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Art professor and artist Sarah Rosalena draws inspiration from the stars, technology and her ancestors

In her piece “Spiral Arm,” interdisciplinary artist [Sarah Rosalena](#) takes a Hubble telescope image of the Milky Way and reinterprets each pixel into a set of complex weave structures. Then, on a Jacquard loom, using hand-dyed cochineal and black cotton yarn, she weaves a constellation of eight-pointed stars. From the cochineal — a scaly insect that feeds on cactuses — the work gets its hot pink color, along with a sharp reference to the Indigenous knowledge that Rosalena, a Wixárika descendent, brings to modern technology and contemporary art.

“My work deconstructs technology with material interventions, creating hybrid objects that function between human/nonhuman, ancient/future, handmade/autonomous and beyond power structures rooted in colonialism,” said Rosalena, an assistant professor of computational craft and haptic media at UC Santa Barbara.

Currently on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara (MCASB) in Rosalena’s solo exhibition “Pointing Star” (May 20 – July 30), “Spiral Arm” will soon travel to the Columbus Museum of Art (CMA) for a retrospective exhibition of Rosalena’s career thus far, primarily in computational craft, including weaving, beading and clay.

“I am shaped by the origins, character and assembly of weaving, including the Wixárika weaving tradition passed down my matrilineal bloodline,” [Rosalena](#) said. Her practice is as hybrid as her art pieces, an amalgam of software programming and handmade crafts. The handmade textiles she weaves on a Jacquard loom, the machine that inspired the first computer.

At MCASB, “Pointing Star” is a series of textiles and ceramics that refigure eight-pointed star motifs used across Turtle Island — in Wixárika patterns — as a template for weaving images of stars.

“I was fascinated by the eight-pointed star as a symbol that points towards the infinite and the borderless,” Rosalena said, noting that the star is like an anti-compass. “It doesn’t represent that but as an artist I’m using it as a weaving method to rethink digital technology.” With a Jacquard loom, she is able to reimagine and reweave images, disrupt patterns and let glitches occur.

Beyond the red of cochineal, Rosalena’s textile work intentionally references the essential colors of digital display technology: red, green and blue.

“The references to screens, digital content, the accidental and intentional glitch creates a dialog between the handmade and the digital pushing and pulling between traditional and contemporary technologies,” she wrote in the exhibition text.

“Pointing Star” also features eight hybrid ceramic pieces created with star designs lifted from the textiles. Using a 3-dimensional printer, Rosalena produces clay sculptures that she augments with hand construction. As a result, their varied formal structures offer alternative perspectives to the familiar star symbol.

The upcoming CMA retrospective “Sarah Rosalena: In All Directions” (Sept. 6, 2023 – April 2024) will exhibit pieces from her recent exhibitions, including “Pointing Star” at MCASB, “Standard Candle” at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and “Above Below” at Blum & Poe, as well as earlier and new works.

Additionally, an 80-page exhibition catalog will be published with essays by Elizabeth Povinelli, Franz Boas Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University;

Kathryn Yusoff, professor of inhuman geography at Queen Mary University of London; and Kris Paulsen, curator and associate professor of art history at Ohio State University.

“The retrospective was introduced by professor of art history Kris Paulsen who is writing a book on critical AI and is writing a chapter about my work in that book,” Rosalena said. “But she also wanted to curate this show because of how it breaks down techno-solutionism as a way to solve problems.” Rosalena’s work intersects with many of the anxieties around future technologies such as space colonization and the rise of AI.

The title of the exhibition, “In All Directions,” alludes to the irrelevance of the compass points in the expansiveness of the universe, CMA said in the exhibition announcement, “and the potential held in multi-cosmologies, temporalities and the infinite that could help us rewrite the narratives of the past and imagine different futures that break the binary structures rooted in ‘discovery.’”

Other works to be presented in the retrospective include “Above Below,” Rosalena’s series of AI-generated double-sided Jacquard weavings created with the use of a neural network trained on satellite data to model geological transformations of Mars over millions of years.

Also included will be beaded and textile works from Rosalena’s recent LACMA Art + Technology Lab exhibition at Mount Wilson Observatory. Rosalena made “Standard Candle” using computer code and basing the complex weave patterns on images captured by the 100-inch telescope used for measuring the universe.

“She’s highly invested in technology and she skews the work in a way that brings life to it, ” said Lindsay Preston Zappas, founder and editor-in-chief of [Contemporary Art Review Los Angeles](#) (Carla). Rosalena was featured on the cover of the magazine in 2021 and in a short film co-produced by Carla with the Southern California Institute of Architecture.

“That combination is really fascinating — she’s referencing JPL and cosmic advanced telescope realities and translating that to ceramic and thread, these basic and traditional materials, and that’s where her Indigenous cultural influences also come into play,” added Preston Zappas, who is also an artist and weaver.

As part of the current exhibition at [MCASB](#), Rosalena will give a free art talk at the museum, moderated by Preston Zappas, Thursday, July 6, 5–7p.m. On Friday, July 28, Rosalena will participate in another event, a conversation with artist Sandy Rodriguez, at MCASB from 5–7p.m. For more information, contact fjanka@mcasantabarbara.org.

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