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Our top 7 art works to see at Expo Chicago 2019

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"To Disarm: Angela Davis Mugshot," by Roberto Lugo presented by Wexler Gallery of Philadelphia at EXPO CHICAGO at Navy Pier, Sept. 19, 2019. (E. Jason Wambsgans / Chicago Tribune)

Even before you step foot into [EXPO CHICAGO](#), the annual International Exposition of Contemporary and Modern Art, you are greeted with art activations

like [Ship of Tolerance](#), the 25-by-35-by-34 foot inflatable sculpture “[Founders](#)” that features four busts notable to our city, and Assaf Evron’s work on the façade of the Mies van der Rohe building at 900 N. Lake Shore Drive (a photograph printed and placed on the exterior of the building, visible to anyone from the street).

In other words, the activations are popping. And once you step through the doors, you can almost strain your neck looking back and forth at the art pieces present.

“There are so many booths bringing solo presentations this year,” said Stephanie Cristello, artistic director of [EXPO CHICAGO](#). “Navy Pier is 150,000 square feet for this exhibition. So if you’re walking around booths, it can very quickly feel overwhelming. Our galleries are from so many different places – I think the count this year is 68 cities, 24 countries. We do have quite a few new galleries from Brazil who have never participated before which is really exciting as well as major galleries from Paris and London who have also never done the fair before.”

Cristello is excited about artists like [Hank Willis Thomas](#) at the Kayne Griffin Corcoran gallery, and [Lorna Simpson](#) at the space of Hauser & Wirth. Naima Keith, curator of the EXPO’s “Exposure” section (which features works from galleries less than 10 years old), traveled the country while working on a triennial for New Orleans and sought out young and emerging artists.

“For me personally, to see the number of artists of color that are being shown as this fair has been really inspiring,” she said. “I think that’s something that people don’t often see in terms of there being a large percentage, but this year, you definitely have quite a few galleries showing artists of color and I think that’s exciting.”

We scouted out the EXPO to find works that spoke to our inner artist. Here’s a brief list.

— [Barnaby Barford](#)’s steel and PVC pipe creation, “The Apple Tree” is something to behold. Barford said he examined man’s search for happiness and his subsequent need for more. The apples (which look very Midwestern variety, by the way), are hand painted in oils bearing any one of 80 words — the interpretation of those words and “their meanings are heightened when you add the prefix “more”. In this case, the apple is Barford’s muse, its significance proven

throughout the years (Isaac Newton, Adam and Eve, even Steve Jobs). Oh, and the individual apples can be bought, by the way. Each one costs over \$2,000. Oh, and be wary of a picture of what looks like a real life photo of a tongue licking an eyeball when you leave Barford's area, it can be jarring.

— Video artist and film director [Charles Atlas](#) has a three-and-a-half minute film of an older woman, in a swim cap and heels, dancing nude with what looks like a stout pool float noodle. The dance for the camera is hypnotic — you can't turn away.

— [Spyros Aggelopoulos](#), a visual artist from Athens, Greece, has an array of shadow puppets on display that any pop culture fan will be drawn to. He's one of the three artists the Dio Horia Gallery is showcasing for its first time at EXPO. The color and youthful images draw you (Freddy Krueger, Angela Merkel and Popeye are all in the mix).



Work by Spyros Aggelopoulos presented by Dio Horia Gallery of Athens, Greece at EXPO CHICAGO at Navy Pier, Sept. 19, 2019. (E. Jason Wambsgans / Chicago Tribune)

— Speaking of pop culture, if you're excited to see the upcoming "Joker" film (set for release in Oct.), you may want to stop by [Frederico Solmi](#)'s work at the gallery of Luis De Jesus Los Angeles. The animation and colors present in his

five-minute video, “The Drunken Boat,” are eerie and mesmerizing. Notable historic figures are seen partying together, vulgar smiles on their faces. It’s like a nightmare steeped in a rainbow of colors that you can’t stop watching.

— **Pat Phillips**’ work (at the Catinca Tabacaru Gallery space) is deep, y’all. Two pieces featured at EXPO look at the crippling prison system in the U.S. — one begs to let those with smaller charges out of jail since it costs more to house and feed those incarcerated, the other looks at the unfair labor practices that prisoners endure while incarcerated.



Pat Phillips work presented by Catinca Tabacaru Gallery at EXPO CHICAGO at Navy Pier, Sept. 19, 2019. (E. Jason Wambsgans / Chicago Tribune)

— **Robert Lugo**’s works center around teapots, but with a violence twist. Stop by the Wexler Gallery booth to see a wall full of ceramic teapots combined with gun parts, decorated with portraits of civil rights leaders and cultural figures from black and Latino culture. “The dissonance created by the combination of all of these elements alludes to the complexity of our shared social history, in which many truths coexist.” Admire the time it took to mold this work and appreciate the “deconstructing and decolonizing history: Violence as Effect” that lies within.



Tea pots by Roberto Lugo presented by Wexler Gallery of Philadelphia at EXPO CHICAGO at Navy Pier, Sept. 19, 2019. (E. Jason Wambsgans / Chicago Tribune)

— And if you're looking for a Zen-meets-Matrix work that you would love to have in your own tranquil spot, turn to [Anila Quayyum Agha](#)'s light installation. It's red, it's bold, it's a three-dimensional cube with an elaborate pattern laser-cut into it. And it is magnificent as "Shimmering Mirage," a 48-by-48-by-48 inch piece comprised of lacquered steel and a halogen bulb.

EXPO CHICAGO runs from Sept. 19-22 at Navy Pier, Festival Halls A&B, 600 E. Grand Ave. Tickets range from \$25-\$50, seniors and students get a \$5 discount.