



ILLUSIONS OF CERTAINTY



Notes & Sketches

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Curated by K. F. Otis & Edwina Polanco

April 28th - May 9th, 2025
Student Union Art Gallery

University of Massachusetts Amherst

CURATORIAL

ILLUSIONS OF CERTAINTY

K. F. Otis

BFA Intermedia, Fall 2025 Graduate

The idea for this exhibition spawned from the United States presidential election results of 2024. I felt anxious, furious, hopeless, and terrified. However, this measure of dysphoria motivated me to try to do something about it: to use the resources available to make a mark by helping others make their mark.

On November 6th I sent an exhibition proposal to our art department chair, Associate Professor Jenny Vogel. I also approached Associate Professor Juana Valdés and Professor Young Min Moon for guidance. They all urged me to begin by reserving gallery space, and later coached through the fact that to do this well I wouldn't be able to do it on my own – especially as a full-time undergrad. Having worked with Edwina Polanco on *Stay, Awaken, and Make Whole* at Herter Gallery in the fall of 2024, I knew that in addition to being a brilliant painter, Edwina possesses an extremely strong work ethic. Edwina agreed to meet and thus began our winter journey through exhibition logistics with Professor Young Min Moon. For the record, it was Edwina who named the exhibition!

In times like these I believe it is absolutely paramount to amplify voices – not silence them. The overarching goal of *Illusions of Certainty* is to offer a welcoming space to have potentially difficult conversations. It is my hope that artists and viewers find comfort here; that they are inspired to engage in constructive discourse fueled by emotionally charged works of art. I also hope this exhibition inspires more student-run exhibitions, especially those curated by undergraduates.

In an effort to renormalize the in-person exchange of thoughts and ideas, particularly as it relates to *seeing* and *talking* about art, I hope this exhibition inspires you to strike up a conversation with someone.

Combining the wise words of August Etzel and Roswell Magne into one bold statement: insist & persist.

Edwina Polanco

BFA Painting, Fall 2025 Graduate

Following the results of last year's election, I experienced a significant decline in hope and a rise in pessimistic outlook, coupled with concerns about the security and welfare of my community. This event led to feelings of isolation and a noticeable reduction in the size and vibrancy of voices.

After working with Krystal in *Stay, Awaken, and Make Whole* at Herter Gallery in the fall of 2024, Krystal approached me and asked me to review her proposal and if I was interested in curating with her! I was immediately motivated to join this important endeavor. I felt hopeful to be of service to amplify marginalized voices and foster open dialogue.

This exhibition is a safe and inclusive space for exploring diverse perspectives and fostering empathy and understanding. It will serve as a platform to challenge our existing beliefs and cultivate open-mindedness. Krystal has been instrumental in my development as a leader, significantly amplifying my voice and fostering a greater recognition of my potential.

My aspirations for this exhibition encompass a transformative impact on our campus community. These aspirations include fostering opportunities for undergraduate student curators, establishing a secure and inclusive platform for diverse voices to address issues concerning marginalized groups, and ultimately leaving a lasting legacy of hope, leadership development, and collaborative spirit that empowers individuals to feel heard and impactful during these challenging times.

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to have collaborated with her and extend my sincere best wishes for her future endeavors. I would also like to extend my sincere gratitude to Professors Juana Valdés, Young Min Moon, and Chair Professor Jenny Vogel for their guidance.

GABRIELLA ADAMS



My name is Gabriella Adams, and I am currently a sophomore painting major here at UMass Amherst. My artwork has been exhibited here at the Student Union Art Gallery, as well as being featured in the spring showcase with the UMass HFA and in a magazine called the Scribe, located on campus as well. A lot of my work has been reflective of my childhood and nostalgia, but lately I've been exploring new themes and ideas with my artwork.

My work blends a variety of materials—including oil paint, printmaking techniques, and ceramics—to reflect on the ongoing tragedies of the Russo-Ukrainian war. During my time in Poland, I listened to stories from friends and family who shared their fears, experiences, and the emotional weight they carry as a result of the conflict. These conversations deeply impacted me and inspired a need to process and communicate these realities through art.

As both an American and a Polish citizen, I experience the war through two very different lenses. In Poland, the war feels immediate—it's in every conversation, every headline, and every uncertain glance toward the eastern border. There's a constant hope for peace, and a fear that the violence might spread. In contrast, back in the United States, the war often fades into the background, barely acknowledged in everyday discourse. That stark contrast in awareness—and the emotional disconnect it represents—drives my work.

