On the edge

Transported across 7,000 miles, Jessica Holt’s (BFA ’19) senior collection hit the runway at the Mall of Qatar on April 27, 2019. Holt, along with Richmond classmates Lama Ali and Yuchen Tian (BFA ’19), made the journey to join their Qatari counterparts for the annual VCUarts Qatar fashion show, EDGE.
At VCUarts, collaboration is our driving force. Whether it’s between disciplines, with partners in the community, or stretching across the globe, shared idea generation is intrinsic to our teaching, learning and discovery.

In this issue of Studio, you’ll see how we’re forming intentional partnerships that prepare students to enter a world of emerging industries, or work together to produce an opera. You’ll read about how we’re forging connections to ignite conversations across lines of difference and change the face of health care and medical education for the better. You’ll understand how we’re fueling a culture of innovation that will forever change the arts, design, performance, medicine, technology and humanity itself.

As we look to the future, this spirit of collaboration will continue to be core to our identity and drive our endeavors. The VCU master plan calls for new spaces that are intentionally designed to optimize innovation where students will learn to harness their abilities and solve the challenges of tomorrow. At VCUarts, we are further investing in collaborative and cross-disciplinary efforts that will mobilize our creative knowledge and convert it into unstoppable momentum.

VCUarts has a unique story of ambition, adaptability, relevance and ingenuity—and we’re thrilled to share it with you.
NEW DEAN IN QATAR

International design expert Amir Berbić is the new dean of VCUarts Qatar. Previously a professor of graphic design at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Berbić has served as associate dean for faculty affairs of the College of Architecture, Design, and the Arts; and on the AIGA Chicago board of directors.

Berbić has collaborated with cultural organizations, arts institutions and publishers. His scholarly and creative work examines the role design can have in shaping identities of places, and has been recognized in numerous publications and exhibitions.

Berbić holds an MFA in visual communication from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a BFA in graphic design from the University of Illinois at Chicago.

"VCUarts Qatar is nimble, dynamic and experimental," he said. "It is a lab for innovative ideas that emerge out of research, teaching and student initiatives within a very unique environment."

ILLUSTRATING HISTORY

As professors in the Department of Communication Arts, Stephen Alcorn and Sterling Hundley (BFA ’98) focus on the powerful and timeless relationship between art and narrative, image and story. The award-winning artists have also illustrated numerous books, where they must bring visual life to another person’s words.

Their most recent works deal with historical narratives comprising serious content, but are designed to speak to children. Hundley illustrated Robert Burleigh’s O Captain, My Captain: Walt Whitman, Abraham Lincoln, and the Civil War, while Alcorn’s latest, Let It Shine: Stories of Black Women Freedom Fighters by Andrea Davis Pinkney, was released in January and selected for inclusion on EmbraceRace’s list of 26 most notable children’s books to support conversations on race, racism and resistance.

"The highly symbolic and stylized portraits created for Let It Shine stem from my belief that through our shared humanity, no matter how we may self-identify, we can learn to transcend the limits of socially constructed realities and see our reflection in others," Alcorn says.

Read more about Alcorn and Hundley’s work in a Q&A with VCU News at news.vcu.edu/article/illustrating_history.

VISUALIZING 22 PERCENT

As Hallie Chametzky (BFA ’19) danced in front of images of data and maps, she told a story of shifting landscapes, of loss and of gain, of percentages and identity.

As a Jewish American growing up in a secular household, Chametzky didn’t always feel a deep-seated connection to Israel. However, when she later began to explore her identity, she also started to question the roots of Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In 22 Percent: A Disintegrating Data Visualization, Chametzky, then a student in the Department of Dance + Choreography, examined the cultural, emotional, spiritual and physical consequences of land loss for those displaced in the 70 years since Israel’s founding. She embodied numbers, starting at 100 and working down to 22, to reflect the dwindling percentage of historic Palestine that remains in Palestinian control.

Chametzky received a VCUarts Undergraduate Research and Innovation Grant to bring her concept to life, with help from Kinetic Imaging student Fiona Penn, who developed a series of animations that incorporated maps, text and data visualization; music by composer Colton Dodd (BM ’18); videography and lighting design from Photography + Film student Zephyr Sheedy (BFA ’19); and advice from faculty mentor Kate Sicchio, a choreographer, media artist and performer.

When 22 Percent premiered this spring at the Anderson, Chametzky says, "It was my first big public performance of my solo work, which was scary. But this felt personal and not like something I would want to coach someone else to do."
Corin Hewitt, associate professor of Sculpture + Extended Media, held his solo exhibition *Shadows Are To Shade* at the Institute for Contemporary Art at VCU.

John Henry Blatter (MFA ‘09) and Jill Ware’s *Embodying Empathy* was featured in *A certain set of dynamics*, Urban Glass Brooklyn.

Photography + Film professor Sasha Waters Freyer’s documentary *Garry Winogrand: All Things are Photographable* aired on the PBS series *American Masters*.

Massa Lemu, assistant professor of Sculpture + Extended Media, as part of the Ozhope Collective, participated in *Row* at the University of Malawi.

Kinetic Imaging Chair Stephen Vitiello was included in *By Any Means: Contemporary Drawings from the Morgan* at the Morgan Library and Museum. The exhibition also featured the work of John Cage, Sol LeWitt, and Robert Rauschenberg.

Filmmaker Mary Beth Reed has a two-person exhibition of several of her shorts at the prestigious Festival Internacional Del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano in Havana, Cuba.

Pam Lawton, associate professor of art education, published *Community-Based Art Education Across the Lifespan*, outlining teaching practices that encourage students to connect their art education in the classroom to applications in the broader community.

FROM THE PODIUM

Sculpture professor Guadalupe Maravilla was interviewed by author Sheila Maldonado for the Distinguished Artist Interviews at the CAA Annual Conference.

Photography + Film professor Paul Thulin’s Faculty Research Grant allowed him to spend time in Puerto Rico working on a family-based photography and multimedia project that was the focus of his Invited Speaker’s Talk at the 2019 Society for Photographic Education National Conference.

At the Amazon MARS conference in March, Communication Arts associate professor Matt Wallin moderated a panel discussion between John Knoll, chief creative officer at Industrial Light and Magic and co-creator of Photoshop, and Dennis Muren, an eight-time Academy Award winner for visual effects who worked on *Star Wars*, *ET*, *Jurassic Park* and more. Bonus: Wallin also chatted with surprise guest Mark Hamill (right), aka Luke Skywalker, and Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos (left).
Connecting the audience with the artist. "

Tony Garcia, director of Jazz Studies, was appointed to the National Endowment for the Arts music application review panel, which awarded more than $3.3 million dollars in grant funds.

Erin Freeman, director of choral activities, was a finalist for Performance Today’s Classical Woman of the Year.

