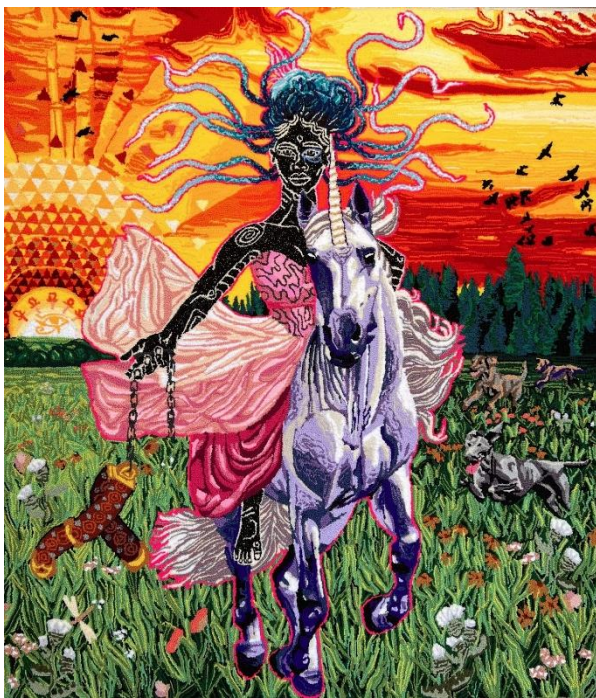




CLAIRE OLIVER GALLERY ANNOUNCES *UNEARTHING UNICORNS*,
THE DEBUT SOLO EXHIBITION BY ARTIST SIMONE ELIZABETH SAUNDERS

ON VIEW IN NEW YORK CITY MARCH 17 - MAY 13, 2023



New York, NY | February 1, 2023 – [Claire Oliver Gallery](#) is pleased to announce *Unearthing Unicorns*, the debut solo exhibition by artist Simone Elizabeth Saunders. *Unearthing Unicorns* showcases the artist's large-scale textile works that explore and recontextualize the iconography of the famed High Renaissance era Unicorn Tapestries in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the early advertising posters seen through a contemporary Black feminist lens. The artist's sweeping art historical reframing is rendered in vibrant polychrome hand-tufted textiles that both reference the prized woven tapestries of the Renaissance as well as the more contemporary Afro-Futurists and feminist craft movement. *Unearthing Unicorns* will be on view in Harlem March 17 – May 13, 2023.

"*Unearthing Unicorns* references both literal and figurative iterations," states Saunders. "I reimagine stories told throughout history, such as the famous and treasured *Hunt of the Unicorn* tapestries, to show Black women portrayed as powerful, highly valued, and respected. Through my work, I want to empower and encourage Black women to never shrink away but instead lean into being the fierce, graceful, and beautiful just as we are – just like the Unicorn. The works in *Unearthing Unicorns* have

allowed me to scrutinize the art historical canon and point out fables that are rooted in colonialism. My goal with this exhibition is to remix these allegories and put Black womanhood as central and further defining that character as one that embodies joy, strength and resilience.”

The exhibition is designed as a conversation between two of Saunders’ series: *Verchü and the Chronicles of the Unicorn*, which directly reframes the Renaissance era *Hunt of the Unicorn’s* iconography of the Unicorn as a creature of mysticism and grace in a dynamic retelling of a rescue in place of a hunt, and *Four Queens*, the artist’s “Black Nouveau” works that position Black women in reimagined renditions of Alphonse Mucha’s sexualized advertising works, where the product these women are selling is inclusivity, grace, love and respect.

Verchü and the Chronicles of the Unicorn

Saunders’ most recent series of works are a reinterpretation of the *Hunt of the Unicorn*, centering her heroine Verchü (phonetic spelling of Virtue) a Black woman who ultimately saves the Unicorn in a pointed retelling of the allegorical Renaissance hunt. The utopian world depicted in Saunders’ work is as detailed and referential as the original, replacing the white virgin with a symbol of Black femininity amid lush tropical flora and fauna.

