

# Simone Elizabeth Saunders

u•n•i•t•y•

October 12 2022 – January 29 2023

Curated by Ryan Doherty

Organized by Contemporary Calgary



Simone Elizabeth Saunders, *Excellence*, 2021;  
velvet, acrylic and wool yarn on rug warp;  
60 x 60 x 2 inches / 152 x 152 x 4cm.  
Courtesy of the Artist and Claire Oliver Gallery.  
Photo by Darren Rigo

## Simone Elizabeth Saunders



**u•n•i•t•y•** is an exhibition of works by **Simone Elizabeth Saunders** (she/her), a tufting artist from Mohkinstsis, also known as Calgary, Canada. The exhibition features 10 pieces, curated by Ryan Doherty (*Contemporary Calgary*).

Simone holds a B.F.A. with Distinction from the *Alberta University of Arts* in 2020. She previously worked in theatre arts as a **set-designer** and **actor**. Simone is a founding member of the first Afrocentric theatre company in Western Canada: *Ellipsis Tree Collective*.

**She has been profiled and featured in various media outlets, including:**

*Boooooom, Canada's House&Home Magazine, CBC Arts, CBCq, Colossal, Create Magazine, DesignMilk, FairLady, Love Embroidery, Pom-Pom Magazine, Studio Magazine, Surface Design Journal, Textiel Plus, and Uppercase Magazine.*

**Recent exhibitions include:**

*Art Museum University of Toronto, The Alberta Craft Council for the Arts, Contemporary Calgary, The Minneapolis Art Institute, The Mint Museum, and The Social Fabric at ArtsWestchester.*

She is represented by *Claire Oliver Gallery*; her debut exhibition opens March 2023.



# Themes

## Afro-diaspora

People of African descent who live all over the globe via displacement, enslavement, and other less violent forms of migration.

## Black womanhood

Simone's work explores and champions Black womanhood. What it means to be a Black woman is very individual; "Black womanhood" refers to the varying experiences of Afro-diasporic people.

## Personal history / Ancestry

Simone is White Canadian on her mom's side, and Jamaican on her dad's side - she credits her parents for nurturing different aspects of her artistic and cultural upbringing. Simone is a multi-disciplinary artist; she has worked in theatre, with other fibre-arts, printmaking, and writes poetry as well!

# Tools

## Tufting gun

A tool used in tufting, which looks like a gun, that shoots loops of fabric or yarn into the rug warp (a cotton fabric which acts as the base of the wall-hanging).

## Punch-needle

A tool used in tufting, which looks like a large needle, that punches loops of fabric or yarn into the rug warp.



L: Simone E. Saunders making a wall-hanging with a tufting gun.

R: The artist working with a punch-needle. Both images from her Instagram: @simoneelizabethtextiles





Simone Elizabeth Saunders, *Cosmos: Creation*, 2021;  
hand-tufted velvet, acrylic and wool yarn on rug warp;  
64 x 64 x 1 inches / 163 x 163 x 3cm.  
Courtesy of the Artist and Claire Oliver Gallery. Photo by Darren Rigo

## Motifs

### Snakes

Snakes can symbolize a variety of things, including fertility, rebirth, and even immortality. There was a myth in the Southern United States that you could cut a snake into pieces and it would reconnect - some Black people use the snake as a symbol of overcoming oppression.

### Mushrooms

Mushrooms and other fungi can communicate using electrical signals! Similar to other flora and fauna, they have their own community and tell each other where to find food and where it is safest to grow. This is yet another connection to the exhibition title, *u.n.i.t.y.*



# Motifs

## Galaxies

In *Cosmos Creation*, Simone uses galaxies to show the scale of the goddess figure. Galaxies also represent infinity, and infinite possibilities for Black women in the context of Afro-futurism (see p10).

## Moons & Flowers

Simone uses moons, flowers, and other aspects of nature to represent femininity. Moon cycles, for example, are often symbolic of menstruation and fertility.

