

CULTURAL POLITICS

The Fellowship that Fuels L.A.'s Avant-Garde Art Scene

Carren Jao | October 18, 2017

In the 80s and 90s, the nation was aflame over art and the country's moral fabric. Conservative political figures and religious leaders moved to curb art's freedom to express. An exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe photographs at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C. was canceled. Legislation barring funding of art used to "promote, disseminate or produce obscene or indecent materials" was passed. All over the nation, budgets to support the work of artists declined.

Amid this controversy, Los Angeles showed its support for the work of independent artists by founding the City of Los Angeles (COLA) Individual Artist Fellowship. In the twenty years since its first exhibition at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery (LAMAG) April 30, 1997, the fellowship has fanned the flames of L.A.'s mid-career artists, helping them explore ideas that would not have seen the light without someone with the faith and the funding to put towards their work.

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"The City of Los Angeles is built on creativity," says Danielle Brazell, Department of Cultural Affairs General Manager, "It's imperative that the City of LA create systems of acknowledgment, support and platforms for valuing and creating expression. COLA artists are really unique civic entrepreneurs that we need in the city."

Since its inception, the COLA Fellowship has gone to many of the city's leading artistic voices: Andrea Bowers, Barbara Carrasco, Heidi Duckler, Harry Gamboa Jr., Terry Wolverton, and the list goes on. The fellowship isn't just money awarded to artists, explains DCA's Grants administrator, Joe Smoke, it's \$10,000 that "allow artists to pay themselves while they create new work that the City of LA doesn't own, but has the ability to premiere in public." In short, it allows mid-career artists to explore new avenues of creativity while worrying less about the financial aspect of

making art. "There's tremendous pressure on artists to produce art that has monetary viability to it. COLA Fellowships are a way for the city to say, 'We want you to explore a new idea or concept, to stretch yourself in a new way,'" adds Brazell.

Artbound asked DCA to introduce us to five fellows, who've created works that push the envelope of the city's art scene.

Sam Durant

Durant's 1999 fellowship installation was titled "Partially Buried 1960s/70s Dystopia Revealed and Utopia Reflected." Here, Durant buried two large speakers, creating unmistakable graves atop large mirrors. These speakers emitted two audio tracks, one from the ecstatic Woodstock concert and another from the tragic Altamont music festival the following year. Durant's work pushes the idea of what sculpture could be at the time. Until today, Durant's sculptural work continues to be contentious, perhaps becoming catalysts for difficult conversations.



"Partially Buried 1960s/70s Dystopia Revealed and Utopia Reflected" | Courtesy of Sam Durant

Sheetal Gandhi

The city of L.A. continues to expand its support for art in all its forms. Sheetal Gandhi's work involves projections, singing, dancing that all coalesce into a personal narrative. "Working with multi-media, (video and animation) is costly," says Gandhi, "When I got the fellowship, I knew that I didn't want to miss out on this chance to stretch myself."

For her fellowship, Gandhi and her collaborators created a site-specific piece especially for the Grand Performances outdoor space. It was a movable set out of recycled materials, where video and animation would be projected. The artist was also able to incorporate the California Plaza

water features into her performance. Her piece, “Human Nature” is a dance narrative inspired by Shel Silverstein’s “The Giving Tree.” It explores the relationship between giving and taking, especially in the content of mankind’s disturbing relationship with Nature today.

Baumgartner and Uriu (B + U)

Architecture and design firm Baumgartner and Uriu (B + U) are one of the few duos named COLA fellows. In 2015, they created a “25-foot techno organic cave” called “Aperture” made of thermal-formed plastic. “The art piece developed as part of the COLA fellowship was a critical piece of work for our studio from which many other projects developed including a single family residence for the Hollywood Hills,” says Herwig Baumgartner, co-founder of BplusU. The sculpture/pavilion was meant to engage visitors with architecture, but also with sound, creating an immersive spatial environment. The forms and concepts in their COLA exhibition could be found echoed in their latest futuristic residential project.



Baumgartner and Uriu's COLA exhibit | Courtesy of BplusU



a rendering of Baumgartner and Uriu's Hollywood residential project | Courtesy of BplusU

Tony de los Reyes

For his COLA exhibition, artist Tony de los Reyes continued his fascination for Herman Melville's "Moby Dick" and created multiple pieces inspired by the classic novel. "COLA fellows allow artists to wildly experiment with the money they receive, they do so because they feel they can exhale and worry less about the financial rewards of work," says Smoke. De los Reyes created sculptural works out of tar, sword blades — "sculptures both elegant and ferocious," says Smoke. The artist's "Sunset" piece also adorns COLA's 20th-anniversary tome.