Communication Arts student Lauren Hanapole’s original short film, A Jungle Journey, was awarded Best Animated Short Film in the District Cinema Film Festival in Washington, D.C.

Trumpet and jazz studies professor Rex Richardson’s latest recording, Freedom of Movement: 21st Century Trumpet Concertos, was nominated by 4BarsRest as the 2018 Solo CD of the Year. The Journal of the International Trumpet Guild called the CD “a triumph of virtuosity and musicianship.”

Melanie Buffington, associate professor or art education, was named to Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney’s History and Culture Commission.

Music students Oakley Bonney, Cougar Conley, Rhys Edwards, Sebastian Ford, Jerry Grimes and Noah Mendoza appeared in the quarter-finals of the National Trumpet Competition.

Don’t Forget Your Bike by Photography + Film students Zephyr Sheedy (BFA ’19) and Will Barker (BFA ’19) was accepted to the 17th Annual Filmed By Bike Film Festival in Portland, Oregon.

The National Endowment for the Arts awarded a $25,000 Art Works Grant to Fathomers, a creative research institute, to construct a site-specific work by associate professor of sculpture Michael Jones McKean. The project, “Atmosphere,” is part of Twelve Earths, a long-term work that spans 12 locations.

CURATORIAL VISION

When graduate sculpture students Umico Niwa and Petra Szilagyi envisioned their project in the mature fruitbody exhibition at the Anderson, they pictured walls painted with crushed vegetables. They imagined a miniature house in the shape of a horse ridden by the prehistoric Venus of Willendorf.

The show’s curators—a group of undergraduate art history students—had to make that vision a reality as part of their Curatorial Theory and Practice class. The course combined the rigors of traditional scholarship and studio artmaking as students studied and debated how art is shown in a gallery space. The class culminated with three exhibitions, each planned and executed by the students.

Allison Myers, visiting assistant professor of art history, developed the cross-disciplinary course after a fellowship at the University of Texas at Austin where she mentored a student organization responsible for installing three exhibitions of student work a year. She wanted students to have complete agency over the exhibitions—just as a professional curator would.

“Seeing what curating is like first-hand really set in stone that what I love to do is create and collaborate,” says Lauryn Pulliam, an anthropology major and art history minor who took the class. “I love showcasing the artist and their message, and connecting the audience with the artist.”

And while the course has been a critical asset to the University, Myers also spearheaded an effort to combine the rigors of traditional scholarship and studio artmaking as students. The result was a series of three exhibitions, each planned and executed by the students.

Students were invited to create and collaborate, and the results were impressive. The shows were filled with works that demonstrated a deep understanding of the subject matter and a creative approach to the exhibition.

The shows included student work from a variety of disciplines, from sculpture to photography to music. The students were able to explore different forms of art and how they can be combined to create a cohesive whole.

The shows were also an opportunity for the students to engage with the larger community. They invited the public to attend and provided opportunities for discussion and interaction.

The shows were a success, and the students were able to learn valuable lessons about curating and art history. The course has been a great addition to the University’s curriculum, and it is likely to continue in the future.

KUDOS

Graphic design professor Nontsikelelo Mutiti received a Soros Arts Fellowship to explore African hair braiding practices as subject and as a metaphor for the braiding together of multiple streams of content through fieldwork, archiving, design, and publishing.

Fashion design student Levi Haskins earned a perfect score in the YMA Fashion Scholarship Fund case study competition, winning a $7,500 scholarship. Four other Fashion Design + Merchandising students—Kate O’Neal, Jane Terrell, Celine Abello (BFA ’18) and Kathy Schraf (BFA ’18)—also won FSF scholarships.

DesignIntelligence ranked the Department of Interior Design among the top 10 most admired graduate programs and the top 20 most admired undergraduate programs.

Physician-Scientist in Residence Dr. John Nester was named to the Association of American Medical Colleges’ new committee on art and medicine.

Communication Arts major Mary Metzger (BFA ’18) was selected as a Top Talent in illustration in the 2019 Adobe Design Achievement Awards for her work But You Don’t Look Sick!, an illustrated zine focusing on the experiences of students who live with chronic illnesses.

Gavagai, a feature film directed by Cinema Professor Rob Tregenza, was named among the best films of 2018 by Metacritic and The New Yorker. Written by Tregenza and former professor Kirk Kjeldsen, Gavagai was shot in Norway by a crew that included professors Arthur Eng and Danny Caporaletti.

Through a Windgate Charitable Foundation Grant, the Department of Craft/Material Studies spearheaded a new post-baccalaureate program for graduating BFA seniors. Each year, the Craft Apprenticeship Program fosters mentorship relationships between two VCU undergraduates and established artists from around the world. The first two CAP recipients went to the Czech Republic and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

E. Gaynells Sherrod, associate professor of Dance + Choreography, was named the interim executive director of the Philadelphia Dance Company (PHILADANCO) as part of a grant from two large foundations.

Through a Windgate Charitable Foundation Grant, the Department of Craft/Material Studies spearheaded a new post-baccalaureate program for graduating BFA seniors. Each year, the Craft Apprenticeship Program fosters mentorship relationships between two VCU undergraduates and established artists from around the world. The first two CAP recipients went to the Czech Republic and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

E. Gaynells Sherrod, associate professor of Dance + Choreography, was named the interim executive director of the Philadelphia Dance Company (PHILADANCO) as part of a grant from two large foundations.

E. Gaynells Sherrod, associate professor of Dance + Choreography, was named the interim executive director of the Philadelphia Dance Company (PHILADANCO) as part of a grant from two large foundations.
At first blush, it seems like an unlikely partnership. There’s the physics professor, with decades of experience working in nanotechnology. Then there are the students—all studying the arts, design and fashion. But this collective is redesigning the abaya—the loose, robe-like garment traditionally worn by Muslim women—to absorb vitamin D-rich light while blocking the sun’s more harmful rays.

Khaled Saoud teaches at VCUarts Qatar where his courses satisfy general science requirements. He said he loves teaching physics to nonphysics students, such as designers and artists, and they often drive his research.

“One thing that we are missing in science is creativity,” Saoud says. “And these students have great creativity.”

Abayas are typically black, Saoud says, and often cover the entire body. The wearer is not exposed to enough sunlight, which contains vitamin D. The vitamin is critical for building and maintaining strong and healthy bones. Saoud created a special coating for fabric that blocks harmful UV rays, while absorbing valuable light and transferring it to the skin. His next step is to work with some of the fashion design students in his class to design and make an abaya from the material.

“We are in the early stages of this research, but the materials... have been synthesized and I’m looking for a way to spray it on this textile,” he says. “Then we want to test it in a real abaya.”
Artists, makers, performers and scholars often visit campus to share their knowledge and experiences with VCUarts students and faculty. In recent months, we welcomed New Museum curator Margot Norton, jazz drummer Matt Wilson, fashion designer Christian Siriano, Brazilian pianist Sonia Rubinsky, artist and dancer Matty Davis, photographer Jess Dugan, and many, many more.