Through my art, I aim to bridge that gap in understanding. I want to confront viewers with the reality of this conflict, even when it's uncomfortable. By weaving together personal narratives, cultural identity, and layered materials, my work invites people to look closer, listen harder, and engage with a war that too many have turned away from.



Top left to bottom right:

The Calls of War
Speedball oil-based ink on Stonehenge paper
60" x 44"

A Peaceful Day in Poland
Oil paint on canvas
30" x 48"

Child's Dollhouse
Ceramic clay and ceramic glaze
12" x 12" x 13"



DAHLIA BIALEK



I was raised here in western Massachusetts surrounded by artists. I have been practicing various forms of fiber arts since my adolescence and I have never lost my passion for creating. Art has always been my escape. Art has always lent me the gift of being grounded. Art has always been a constant in my life. When first learning about this exhibition, I envisioned being able to be a part of it, and I am so grateful to have been trusted to create a piece for this gallery.

My piece is entitled, "He Shreds, She Threads." This is a sculpture to represent the current social-political climate revolving around the topic of reproductive rights in this country. The piece shows a pair of mens hands ripping apart a uterus, and a pair of womens hands sewing a uterus back together. The hands were constructed using plaster and clay. The uteruses were hand felted and beaded. I wanted this piece to capture the grip that men have over our reproductive organs. I wanted the beads to symbolize the fragility of these organs, and show the delicacy they should be treated with. Instead, it highlights the aggression that is felt when our rights to our own bodies get stripped away by men. A uterus is wrapped in layers of muscle, fat and skin. Held gently in our bodies, providing an illusion of safety, and an illusion of certainty. However, when our right to choose gets taken away from us by people who do not possess the organs in question, it feels like their hands have surpassed our skin, and have cemented their grip in our bodies.



He Shreds, She Threads

A collaboration of clay, fabric, felt and beads
Roughly 12" x 12"

AUGUST ETZEL



The Creature of the Public Restroom confronts the false narratives that dehumanize trans people, exposing the fragility beneath the rigid frameworks society builds to define identity. Two clear plexiglass panels stand at the front of the piece, clouded by an exaggerated transphobic slogan. These panels represent the illusion of certainty: the idea that identity can be seen, judged, and confined to binary definitions. Their transparency is a metaphor for how these narratives claim to be objective truths, even as they distort and obscure.

Behind the panels is a collage of my clothing, functioning as a self-portrait. The clothes bring intimacy, resisting the flattening imposed by public discourse. The keffiyeh symbolizes global solidarity between oppressed people. In the center, a pink triangle-shaped slice of watermelon merges two symbols: the pink triangle, reclaimed from its use in Nazi camps to mark queer people, and the watermelon, often used in visual culture as a symbol of Palestinian identity. This fusion expresses the interconnectedness of queer liberation and anti-colonial struggle.

Resist misrepresentation. Insist on humanity.



The Creature of the Public Restroom

Lithography ink and chalk pastel on plexiglass, multi-media collage
Panels 32" x 20", collage 36" x 28"

EESHA GORANTLA



My name is Eesha Gorantla, and I am an undergraduate student at UMass Amherst studying Biochemistry. As a first-generation Asian American, I often turn to art as a way to explore and express my personal history and identity. I primarily work with acrylics and oil pastels, and for this body of work, I used acrylic on canvas to create two pieces that explore themes of immigration, memory, and the complexities of the American Dream.

One of the paintings incorporates photographs from my childhood and from my parents' early years in the United States — images of them obtaining their citizenship, the first house they purchased, and other symbols of their hard-won successes. These elements are layered to evoke a bittersweet narrative: the deep pride in their achievements, alongside the subtle but persistent disillusionment with the promises of opportunity in this country. Central to the painting is the image of my young self clinging to a flagpole, representing the attachment to a dream that, over time, reveals its fragility.



The other work mimics a photo of my father working at a cubicle at his first job in the United States. This work is deeply personal, rooted in my own evolving understanding of my parents' sacrifices and the systemic barriers immigrants continue to face. My father's success, aided in part by the tech boom of the early 2000s, is not representative of the broader immigrant experience, and I aim to reflect that complexity — the interplay of gratitude, pride, and disillusionment — through my art.

This exploration ties closely to the theme of *Illusions of Certainty*. The "certainty" promised by the American Dream, especially to immigrant families, often dissolves into a more complicated and painful reality. Through these pieces, I hope to invite viewers to question the narratives they take for granted, and to recognize the unseen struggles behind stories of success.

