

VISUAL ARTS

Emerging Artists Challenge Perceptions at Open Studios Exhibition

By Lauren Harris

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In the bustling halls of this year's Visual Arts + Sound Art Class of 2025 [Open Studios Exhibition](#), second-year Visual Arts and Sound Art students opened their studio doors to the public, showcasing a diverse array of innovative and thought-provoking works. The exhibition offered a glimpse into the creative minds shaping the future of contemporary art, each artist pushing boundaries and challenging perceptions in their unique way.

Andrea Moreno, a Sound Art student, is an interdisciplinary artist whose work blends sound, sculpture, and spirituality. Originally aspiring to be a film composer, Moreno's undergraduate years saw her integrate sound into a variety of media, from video art to ceramics and experimental films. This integration of sound into visual art became the foundation for her current multisensory installations.

In the Sound Art program, Moreno expanded her practice by exploring new materials and techniques like metalworking, woodworking, and electronics, which allowed her to create more complex, immersive pieces. Her work is driven by themes of the unknown, spiritual connections, and interspecies relationships, often challenging viewers to rethink materiality and existence. Drawing on influences from her Catholic upbringing, astrology, and personal experiences, Moreno's art delves into existential questions while incorporating deeply personal elements. One notable piece on display at Open Studios was a tapestry created with her mother, highlighting her vulnerability and showcasing her heritage.



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Moreno's pieces often incorporate hidden elements, such as speakers or air circulators, to create dynamic, breathing sculptures. She aims to create encounters and spaces that provoke thought and emotion, posing questions like, "If you were to touch this, or if this were to suddenly move, would you feel it in the back of your neck? Would you feel it in your body? Do you feel like some sort of visceral reaction, as if this were real?"

Another artist pushing boundaries at the Open Studios exhibition was Visual Arts student **Magali a Cult**, whose unique salt sculptures bridge the gap between digital and physical art. Cult's artistic journey has been one of constant evolution, beginning with music and transitioning through various visual mediums before landing on her current focus.

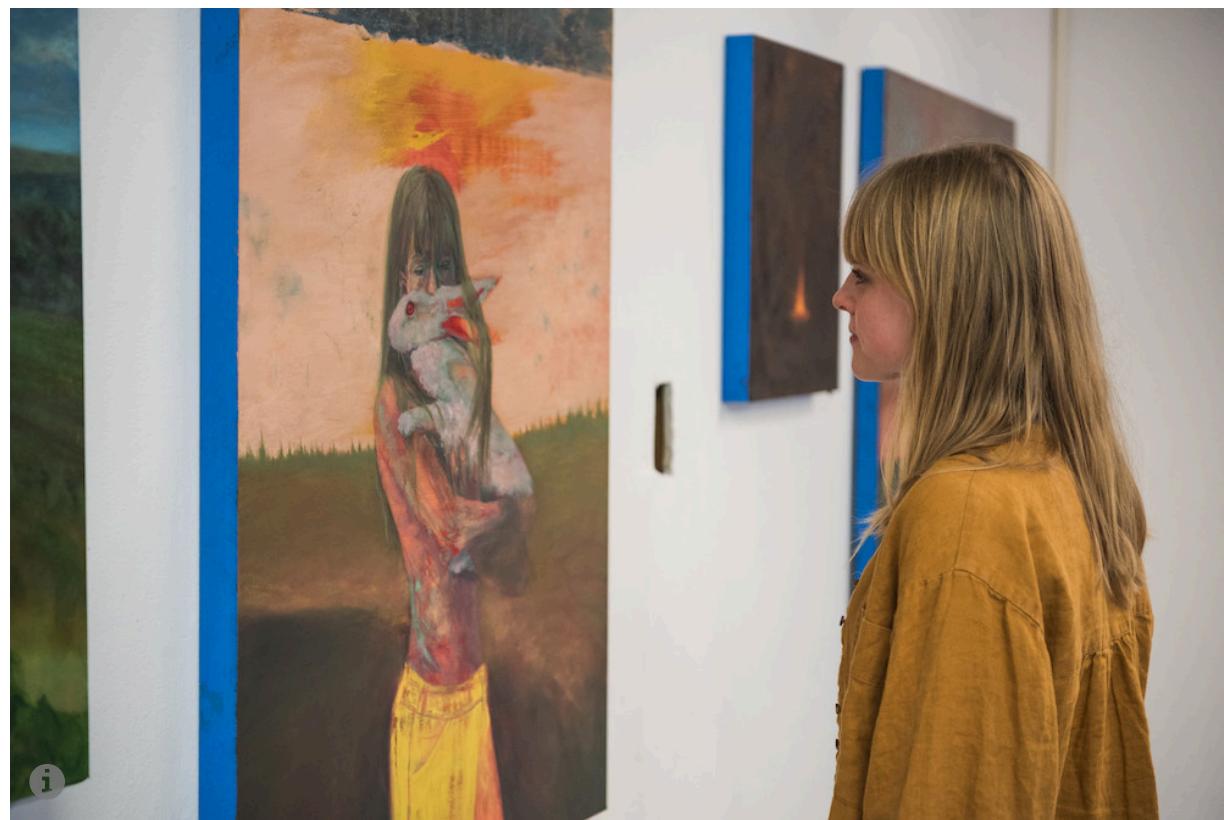
During her open studio, Cult incorporated performance art, working with salt for three and a half hours. This decision stemmed from multiple motivations: showcasing her process,

