

Calli Roche

Doubt and Defiance

May 3 through June 16 2024

Curatorial Assistant Jalen Kendrick

Education Materials

Exhibition Overview

Doubt and Defiance features new and recent work by artist **Calli Roche**, 2022-2023 alum of AAI's LES Studio Program.

Calli's exhibition is a profound exploration of one's true self through understanding the depths of human identity in the present moment. The exhibition includes several sculptural works that feature or refer to Calli's constructed box, a recurring symbol in the artist's practice that explores confinement and liberation to challenge social constructs and explore how we deconstruct the world that confines us.

Calli highlights the intricate nature of survival and identity and how our character is firmly molded through those experiences of perseverance. The use of found objects—wood, leather, fencing wire, muslin—reflects the artist's struggle to embrace a world that may not embrace them. Using natural materials, Roche can mimic the aging process and material properties of human bodies, drawing further comparisons between the tangible world and our physical forms.

The **LES Studio Program** is a three or six-month residency program open to underrepresented, emerging, and mid-career professional working artists. Founded in 2003, the LES Studio Program underscores AAI's belief that the arts and individual artists are essential to the culture, history, and future of the Lower East Side community. Artists of all disciplines—painting, photography, sculpture, video, installation, and new media—receive fully funded studio space to produce new work. The residency offers 24-hour studio access and the opportunity to present work to curators and critics through AAI-organized studio visits, a curated exhibition at Cuchifritos Gallery + Project Space.

Reference Terms

Defiance

A refusal to obey; a state of fugitivity.

Ecdysis

The shedding or casting off of an outer coat or integument by snakes, crustaceans, etc. Also referred to as "Molting," ecdysis is the process of shedding the old cuticle as an organism enters the next developmental stage.

Kosmos

A space of return; like limbo, a spiritual portal or womb.

Envellum

The combination of envelope + vellum; the term is made up by the artist to describe the sometimes porous, sometimes protective, membrane between oneself and all else.

Elmina Slave Castle

Built in 1482 by Portuguese traders, Elmina Castle was the first European slave-trading post in sub-Saharan Africa. Located on the western coast of present-day Ghana, it was originally built to protect the gold trade, but following its capture by the Dutch in 1637, it came to serve the Dutch slave trade with Brazil and the Caribbean. The castle came under British ownership in the 1800s.

Elmina, like other West African slave fortresses, housed luxury suites for the Europeans in the upper levels. The dungeons below were cramped and filthy, each cell often housing as many as 200 kidnapped people at a time, without enough space to even lie down. The dungeon's floor, due to centuries of impacted filth and human excrement, is now several inches higher than it was when it was built. Outbreaks of malaria and yellow fever were common. Staircases led directly from the governor's chambers to the women's dungeons below, making it easy for him to select personal concubines from amongst the women. (Source: *pbs.org*)



Door of No Return at Elmina Slave Castle

At the seaboard side of the Elmina Slave Castle was the Door of No Return, the infamous portal through which slaves boarded the ships that would take them on the treacherous journey across the Atlantic known as the Middle Passage. By the 18th century, 30,000 slaves on their way to North and South America passed through Elmina's Door of No Return each year. (Source: *pbs.org*)

Henry "Box" Brown

In March 1849, an enslaved man in his mid-thirties, Henry Brown, paid \$86 of his saved tobacco money to ship a 3-foot by 2-foot crate from his master's home in Richmond, Virginia, to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The box was lined with coarse woolen cloth, contained a small hole on one side, and traveled by wagon, railroad, and steamboat.

Twenty-seven hours later, abolitionist Passmore Williamson and the rest of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee received the box at Williams' office. (Source: *National Endowment for the Humanities*)

Mile Marker

The first transatlantic voyage with human cargo set sail in 1526 to Brazil. Mile Markers 496, 497, and 498 within the exhibition reference the passing of time since this first voyage.

Artist Narrative



Calli's latest exhibition serves as a profound exploration of one's true self through understanding the depths of human identity in the present moment.

[Calli Roche] *"I don't think there is necessarily an overarching theme [to the exhibition], but it's more of a progression of my creative process and thoughts surrounding afro-futurist dreaming. I'm interested in the fact that the work continues to evolve with the involvement of the viewer. I'm very curious about what other people's interactions will add to the work. There are motifs, materials, and shapes that I use that have a specific meaning to me, but may be different to other people, and it might change for me. The art-making is for my own healing, but the sharing is for the viewer, and an invitation to be in communion with me."*

The works on view are objects that remain from Calli's ongoing insistence and struggle to remain in a space, a portal, or undetermined interim of doubt. Various portals and windows mark different ways Calli is choosing peace and presence in the midst of chaos; by cultivating life and connection therein.