“An opportunity was offered, a plan unfolded. I accepted and I had no idea at the time but a salvation was put into play.”

Jason Butler Harner (BFA ’92)
actor, writer and producer

“… I would have nurtured myself as a person more, not as an actor. I wish I’d paid more attention to me, because that comes through first.”

Chad Coleman
actor, The Walking Dead and The Orville

“I’ve drawn a lot of skulls in my life.”

Mike Mignola
comic artist, creator of Hellboy
“Ideas are thrilling and consistently give me a high. But it is in the process of making art where I find refuge. In the face of life’s fragility and incoherence, it is in the hands-on, dirty work that I find peace and feel safe. The focus required gives order to my thoughts and emotions, regardless of how fast they race. And, I can discover the pace of my own heartbeat.”

Elizabeth Turk
—Artist, sculptor and MacArthur “Genius” Fellow Elizabeth Turk in her commencement address to the Class of 2019

Access to opportunity

For more than 90 years, VCUarts has been providing students with a peerless education, teaching them to harness their abilities and transform the landscape of our communities. We invest in experiences that equip our students to leverage their abilities, talents and drive to bring ideas into existence, and support them as they pursue internships that prepare them to be leaders in their creative practices.

However, for many students, simply having the financial resources to graduate is an obstacle. While VCUarts has one of the highest four-year graduation rates within the university, finances remain the number one barrier to obtaining a degree.

With the support of visionary donors, VCUarts can remove barriers and ensure that our students remain focused on their explorations, rather than on the fear of financial uncertainty.

For more information on how to invest, please contact Anna von Gehr, executive director of development and strategic initiatives, at (804) 828-3189 or aevongehr@vcu.edu, or make a gift today at arts.vcu.edu/give-to-vcuarts.
A NIGHT AT THE OPERA
A NIGHT AT THE OPERA

THE OPERA
When the curtain rises over the Sonia Vlahcevic Concert Hall at the start of *The Pirates of Penzance*, it’s easy to become absorbed in the story of Frederic as he celebrates his 21st birthday and the end of his apprenticeship to a band of pirates. You’re probably not thinking about how, just moments ago, the singers were backstage warming up their vocal cords while a violinist practiced that tricky phrase one last time.

As you watch Major-General Stanley’s wards dance across the stage, you don’t imagine that hours earlier Melanie Kohn Day, director and producer of Virginia Commonwealth University Opera, was surrounded by curling irons and wigs as the pirates flipped through stuffed costume racks, and the crew checked lights and ensured all the show’s props were in place.

You’re definitely not thinking about how these students didn’t just have to learn the music, staging and choreography to arrive at this performance, but also skills that transcend it, such as audition techniques, a variety of British dialects, improvisation, and the business of being a professional opera singer. You might not realize that you are looking at the company with the longest-running tradition of full-scale opera productions in Virginia.

You’d be forgiven for these oversights because, after all, that’s the point. You’re here to enjoy a show. But the months-long preparation by this team of opera professionals and undergraduates balancing work and school and life? It’s worth taking note.

Here’s a look at everything it takes to get to curtain call.

---

Melanie Kohn Day and Ken Wood, the opera’s co-directors and both professors in the Department of Music, select *The Pirates of Penzance* as the spring opera production. A number of factors play into the decision, from the experience and vocal ranges of students to the orchestra’s schedule. This year, Daniel Myssyk, VCU Opera’s orchestra conductor, is concerned about the ensemble’s limited availability for rehearsals. The night before students depart for winter break, Day announces the cast and distributes music. They spend their break familiarizing and practicing.

---

The week classes begin, so do vocal rehearsals. Students also explore their characters and their motivations.

Micah Baldwin, a junior, plays the role of Frederic. He says he doesn’t know “if you’d call Frederic a hero or a villain. He’s very devoted to his sense of duty.”

Senior Emily Nesbitt plays one of Major-General Stanley’s wards, Edith. “She’s a bit of a stick in the mud,” Nesbitt says. “She keeps all of her sisters in line. But she has a couple of moments when she lets her hair down.”

VCU Opera is an undergraduate opera program, meaning students have the chance to tackle roles typically given to graduate students.

“When our students audition for graduate school, they’re up against people who have similar singing talent, acting skills and foreign language skills,” Day says. “But our students have worked out their physical kinks and nerves so they have more polish, and they get huge scholarships.”
FEB 6

Four miles north of VCU, Leslie Winn and Ivy Austin stand in their garage-turned-costume-studio looking over binders of sketches, movie stills and historical images before designing the show’s costumes.

“We’re presenting a picture for the audience,” Winn says. “Because this is all about Gilbert and Sullivan’s commentary on the politics of the day, it’s very confusing if we don’t put people into that time period.”

They aren’t starting completely from scratch. Day has been building VCU’s costume collection for decades, beginning with a fundraising campaign to SurcKase ƮYe corsets Sanniers and petticoats. In 2011, William Welty donated a collection worth $200,000 IroP tKe 2SeraIestiYal di 5oPa ZKere Day was a former artistic director.

FEB 27

Rehearsals move into blocking, where Wood acts as stage director and develops the blueprint for how each cast member will move during singing and dialogue.

“I have to sit down with the score and think logically about where a person would be coming from as they enter the space, and about the interaction between the characters,” he says.

Kate Juliana (BM ’18), who returned to sing in the chorus, says it’s a challenge to juggle singing and dialogue with dancing and movement. “[I have to] dance around the stage with a parasol without hitting anyone, without running out of breath and smiling the entire time,” she says.

APR 8

Austin and Winn attend rehearsals, armed with racks of dresses and uniforms for fittings. They shift buttons, sew in hooks for quick removal and add details. “We keep working until they do their first performance,” Austin says, “and we have to stop.”

APR 9

For the first time, the orchestra and cast rehearse together. Myssyk drills sections of “I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General,” known for its fast pace and tongue-twisting lyrics. “Don’t rush me,” he warns.

“Young musicians are often worried about their own parts and don’t listen as well to each other and to the singers,” Myssyk says. “I teach them how to become more sensitive to their environment, and more flexible with tempo.”

APR 18

The cast and crew spend the weekend assembling the set. They hammer and paint, climb ladders and check lights, all with the support of technical director Roland Karnatz, lighting designer Curt Blankenship and scenic designer Mercedes Shaum.

Just like the costumes, they have an extensive prop and set inventory to pull from. “Visitors who know what they’re looking at walk into our storage and their jaws drop to the ground,” says Karnatz, who is Day’s husband and also a music professor at Longwood University.

