

## Artist Opportunities: Professional Development and Project Support for Individual Artists



**Melissa Ajayi** | *Shaker Heights, Ohio*

Melissa Ajayi is a performer, choreographer, and recreation therapist based in Cleveland. An independent artist since 2009, she has performed in works by various companies and artists in New York City, Lexington, Kentucky, and Cleveland. Since founding Ajayi Dance in 2021, Ajayi has created 12 original works, including three site-specific immersive experiences and a commissioned piece for No Exit New Music Ensemble. Her work has been presented at venues and events such as Cleveland Public Theatre's Danceworks, Borderlight Festival, Ingenuity Fest, and Pandemonium. Dedicated to process and collaboration, she co-founded inFORMal Fridays, a space for dance artists to experiment in a community setting. Ajayi also teaches weekly classes, organizes community-led sessions, and has served as a guest artist at institutions including Cleveland State University, Dancing Wheels, and Cleveland School of the Arts.



**Michael Anthony Forney Jr.** | *Youngstown, Ohio*

Michael Anthony Forney Jr. is a producer, director, and writer based in Columbus, Ohio, with expertise in film, television, stage plays, and music. Since founding Michael Anthony Productions in 2012 and launching the ForneyExtremeTV streaming network, he has built a reputation for high-quality storytelling and innovative production. Forney leads a team of skilled professionals and event technicians, bringing creative projects to life with precision and dedication. His dynamic work consistently resonates with audiences, setting new industry standards. Passionate about the performing arts, Forney has written, directed, and produced more than 30 stage plays, each reflecting his ability to capture human emotion and experience. His narratives entertain while encouraging audiences to reflect on deeper themes, showcasing his commitment to impactful, thought-provoking storytelling.



**Kevin Auzenne** | *Cincinnati, Ohio*

Kevin Auzenne is a Cincinnati-based self-taught painter and sculptor engaged in a broad-based practice at the intersection of narrative figuration and conceptual abstraction. He spent many years as a studio artist in New York while also assisting prominent galleries as a preparator and artist liaison facilitating exhibition installations, which provided him valuable insights into the highest levels of the industry. Auzenne became an artist-in-residence at Rookwood Pottery Company, producing an original series of hand-painted ceramic works in his signature figurative style. In his current work, Auzenne has introduced a conceptualist approach by translating social systems of competing world views, bias and issues of race, into systems of competing forms, color, and structure, yielding a unique and wholly original visual language.

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**Kelley Booze** | *Springfield, Ohio*

Kelley Booze is a visual artist with a studio practice based in Springfield, Ohio. She earned her BFA in fine art from Columbus College of Art and Design and is pursuing her MFA in studio practice at Miami University. Booze has taught classes and workshops, led public art initiatives, and exhibited her work in numerous solo and group shows. Her artwork has been displayed nationally and internationally, including at the Zanesville Museum of Art, Springfield Museum of Art, and the Ohio Arts Council's Riffe Gallery. Represented by Sharon Weiss Gallery in Columbus, Ohio, she has participated in artist residencies in France and Scotland. Recent honors include being featured in Studio Visit magazine, recognition as a Spotlight Artist at the Ohio Governor's Residence, and receiving an Individual Excellence Award from the Ohio Arts Council.



**Ian Breidenbach** | *Findlay, Ohio*

Ian Breidenbach is a conceptual artist, curator, and educator based in Findlay, Ohio. In 2012, he founded The Neon Heater Art Gallery—an artist-run space serving the community of Findlay and surrounding areas and providing access to contemporary art in a rural setting. His artistic practice explores the connective quality of narrative in the creation of worlds and possible futures. In 2022, he started The Utopian Megapraxis Collective, a non-situated community of artists, curators, writers, educators, and thinkers. He holds a BFA from Wright State University in selected studies video art and an MFA from Texas Tech University. He is currently a visiting assistant professor at The Ohio State University at Lima, Ohio, teaching art and curating The Farmer Gallery.



**Gabrielle Burton** | *Delaware, Ohio*

Gabrielle Burton is a filmmaker and writer based in Ohio. With a passion for human-focused storytelling and social engagement, she has received an Ohio Arts Council's Individual Excellence Award in both poetry and filmmaking. Burton leads Five Sisters Productions alongside her four real-life sisters, creating fiction and documentary films. She directed the award-winning documentary "Kings, Queens, & In-Betweens," and her comedy "Old Guy" was in consideration for an Emmy nomination. Her current film, "Somebody to Lean On," explores Harmony Project's Ohio men's prison choir at Pickaway Correctional. Burton received a Wexner Center for the Arts residency for her project inspired by her TEDx Talk on gender, drag, and parenting.

