as a kind of tapestry, sprawling free-form across the wall of the MSU Broad Art Museum and spilling onto the floor, on which to attach and compose a range of media.

Her palette of materials includes readymades like Beanie Babies, McDonald's Happy Meal toys, Hello Kitty stickers, and Barbie dolls—all part of the steady diet of desirable items fed to children of her generation. She integrates these commercial objects with organic-looking textures built up from 3-D filament. Accretions of the plastic material in neon-yellow resemble mounds of fungus and intestinal, bodily forms, suggesting a sort of visceral internalizing of cultural influences.

Words written with a 3D pen in the same acrid-colored filament spell out things that Burkhead considers unpleasant sensory “triggers,” such as “contemporary Christian music,” “unsolicited advice,” “hypocritical millennials,” and “SCOTUS.”

Using pink 3D filament, intermixed with sparkly glass beads and sequins and butterflies, Burkhead “grows” a kind of pink moss and in pink lettering articulates her “glimmers”—things that for her are dopamine producing such as “my weighted blanket,” “my puppy's ears,” “rainy day video games,” and “laughing fits with Henry.”

Scattered across the composition, like gestural brushstrokes in an Abstract Expressionist painting, are dashes of brilliant blue, referring to the third piece of the installation title, “something else.” Delicate tangles of blue 3-D filament, for instance, could suggest connecting neural pathways and the artist's unique way of processing. “It's the in-between—complex relationships or complexity that I'm trying to figure out,” Burkhead says.

Suspended like a canopy above the visual saturation of the wall piece is a strip of pink translucent vinyl inscribed with rows of lacy pink handwriting—hard to decipher but evoking the stream of consciousness in a young girl's journal. More legible are three vintage television monitors, stationed on pedestals at a distance from the installation with seating provided. Scrolling down the screens is text from Burkhead's personal “manifesto,” an analysis of the three types of people in our society—“mean girls,” “weirdos,” and “frauds”—as she sees it. By turn humorous, angry, confessional, vulnerable, it is essentially about the artist trying to embrace her inner weirdo.



### Trigger/Glimmer/Something Else (detail)

Faux fur, clear vinyl, flexible TPU, and found objects  
Dimensions variable 2024 ●



### Trigger/Glimmer/Something Else

Faux fur, clear vinyl, flexible TPU, and found objects  
Dimensions variable 2024 ●

# ADELINE NEWMANN

Adeline Newmann approaches storytelling as a dynamic and experiential stream-of-consciousness. Through a vast accumulation of acutely observed works on paper, layered with projections of hand-drawn animations in her thesis exhibition at Michigan State University, she ruminates on subjective health issues against the backdrop of a global pandemic and the permeable boundaries between illness and wellness.

“It is my own sort of cabinet of curiosities in the journey of confronting mortality on a personal and cultural level,” says Newmann, of her immersive installation titled *Corrupted Uncorrupted*. Observational drawing is foundational to the 34-year-old artist, who discovered it as a kind of building block and way of seeing during a summer art intensive for animation when she was a teenager in the San Francisco Bay Area. Newmann went on to get her BFA in experimental animation at CalArts in Santa Clarita and worked for a decade in the entertainment

industry, including seven years at Walt Disney Imagineering doing projection mapping and immersive video design.

While pursuing her MFA at MSU, Newmann has combined her facility for drawing from life with her ability to manipulate these works digitally to engage viewers in non-linear narratives and spatially complex environments. Inspired by the threat and uncertainty of her own diagnosis with a high-risk strain of the HPV virus that may (or may not) lead to cervical or other forms of cancer, Newmann has produced a cacophony of images playing with anatomy and metamorphosis in *Corrupted Uncorrupted*.

Drawings, watercolors, and gouache and ink studies of skeletons and Baroque pelvic bones gilded in gold are juxtaposed with explorations of bruised skin. Details of Gothic architecture take on bodily qualities, such as a reliquary window with a pattern that seems to melt into human silhouettes.

Research sketchbooks were drawn on site during the artist’s trips to the UK, Italy, Canada, and Philadelphia to visit an ossuary, medical history museums, and other contemporary and historic cabinets of curiosities—eccentric collections put together by individuals that often contain creatures preserved in jars, specimens that Newmann renders in a lurid palette of yellows and reds.

Washing over this dense collection of drawn works pinned to the walls are looping ambient projections—atmospheric textures suggestive of magnified bodily tissues, for instance, and squiggly kinetic lines evocative of territorial borders between landmasses, or bodies. Another animates a simple watercolor silhouette of a figure with fast-moving X-ray-like images lighting up internal systems. In one mesmerizing projection, eerie faces flicker between ghouls and skulls before disintegrating into organic abstractions. Through Newmann’s deft hand, contour studies of tree bark can morph into a zoomed-out view of virus spreading.

As part of her interactive installation, Newmann includes two display cases—one covered, one uncovered—with her sketchbooks, art books, and samples, hand-made puppets and flipbooks. “It’s animation without any computers,” says Newmann, of her low-tech flipbooks with dozens of little drawings of transforming faces that people can pick and activate. “It’s self-propelled.”

