

Ariel Global

Quarter Ended December 31, 2024

Markets worldwide defied expectations in 2024 led by the dominating performance of U.S. mega-cap technology companies and investor enthusiasm for artificial intelligence (AI) themed stocks. However, persistent challenges in the Eurozone, including uncertainty around interest rates, concerns surrounding the new U.S. administration's policies as well as a strengthening U.S. dollar drove the MSCI ACWI, MSCI ACWI ex-U.S. and MSCI EAFE Indices into the red. China's economy also ended the year sluggishly, with September's stimulus efforts losing steam and the recovery in consumer spending turning elusive. Although uncertainty and volatility are likely to remain elevated, the patient investor knows "stock prices trade on fundamentals. And when those solid fundamentals shine through, share prices rise."¹ Against this backdrop, the Ariel Global Composite fell -3.51% gross of fees (-3.65% net of fees) in the quarter, trailing the -0.99% return posted by the MSCI ACWI Index, but ahead of the -4.71% decline of the MSCI ACWI Value Index. Over the last one-year period, the Ariel Global Composite advanced +8.12% gross of fees (+7.55% net of fees), underperforming the MSCI ACWI Index's +17.49% gain and the +10.76% return of the MSCI ACWI Value Index.

Ariel's non-consensus approach seeks to identify undervalued, out-of-favor, franchises that are misunderstood and therefore mispriced. The Ariel Global bottom-up strategy is overweight Consumer Discretionary, Financials, Health Care and Utilities, meaningfully underweight Industrials, Consumer Staples, Information Technology and Communication Services, as well as lacks exposure to Energy and Materials. At the sector level, our allocation to currency forwards, Real Estate holdings and avoidance of Materials were the greatest contributors to returns, while our investment choices within Consumer Discretionary, Information Technology and Communication Service were the largest performance detractors.

Emaar Properties PJSC, a property investment and development company in the MENA region, traded higher over the period on strong earnings results, highlighted by record quarterly residential sales, healthy margins and robust free cash flow. Additionally, the company announced an attractive long-term dividend policy to return capital to shareholders. Looking ahead, we believe Emaar Properties

will continue to benefit from the post COVID recovery in Dubai's real estate market, which has been amplified by a large number of expatriates entering the country.

Global financial services company, **Capital One Financial Corporation (COF)** was another top performer during the period. Shares rallied following the U.S. election as investors believe the potential Discover Financial Services (DFS) acquisition is more likely to close. The new administration is expected to be more accommodative of bank mergers and acquisitions. In our view, the deal would produce significant long-term earnings accretion. COF will be able to leverage DFS' proprietary payments network, enabling direct interaction with merchants and consumers. This closed loop dynamic should lead to higher volumes of credit card conversions boosting its shares. At current levels, we view the long-term outlook to be attractive, given favorable business trends, stabilizing delinquency rates within the credit card industry, upside from the DFS acquisition and COF's enhanced focus on technology.

New holding, Italian bank, **Banca Monte dei Paschi** also advanced following a quarterly earnings beat and subsequent raise in full year guidance. The Italian government also sold a portion of its stake in the firm further aiding share price appreciation. We believe the bank can provide long-term earnings stability through its recent actions to reduce interest rate sensitivity and improve asset quality, thereby enhancing profitability and the balance sheet. Additionally, the bank's increased payout ratio to 75% and attractive cash yield—the highest among European Union banks—bolsters our positive outlook. Furthermore, we think a favorable interest rate outlook alongside the company's solid capital profile and robust trading book as well as the potential for consolidation in the Italian banking sector presents additional upside potential.

Alternatively, several positions weighed on performance. French multinational tire manufacturer, **Michelin (CDGE)** was a notable underperformer in the period due to a challenging macro environment. Weaker-than-expected consumer demand caused a sharp decline in volumes resulting in to a top- and bottom-line earnings miss. Subsequently,

¹ Hobson, Mellody and John W. Rogers Jr. "What the Stock market Taught Us This Year: Don't Fall for These Investing Traps." *Wall Street Journal*, 5 December 2023.



management cut 2024 guidance and announced plans to close two of its factories by 2026 to reduce costs. Nonetheless, we remain enthusiastic about Michelin's strong global competitive position and pricing strategy. In our view, shares are trading at a large discount to historical multiples despite a stronger balance sheet, higher free cash flow generation and attractive returns of capital to shareholders.

China-based E-commerce company, **JD.com, Inc.** also detracted from performance in the period. The stock came under pressure as some investors took profits on solid earnings performance, while others became concerned with the implications tariffs could have on the Chinese economy. In our view, this share price action runs counter to the company's solid business fundamentals. The home appliance trade-in program and popular shopping event, Singles' Day, generated significant consumer spending across various product categories. Additionally, the company's strategic decision to diversify general merchandise product offerings, expand its third-party marketplace business and monetize advertising streams continues to aid the top- and bottom-lines. Despite the near-term noise, we continue to view the company's strategic positioning favorably and like JD.com's long-term growth prospects.