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**Michael Bush** | *Columbus, Ohio*

Michael Bush has volunteered for more than fifteen years, demonstrating his commitment to the arts community of Columbus, Ohio, where he currently resides. He has served as co-chair of the Columbus Arts Fest's Emerging Artists Mentorship Program, board president of the Franklinton Arts District (2021-22), and juror for regional and national exhibitions—most notably the Naples National Arts Fair (2020) and the Columbus Arts Festival (2019-2024). Bush has presented works regionally, with select exhibitions including Art Link Gallery's Midwest Regional Exhibition and the Ohio State Fair Fine Arts Exhibition. Bush is represented

by Sarah Gormley Gallery in Columbus. He has works in a host of private collections, most notably the permanent collection of Capital University's Schumacher Gallery.



**Ben Butler** | *Memphis, Tennessee*

Ben Butler is a sculptor and public artist based in Memphis, Tennessee, and Quogue, New York. He has exhibited his work extensively in galleries and museums across the country and has created commissioned sculptures and installations for a variety of public spaces, including Portland International Airport, St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, Hyatt Regency Hotel Chicago, and Crosstown Theater in Memphis. Butler holds an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a BA from Bowdoin College. He is a recipient of a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Individual Artist Grant and has received fellowships from

renowned residency programs, including the MacDowell Colony, the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art, and the Ucross Foundation.



**Juan Daza** | *Hilliard, Ohio*

Juan Daza is a Colombian visual artist with Indigenous roots. He began as a graffiti artist, using his work to protest the civil war in his country, and later became an editorial cartoonist. Now working in fine art, Daza uses humor and satire, employing vibrant colors that reflect nostalgia for his origins and culture. Passionate about public art, Daza creates murals, tifos (i.e., large-scale supporter banners), and interventions, showcasing his commitment to community and environmental causes. His work has been exhibited in galleries, live painting events, and artist residencies. In addition to his art, Daza teaches

children, mentors other artists, and volunteers at art festivals and curated exhibitions. Daza collaborates on public art projects with organizations including the Columbus Crew, Short North Arts District, Columbus Metropolitan Library, and Franklinton Arts District.

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**Allen Dennard** | *Detroit, Michigan*

Allen Dennard is a rising talent in Detroit's storied jazz tradition, celebrated for his bold yet smooth sound and musical depth. He has collaborated with renowned artists, including Ray J, and performed in the MC5 reunion, sharing the stage with Wayne Kramer, Phat Kat, Elzhi, Jessica Care Moore, and Dwele. In 2019, Dennard contributed to Alice Cooper's album "Breadcrumbs" and toured with world-renowned R&B singer K'Jon. As a bandleader, Dennard has released two acclaimed projects: "Stepping In" and his 2022 album "Flashback," which earned a Detroit Music Award nomination in 2023. He has also performed alongside saxophonist Walter Blanding and received the Preservation of Jazz Excellence Award for "Best Spirit" from the City of Detroit and the State of Michigan in 2023.



**Ching-chu Hu** | *Granville, Ohio*

Ching-chu Hu is a composer, conductor, and pianist who infuses his music with his dual cultural upbringing as a first-generation Chinese American. Identity, political, social, and environmental issues are at the core of his music, which has been reviewed as "breathtaking" (allmusic), "richly textured" (Charleston Post and Courier), and "incredible" (The Columbus Dispatch). Hu is founder of the TUTTI Festival, a weeklong celebration of new art at Denison University, where he is director of the Vail Series and the John and Christine Warner Professor of Music. Recent projects include composing works for Chamber Music Columbus' 75th season. Honors include being named the Aaron Copland Fellow at the MacDowell Colony for the Arts; composer-in-residence at the Piccolo Spoleto Festival; guest composer at the American Music Week Festival in Sofia, Bulgaria; and winner of various grants and competitions, including an Individual Excellence Award and an American Prize for Chamber Music.



**Virginia Kistler** | *Gahanna, Ohio*

Virginia Kistler earned her BS from The Ohio State University and an MFA from the Columbus College of Art & Design. She is an interdisciplinary artist working primarily in sculpture and photography, while using a variety of media—laser cut acrylic, CNC router-cut plastic, stainless steel, wood, and 3D printed plastic. Before becoming a public artist, she spent 20 years designing interactives for children's museums and science centers. Kistler has shown work nationally and has been commissioned by the Lincoln Motor Company, the Dayton Metro Library, The Ohio State University, and Cleveland State University to create permanent works of sculpture. Currently, Kistler lives and works in Gahanna, Ohio.