"Where would I expect to arrive when I'm in the box? Am I thinking about what's on the other side? Or am I just here? And so when I'm thinking about doubt, I have this sort of ideal that we as Black people could create the space where we collectively dream of a future and build something beautiful for the next generations, whether it's genetic or not. Right now, I'm a little more interested in the contents of that space. So less about the future dream, and more about who and what is in this space now."

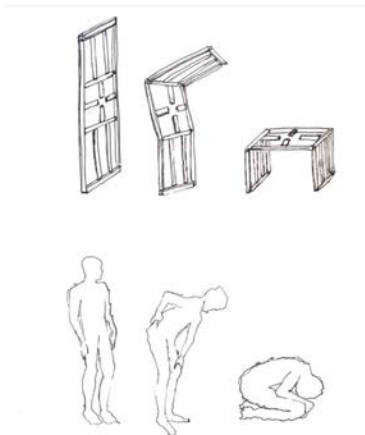
The exhibit is a continuation of previous art made and shared and, again, the art is offered up as an invitation.



"My last [body of] work was really about sort of peeling back layers of the self to find what is the true self. Does that exist? Do we exist outside of our experiences, outside of things like nature, nurture, DNA, and ancestry? Is there somebody else there? And I still don't have an answer to that question, which is why I'm continuing to define a doubt, if you will. In works prior, I have had this motif that I continue to use that you can see in boxes I've made - I call it a portal. It references a specific gate at the Elmina slave castle. And this idea of "being in the wake" like Christina Sharpe says, or to exist, sort of not back there and not up there, but here as Black people. What beauty can we build here?"

Doubt and Defiance includes several sculptural works that feature or refer to Calli's constructed box, a recurring motif in the artist's practice that explores themes of confinement and liberation that challenge present social constructs and explore how we deconstruct the world that confines us.

"Like Henry Box Brown. He shipped himself North, from slavery, in a box. I use a lot of those proportions [of the box] in my work. I wonder what he was thinking. What's going on while he spends 27 hours in a box? Part of that time is upside down. So that's where I started. And then I moved on to what if I'm the box, and I peel that away? And that was the emphasis. And now I've sort of moved into reverse engineering, the portal, the box, and trying to figure out if this is a space for dreaming? What am I? What's the dream? And who is joining me?"



So I'm calling it doubt and defiance. And the materials that I use have been relatively consistent. I use a lot of natural materials, a lot of found objects. I think that really speaks to, specifically in this moment, my resolve to survive, to exist, and to exist fully. Even in a world that doesn't necessarily want that for me. This particular show is a recognition of my defiance in existing, but also my acceptance of the doubt that I have within that."

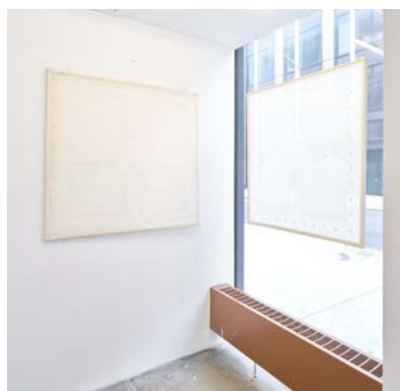
The use of found objects—wood, leather, fencing wire, muslin—serves as a reflection of the artist's own struggle to embrace a world that may not embrace them. Through using natural materials, Calli is able to mimic the aging process and material properties of human bodies, drawing further comparisons between the tangible world around us and our own physical forms.

"I like to both include the past history of the objects that I find, and then I also add some of my own over time. I don't know if you saw the wood that's on the ground outside. I'm just leaving that there until you know..."

The materials that I use lend themselves towards neutral colors: wood, I use a lot of rust, I use a lot of leather. And a lot of them, I think, have sort of a more visceral feel; to me, rust, iron oxide, and blood are very connected. I like for people to sort of get that sensation without necessarily the shock of a bright red. I primarily use found leather. I don't tend to purchase leather but I like to have the violent energy of skin in my work. I acknowledge that the leather industry is pretty awful, so I use the material in the most ethical way possible. If I could skin myself I would. I think the materials more and more have become extensions of my body. Leather and metal sometimes act as stand-ins for skin and bones. Outside of our health, and environment, it is also the oxidation of the human body that kills us. It's strange to think about breathing as both necessary and detrimental to living."



Calli highlights the intricate nature of survival and identity and how, through those experiences of perseverance, our character is firmly molded.