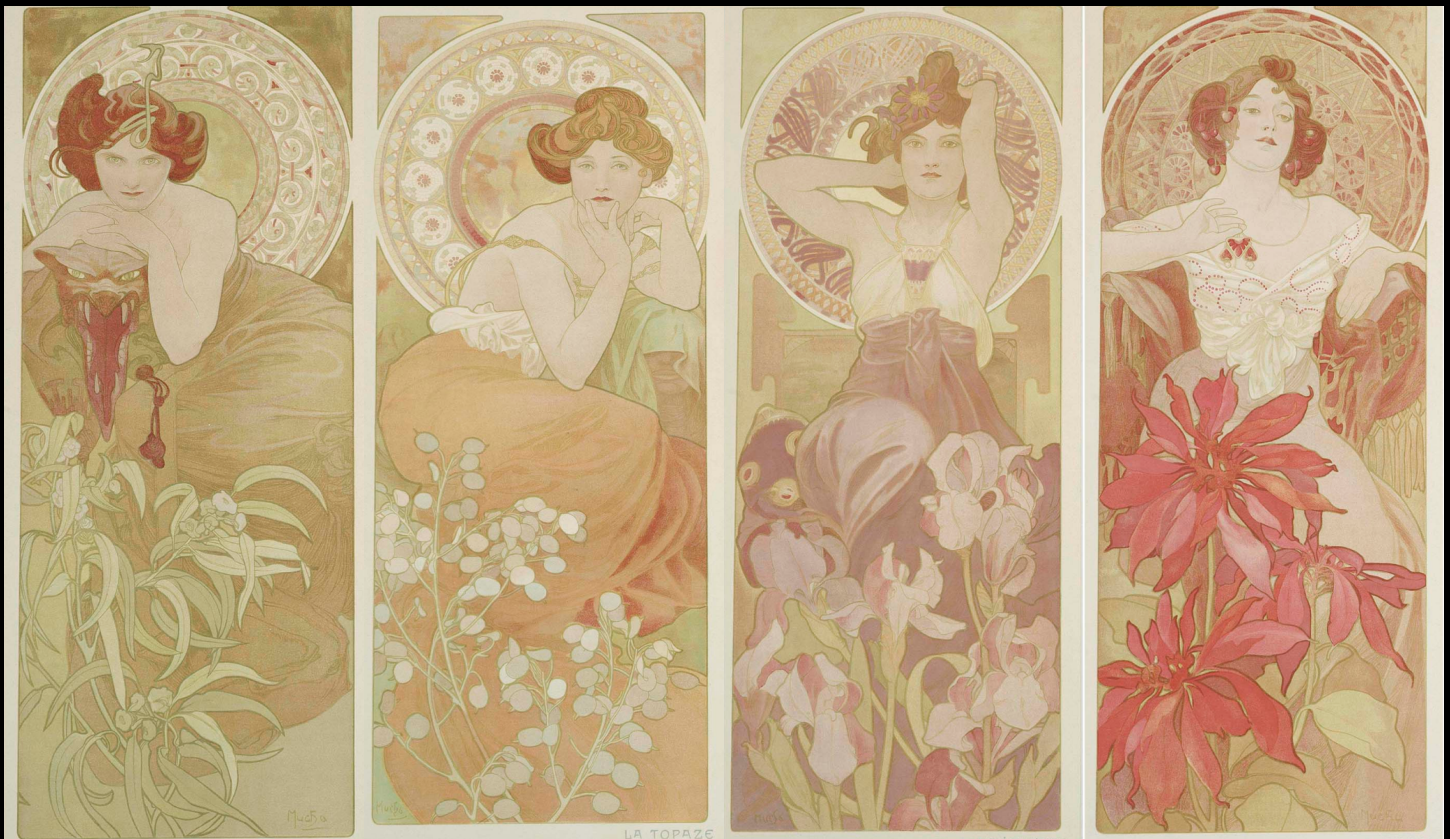




# Simone reconsiders iconic figures and gestures in a contemporary light



Simone Elizabeth Saunders, *The Four Queens*;  
hand-tufted velvet, acrylic and wool yarn on rug warp, 65 x 30 x 1 inches / 165 x 76 x 3 cm.  
Courtesy of the Artist and Claire Oliver Gallery. Photo by Darren Rigo



Alphonse Mucha, *Precious Stones*, colour lithograph, 1900.





“I am completely enamoured by Art Nouveau. The whimsy and grace, with figures adorned in golds and surrounded by intoxicatingly rich patterns. And the way in which women were portrayed in Art Nouveau, so sensual and alluring.

I adopt the techniques and inspiration from this era and emulate my own style, championing Black womanhood, creating **Black Nouveau.**”

Simone Elizabeth Saunders,  
*Star Gaze*, 2022;  
tufted wool fibers;  
166 x 7 x 3cm.  
Courtesy of the Artist and Claire  
Oliver Gallery.  
Photo by Darren Rigo.



Simone Elizabeth Saunders follows the **feminist** trend of appropriating historical works by white male artists into **new innovative works**.