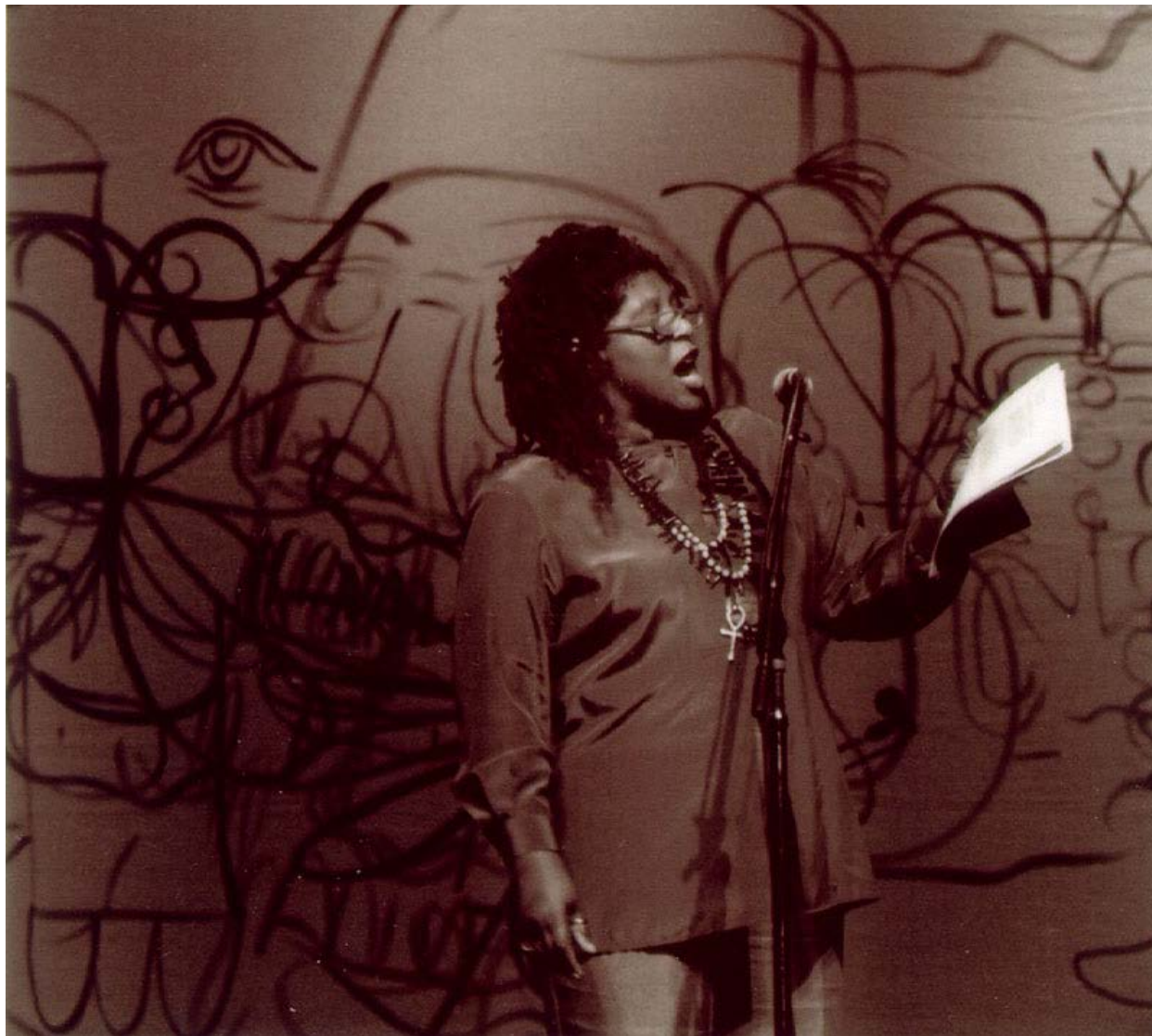


"Sunset" | Tony de los Reyes

Wanda Coleman

Long regarded as L.A.'s unofficial poet laureate, Wanda Coleman found inspiration in her experience of Los Angeles and the tumult of her Watts neighborhood. Her work brings to light the black woman's everyday struggle for dignity and respect.

Coleman was the first in the literature field to be given the COLA fellowship, which allowed her to create new work, which she debuted at the COLA exhibition.



Wanda Coleman | Courtesy of the city of L.A.

The City of Los Angeles continues to support its creative community. The call for submissions for 2018-19 City of Los Angeles (COLA) Individual Artist Fellowships and for the Artist in Residence (AIR) Program is on-going. Deadline for online submission is October 27, 2017. More details at: www.culturela.org.

Top Image: Sheetal Gandhi performing "Human Nature" | Courtesy of Sheetal Gandhi

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CARREN JAO

Carren is the Arts & Culture editor for KCET. She is also an art, architecture and design writer. Her work has been spotted on Los Angeles Times, New York Times, Atlantic's CityLab and others. You can find her [online](#) and on [Twitter](#).