While discussing the upcoming exhibition, Curatorial Assistant Jalen Kendrick asked, "What do you hope to communicate to black women? Do you feel like the community or social dynamics of black women are lacking in any particular areas?"

Calli responded "I refuse to see Black women as lacking. I think that we're fine. We're holding things up. I think that the problem is not with Black women. And the only thing that I would say to Black women and non-binary folks is that I love you. And I see you and I'm fighting for us. I want to believe most of us are doing our best. And that's something that I have to believe. Because if I don't believe that about other Black women, I don't believe it about me. And I'm okay exactly as I am right now. I wish there was more space for the ordinary."

About the Artist

Calli Roche uses she/they pronouns*.

Calli is a Brooklyn-based artist whose own creative lineage lies in tailoring and dressmaking. Their great-grandfather was a tailor in St. Kitts; their great-aunt was a dressmaker in the Bronx, and their great-uncle was a costume maker for the Birmingham, UK carnival. Like so many Black people, poor people, and Black poor women, Calli has often tailored their creativity to an income-generating praxis. The art practices of many Black women still reference these "practical" skills, disrupting western distinctions between art and craft. Frequently working with reclaimed materials, which take on varied ontological significance, yet frequently reference the fraught relationships between violence, identity, and sexuality. Calli uses their sewing and pattern-making background to create artifacts to reflect and reference socio-political narratives.

More information at calliroche.com

* **What is a Pronoun?** A pronoun is a word that refers to either the people talking (like I or you) or someone or something that is being talked about (like she, I, them, and this). Gender pronouns (like he and hers and them) specifically refer to people that you are talking about.

What is a “Gender Pronoun”? A “gender pronoun” is the pronoun that a person chooses to use for themselves. Gender Pronouns are the pronouns that we use to refer to people in sentences and conversation.

Click [here](#) for more information on pronouns and gender pronouns.

Recommended questions for discussion

Before Your Visit

1. How do objects or materials reflect or symbolize personal challenges that you have faced?
2. Does an object or material representing a particular collective struggle come to mind?
3. What practices or habits do you use to connect or reconnect with your sense of a “true” self?

During Your Visit

1. In what ways do the boxes within the exhibition represent confinement or liberation for you?
2. How do the sculptures resonate with or challenge your idea of identity and survival?
3. Calli Roche's exhibition considers portals and windows as symbols for their personal choice to focus on peace and presence. When looking at these elements, what do they represent to you?

After Your Visit

1. How has the exhibition changed or emphasized your perception of material as an avenue to express complex experiences?
2. Based on your time in the exhibition, how do you interpret Calli's themes of private and collective struggles? Do these concepts resonate with or challenge you?
3. What connections do you see between your idea or perception of peace, presence, and chaos in your surroundings and collective society?

Playlist

Created by Calli Roche for the exhibition Doubt and Defiance. Click [here](#) to listen to the playlist on Spotify.

1. Sun Ra, “Door To The Cosmos - Mixed”
2. KIRBY, “Black Leaves”
3. Maria Isa, “Como Duele”
4. Aye Nako, “Leaving The Body”
5. Algiers, “The Underside of Power”
6. The Muslims, “Call The Cops”
7. Saul Williams, “List of Demands (Reparations)”
8. Moor Mother and Saul Williams, “Black Flight”
9. Death, “Keep on Knocking”
10. Sault, “Foot on Necks”
11. Xenia Rubinos, “Just Like I”
12. Mereba, “Black Truck”
13. serpentwithfeet, “A Comma”
14. Joy Oladokun, “jordan”
15. Mourning [A] BLKstar, “If I Can If I May”
16. keiYaA, “Forreal???”

17. Charlotte Adigery and Bolis Pupul, "HAHA"
18. The Muslims, "Fuck These Fuckin Fascists"
19. The Younger Lovers, "Get Up, Get Up (Love Makes My Heart Beat Faster)"
20. Weaves, "Neighborhood #3 (Power Out)"
21. Wheelchair Sports Camp, "YESS i'm a MESS"

Accessibility Information

Visitors Who Are Deaf, Partially Hearing, and/or Have Sensory Sensitivity including those on the Autism Spectrum

The current exhibition includes the gallery's main room and a smaller back room that can be accessed through the opening in the left-hand corner of the gallery. Both spaces include large street-facing windows and have overhead LED lighting (4,000K). This exhibition includes two fabric-based works in the smaller room, and several large wall and floor-based installations throughout the larger gallery space. The floor-based works do minimally restrict movement in the gallery.

The exhibition does not include any sound-based work.

