

# Brati's Throne at ANDREW RAFACZ, on view February 27 – April 10 in Chicago

Amanda Joy Calobrisi ✕ 03/25/2021 ✕ » Design



Brati's Throne

## Brati's Throne at ANDREW RAFACZ in Chicago

**B**rati's Throne at [ANDREW RAFACZ](#), on view February 27 – April 10 in Chicago, pairs artists Nick Makanna and Maryam Yousif. Their ceramic work adorns the walls, sits on pedestals, and stands freely throughout the room. On first entering the gallery, it is the color palette that draws you in. The softened pinks, yellows, oranges, greens, and blues unearth a slew of recollections both art historical and contemporaneous, as well as of the natural world, that immediately turn on the intersubjectivity needed to commune with artworks. The room has a felt rhythm, it comes from the interspersing of solid blocky (and light obscuring) figural objects and of the airy open spaces of the latticed coiled pieces. These repetitions in visual weight, the solid and the spindly, as well as varying placements, create a shape melody that accompanies my further investigations of the forms and content of the individual works. The show instilled in me an immediate sense of contentment. The pairing of the two artists is seamless. After several minutes of looking, I found myself wondering whose work is whose? Not that the two artists' individual works are similar, they are not, but its orchestration felt holistic and intimate. When I paint, I often feel as if I am having an imaginary conversation with some other painter. These two artists on the other hand seemed to be having a conversation with each other. How else can two very distinct visual vocabularies meld together so perfectly? As an exercise in looking, I very rarely read the show's prospectus until after I return home, or on the ride back if the work implores me to do so and it turns out my gut was right on this point.



Installation view 1 *Brati's Throne* at Andrew Rafacz Gallery, Works by Nick Makanna & Maryam Yousif in Gallery 1.

All images by Amanda Joy Calobrisi

*Brati's Throne*, the exhibition's mysterious title, as well as the title of a collaborative piece in the show needs further explanation. The gallery's website explains, "*Brati* meaning 'my daughter' in Assyrian, the language of the indigenous people of modern day Iraq, a diasporic community to which Yousif belongs." *Throne* alludes to the trio of named references in Makanna's work "gothic architecture, camp sci-fi and heavy metal aesthetics." The artwork *Brati's Throne* is 40 x 19.5 x 9 inches tall. It is glazed ceramic; the majority of its surface is glossy and probably smooth to the touch with some matte details. In this piece the two artists combine their motifs and techniques. A woman in a bell-shaped dress with puff sleeves sits atop a framework of coils that reveal themselves through color as a series of eyes. The woman holds a handbag that mirrors the shape of her lattice stage or vice versa. Throughout the show, we see similarly imaged women represented both three dimensionally as well as two dimensionally, drawn into flat surface areas of various ceramic pieces. Yousif's works are often titled with the colloquial Arabic word *Habibti*, which means 'my beloved' in feminine form. Similarly in this piece, we begin to recognize Makanna's technique of rolled coils pieced together to build volumes and create pattern. These are often stacked and have titles that include the word *Rune*. In this piece, *Brati's Throne*, the two artists' visual worlds meet, touch and their individual visual vocabularies unfold.



Installation view 2 *Brati's Throne* at Andrew Rafacz Gallery, Works by Nick Makanna & Maryam Yousif in Gallery 1.

Maryam Yousif's works in the show consist of three major forms: figures, palm trees and rectilinear objects with arched handles. These objects are often embellished with flowers, stripes, bows, Arabic writing and other trees and foliage. The figures often sit atop other forms. Their position and repetition convince me that they are a representation of a celebuntante worthy of veneration. In one installation in the room, she sits atop a rectangular stepped tower or pyramid structure. Her form is similar in bulk to the Bactrian Princesses of the Bactrian-Margiano civilization (2200 BCE-1700 BCE). These bronze age composite figures made from steatite and calcite also wear dresses that dwarf their heads and hands; their ballooning skirts are thought to be inspired by *kaunakes*, a piece of traditional Sumerian clothing. Here Yousif's *Habibti* fixes her gaze forward and above our heads, purse in hand, surrounded by date palm trees and variously embossed larger blocky handbags with arched handles. The gesture of her hand clasping the bag feels as important as symbolic hand positions in a renaissance painting. Or perhaps it is some ladylike etiquette similar to clasping your hands in your lap when sitting pretty. But I can't help but read her cuteness as a tranced out shopper in some luxurious shopping mall in Santa Monica, Miami or Dubai. I've yet to travel to any of these destinations, but the palm trees and her one-of-a-kind couture in combination with my limited knowledge of lavish destinations take me elsewhere. The bags also remind me of padlocks, kids lunch boxes, portable TVs and boomboxes of the late 80's and early 90's. They each seem locked on some memory that I don't have access to decode, but I can admire the formal elements of its ambiguous depiction. Thinking of the work as a possible narrative or part of a story brings Charlotte Saloman's *Leben oder Theater* to mind and provokes me to imagine how Charlotte's pictures would have been read if they were not accompanied by text. Would we see through the candy like palette and playful simplifications to get to the story of her turbulent life?



Maryam Yousif, *Cosmic Handbag: Cameo*, 2021, Glazed Stoneware, 15.5 x 10 x 3 inches, surrounded by various sized Date Palms, 2021, Glazed Stoneware.

Nick Makanna uses hand rolled clay coils to build the structures of his pieces. They are manipulated into frameworks of forms that might remind you of namable things like a stool, a table, a window but the function of these things are removed as are their absolute symmetry. If I said his sculptures are more like the metal piping around stained glass windows than the legs of a chair, you would probably picture them as overly elegant. So I will say they are more like deconstructed donuts, if donuts were more pliant-frosted donuts bent in unimaginable ways to create space shapes for light to travel through. When I see Makanna's tall, stacked piece, *Rune XLI*, 2020, glazed stoneware, 60 x 19.5 x 9 in., its palette recalls the Nabis painters, who were also looking to harness light. I think specifically of the sensuous facture that describes the atmosphere around Marthe in *Nude in Bathtub (Grand nu à la Baignoire)*, (1940-1946). In this late painting of Bonnard's, he used softened pinks, yellows and blues to preserve his memory of his lover then gone. Like the painter's brushwork, Makanna's work has touch, facture remains from the squeezing, rolling and marrying of the tubular segments, which imbues the work with human presence and in-turn emotion. The two window pieces on the wall backed with colored plexiglass are another way the artist catches light and in this case an illusion of luminosity. These two caged windows also reveal his sense of humor. I can't help but think of early 1980's cartoons when I gaze into the arched portal, my admittance to another dimension blocked by a heavily handed purple spider web.



Nick Makanna, *Isolationism XI*, Glazed stoneware and Fluorescent Acrylic, 20 x 14.5 x 4.75, 2021