Left to right:

cling to
Acrylic on canvas
28" x 22"

opportunity
Acrylic on canvas
36" x 24"

BO KIM

I am a South Korean-born, U.S.-based artist whose practice bridges traditional East Asian materials with contemporary inquiries into cultural identity, displacement, and the transformation of memory. Drawing from my background in Traditional Korean painting, art therapy, and visual research, I work with sumi ink, natural pigments, animal skin glue, mulberry tree paper, and rice paper. These materials, fragile yet enduring, are methodically layered on mounted panels. This approach echoes traditional Korean aesthetics while reflecting the tensions and nuances of hybrid existence.

My current series draws from personal archives and media imagery to examine Koreatown as a living site of layered identities and inherited histories. These paintings are rooted in photographs from immigrant family journeys, street scenes, and the media's portrayal of Korean American life. Recontextualized through light brushwork and subdued color palettes, these images become fragmented reflections of cultural hybridity. I aim to visualize the duality experienced by Korean and Korean Americans, who are rooted in ancestral memory while navigating the shifting dynamics of American society. Each work serves as both document and disruption. I invite viewers to consider the interplay between personal memory and public narratives. I explore identity as a constantly negotiated and redefined experience. The imagery I use, detached from its original context, reveals the fragility of cultural certainty and the beauty within its transformation. My practice engages with the emotional and historical textures of living in-between, where notions of home, tradition, and selfhood remain in flux.

This body of work connects with the exhibition theme *Illusions of Certainty* by visually examining how cultural identity and memory, though often perceived as stable, are in fact fluid and continually evolving. Through layering, fragmentation, and reconstruction, I seek to challenge the idea of fixed identity and invite viewers to reflect on their own assumptions about belonging and origin. Rather than providing resolution, my work embraces ambiguity and transition, emphasizing the emotional and conceptual complexity of diasporic experience. Ultimately, this work is both a personal reflection and a broader cultural inquiry. It bridges memory, materiality, and visual storytelling to explore the contradictions, inheritances, and evolving meanings embedded in hybrid identities. In doing so, it speaks to the uncertainty that defines our relationships to history, culture, and ourselves.



Asian & Asian American Studies: Time & Space in Diasporic Hybridity
Sumi ink, Korean color on Mulberry tree paper, mounted on panel
16" x 20" and 20" x 16"

ROSWELL MAGNE



My name is Roswell Magne, and I am a Junior Animation student here at UMass Amherst. My work has previously been displayed in the Five Colleges Film Festival (2025) and the UMass Amherst Film Festival (2024 & upcoming 2025), but I work in a variety of mediums, motivated by whatever inspires or impasses me at the time (often joy, connection, identity, and bugs.)

The work I am displaying for the “Illusions of Certainty” exhibition visually depicts my personal experience, specifically as a transgender individual, regarding the results of election day. I sat on the side of a hill on campus, incredibly hopeless and afraid- for my own future and for my loved ones- filling pages of my sketchbook until it got too dark to see. I felt powerless and devastated; as though everything was bigger than I was, but was able to find some amount of comfort and control in channeling that into my art. Continuing to make art is how I find it in myself to persist in the face of oppression.

I spent that day incredibly isolated, which only served to heighten my dread, but through the art I made, I was able to find community in the people around me & recognize how universal my feeling of helplessness was. And through that, I understood that I was not as helpless as I previously thought.



I feel there's an "Illusion of Certainty" in the hearts of many marginalized peoples that all hope for us is lost. And while it would be incredibly foolish to pretend nothing bad is happening, or that hope itself can fix everything, the last thing we should do is accept defeat prematurely. My work serves to highlight the importance of staying hopeful and resisting, in whatever way or scale that may be. It is nearly impossible to stay optimistic when witnessing widespread hatred for me, my friends, and my family, when I know that the man in charge of my country wants to directly harm my right to an authentic existence. But assuming that our fight is already lost only puts more power in their hands.

Despite it all, we must persist.

Persist, Persist, Persist
Soft Oil Pastel on Black paper
11" x 14"