Facility Accessibility

Baby strollers are welcome in Essex Market and Cuchifritos Gallery + Project Space. Both facilities are wheelchair accessible, and service animals on a leash are permitted.

Doubt and Defiance does include some floor-based works that narrow the available floor space while maneuvering around the space. All pathways remain ADA accessible.

If you have questions, comments, or concerns about accessing Cuchifritos Gallery + Project Space or attending programs, please contact Jodi Waynberg at jodi@artistsallianceinc.org or (212) 420-9202.

Restrooms

Restrooms for visitors are located on the second floor of Essex Market, which is accessible via elevator or stairs.

The following pages provide a visual guide to accessing Cuchifritos Gallery + Project Space and the Market's public restrooms:

Visual Guide: Accessing Cuchifritos Gallery

Hello! This is a visual guide for visiting the Cuchifritos Gallery in Essex Market at 88 Essex Street in New York City. Walking down the street, you may be able to recognize us! At Artists Alliance Inc., we display contemporary artworks by new and emerging artists.



Our Cuchifritos gallery is located inside Essex Market, where many shops are indoors. This means that many people are walking and touring the shops and the people who run them. You will most likely hear the sounds of chopping from the vendor's food prep, the smell of food, and the voices of people talking and interacting with the stores. It is a comfortable social space, and entering our gallery is as open and welcoming.

This is the entrance to the Essex Market on Broome Street between Essex and Norfolk streets.



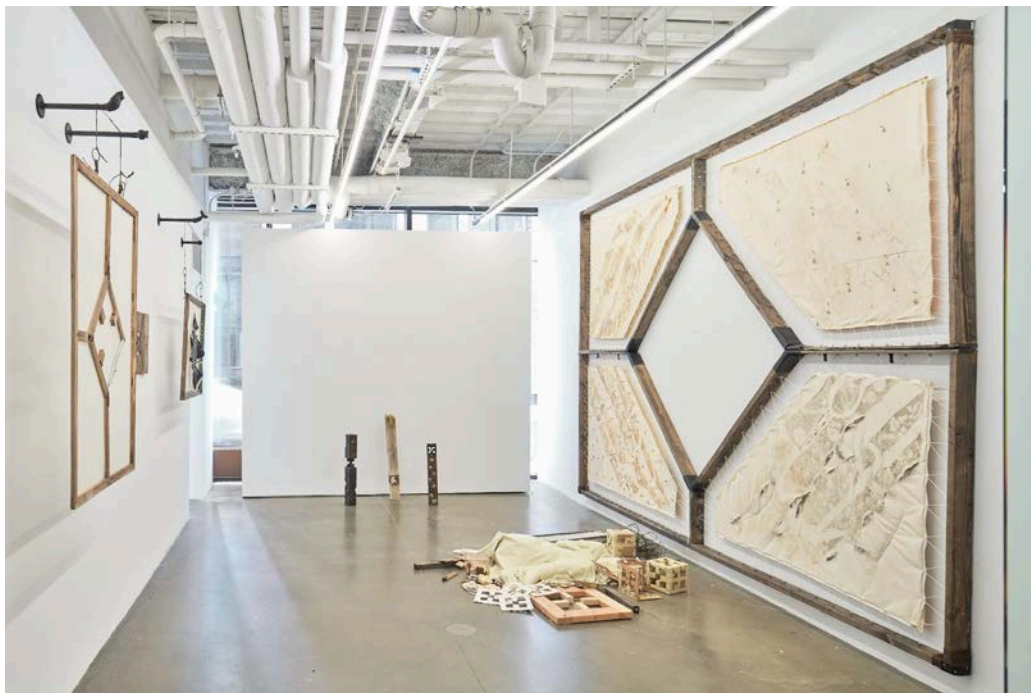
Once we enter through the automatic glass doors, we should head to the right. We can check if we're heading in the right direction by following the vendors: Top Hop, Puebla Mexican Food, Cafe D'Avignon, Dominican Cravings, and Zerza (in that order). Once you hit Zerza, you can take a left turn, and we will be right in front of the gallery!