LE DÉJEUNER SUR L'HERBE: LES TROIS FEMMES NOIRES, (Mickalene Thomas, 2010, above) makes reference to Manet's *Le Déjeuner Sur L'Herbe* (1863, below).







“ I start with a gaze. When creating portraits of Black women, I want our power and resilience to shine through. And the eyes are portals. I aim for intent, for the gaze to pull in and engage the viewer. The character is developed through a curiosity for connection: what is happening in the world? What is this figure wanting to say?”



# Definitions & Important Terms

## Ancestry

The familial or ethnic origin of many generations.

## Afrofuturism

Is a philosophy and cultural aesthetic applied by artists in various mediums such as writing, art, music, and more recently, film, which envisions the future of Black people of the African diaspora often through sci-fi and speculation.

## Art Nouveau

An ornamental art style popular between 1890 and 1910 in Europe and North America. Simone Elizabeth Saunders references art nouveau in several of her works, but especially in *The Four Queens*, where their poses mirror Alphonse Mucha's *Precious Stones*.

## Black Lives Matter

A political and social movement that originated in 2013 from a hashtag of the same name by 3 Black female activists: Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. This movement began after the tragic death of Trayvon Martin, and it aims to highlight police brutality and racism towards Black people.

## Diaspora

The dispersion of people from their original homeland or country, to another part of the world. The African diaspora represents people of African descent that live all over the globe via displacement, enslavement, and other less violent forms of migration.

## Feminist

An ideology that fights for the equal rights of women, who are often oppressed on the basis of gender due to patriarchal (male-dominated) societal systems.

## Galaxies

Systems of stars and other spatial matter. Planet Earth is on the Milky Way galaxy which comprises of the solar system, but there are roughly 200 billion galaxies in our universe according to NASA. Simone Elizabeth Saunders references galaxies in her work, as do many other Afro-futurist artists, referencing the ever-expansive future in which people of the African diaspora will inhabit.



# Definitions & Important Terms (continued)

## Misogynoir

A term coined by Black feminist Moya Bailey, which references both gender and race as factors in bias towards Black women. In her works, Simone Elizabeth Saunders challenges preconceived biases against Black women, or misogynoir. Through hand tufting her works out of soft materials, she offers sensitive and vulnerable aspects that dull the misperception of Black women as hard and angry.

## Tufting

A textile technique that consists of large embroidered patterns made of loops of fabric or yarn into a base fabric. After the piece is tufted with a punch needle or completed, the back of the piece is finished with glue or other adhesives, and a backing fabric is often added.

**Fun fact: Simone's twin brother constructs her tufting frames, so her work can be whatever size she likes!**



## Activities & Discussion

Simone likes to put on a playlist of her favourite music when she's creating art, to keep her mood positive and to help her stay focused. Try creating a playlist of music you love, and make some artwork of your own (sketch on notebook paper, create a collage, or even get up and dance!)

- Do you notice any changes in the art as the music changes?
- Do you think that music helps your creative process?

Some of Simone's inspiration comes from thinking about her ancestors and family history. Consider your own background and take a few minutes to write about where you come from.

- Do you think that what you've written has an influence on you as a creative person?
- What about the motifs and themes you use when making art?



# Rug-making in Canada

**Rug hooking** is a unique North American tradition that arose in response to the need to cover the cold bare floors of pioneer homes. Weaving cloth required long hours at the spinning wheel and loom, but rugs could be made from scraps of fabrics and fibres that were pulled through a burlap base to produce warm floor-coverings to brighten the home. It is rare to find a hooked rug whose maker is known; unlike quilts, which were treasured family possessions, hooked rugs wore out and their history was often lost.

The rugs below are a part of the Museum's permanent collection. To view even more of our objects, you can visit



Clockwise, from left to right:

1. Hooked rug, maker unknown, 1941, burlap and wool, 84 x 86 cm, Quebec, Baie St. Paul, Gift of Miriam Waddington.
2. Hooked rug, maker unknown, 1930s, burlap and wool, 81 x 116 cm, Eastern Ontario, from the Opekar / Webster collection.
3. Hooked rug, Florence Ryder, 1980, burlap, wool, and cotton, 82 x 43 cm, Standing Buffalo Reserve, Saskatchewan, gift of Max Allen.



**Learn more:**

## **In Our Library:**

*The Craft of Hand-Made Rug*, Ami Mali Hicks

*Design and hook your own rugs*, Ivan H Crowell

*Rag rug inspirations*, Juliet Bowden

*The techniques of rug weaving*, Peter Collingwood

...and many more! Come take a look, or browse online: