

ART REVIEW

At the ICA, a vital view into the Boston art scene

The biennial Foster Prize exhibition gives three local artists a big stage and reaffirms the city's creative life

By [Murray Whyte](#) Globe Staff, Updated October 26, 2023, 5:22 p.m.

[The James and Audrey Foster Prize](#), a biennial award launched in 1999 at the Institute of Contemporary Art, offers the museum's big stage to a cohort of artists who, in the city's broader cultural narrative, are most often bit players: artists actually *from* Boston and its immediate surroundings. There are a tangle of reasons why that's so — a contemporary art star system, for one, so completely devoted to New York or Los Angeles that it shoulders out almost everything else — and I'll make no attempt to unravel the rest here.

What I will do is suggest how those blinders make the Foster Prize all the more essential. The ICA's prize and efforts like it break down the myth that art worth knowing only comes from elsewhere, and help tell a different story: of a city thriving with talent, much of it yet to be discovered. Previous Foster Prizes have helped nudge careers forward, and brought other institutions along: In 2021, [the MFA's "New Light"](#)

exhibition showcased work by prior Foster Prize recipients [Stephen Hamilton](#) (2017), [Lavaughan Jenkins](#) (2019), and [Eben Haines](#) (2021).



Cicely Carew's work installed for the 2023 Foster Prize at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston. MEL TAING

The three 2023 winners — [Cicely Carew](#), [Venetia Dale](#), and [Yu-Wen Wu](#), chosen by [assistant curator Anni Pullagura](#), are currently featured in the ICA's Foster Prize exhibition, on view through the end of the year. Shown in mini solo shows, the trio shares an affection for creative re-use: Carew, with the detritus of her studio; Dale, who works with remnants in the disparate materials of fabric and pewter; and Wu, with castoffs collected and reassembled as emblematic of the complex construction of immigrant identity.

All three are makers of intimate, tactile things; Carew's ebullient clusters of thin, colorful sheets of plastic mesh and spray paint all but cry out to be

hugged. For a prize predicated purely on geography, the happenstance harmonies are to be savored. They suggest a coherent moment, an art scene in broad conversation with itself, typically a sign of a healthy creative ecosystem.



Venetia Dale's work at the 2023 Foster Prize exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston. MEL TAING

Another positive sign is the presence of all three outside the cozy confines of the Foster show. Dale's work is currently appearing in the Museum of Fine Arts exhibition "[Tender Loving Care](#)," while work by Carew and Wu has been installed in the urban landscape with public art projects through

the nonprofit [Now + There](#) (Carew at the [Prudential Center in 2021](#), Wu in East Boston and at Boston City Hall [in 2022 and 2023](#)).

So is the Foster Prize meant to discover artists mostly unknown, or to recognize artists already in the swing? The answer, from what I can tell, is yes. Awards are always some degree of arbitrary; best not to overthink it and embrace the opportunity. In this case, it's an experience of delicate wonder. Carew's sculptural pieces either dangle from the ceiling or are pinned to the sky-blue walls. They're inviting knots of ebullient chaos, as good a metaphor of a productive studio as I can imagine.

They feel like three-dimensional expressions of the vibrantly gestural abstract paintings that hang between and beneath them. In the exhibition text, Carew speaks of the hoary legacies of [Abstract Expressionism](#) turgid and overwrought, filtered through the effusive soundscapes of jazz, a mash-up that claims space in American art history for Black culture. The sculptural works in particular feel almost like a literal translation: Exuberant and inviting, they're material tufts of free-spirited expression that you negotiate with your body in physical space. They are, quite literally, bundles of joy.



An installation view of Yu-Wen Wu's work at the 2023 Foster Prize exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston. MEL TAING

Dale and Wu offer less-related experience. Dale's work is underpinned by the weighty practice of domestic life. She gathers the detritus of inner worlds — orange peels and fabric scraps, meals finished and tasks left incomplete — to cobble intimate snapshots of lives in progress. The material counterpoints can be jarring. On one wall, “Piecing Together: bless our home go,” 2023, is composed of dozens of fragments of embroidery she acquired online, dangling together like a loose web of unfinished thoughts; on the floor in front of it, “the gradual gathering of something,” an ongoing project begun in 2021, is a cluster of three

misshapen pewter orbs on a tufted wool rug. Their rough forms feel forlorn; they're pieced together from pewter castings of orange peels left over from feeding her own children. Dale then assembles them into a make-do, semi-coherent whole — an experience to which any parent can relate.

Wu's practice includes drawing, painting, sculpture, and video; a large projection of cascading dried tea leaves occupies a whole wall of her space. Called "The Accumulation of Dreams," 2015/2023, it brings to life Wu's ideas around belonging and transformation expressed in the work that otherwise fills the room. Wu, who emigrated from Taiwan, uses tea leaves as a symbol both of her Asian heritage and of the transformation into her hybrid American self. "Acculturation," 2023, a tidy grid of gilded leaves, tea included, signifies the collective American dream of prosperity that so many immigrants come here to pursue.

But for me, her most poetic piece is from her "States of Being" series, a broad, experimental project of composing semi-finished objects from disparate parts. Made this year, "Object 5," fuses the halves of a split rock back together with a warbly vein of molten gold, a lovely but tenuous seal between parts. A symbol of the uneasy fusion of identity in the immigrant experience, it has more to say. Think about it and wonder what, if anything, is holding any of us together.

2023 JAMES AND AUDREY FOSTER PRIZE EXHIBITION

Through Jan. 2. Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, 25 Harbor Shore Drive. 617-478-3100, www.icaboston.org

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