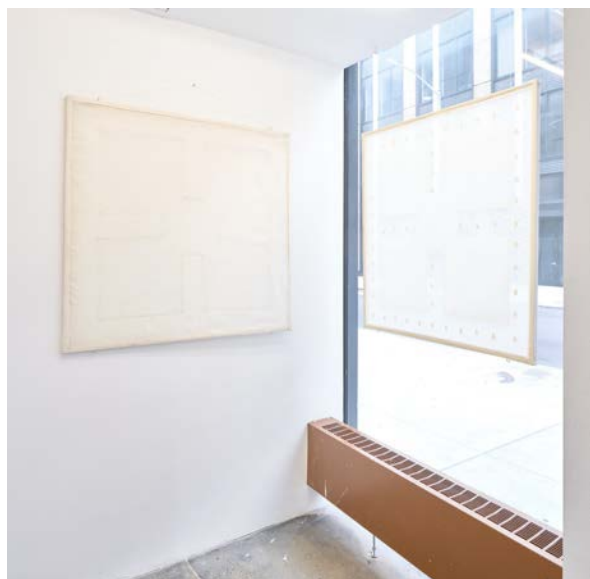


You can enter the gallery through the glass doors (which are always open during visiting hours!). There will be someone at the desk to greet you, but you may freely walk around the space to see what you like. On the desk are one or two stacks of paper: one with the names of the Curator and Artists of the show and one that provides the titles and materials in the work on view. You can take these with you to better understand the artwork.

Upon entering the gallery, you will be greeted by artworks installed in the main space. On the left, two hanging frames protrude about 4 inches from the wall with 4 sculptural works in the center. On the right-hand wall, a large wood and textile piece takes up most of the gallery wall. Just beneath it, on the floor of the gallery, is an installation of materials from the artist's studio. In front of the center wall, there are three floor-based sculptures.