APR 25

Tech week is all about bringing the show to life. First, the orchestra sits in the pit and the cast rehearses in costume. Then come the wigs and hairstyles. At the last dress rehearsal, complete with stage makeup, the focus is on final adjustments: fixing costumes, setting lighting cues, fine-tuning choreography and maintaining eye contact with the conductor at all times.

APR 28

The final performance opens at 4 p.m. Just three hours later, set pieces will be broken down and returned to the James W. Black Music Center. Costumes and wigs will fill the clotheslines strung across Day’s and Karnatz’s backyard as they wash and clean hundreds of pieces.

But before she starts the process all over again—researching operas, pulling costumes and props, and considering the voices of her students—Day pauses to reflect.

“It’s so impressive that these undergraduate multitaskers can pull off these large-scale productions,” she says. “They have to instantly memorize long dance sequences, then add singing to the dancing, all in wigs and long costumes. I am absolutely awestruck when I watch all that they have to do.”

See more from behind the curtain at vcu.exposure.co/a-night-at-the-opera.
Imagine the last time you went to the doctor. Maybe the environment—the smell of chemicals, the sounds of machines beeping—made you feel uncomfortable. Perhaps you had trouble describing your symptoms, as if no one could understand the sensations you knew to be true. Or, your physician interrupted you before you even had the chance.

Maybe you felt like the doctors and nurses saw you as an illness to be diagnosed, a problem to solve, rather than a person with passions, a cultural history, family and friends, life experiences—a human being with a story all your own.

This disconnect between patient and medical professionals is becoming a frequent point of conversation. In one recent study, published in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, researchers found that patients have 11 seconds to explain the reasons for their visit before physicians interrupt them.

But what if the arts could change the whole experience?

At VCUarts, faculty and students are leveraging the school’s position within a major research university—outfitted with a range of medical programs and a top-ranked hospital—to help people live happier and healthier lives. Within VCUarts, 20 percent of faculty members actively engage in research collaborations, creative works, courses and programs related to health care. Research projects take creative approaches to managing pain, increasing empathy among health care professionals, and enhancing understanding of patient symptoms. Some projects benefit from the guidance of VCUarts’ inaugural physician-scientist in residence, Dr. John E. Nestler, as he deepens collaboration between the two campuses.

“Medicine and the arts deal with the same thing—the human condition,” Nestler says. “They seek to heal the body and heal the soul. The bringing together of art and medicine allows both artists and medical professionals to be better.”

Improv isn’t about comedy; it’s about the communication of a shared world. We are asking the medical learners to let the patient lead the communication of that shared world (the world as the patient experiences it). This is the essence of empathetic communication. The physician attempts to join the patient in their world without judgement. To do that, they need to listen very actively and observe nuances in body language and tone of voice.

—Aaron Anderson, associate chair of the VCUarts Department of Theatre and principle investigator on a pilot study evaluating whether improv theater techniques could improve physician communication skills.
When Semi Ryu performed *Parting on Z*—her work about a farewell between symbolic lovers: user and avatar—in London in 2013, something unexpected happened: She found herself sobbing in the middle of it.

That’s when, she says, she found her Han—a Korean concept where one feels extreme grief coupled with great hope.

Ryu, an associate professor of Kinetic Imaging, wondered if this same experience could be replicated in others. She worked with Tracey Gendron from VCU’s Department of Gerontology to develop VoicingElder, which used avatars and lip sync technology to help residents in an assisted living facility listen to their own stories. Ryu saw the practice as a way to improve quality of life and connect through storytelling.

Lately, Ryu has been testing a new hypothesis: Can personal storytelling and virtual reality help terminally ill patients manage their pain and construct meaning for their lives? Working with a team of Kinetic Imaging students and health care workers from VCU’s palliative care unit, Ryu developed avatars representing a variety of ages and ethnicities, in a series of environments, allowing patients to connect with places and moments in their memories and imaginations. One test case involved a woman with cancer that resulted in pain in her left arm. By watching her movements through the avatar, however, the patient’s perception of pain changed and her mobility increased.

This summer, Ryu and her teammates presented VoicingHan at the International Symposium on Electronic Art, showing how the practice can be used to approach mortality and mitigate existential suffering for palliative care patients.

Ryu says her research has deepened her own understanding of palliative care.

“In the past, it was to enjoy every moment of life. They loved spirituality because they are starting to think beyond the physicality of life. That is very close to what artists are talking about.”

Improving the patient experience isn’t just about staying abreast of the latest diagnostic and treatment techniques. For VCUarts physician-scientist in residence Dr. John E. Nestler, assistant professor of medicine Megan Lemay, and Chair of art education Sara Wilson McKay, it means completely rethinking physician training programs.

In their new medical elective course—Medicine, Art and the Humanities—instruction is infused with concepts from arts education in hopes of developing physicians who are more empathetic, attuned to their patients’ symptoms, and equipped to manage their own stress.

In one assignment, medical students interviewed a patient and drafted a living history narrative. At the same time, Communication Arts students in Stephen Alcorn’s Metamorfaces class drew the interaction. Nestler says the assignment fostered young artists’ understanding of the human condition, while medical students were reminded to see their patient as a person, rather than an illness to be diagnosed.

“Doctors need to notice if a patient’s pallor is ashen, if their breathing is labored, if they have swelling in their ankles, if they have lesions on their body,” Nestler says. “We have a lot of tests available to us now, but observational skills are still a crucial diagnostic tool.”
Can artists use virtual reality to train doctors to be more empathetic?

That’s one of the questions being answered by Embodied Empathy, a new interdisciplinary project lab at VCU arts—led by VCU arts assistant professors Jill Ware and John Henry Blatter (MFA ’09) — that uses virtual reality to simulate another person’s experiences. They’ve studied micromovements in golf swings, helped violin students improve technique, and analyzed ballet form among dance students.

“Early on,” Ware says, “it became really apparent there were a lot of ways to connect this project to other disciplines.”

Several new projects are forging connections between the arts and health. In one, the Embodied Empathy team worked with Dr. Scott A. Vota, and Dr. Kathleen Pearson, from the Department of Neurology at VCU Health to help family, caregivers and advocates understand what it’s like to suffer from early, middle and late stages of ALS. In a partnership with Dr. John E. Nestler, VCU health physician-scientist in residence, VR is used to promote empathy and reduce bias towards gerontology patients among first-year medical students. Clinical trials have shown improvements, and the researchers see potential for VR training to become part of the medical school curriculum.

Connecting the arts and medicine through an emerging technology has been an exciting undertaking for the team. “It’s about striking the balance of the creative versus the cognitive and the analytical versus the creative,” says Ware.

Mary Metzger, communication arts major: We all took the product innovation capstone through the da Vinci Center. We were grouped into interdisciplinary teams and outside companies gave us assignments.