In the first tapestry, Verchü encounters the Unicorn within the white fence (sacred garden) where she frees the Unicorn of its chains. In the second, Verchü rides the freed Unicorn galloping with her braids and the Unicorn’s mane flowing in the wind while shadowy figures follow behind them. In the third tapestry Verchü and the Unicorn are seen nestled below a rocky cliff with a cascading waterfall. In the fourth and final work, Verchü and the Unicorn embrace, along with a harmonious menagerie, revealing the restoration of a beautiful and synchronized world.

Four Queens

Saunders’ *Four Queens* aims to insert Black Women into scenes reminiscent of Art Nouveau, in specific Alphonse Mucha’s lithographs. Saunders’ celebrates her subjects’ softness, elegance, beauty, and vulnerability. The resulting images, termed “Black Nouveau,” are images resplendent with ornate and enticing backgrounds, reframing the vernacular of Art Nouveau advertising with a slogan of Black empowerment.



IMAGE CAPTIONS (top to bottom, left to right):

Simone Elizabeth Saunders, *Break Away at Dawn*, 2022, Unearthing Unicorns series, Hand tufted velvet, acrylic and wool yarn on rug warp, 66 x 56 x 1 in

Simone Elizabeth Saunders, *Release in Darkness* (detail), 2022, Unearthing Unicorns series, Hand tufted velvet, acrylic and wool yarn on rug warp, 66 x 56 x 1 in

Simone Elizabeth Saunders, *Queen of Diamonds*, 2021, The Four Queens series, Hand tufted velvet, acrylic and wool yarn on rug warp, 65 x 30 x 1 in

Simone Elizabeth Saunders, *Queen of Clubs*, 2021, The Four Queens series, Hand tufted velvet, acrylic and wool yarn on rug war, 65 x 30 x 1 in

Simone Elizabeth Saunders, *Queen of Spades*, 2021, The Four Queens series, Hand tufted velvet, acrylic and wool yarn on rug warp, 65 x 30 x 1 in

Simone Elizabeth Saunders, *Queen of Hearts*, 2021, The Four Queens series, Hand tufted velvet, acrylic and wool yarn on rug warp, 65 x 30 x 1 in

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ABOUT SIMONE ELIZABETH SAUNDERS

Simone Elizabeth Saunders (b. 1983, Calgary, Canada) is a textile artist who focuses primarily on punch-needle and tufting tapestries to create allegorical narratives of Blackness and Womanhood using polychrome and textural portraits. Based in Mohkinstsis, Canada, she holds a B.F.A. with Distinction from the Alberta University of Arts in 2020 and a background in the theater arts, with a previous B.F.A. from the University of Alberta's Acting Conservatory.

Saunders' practice is anchored in a process that starts with collages or sketches that are then transferred to large-scale frames. From there, they are tufted using a myriad of yarn colors. Saunders' artistic process represents a performative negotiation of weaving and coloring at the same time. This results in detailed portraits that capture nuanced individuality. Recent international exhibitions include the Textile Museum of Canada, Contemporary Calgary, Minneapolis Art Institute (Minnesota), the Mint Museum (North Carolina), and Arts Westchester (NY), among other international museums and prominent collectors.

ABOUT CLAIRE OLIVER GALLERY

Claire Oliver Gallery is located in Central Harlem in a four-story brownstone. For nearly 25 years, Claire Oliver Gallery has showcased and celebrated artwork, with a focus on work by women and people of color, which transcends and challenges the traditional art historical canon. Our forward-thinking program and exclusive commitment to the primary market allows for an intensive focus that has nurtured and grown the careers of our artists. Many of the gallery's artists have been included in The Venice Biennale, The Whitney Biennial, and biennales in Sydney, Pittsburgh, and Lyon and have exhibited works in major international museums including the Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Art Institute of Chicago, Center Georges Pompidou, The Philadelphia Museum of Art, and The Los Angeles County Museum of Art amongst others. Claire Oliver Gallery artists are included in the permanent collections of many important museums worldwide including The Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Art Institute of Chicago, The Tate Britain, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The State Hermitage Museum, MoMA, and the Museum of Arts and Design amongst many others. Claire Oliver Gallery held the first American exhibition for the Russian collaborative AES+F, whose work went on to twice represent Russia in the Russian pavilion of the Venice Biennale. Gallery artists have received prestigious fellowships including Fulbright, Guggenheim, USArtist and National Endowment for the Arts.

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