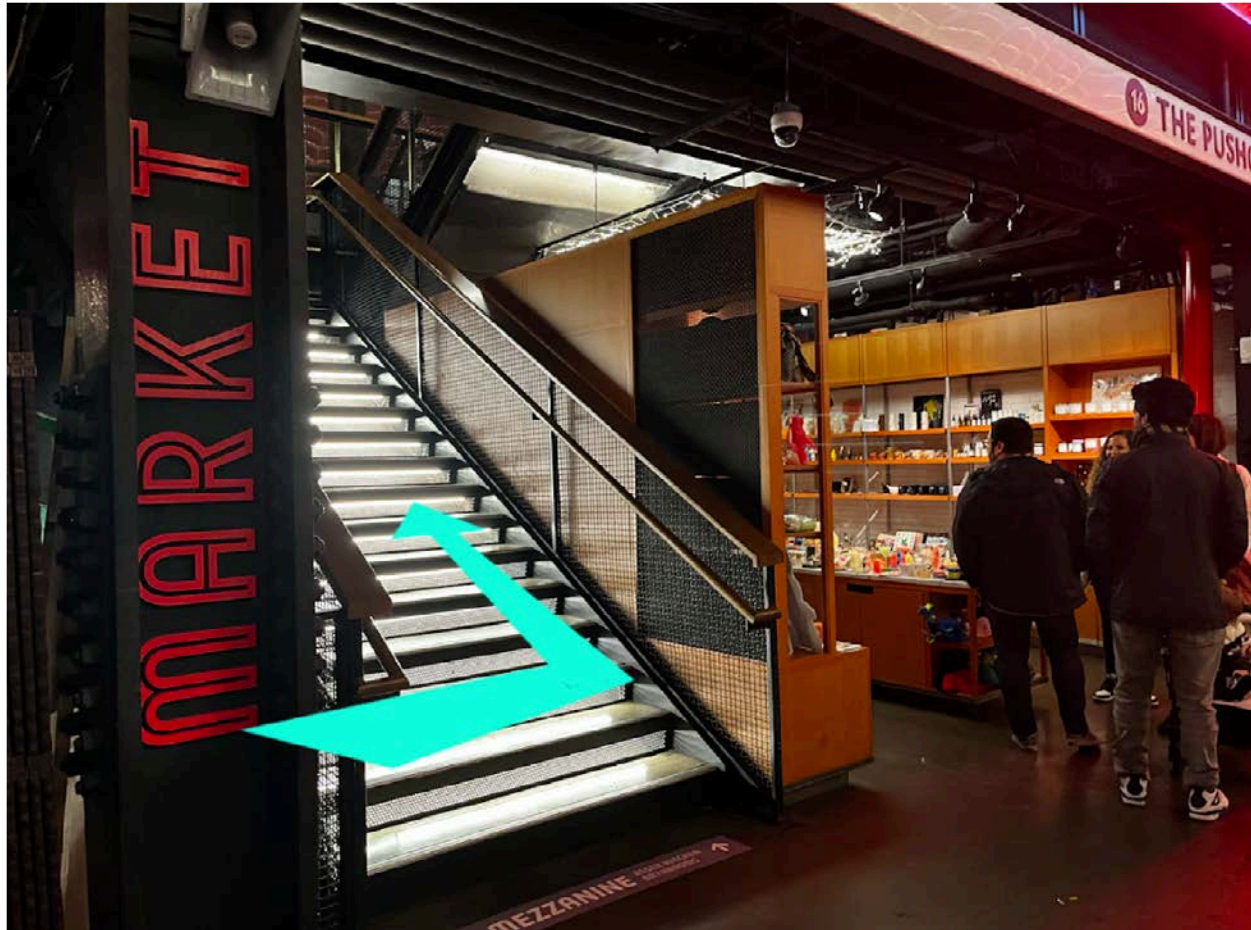


To the back left of the main gallery space, is a small back room that is illuminated by the natural light coming from the gallery windows, and LED lights overhead. In this room, you will find two fabric-based hanging works. From the exterior windows of the gallery, along Norfolk Street, an additional painting is presented.



Guide to the Bathrooms

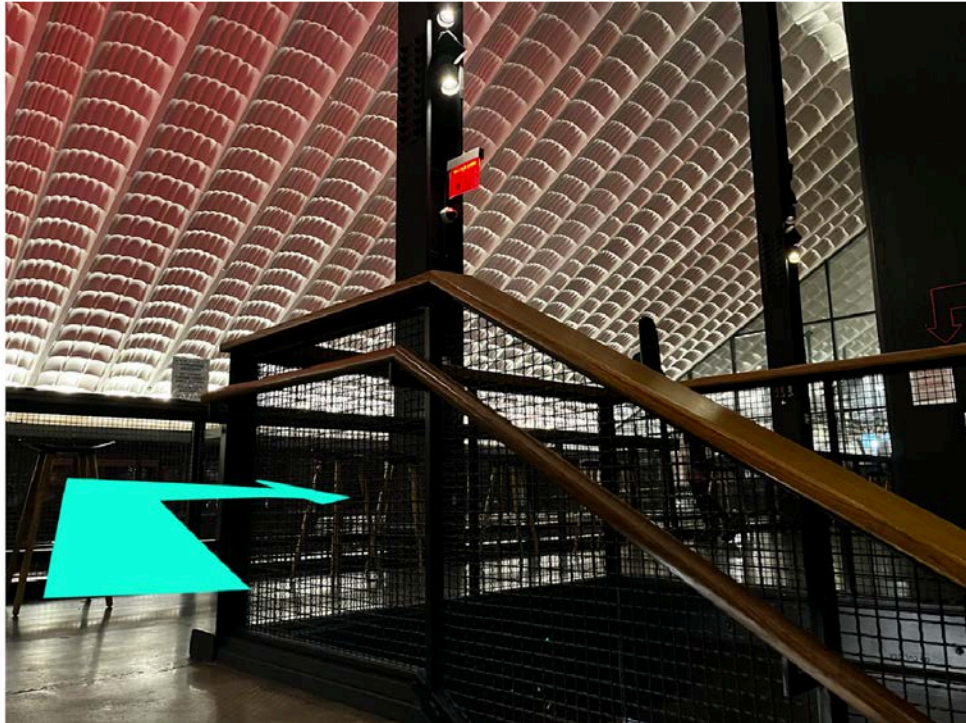
To enter the bathrooms, you can head back toward the same entrance you came through in the very beginning. Just beyond that you should be able to see a staircase leading up to the mezzanine. You can walk up these stairs. Or...



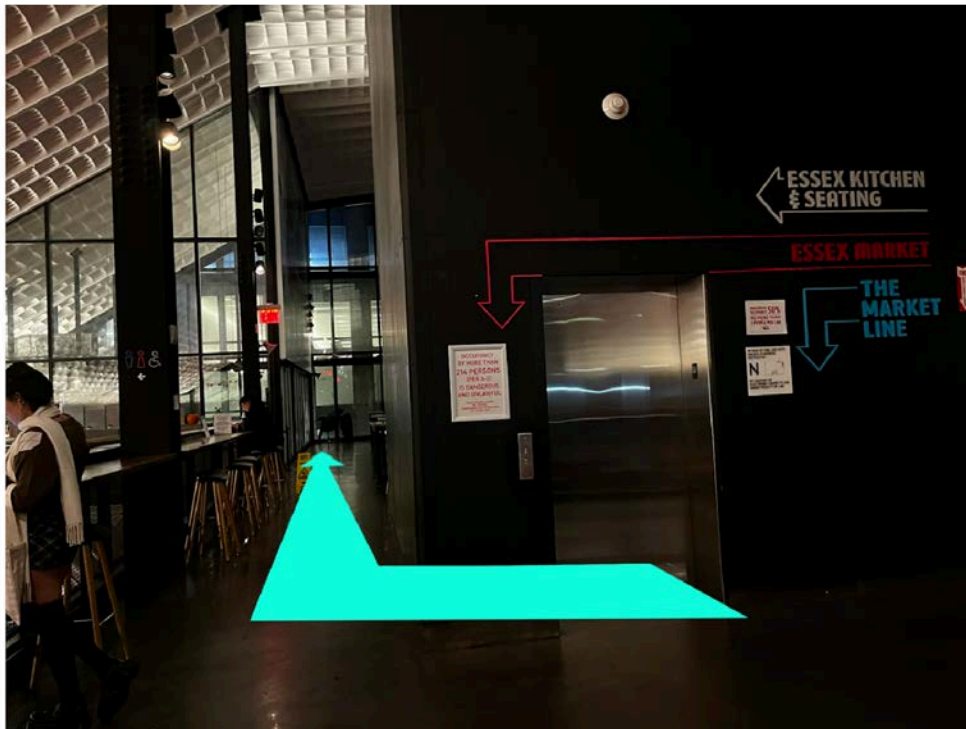
You can use the elevators, which you might have noticed on the right side when we first entered the market