Tommy Ryan, graphic design major: The central pharmacy at VCU’s hospital uses Rubbermaid carts to distribute medication. They’re not secure and they’re hard to maneuver.

Calvin Price, business major: We found one cart that had extra shelving, and one cart had a locking mechanism. We thought, “How can we bring all of these features into one model?”

Ryan: Right now the carts are plywood boxes. It’s exciting to see it go from a sketch to the real thing. And then it will become the real-real thing when it’s injection-molded plastic and steel.

Metzger: We tested our last prototype for two or three weeks. This summer, we’re giving VCU Pharmacy higher fidelity prototypes for a six-month test.

Ryan: We’ve been able to get our prototypes in the hands of physicians, which is crazy valuable. But it would be great long-term if we could get our design into as many hands as possible.

Observation is a nurse’s most important skill—and one they typically develop in the hospital rooms and doctor’s offices. For some VCU nursing students, though, art holds the key to attention and awareness.

Since its founding in 2012, the Art of Nursing program has paired art education students and faculty with more than 1,000 nursing peers. In art museums and galleries, they conduct slower and deeper engagements with works of art. Conversations speculate on the content and the message an artist is communicating—what art education chair and Art of Nursing founder Sara Wilson McKay calls “dialogic looking.” In turn, this training strengthens nurses’ abilities to recognize the subtle needs of their patients, and the limits and biases that shape their perceptions.

Patrick Carter (BFA ’15), an art education graduate student and Art of Nursing instructor, describes one conversation about Nam June Paik’s Buddha Watching TV. Initially, the nurses hated the work. But when pressed to consider the artist’s intentions, the conversation turned to self-reflection and how to cope with trauma and stress while caring for others.

These discussions not only reveal how nurses can better serve their patients, but also how future art educators can serve their students.

“It’s made me better at asking questions,” Carter says. “Teaching isn’t so much telling information, but guiding students to that understanding through questions.”
“What’s more important: what you have or what you need?”

The students glance down at the cash on the table as Garreth Blackwell’s question swirls around their heads. Two weeks prior, instructor Blackwell had split the class of about 20 students into four groups and lent each team a $5 bill. The goal was to take their modest investments and make as much money as possible. Most students returned with more than they ever expected—one team earned $248, another $823.87. A third returned with $20 while the last team broke even.

$t$ Ʈrst tKe assiJnPent seePed iPSossiEle :Kat Eusiness could thrive on just $5? But the challenge sparked their imaginations, spurring them to recognize the assets money can’t buy: ingenuity and perseverance. They became service providers, cleaning homes and delivering groceries. They offered massages and tutoring. They returned products to IKEA, read Tarot, watched pets, developed a zine-making nonprofit, and even courted an additional investor.

The lesson in Blackwell’s question seemed obvious now. As arts majors, they already possess a creative curiosity that empowers them to stray from norms and standards, that primes them to invent new ways of thinking about and seeing the world. They didn’t need $5 to realize that, but the limitation pushed them to reconsider what they were capable of.

What they already have, they realized, is far more important than what they thought they needed.

The assignment was given in Blackwell’s course, The Creative Economy, which demystifies the business world for arts students. Blackwell, an entrepreneur, graphic designer and instructor in the VCUarts Center for the Creative Economy, built the class around the idea that artmaking and business are inherently similar collaborative processes that need passion, experimentation and unorthodox methodology to succeed.
How the Center for the Creative Economy is guiding the next generation of creative entrepreneurs
VCUarts students see their careers, revealing to them with this climate in mind, the CCE is changing the way arts and entertainment, are virtually immune to that fate. With every discipline drive the economy.

"It's a nice mix of practical business advice and more philosophical ideas about how we treat our practice and tackling the anxieties that many artists feel," says Summer Doss, a senior majoring in Communication Arts.

Matt Woolman (BA ’90, MFA ’96), interim associate dean for research, innovation and graduate studies, co-founded the center after introducing the idea at VCUarts’ campus in Qatar in 2009. Then the director of design entrepreneurship, he quickly realized that Qatar’s fledgling design industry meant the job market was highly competitive. VCUarts Qatar graduates needed the skills and confidence to open businesses of their own or stand out against other skilled professionals. He created a successful entrepreneurial training program that was attuned to artists’ needs and partnered with local businesses. The model served as the framework for the CCE in Richmond when it launched in 2011.

The Richmond center’s curriculum needed to respond to different challenges. With a deep recession across the United States, art students and their parents were concerned that arts-related careers would be considered inessental amid widespread layoffs and downsizing. Woolman wanted to confidently assure them that creative disciplines held enormous value, and that the skills art students were learning in the studio or on stage could apply to a broad range of potential careers.

“We provide them with experiences that are transferable to any workplace,” says Woolman.

**Guiding the next generation**

The creative economy is a 21st-century concept, a term coined to describe the appreciative value that art and innovation lend to an idea or product. In theory, the creative economy encompasses any cultural good or service—from television to publishing to textiles—but not every output of the creative economy is strictly a commodity. In practice, TV programs pull advertising campaigns and streaming apps into their orbits, books necessitate translation and digitization, and clothing requires materials sourced and items distributed.

The United Nations reported in 2013 that the growing creative economy generated more than $2 trillion in global revenue. And while the specter of automation could even eat up jobs in the legal and accounting sectors, a 2016 study in business magazine McKinsey Quarterly found that team management and project planning, especially within arts and entertainment, are virtually immune to that fate.

With this climate in mind, the CCE is changing the way VCUarts students see their careers, revealing to them a wide range of industries and professions that can benefit from their skills as illustrators, musicians, filmmakers and more. The curriculum encourages students to consider the broader applications of art, design, performance and scholarship by preparing them to build prototypes, present ideas to corporations, empathize with customers and work with engineers. The center’s three programs of study—Creative Entrepreneurship, the internship program Design Operations, and the certificate in Advanced Media Production Technology—train students to be leaders and teammates in industries that value innovation above all else.

The Richmond center’s curriculum needed to respond to different challenges. With a deep recession across the United States, art students and their parents were concerned that arts-related careers would be considered inessental amid widespread layoffs and downsizing. Woolman wanted to confidently assure them that creative disciplines held enormous value, and that the skills art students were learning in the studio or on stage could apply to a broad range of potential careers.

“We provide them with experiences that are transferable to any workplace,” says Woolman.

**Brainstorming in the Depot**

Located in the VCUarts Depot on Broad Street, the CCE’s space echoes the spontaneity of a Silicon Valley startup with high ceilings and exposed brick, long conference tables and rolling whiteboards. It’s easy to imagine the next Apple or Netflix emerging from amongst the bean bag chairs, Post-it note-covered walls, 3D printer and ping pong table. It’s cozy and modular, a box suited for thinking outside of one.