Newmann’s maximalist meditation should resonate with anyone who has lived through these pandemic years facing all the implications of contagion—micro and macro, internal and external—and provides multiple points of entry for viewers to navigate a universal landscape. She aims to confront the stigma associated with HPV and related cancers and draw attention to a widespread affliction and experience often shrouded in silence. “At the end of the day,” she says, “we are physical humans and we interact with one another, and there isn’t really a barrier between people when it comes to illness and infectious diseases.”



## Corrupted Uncorrupted

Ink, gouache, watercolor, pencil, crayon, acrylic on cotton rag paper, kraft paper, Yupo paper, animation paper, miscellaneous papers, with digital projection, animation, photographs, vinyl, flipbooks, art books, and other collected artifacts ■■■■■ 2"x3" pages ● 2024



## Corrupted Uncorrupted

Ink, gouache, watercolor, pencil, crayon, acrylic on cotton rag paper, kraft paper, Yupo paper, animation paper, miscellaneous papers, with digital projection, animation, photographs, vinyl, flipbooks, art books, and other collected artifacts ■■■■■ 2"x3" pages ● 2024

## PATRICK N. TAYLOR

As an experimental video and intermedia artist, Patrick Taylor uses electronic technology to question, and make visible, relationships between our physical, spiritual, and digital lives. “The idea I’ve fixated on for a long time is that the screen operates on the same sort of principles as the natural world,” says Taylor, influenced by the pioneering video artist Nam June Paik whose monumental installations with flickering televisions shifted the electronic moving image into the realm of spectacle and transcendence. “This ideological separation between technological life and organic life has dissolved for me.”

Born in Texas in 1991, Taylor studied in Fairfield, Iowa, at Maharishi International University—center of the transcendental meditation movement—where he received his undergraduate degree in creative writing and a masters in studio art.

He came to visual art through music, playing in bands and then making videos for live music performances by modifying analog electronics to create glitch art. Taylor became fascinated by feedback loops and setting up conditions for generative systems to spontaneously create their own patterns, something he has explored in multiple media—including ceramics, sculpture, and performance—as an MFA student at Michigan State University.

For his thesis show at the MSU Broad Art Museum, Taylor’s installation—comprising three sculptures and a projection of a performance—centers on the question, what is the weight of the digital soul? Positing that people’s data may be the real eternal life after they die, Taylor seeks to quantify and visualize the equation between every action that happens on the internet and its equivalency in carbon produced by fossil fuels burned to keep the servers running.

In *Tree Effigy/Milagros*, Taylor coated a real tree in black paint and suspended it upside-down from a circular mount—its roots extending upwards toward a glowing LED halo as though taking sustenance from the cloud, its branches angled downwards toward a ring of carbon ash scattered on the floor. Dangling as well from the mount are six florescent tubes, powered by a computer monitoring the traffic on the local Wi-Fi network at the museum and flickering and clicking poly-rhythmically in response to the level of internet activity.

In conversation, the wall piece *Procession* is also composed of long florescent bulbs, configured into six large rectangular forms, each with radiant tubes crisscrossing their centers, that suggest stained glass windows as well as abstracted floor plans of a basilica. On the floor, *Funeral Mound (Terminus)*, a heap of black carbon spread to the size of a human grave, symbolizes the toll of the comforts of the connected world.

As viewers move between the mound and the wall piece installed with sensors, the bulbs interact with their presence, scrambling the display and casting kinetic shadows.

“The impression I want is that this is a thinking computational system,” says Taylor of *Procession*. This jerry-rigged display, essentially a giant screen composed of nearly 100 florescent bulbs (almost obsolete technology), becomes a kind of surrogate for human consciousness.

In another layer of storytelling, a video projected on an adjacent wall shows a young man activating the installation by collecting and crushing charcoal from the mound and scattering the ash around the base of the tree in a ritualistic procession. He faces two of the glowing florescent displays as though they are the eyes of God.

“My goal was to make a simulated religious space,” Taylor says, interested in a dialogue between the ancient and the contemporary. “I want to inspire awe.”



## Milagros/Tree Effigy

Organic material, LEDs, Microprocessor, Relays, Granular Carbon  
17'x10'  2024 ●



## Milagros/Tree Effigy

Organic material, LEDs, Microprocessor, Relays, Granular Carbon  
17'x10'  2024 ●

## CONTACT

For more information on the Department of Art, Art History, and Design or our Master of Fine Arts program, contact [artgrad@msu.edu](mailto:artgrad@msu.edu).

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This year the annual Master of Fine Arts Prize will be awarded by guest juror Teréz Iacovino, Assistant Curator of the Katherine E. Nash Gallery at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. Journalist Hilarie M. Sheets was invited to serve as the 2024 Critic-in-Residence and contribute essays to the exhibition catalog.

The *2024 Master of Fine Arts Exhibition* is organized by the MSU Department of Art, Art History, and Design and the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University, with curatorial oversight provided by Dalina A. Perdomo Álvarez, Assistant Curator. Support for this exhibition is provided by the Graduate School at MSU and the John and Susan Berding Family Endowment.

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