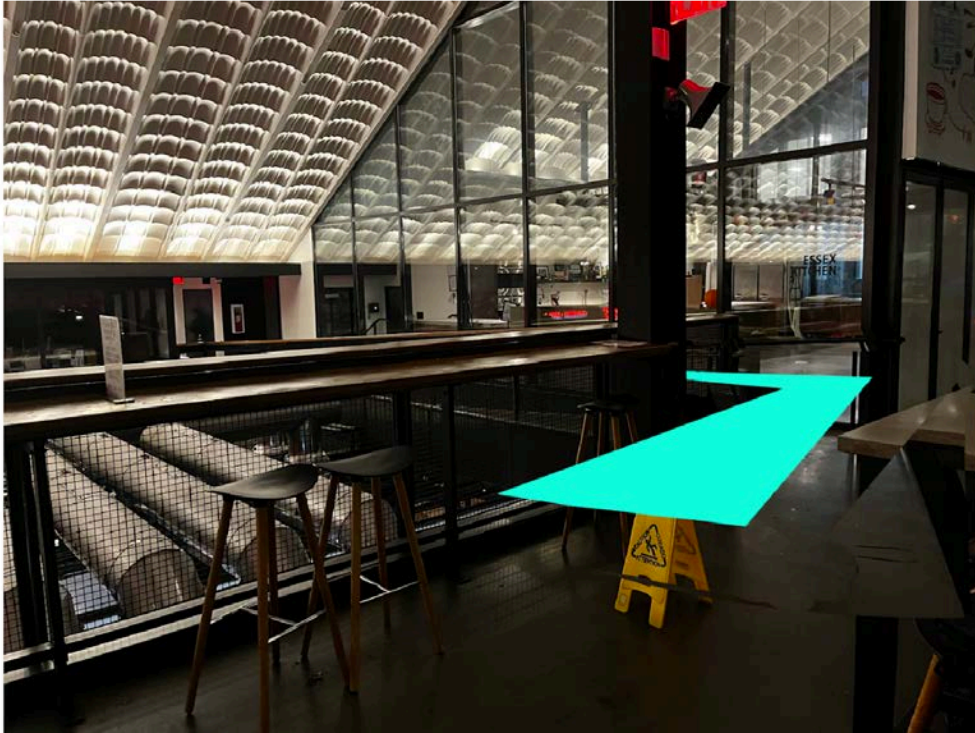
If you take the stairs up to the mezzanine, you can head toward the right.