When Jeff Foster tells his Idea Accelerator class to devise “problem statements” for their business concepts, students take off to huddle in different rooms designed for collaboration. Foster, the interim associate director of the CCE, wants these statements to be a clear articulation of the challenges each team’s project faces and how their unique ideas respond to them. It’s still early in the semester, which means they have several weeks to test and tweak their concepts.

Problem statements are the first step on what Foster calls “innovation canvases”—comprehensive worksheets that guide the development of their projects. The canvases ask incisive questions like, “What are you trying to achieve?” and “How many different ways can you meet your population’s needs?” that put each group’s ideas through rigorous intellectual tests.
One group’s concept for an online fine arts market materializes on a whiteboard as a dense site map. The group is trying to fill a common need among artists: a dedicated website where they can connect with potential buyers. Instagram’s algorithms aren’t tailored for their purpose, and Etsy is more focused on crafts.

When the canvas prompts them to consider their audiences’ needs, they run through the solutions they’ve devised. Robust navigation with granular search filters will help buyers find what they want, while personalized artists’ pages, with a portfolio and direct sales from the site, ensure the platform can accommodate thousands of individual creators.

In the coming weeks, they’ll continue to answer questions from the innovation canvas, which will press them to envision their technology needs, required user competencies, feasibility, cost and limitations in realizing their vision. At the end of the semester, they’ll sell their idea to the class through a detailed product pitch.

Foster compares this exercise to being a prototype developer. To sell an idea, even internally, innovators need to clearly explain the problem it solves and how. In many ways, the process parallels an artist’s statement by explaining the methodology behind creative decisions.

“All those things that they’re learning in an arts and design context easily translate to entrepreneurship,” says Woolman. “They have to think on their feet, they have to defend oftentimes crazy ideas, they have to listen to criticism and they have to understand the value of failure.”

**Switching paths, forging new directions**

In Your Ear Studios is a slice of Hollywood nestled in Shockoe Bottom—and the home of the CCE’s Advanced Media Production Technology program. Its sound production studio is a powerhouse of mixers, consoles and inputs, flanked by recording spaces for musicians and actors. It’s the birthplace of Grammy-winning albums, commercial spots for major brands like Coca-Cola, and dialogue production for films such as The Help and Gladiator. In between, the studio is a state-of-the-art classroom with expert instructors. As a living, breathing workplace, In Your Ear is the best hands-on experience CCE students can get, allowing them to work with industry-standard equipment and sought-after professionals.

In the AMPT program, intensive hands-on coursework is the fulcrum by which graduates leverage a major career change. Co-managed by In Your Ear Studios, the one-year post-baccalaureate certificate program takes graduates from any discipline who are seeking employment in the vast and growing field of digital media.

Students can choose to focus on various specializations within media, from editorial storytelling to music production, but they’re all required to collaborate on major projects—a crucial skill in the world of media production.

“One of the greatest challenges and blessings of this program is that you learn how to work with other people,” says AMPT student Sarah Kerndt, who earned her BA in communication studies from Christopher Newport University. After graduating, she wanted to be a filmmaker, but wasn’t sure how to break into the industry without much formal training. The AMPT program helped her find a career path, teaching her specialized and transferable skills in editing and production. “It’s given me a leg up. I’ve learned so much about audio and post-production and pre-production. It’s really been a crash course in the industry.”

Kahlil Shepard, who graduated from VCU’s broadcast journalism program, enrolled in AMPT to better understand the production side of documentary filmmaking. “It’s really unique to VCU and to most universities, because you don’t always get a chance to work in an environment with technology and professors from various parts of the industry. I think just being in this environment gives you an advantage.”

While the AMPT program offers a clear line from class assignments to future jobs, the CCE is full of similar examples. A collaborative project developing new products for companies like Capital One can lead to an internship that transforms into a full-time job. Challenges faced by students in Blackwell’s Creative Economy class have sparked innovative modes of thinking that impressed interviewers at IBM. And group projects with the potential to be more than a PowerPoint presentation have led to major investments and promising new businesses.

The CCE has plenty of room to grow, and recent changes project a bold future for it. In the past year, the center’s courses have been made more visible to students when enrolling in classes, and they’ve launched two Art Foundation courses that introduce first-year fine arts and design students to the center’s offerings.

“We set out not to be another academic department, but to be a center,” says Woolman. “We wanted to operate like a startup—lean and mean and nimble enough to create something that responds to what’s happening out in the industry or the marketplace that we can pilot or test drive here. Maybe it evolves into a course, maybe it evolves into an internship, maybe it evolves into something else. But it’s a way to operate outside of a traditional discipline, to give students a taste of how they can apply their skills to industry.”
IN THE STUDIO:

CHRIS VISIONS, COMIC ARTIST

Chris Visions (BFA ‘07) is a Richmond-based artist whose work inspired this issue of Studio. He works in graphic design, game design, storyboarding, illustration and comics. In June, he released the first issue of Trust Fall, written by collaborator Christopher Sebela and published by AfterShock Comics.

Here, Visions talks about the comics industry, how he got his start, and what it’s like to create a character.

Why comics?
I’ve always had a fascination with movies and cinema and storytelling. It seemed like the most successful way to make my own movie, basically, on paper. With a story, I can specify the themes that I’m going to hit on and tell them in an artful way that gets people thinking.

How would you describe your aesthetic?
A lot of people have described it as kinetic and energetic. I want it to feel vibrant and lifelike. When someone sees my art, I want them to feel something or to wrestle with something.

I don’t want eye candy. Even with how expressive my work is, I’m still telling stories. It helps you settle into those more subtle moments, instead of everything being in your face.

How did you get your start?
I went up to New York Comic-Con a couple of times and put a portfolio in and didn’t hear anything. One time I sold my car to pay for the bus ticket to go. I talked to Neal Adams [known for his imagery of Batman and Green Arrow] and got him to critique my work; he totally trashed it the first couple of times. I talked to an editor who gave me an art test for American Vampire. He said it was very ambitious, and that was it. It was like that, over and over again.

Then, one time I went to the convention and didn’t bring a portfolio. I talked with a guy who was a fan. He said to send him some stuff and, long story short, my first real professional gig was doing a cover for Adventure Time. It propelled me and got me into my first book, Dead Letters.

What’s it like to work with a collaborator?
When [writer Christopher Sebela] and I first started working on Dead Letters, we had a Tumblr where we would share our interests and things to pull from them. You start developing a language with that person and get in their head. For Trust Fall, Chris knows me pretty well and leaves the door open for me to put myself in there. It’s a healthy balance and probably one of the best experiences I’ve had.

How do you create a character?
Usually, I go through a lot of clearing cobwebs where I do basic sketches that I know I won’t use, but it’s getting it out of my system. Then I start whittling away things that are overdone and tropes and putting things in that speak to me.