Lastly, American healthcare company, **CVS Health Corporation (CVS)** underperformed in the period. The company preannounced a third-quarter preliminary profit estimate materially below consensus expectations and pulled its 2024 guidance due to continued medical cost pressures. Investor concerns around the recently proposed Pharmacy Benefit Management (PBM) legislation further weighed on shares. Despite these challenges, management reiterated its focus on improving margins and enhancing its positioning in Medicare Advantage (MA). CVS believes the program can remain an attractive business for Aetna and CVS Health over time as it implements a multi-year repricing strategy across plan level benefits. Meanwhile, CVS continues to take actions to drive long-term success including the appointment of longtime company executive David Joyner as President and CEO as well as adding four new board members.

In addition to purchasing Italian bank, **Banca Monte dei Paschi**, we initiated eight new positions in the quarter.

We added research-based biopharmaceutical company, **AbbVie, Inc. (ABBV)** following a recent pullback in shares related to a Phase 2 clinical failure for schizophrenia drug, Emraclidine. Despite the setback, we believe AbbVie's core inflammation and immunology (I&I) business is set to outperform. We expect next-generation I&I drugs, Skyrizi and Rinvoq, used in the treatment of inflammatory bowel disease, to be key long-term revenue drivers.

We bought global bank and financial services provider, **Barclays PLC**. We expect shares to benefit from a recovery in global capital markets and net interest income (NII) growth

driven by macroeconomic hedging and asset flows. The bank is also planning to expand its investment banking advisory business. Moreover, its U.S. credit card business presents opportunities for either a potential sale or a quicker earnings recovery. Taken together, we see a reasonable path for Barclays to pursue its return targets, which include the distribution of £3 billion and £10 billion to shareholders through dividends and share repurchases between 2024 and 2026 and achieving a return on tangible common equity of about 12%.

We initiated a position in specialty insurance company, **Beazley plc**. The firm's diversified portfolio offerings include commercial property, specialty risk and cyber insurance. We find the growth and profitability profile of its property segment to be attractive as 100% of its business in North America is being generated by the booming Excess and Surplus (E&S) market—an area that caters to non-traditional, high-risk insurance needs. Cyber also presents an exciting structural growth opportunity for the company, particularly since insurance penetration of information assets is low. Looking ahead, we find Beazley's earnings outlook to be attractive, supported by its robust business mix, solid margins and improving capital profile.

We purchased **CenterPoint Energy, Inc. (CNP)** which is a utility company that owns and operates electric and natural gas transmission and distribution facilities primarily in Texas. Shares came under pressure following political pushback on CNP's poor response and restoration efforts following Hurricane Beryl. The uncertainty ignited concerns around the company's balance sheet health and regulatory risks. We view the sell off as an overreaction and believe CNP is at an inflection point where recent infrastructure upgrades and momentum around a potential divestiture of its mobile generation assets to another entity should improve CNP's regulatory standing. We think the company has a strong growth profile underpinned by economic expansion in Texas and see this supporting long-term earnings growth. Furthermore, management's execution of asset sales in 2025 should further stabilize the company's balance sheet.

We added leading European telecommunications services operator, **Orange SA**. The company offers mobile, fixed-line and broadband services to roughly 300 million customers across 26 countries. Orange SA has a strong market presence in France and Spain and is expanding operations across the Middle East and Africa (MEA). We believe positive subscriber trends and rational price increases across these markets will support long term revenue growth. For instance, Orange is gaining market share on its network and service quality in France; benefitting from merger synergies and monetizing the fiber business in Spain; and offering mobile data services to significantly under-penetrated regions in MEA. Meanwhile, as the company completes its fiber-roll-out



in France, we expect higher profitability, free cash flow generation and increasing shareholder returns.

We purchased **Redeia Corp SA**, a Spain-based electricity provider. We believe Redeia's ability to generate robust earnings growth with further upside from additional regulatory drivers is currently being underappreciated by the market.

We also bought shares of leading pure-play producer of memory semiconductor products, **SK Hynix Inc.** In our view, SK Hynix is well positioned to benefit from increased deployment of its leading-edge High Bandwidth Memory (HBM) products, which are experiencing rapid demand growth to power Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Finally, we initiated a position in **Sega Sammy Holdings Inc.**, a Japanese holding company specializing in the development of video games and the production of pachinko and pachislot machines. We believe the company is poised to deliver higher earnings, driven by robust growth within its video game segment. This is largely due to the company's new multiplatform storytelling strategy centered around the firm's core intellectual property: *Sonic*, *Atlus*, and *Like a Dragon*. We believe it will help drive sales of both old and new titles, thereby boosting margins. Meanwhile, the pachinko and pachislot segment remains a profitable and stable cash flow generator for the company.

By comparison, we successfully exited Brazilian insurance company, **BB Seguridade Participacoes SA**, financial holding company, **Comerica, Inc. (CMA)**, diagnostics leader, **Roche Holding AG** and leading mobile telecommunications company, **Telefónica Brasil SA** on valuation. We also sold our position in biopharmaceutical company, **Bristol-Myers Squibb Company (BMY)**, global pharmaceutical and healthcare company, **GSK plc** and Italian gas distributor, **Italgas Spa** to pursue more compelling opportunities.