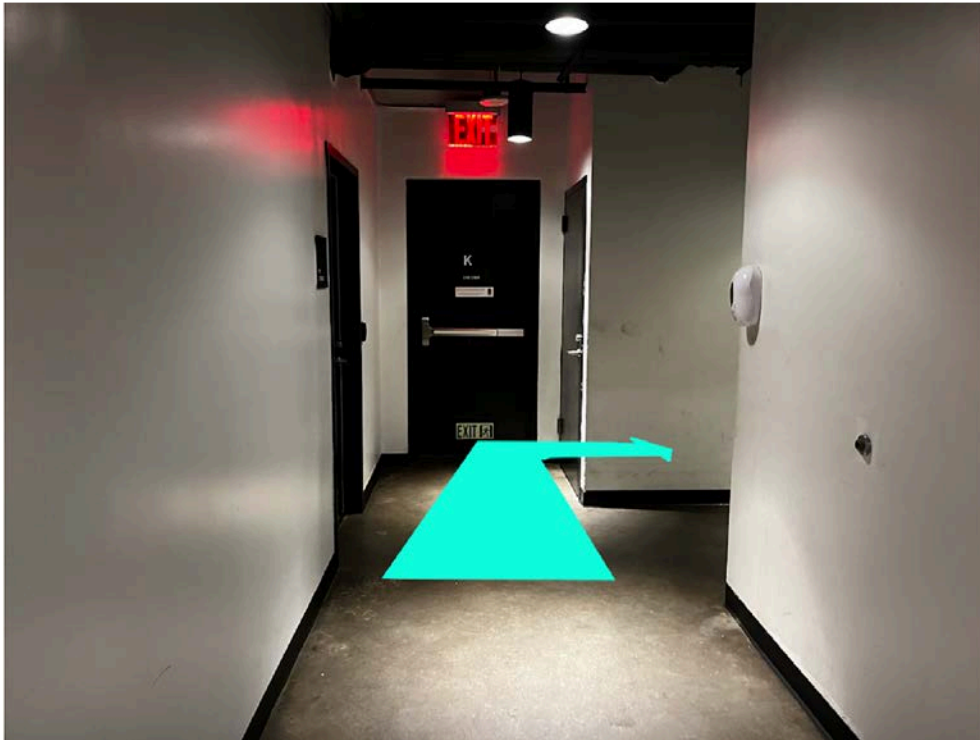
If you took the elevator, you should make two right turns



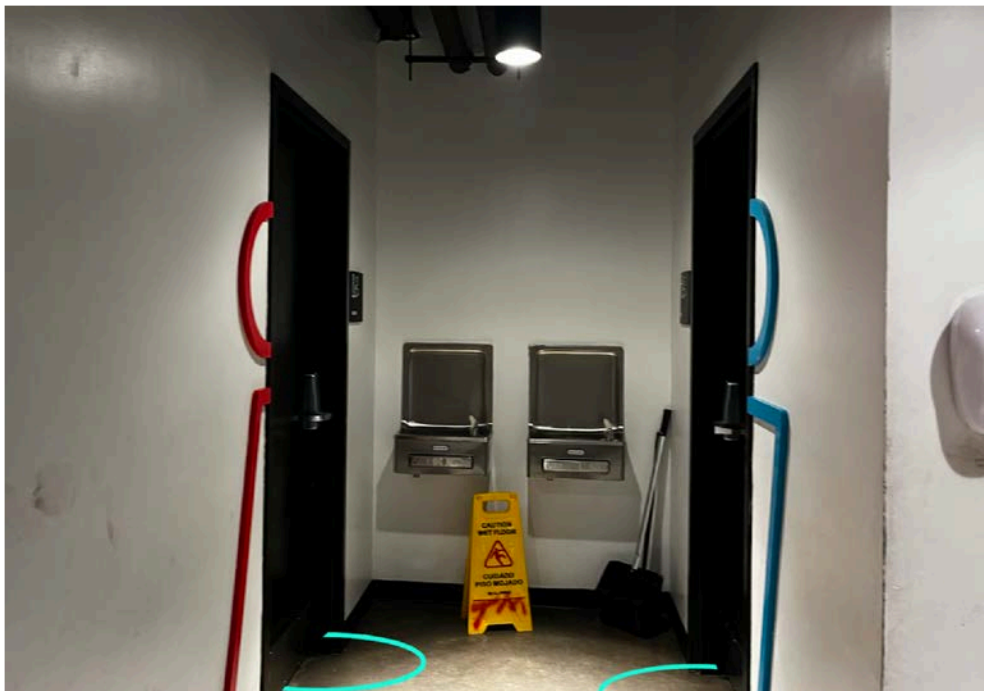
Then, you should keep walking along the counters and stools to the left, until you see a long, declining ramp. You can follow it straight down until we reach the end of it by the multiple doors and a glowing exit sign overhead.



Once you reach this area, you can turn right toward the hand sanitizer dispenser.



There are the bathrooms! The one on the left with red is for women, and the one on the right with blue is for men. To use them, you will need to put in the bathroom code: 80220#



When you are ready to leave, you can exit through the gallery doors and retrace your steps to the large glass doors of the market. Or feel free to explore the other amazing Essex Market shops!

We look forward to seeing you at Cuchifritos Gallery + Project Space!



This Education & Accessibility Guide was inspired by the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts Education Guide for the 2022 exhibition Drum Listens to Heart. This template was developed for Artists Alliance Inc and Cuchifritos Gallery by Emilie Sano. If you have any suggestions of additional resources and ways we can improve this guide to be as accessible as possible, please email galler@artistsallianceinc.org.