

GALLERY OPENING

With Tala, Francine Almeda brings her curatorial eye to West Town

The new gallery opens during EXPO Chicago.

By **CHRISTINA NAFZIGER**

A star is something you wish upon as it travels across the night sky, sinking down into the horizon like a droplet of water returning to the lake. A star is also a guiding light; it is a point of reference and anchor bringing you home, reorienting you towards the place you're meant to be. These are the elements and sentiments Chicago curator Francine Almeda aims to bring to life in her next project: Tala.

Tala, which means “bright star” in Tagalog, is the namesake of Almeda’s new gallery, opening in West Town’s gallery district on April 12 during EXPO Chicago. The gallery is an evolution of Almeda’s ongoing curatorial work, including her previous project, Jude Gallery. Located in Pilsen, Jude hosted groundbreaking exhibitions, unforgettable performances, and countless parties. For Almeda—a talented DJ herself—these moments of gathering, celebrating, and finding collective joy on the dance floor were abundant at Jude and will luckily be a part of Tala’s programming as well. But Tala will not just be more of the same—it is truly a transformation. It is the embodiment of Almeda’s growth as a curator, community builder, and dreamer.

If you know Almeda, you know how thoughtful her creative projects are: her concepts run deep and wide. If you haven’t experienced her curatorial work through Jude, you may know her work as manager of Wicker Park’s Heaven Gallery. Before leaving the gallery to launch Tala, Almeda was a friendly staple at Heaven for over three years, curating thoughtful shows like “Space to Say,” which explored the in-betweenness of language. The approach and process of creating Tala is no different. Using its namesake as a guiding pillar, the space is designed to emulate the path of a shooting star moving across the sky. This metaphor was embodied into an architectural space from the collective efforts of Chicago’s creative community, with designers including Roland Knowlden, Katie Lee, Josué Esau, Serena JV Elston, Sam Algas, and David Beltran.

In the front is a sunny, yellow-beige welcom-

ing space for the public to sit and stay awhile, complete with custom seating that wraps around the room—perfect for intimate conversations, small gatherings, or chill hangs. This section of Tala, which is intentionally low-pressure, will be filled with accessible art objects for sale that are meant to be explored and touched, like ceramics and zines.

In the middle, a more formal gallery space takes form where Almeda will be curating her dynamic exhibitions. A rich blue office sits adjacent to this area, where you can find the curator planning her next event (but more likely, she will find you and welcome you gladly, filling you in on her space and vision).

Tala ends in a lush, midnight purple room where you’ll find a community art library meets listening room. Meant to be public, this area will house a handpicked art book collection as well as collections of other community organizations whose work focuses on libraries, collections, and archives. For example, you’ll find books from the library of Chuquimarca, whose collection includes contemporary art discourses happening within diasporas, the Global South, and Indigenous perspectives, amongst other conversations.

This area will also feature amphitheater-like seating complete with a custom hi-fi sound system. Tucked underneath the library bar, a curated fridge by Monday Coffee—run by Amanda Christine Harth and Felton Edward Kizer—will house a rotating selection of bottled coffees, NA wines, kombucha, and sparkling water, encouraging visitors to nourish themselves and linger. This multifaceted space makes it a perfect container for screenings, panels, music

programming, and other community events that Almeda has in mind for the future.

No matter which area of Tala you are in, the concept of the space can be deeply felt, and with it, the concept of the first show. Like most of Almeda’s practice, everything she builds informs the next; it all goes hand in hand. While discussing the inaugural exhibition, Almeda describes the multisensory elements that will come into play. For her, it is about grounding the viewer in the space, leading them in and through. During our conversation, the word “shepherd” came to mind. This is how Almeda approaches curation: she embeds herself deep into the feel of the artwork, the worlds the artists are building. Then she ushers in not only the artists featured in the show, but also her audience and community, on a path towards her artistic vision of openness, care, and deep

painting to sculpture, photography to installation. Through sometimes unconventional methods such as sound and smell, the art calls you on a journey. And on this journey, we are given an offering in the form of writing by isrene, whose prose will be written on handmade paper for the opening. The writing—an art piece in and of itself—acts as a participatory artwork and a takeaway for audience members to keep and remember.

All of Almeda’s work is connected; it is a through line whose remnants can be found within each of her projects. This inaugural exhibition is no exception. Included in the show is a photograph made from the scans of flowers used at the last performance that took place at Jude Gallery, which ran from 2021-2024. Junio took flowers from At Rest, a performance by Ále Campos in collaboration

with Vince Phan, and scanned them while they were still alive. The inclusion of this piece pays homage to the artists, spaces, and collaborators that nurtured Almeda and continue to do so.

Moving through the space, it is as if you are the shooting star traveling across the sky as the light of day transitions to the deepness of night. Light and dark, night and day—it is within this dichotomy that Almeda’s strength lies. She can do both/and. She has the ability to curate unique exhibitions that are both complex and challenging, and then switch over to raver and throw

a damn good party. And lucky us—we’re invited! At Tala’s public opening, you will find cocktails, DJs, art, tattoos by Jaxx (available on the spot!), and community. Congratulations, you are now in Tala’s orbit.

Almeda is the warm center that her community gravitates towards as she approaches every project as an opportunity for collaboration and lasting friendship. Tala is not just one star. It is the vehicle with which Almeda forms a constellation: her community. 



Francine Almeda at Tala  STEVEN PIPER

connection.

Tala’s opening exhibition will feature Chicago artists like Kushala Vora, Kiam Marcelo Junio, Knowlden, Farah Salem, Roland Santana, Corrine Slade, and Jasmine Huaimin Yeh, as well as artists from all over the world, such as Nicole Ji Soo Kim (Toronto), Ang Ziqi Zhang (NYC), Chaveli Sifre (Berlin), and Pierre-Alexandre Savriacouty (Paris). Each artist’s work is vastly different from the next, but the thread that ties them together is undeniably present. Sitting somewhere adjacent to abstraction and transcendentalism, the works range from

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