One of the most important things I was taught was to create from my own experiences. I try to put as much of myself in there, where it’s appropriate. I also try to empathize with, and not judge, the character. Wherever he goes, that’s his expression of who he is.

What’s challenging about working in comics?
A lot of people romanticize art, and they’re like, create from passion and don’t worry about money, but that’s not the world we live in. People need more practical advice on how to do things, especially when they come from different economic backgrounds. And the industry is more accessible for some people than others.

Everybody’s got their own path they have to take, but [we should] at least be honest about it. Say, “Yeah, comics doesn’t pay great and a lot of it is about passion, but it’s also setting up a plan of what you want to do and looking ahead, rather than what’s right in front of your feet.”
Sketchbooks play a crucial part in Chris Visions’ process—he rarely leaves home without one, and can often be found sketching the scenes of his life.

“I always start super small, going back to our exercises at VCUarts where we had one image and we had to do 40 thumbnails,” he says. “That’s a good process because you weed out the tropes and get down to something unique. It’s like a playground or a workshop, where you tool things and make them better and eventually they can live outside that and be their own piece.”

This emphasis on the fundamental skill of drawing is one he learned in the Department of Communications Arts. Alumni might pursue a spectrum of careers, including many—like concept artists, interactive media designers and 3D animators—in the digital sphere, but all begin by refining their skills in figure drawing, illustration and visual studies.

In the sketchbooks shown here, current Communication Arts students provide a glimpse into their own creative processes.
Featured artists: Gray Gibson, Diassaku Banton-Perry, Caroline Harpring, Zhaoyi Wang, Anna Bowder and Sidney Morgan
Saxophonist Jason Arce (BM ’07) has worked with recording artists such as Weezer, Adele, Joe Jonas, and Blood Orange. His work with CeCe Winans on her album Let Them Fall In Love earned him an award for Best Gospel Album at the 60th Grammy Awards in 2018. He performed at Coachella this year and is diligently working on a solo album.

Reagan Lodge (BFA ’17), a comic artist and writer, is in the process of completing inks on his independently published 180-page graphic novel, WYIT, which he began as a senior in the Department of Communication Arts. He is currently live-streaming his creative process as a Twitch.tv affiliate.

Ruthie Edwards (BFA ’10) is an experience designer and animator who’s dedicated herself to developing more accessible digital interfaces and experiences for users with disabilities. In her spare time, she’s also an enthusiastic video game designer and has led panels on accessibility at VCU and MAGfest. In May, she graduated from the VCU Brandcenter with a master’s degree in Experience Design.

At architecture and engineering firm SmithGroup, Stephanie Mitrović (BFA ’05) is principal-in-charge at the company’s science and technology studio in Phoenix, Arizona. She is the first woman and the youngest in her firm to hold this position. Mitrović works to diversify and expand the Phoenix studio, notably securing a project to design the new Axon Headquarters in Scottsdale. AZRE Business Magazine recently named Mitrović as one of 2018’s “Most Influential Women in Business.”

Kunitaro Ohi (BFA ’07) was named one of 30 fellows at Project Involve, the mentorship and diversity program of the nonprofit Film Independent. Born in Tokyo, Japan, Ohi is a cinematographer based in Washington, D.C. Notable works include the Showtime documentary series Years of Living Dangerously and Paul Harrill’s debut feature Something, Anything, which was a New York Times Critics’ Pick. Recently, several of his music videos have been featured in publications such as Rolling Stone, Billboard and BBOOOOOOM TV. When he’s not working you can see him wandering the streets taking photos of abandoned shopping carts.

“Some people dream of meeting their favorite artists—I teach mine.”

—Angelique Scott (BFA ’18), who teaches painting, drawing, sculpture and graphic design to Richmond high school students. Scott also teaches workshops in Northern Virginia and maintains a part-time studio practice.
We also received a wonderful obituary for Dr. Wei Dong (MFA ‘88), who passed away in December. The obituary, which appears on page 28 of this issue, pays tribute to Wei’s life and career as an architect and educator. It highlights his groundbreaking work in interior design, his influence on the field, and his mentorship of generations of students. We encourage you to read this touching tribute to Wei’s legacy.

In addition to this, we have several profiles of alumni who are making waves in their respective fields. Adjunct professor Julia E. Pfaff (MFA ‘93) divides her time between educating fashion and craft students at VCUarts, and expanding the boundaries of contemporary quilting through her studio practice. Her quilted constructions have been exhibited at venues around the world, including the American Craft Museum in New York, the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C., and the Carnegie Center for Art and History in Indiana. She also worked as an archaeological technical artist in Greece, Egypt and Jordan for more than 25 years, and an archaeological technical artist in Greece, Egypt and Jordan for more than 25 years, and an archaeological technical artist in Greece, Egypt and Jordan for more than 25 years.

Chris Kindred (BFA ‘15) is an illustrator and writer in Brooklyn, New York, whose clients include The New Yorker, New York Times and NPR. He is currently a graduate student in NYU’s Game Center. While a VCUarts student, Kindred was editor of The Commonwealth Times comics section, as well as the founding editor of the annual comics anthology Emanata. His work can be found at chriskindred.com.

Amber Esseiva (BA ‘12) is the assistant curator at the Institute for Contemporary Art at VCU. This year, she curated the fall exhibition Great Force, which features newly commissioned and recent work by 21 established and emerging artists, including Pope.L, Sable Elyse Smith, Charlotte Lagarde and Tomashi Jackson. Through a variety of mediums, performances, public events and site-specific creations, the show addresses the reality of race in America and how art can help oppressed communities achieve visibility.

Gordy Haab (BM ‘00) is the composer of Star Wars Battlefront II (2018), for which he won Video Game Score of the Year from the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers. Haab has also composed critically acclaimed scores for games such as Halo Wars 2 (2017) and Crusaders of Light (2017).

Robin Verrier (BA ‘13) is a prop stylist and photographer who works through her company Verry Robin & Co. to develop imagery for fashion brands for social media, websites, catalogs and magazines. Verrier’s work has appeared in publications such as Vogue, Southern Living, Architectural Digest and Brides.

If you would’ve told me 10 years ago that I could build a career by combining my love for the guitar with my arguably less productive love for movies and video games, I wouldn’t have believed you.”

—Nathan Mills (BM ‘11), a classical guitar performance major who now runs a successful YouTube channel, Beyond The Guitar, featuring his unique blend of classical guitar and movie, television and video game soundtracks.

VCU really gave me a chance for a second life,” says Dong. A year later, he was hired by Iowa State University. He spent four years conducting research that anticipated a digital future where freely accessible knowledge would change the classroom dynamic. By the 1990s, the industry had caught up. CAD software and online communications were standard practice and digital media had transformed how designers visualized buildings with animation, 3D modeling and simulations. Dong published multiple books on modern design practices that gained international recognition.