challenging herself, and engaging with her performance background. The experience proved enlightening, with visitors sharing cultural meanings of salt from various traditions.

Her transition to working with salt came from a desire to escape the digital realm. "I was so tired of staring at my screen," Cult admitted. This led to extensive experimentation with various materials, ultimately landing on salt as her primary medium. The unpredictable nature of salt—its tendency to crack, crystallize, and evolve—has become an integral part of her artistic process. One piece holds particular significance for Cult—a salt sculpture resembling a fossilized spine or rib cage. "This was the first one that [made me think], 'I think this is what I'm going to keep doing,'" she recalled.

Andreas Alvarez Backus, a second-year sculpture and expanded practice student, delves deep into themes of intimacy, identity, and the complex interplay between beauty and objectification with his work, questioning "what does it mean to be a person versus what does it mean to be a tool

or an object or a decorative element?" This exploration is deeply informed by his identity as a Filipino American and a queer person, drawing inspiration from the rich histories of craft within these communities.



A striking aspect of Alvarez Backus's work is the tension between organic and mechanical elements. He combines biological materials like collagen and keratin with natural substances such as soil and beeswax, and contrasts these with industrial materials like resin and silicone. This approach reflects his belief that identity and selfhood are composites of various histories and narratives, shaped by our environment and interactions.

One of Alvarez Backus's recent pieces, titled *be with me (not here, not there, either)*, features beeswax feet peeking out from beneath a shroud of palm leaves, exploring themes of intimacy and visibility. "I wanted to kind of shield it from the viewer," he explained, challenging the expectation for queer artists of color to be hyper-visible about their otherness.

Backus's creations are characterized by a blend of surrealism and symbolism, often featuring unexpected juxtapositions that create an eerie or uncanny atmosphere. "I think a lot about this sort of productive disgust with some of the work," Alvarez Backus explained, showing a piece from his collection that is a pair of socks made from beeswax—recognizable yet non-functional, challenging our perception of everyday objects.



The theme of “productive disgust” is also explored in the work of Cuban artist **Grethell Rasua**, who challenges conventional notions of beauty and value through her artwork. “I’ve been working since the beginning with the concept of beauty,” said Rasua. “How we can understand beauty from different points of view. The thing that is beautiful for you could be the opposite for me.”

While exploring these questions, Rasua asked people about the most repulsive things in their lives, and quickly found a common thread: “All of them had the same answer—the experience that they have with their own bodily [functions], like vomit or ‘the poop of my baby’ or ‘the poop of my dog,’ and that kind of materiality.”

Rasua’s unique approach involves transforming these universally repulsive materials into personalized works of art. She describes her series *With Your Own, With All the Taste in the World* as a service where she uses bodily waste combined with precious metals. “I decided to transform the bodily waste from each person into their own concept of beauty.” This process results in highly personalized pieces, often in the form of jewelry. Rasua explained, “The design will remember special things, special moments or experiences in their life. So the object becomes unique and special for each person.”

Rasua’s work deliberately plays with audience expectations. She described how people initially react to her pieces: “The first reaction is like, this is so beautiful and clean and elegant, but when they realize what it is, then they totally change their mind. I’m playing with that, with color, with contrast, with that kind of aesthetic that everybody has in their mind.” Through this unconventional approach, Rasua challenges viewers to reconsider their preconceptions about beauty, value, and the human body.

As visitors moved through the studios, they were confronted with pieces that demanded not just visual appreciation but also emotional and intellectual engagement. The exhibition served as a testament to the power of art to provoke, inspire, and transform. In a world increasingly dominated by digital experiences and mass-produced goods, these artists remind us of the enduring value of handcrafted, deeply personal artistic expressions.

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