The stock market dynamics of 2024 highlight a transformative shift in the global economy, fueled by advancements in artificial intelligence and geopolitical fragmentation. While the narrow ascent of AI themed stocks have driven market returns in recent years, opportunities should broaden to companies utilizing AI to create real-world efficiencies. As we head into 2025, there may be an over-reliance on the U.S. stock market to drive returns. With uncertainty surrounding rate cuts as well as the policy agenda for the new US administration, we expect heightened market volatility. We see this environment as conducive for active managers, whose knowledge, expertise and forward thinking enables them to look beyond the short-term noise and identify opportunities. Accordingly, we are finding many mispriced global and international stocks trading at a discount to their U.S. counterparts. Their valuation is attractive, profitability less vulnerable and balance sheets remain strong. Against this backdrop, our international and global portfolios are well-positioned to deliver stronger returns over the long run.

Investments in non-U.S. securities may underperform and may be more volatile than comparable U.S. stocks because of the risks involving non-U.S. economies, markets, political systems, regulatory standards, currencies and taxes. The use of currency derivatives and ETFs may increase investment losses and expenses and create more volatility. Investments in emerging markets present additional risks, such as difficulties in selling on a timely basis and at an acceptable price. The intrinsic value of the stocks within the strategy may never be recognized by the broader market. The strategy is often concentrated in fewer sectors than its benchmarks, and its performance may suffer if these sectors underperform the overall stock market.

Past performance does not guarantee future results. For the period ended 12/31/2024, the performance (net of fees) of the Ariel Global Composite for the 1, 5, and 10-year periods were +7.55%, +7.14%, and +6.97%, respectively. For the period ended 12/31/2024, the performance for the MSCI ACWI Index and the MSCI ACWI Value Index for the 1, 5, and 10-year periods were +17.49%, +10.06%, and +9.23% and +10.76%, +6.42%, and +6.24%, respectively. Ariel Composite Net of Fees returns are calculated by deducting: (1) for the period from inception to December 31, 2013, the maximum advisory fee in effect for the respective period, applied on a monthly basis; and (2) for the period from January 1, 2014 onwards, the actual monthly advisory fee (on an asset-weighted basis) accrued for the accounts in the composite, using the fee rates in place as of the most recent calendar quarter-end. Gross returns do not reflect the deduction of advisory fees. Client returns will be reduced by advisory fees and such other expenses as may be incurred in the management of the account. Advisory fees are described in Part 2 of Ariel's Form ADV. Returns assume the reinvestment of dividends and other earnings. Returns are expressed in U.S. dollars. Current performance may be lower or higher than the performance data quoted. The Ariel Global Composite differs from its benchmark, the MSCI ACWI (All Country World Index), because the Composite has fewer holdings than the benchmark.

The opinions expressed are current as of the date of this commentary but are subject to change. The information provided in this commentary does not provide information reasonably sufficient upon which to base an investment decision and should not be considered a recommendation to purchase or sell any particular security. There is no guarantee that any of the views expressed will come to fruition or any investment will perform as described.

As of 12/31/2024, Emaar Properties (P.J.S.C) constituted 1.8% of the Ariel Global Composite (representative portfolio); Capital One Financial Corporation 3.0%; Banca Monte dei Paschi di Siena SpA 1.8%; Michelin 2.8%; JD.com, Inc. 3.6%;



CVS Health Corporation 2.5%; AbbVie Inc. 1.7%; Barclays PLC 1.3%; Beazley PLC 1.5%; CenterPoint Energy Inc. 2.8%; Orange SA 1.2%; Redeia Corp SA 1.2%; SK Hynix Inc. 1.0%; Sega Sammy Holdings Inc. 1.3%; BB Seguridade Participacoes SA 0.0%; Bristol-Myers Squibb Co. 0.0%; Comerica Inc. 0.0%; GSK PLC 0.0%; Italgas SpA 0.0%; Roche Holding AG 0.0%; and Telefonica Brasil SA 0.0%. Portfolio holdings are subject to change. The performance of any single portfolio holding is no indication of the performance of other portfolio holdings of the Ariel Global Composite.

A glossary of financial terms provided herein may be found on our website at www.arielinvestments.com.

Indexes are unmanaged. An investor cannot invest directly in an index. The MSCI ACWI (All Country World Index) Index is an equity index of large and mid-cap representation across 23 Developed Markets (DM) and 24 Emerging Markets (EM) countries. Its inception date is January 1, 2001. The MSCI ACWI Value Index captures large and mid-cap securities exhibiting overall value style characteristics across 23 Developed Markets countries and 24 Emerging Markets (EM) countries. Its inception date is December 8, 1997. All MSCI Index net returns reflect the reinvestment of income and other earnings, including the dividends net of the maximum withholding tax applicable to non-resident institutional investors that do not benefit from double taxation treaties. MSCI uses the maximum tax rate applicable to institutional investors, as determined by the company's country of incorporation. MSCI makes no express or implied warranties or representations and shall have no liability whatsoever with respect to any MSCI data contained herein. The MSCI data may not be further redistributed or used to create indices or financial products. This report is not approved or produced by MSCI.



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