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**Andrea McLeod** | *Columbus, Ohio*

Dre McLeod is a contemporary fiber artist based in Ohio known for her captivating textile creations. Hailing from Appalachia, her artistic journey is rooted in the rich quilting tradition passed down by her foremothers. She earned her BFA in fashion design from the Savannah College of Art and Design in 2008. McLeod's work has been showcased in galleries in West Virginia, Ohio, Georgia, and California. Her thought-provoking pieces have garnered attention and earned her a growing community of collectors throughout the United States. Combining her love for repurposed and rescued textiles with influences from historical art movements, McLeod's artwork redefines the boundaries of traditional quilting. Through her intricate appliqué and textile compositions, she explores themes of self-reflection and human connection.



**Kortney Morrow** | *Cleveland, Ohio*

Kortney Morrow is a poet and writer based in Cleveland, Ohio. Her work has been supported by 68to05, The Academy of American Poets, The Studio Museum in Harlem, Prairie Schooner, Tin House, and Transition Magazine. Her debut poetry collection, "Run It Back," won the 2024 Saturnalia Books Poetry Prize. Morrow holds an MFA in Poetry from The Ohio State University. In 2023, she received the Walter Rumsey Marvin Grant Award from the Ohioana Library Association for her creative nonfiction. Represented by McKinnon Literary, she dedicates herself both to her own writing and to amplifying the work of emerging artists. She has helped raise more than \$1 million for arts and culture organizations nationwide. In 2022, she founded Studio Reciprocity, an arts-based social impact firm.



**Sara O'Keeffe** | *Ridgewood, New York*

Sara O'Keeffe is Senior Curator at Art Omi in Ghent, New York. In 2023, she curated Pippa Garner: \$ELL YOUR \$ELF, the artist's first institutional solo exhibition in New York, accompanied by a fully illustrated monograph co-published with Pioneer Works Press. O'Keeffe previously held curatorial positions at the New Museum, where she co-curated "Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon" with Johanna Burton and Natalie Bell. She was also part of the curatorial team for the 2015 "Triennial: Surround Audience" with Lauren Cornell and Ryan Trecartin, and curated projects with artists such as Sable Elyse Smith, Tau Lewis, and Morgan Bassichis. Before joining the New Museum, O'Keeffe worked in the curatorial department at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum from 2011–2013.

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**Cigdem Slankard** | *Rocky River, Ohio*

Cigdem Slankard is an educator and filmmaker based in Cleveland, Ohio, currently serving as the director of the school of film and media arts at Cleveland State University. She was born and raised in Turkey and received her BA in translation and interpreting from Bogazici University and her MFA in filmmaking from Ohio University. Her documentary films and immersive cinema experiences have been screened in film festivals around the world, garnering numerous awards and recognition. She is an active filmmaker, often engaged in interdisciplinary and collaborative projects with different departments within academia and stakeholders in the Greater Cleveland community.



**Megan Smith** | *Waverly, Ohio*

Megan Smith was born and raised in rural Midwest America and has been honing her acrylic painting skills for more than two decades. After attaining her BFA in painting and BA education in 2008, she has taught a range of art levels and mediums. Along with providing art lessons in the classroom, she also creates opportunities for her students to experience art beyond the classroom walls, including visiting art museums, leading workshops, painting murals in the community, and taking trips to New York City. Outside of teaching, she is also a mother and wife who enjoys quality family time traveling, creating, and discovering. The combination of these passions sparked her idea, CREATE2FIND—an interactive art challenge where she travels, paints, hides, and posts her artwork for anyone to find and keep.



**Erin Smith Glenn** | *Fairborn, Ohio*

Erin Smith Glenn is an associate professor of art, former vice president of the board for the Dayton Society of Artists, and an alumna of Central State University (CSU). She holds an MFA from the University of Cincinnati. Her work has been showcased in numerous solo and group exhibitions across the country as well as internationally. She is the creator and faculty lead for CSU's Fine Arts Study Abroad program, facilitating trips to Italy and Paris. Committed to continually enhancing her creative practice, she fosters growth in her students, mentees, and three children. Outside of academia, she operates TheScarvinArtist LLC, accepting painting and drawing commissions, crafting unique crocheted and artisanal designs, and creating mixed media projects.