TESSERA PHILOMINA MATAHARI

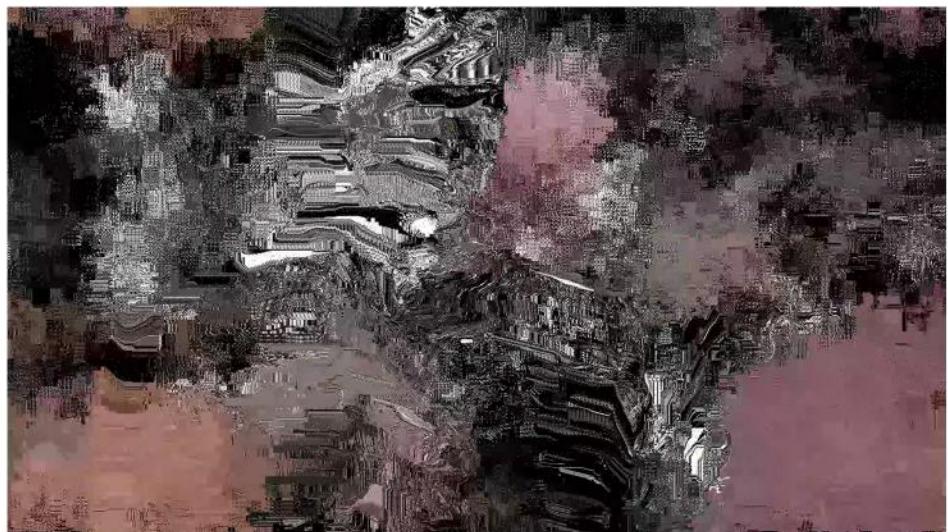


thank you for logging in, we hope you enjoy your experience. you will find yourself pulled and pulled apart in a million different directions, but that's okay. just let it happen. i will be your guide.

i am tessera philomena matahari, and i explore the intersection between the emotionalities of identity politics and metaphysics through avant-garde intermedia demonstrations. i weaponize animation, videography, photomanipulation, audio design, coding, and other modern techniques, wielding them in ironic, meta self-critiques, as if a neurosurgeon was operating on their own brain. my flagship projects have been particularly involved in the abuse of video filters and techniques in order to create tantalizing motion experiences, mental and emotional assaults of visuals and music.

forgive me if my speech is unclear or absurd. when you gaze upon the projection in front of you, i want you to think of all the voices you've heard in the past, let's say, 24 hours. every friend. every relative. every teacher. then every podcaster. every video. every song. every show. everything that everyone knows. now, look at your phone. i know it's in arm's reach. isn't it strange how something so fake has such a real hold on your life? every time you unlock it, that is the illusion of control. every time you open an app, that is the illusion of entrance. every time you respond to someone... that is the illusion of dialogue. or perhaps it's real. perhaps their confidence in what they say is real. or perhaps that is an illusion too. are you certain you're talking to someone right now? are you certain? or are you... lonely? are you lonely? are you lonely? are you lonely? ...

we're sad to see you go. would you like to fill out a survey telling us what we could do better? wait for the red dot and then scan the QR code. have a nice day!



r.u(LOnely)?

Datamoshed video collage with musical accompaniment
1920 x 1080 px, 2:45

RYAN SETOW

My name is Ryan Setow. I am a queer Asian American artist who seeks to capture the nuances of my identity through my artwork.

The Documented and Undocumented: An Immigrant's Dilemma

There is a significant proportion of our community that believes they are exempt from deportation, so long as they discriminate and distance themselves from undocumented individuals. I demonstrate that documented and undocumented immigrants are more similar than they are different.

I depict the control the government has on immigrants, both documented and undocumented. The hand above the documented immigrant is strained, outstretched, like a puppeteer's hand, policing his thoughts and actions. The hand above the undocumented immigrant is taunting, unyielding, torturing his mind and body. Red dominates the background and shadows of the left piece, while blue dominates the background and the shadows of the right piece.

Additionally, in the background of both of the pieces, there are painted strokes that from afar, appear to resemble sentences from an East Asian language. Upon closer inspection, these sentences are pure gibberish, representing the racial outgroup perception the government holds on East Asians. This further reinforces the idea that regardless of your citizenship status, you could be deported, since in the eyes of the government, you're just like every other immigrant.

There is this "Illusion of certainty" that some documented immigrants hold where they believe that they are superior to undocumented immigrants because they've immigrated here the "proper way". They might believe that through assimilation, they can gain immunity from the injustices facing undocumented immigrants. Some use the terms like "illegal" or "alien" to refer to them, which furthers the dehumanization of undocumented immigrants in an attempt to maintain their own status.

Current events inspired this work, namely the mass visa revocations and deportations of immigrants, both documented and undocumented, across the United States. With all the strife, there efforts being made within our community to look out for each other. Please critically think about what we are currently going through as a nation. We must continue to support and hold each other accountable through these uncertain times.



Top to bottom:

The Documented
Acrylic on stretched canvas
22" x 28"

The Undocumented
Acrylic on stretched canvas
22" x 28"

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Thanks

UMass Amherst Art Department

Professor Young Min Moon

Associate Professor Jenny Vogel

Associate Professor Juana Valdés

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Notes & Sketches

Visitor responses
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