Today, he is the Vilas Distinguished Achievement Professor of design studies at University of Wisconsin-Madison. He has cultivated a new design philosophy in reaction to the ubiquity of computers—a process that blends manual and digital rendering. In a new workshop, he introduces Chinese brush painting and calligraphy as two instruments for planning a house. It’s an idea that harkens back to his trust in feng shui, the power of numbers and balance, and yin and yang. To him, this blending of two traditions, old and new, is a way for students and professors to move forward together in their creative processes. Traditional media, he says, provides a source for deep concentration and calm in a fast-paced world.

“I always see the opposite of elements,” Dong says. “The computer is more systematic, with a broader production impact. But you have more direct control with physical design.”
As a graduate student in the Department of Painting + Printmaking, Ander Mikalson (MFA ’12) set out to capture the sound of the universe’s first explosive moments. The project took eight years and involved reconstructing a vintage recording device, interpreting NASA satellite data, and collaborating with experts in astronomy and composition. Her ambitious work culminated in a performance of Score for the Big Bang in a sonorous cathedral.

It also led Mikalson to an artist research fellowship at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C., where she’s studying how the human voice and scientific instruments can work in concert. This time, her tools will include the acoustic instruments collection at the National Museum of American History, and Alexander Graham Bell’s working lab books at the Dibner Library. Combined with rebuilt 19th century recording and playback machines, she plans to develop a new body of work that draws from the history of the synthesis and transmission of the voice.

“It’s been a very personal project for me,” Mikalson says. “My intention is not to evoke nostalgia for the past, but rather to insist upon the vital relevance of our technological history to the present, and to our future.”

This won’t be her first time refabricating past inventions. Before she composed Score for the Big Bang, she built a phonautograph, the earliest sound recording device, out of steel, plaster and animal skin. She used the device to capture data archived by a NASA satellite. But the phonautograph wasn’t designed for playback; her desire to replay sounds from deep space inspired Score for the Big Bang.

“I realized that I needed to work with that sound, directly,” she says. “That sound actually preceded the structure of the universe that we see today.”

Score for the Big Bang was performed at the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in 2018. More than 80 singers from Richmond Symphony Chorus, VCU Commonwealth Singers, Handel Choir of Baltimore and Third Practice, a Washington-based chamber vocal group, comprised the ensemble, which was directed by Erin Freeman, director of choral activities in the VCUarts Department of Music, and Brian Bartoldus, artistic director and conductor of the Handel Choir.

In pursuing the haunting and awesome roar of the Big Bang, Mikalson enlisted the talents of Mark Whittle, a professor of astronomy at the University of Virginia, Stephen Vitiello, chair of the Kinetic Imaging department, music alumnus James Elliott Shelton (BA ’11) and Caroline Shaw, a Pulitzer Prize-winning composer.
It might be a piano chord or the strum of a guitar or a simple drum beat. When Devonne Harris (BM ’11), aka DJ Harrison, sits down to write a new song, those first loops of melody and rhythm become the map that guides his entire production.

The multi-instrumentalist performer and producer takes a scientific approach to songwriting—a technique he says he learned in the VCUarts Jazz Studies program. Whether he’s penning new instrumentals for his solo work or developing tracks with his band Butcher Brown, Harris builds his songs methodically by researching and experimenting with new sounds.

“Doing extensive research is definitely something I practice—listening to new recordings, watching videos of performances and interviews,” Harris says.

Harris’ curious ear has been just as important to his success. Harris is the son of a record DJ and was a crate-digger from a young age, sampling sounds from recordings that spanned decades and genres. Those formative years shaped his wide sonic palate, deft hand and eagerness to explore new sounds that defy categorization. Even his band Butcher Brown describes its style as “garage punk jazz funk.”

In his young career, he’s performed across the country with Galactic, Turkuaz, Kamasi Washington, and Steely Dan at jazz clubs, festivals and concert halls. He even recorded with Jack White on his recent album, Boarding House Reach.

“*I grew up recording to tape, so I like to keep that aesthetic while recording,*” he says. “*Even if it’s to a DAW [digital audio workstation] software, I try to play every part as close as possible to the final, trying not to rely so much on editing. There are definitely certain sounds I use to get desired effects, but I’m also trying to find new ways of crafting tones unfamiliar to the ear.*”

Harris further staked his claim in the Richmond music scene about five years ago when he co-founded the Jellowstone music production studio with No BS! Brass Band leader and fellow VCUarts classmate Reggie Pace. Located inside an unassuming house in the Near West End, the studio has been the cradle of many new projects by local artists released under the Jellowstone Records label.
We dabble in lots of genres, from Indonesian kroncong...

2017 was also the year I went to the bathroom and walked out with a ‘selfie’ little did I know what that split second would turn into...

hi, @sophie.itaking over Proud 2013 @fycuartalumni in NEW YORK, NEW YORK

Getting an inside look at NASA Mission Control center

here are some pretty images I styled and photographed for this project! I ve been using my new europes line for a while now

thanks for the interview! and thanks to @sassystatic for teaching me how to make a whole bunch of stuff.
VCUarts alumni can be found everywhere, from the red carpet to the Johnson Space Center—and now they’re taking us along for the ride. In a series of Instagram takeovers last year, alumni gave us virtual tours of their studios and businesses, handed us a Juest Sass to take along for the day, followed us at our glass blower, and用手 with us to video from SXSW and NASA. From their first cup of coffee to the bike ride home, here are just a few scenes from their daily lives.

Think you have an Instagram-worthy story? Tell us more at @VCUarts or artssocial@vcu.edu.
Before Wes Taylor and MK Abadoo could co-teach their new course—Dance, Design, and Community Justice—they wanted to get to know each other.

Both have creative practices that are rooted in collaboration. Taylor, a graphic design and Art Foundation professor, is a lead artist in the Detroit-based Complex Movements collective, while iCubed fellow and dance professor Abadoo choreographs performance works using the anti-racist values and principles of the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, Angela’s Pulse and Urban Bush Women. They wanted the same spirit of partnership to shape their teaching.

“Individualism is a manifestation of the dominant racialized culture,” Abadoo says. “This idea that well-intentioned individual choices will bring the changes communities need actually undermines justice-making. It takes flocking; it takes collective wisdom to do the work.”

“Even in teaching practice, the dominant practice of a singular teacher limits our capacities as educators to facilitate equitable learning environments. Equity and justice require partnership—in leadership, learning and followership.”

Before the semester began, Taylor and Abadoo met to dance, design and collage together, building a foundation for their class and an embodiment of the sharing process they hoped to implement with their students.

Bringing together dance and graphic design students, the course introduced principles of community building as creative and artistic practices, and discussed how to establish intentional partnerships with clear objectives. They fostered bold and compassionate dialogue about power dynamics, and developed shared structures for mitigating them.

With further guidance from Free Egunfemi, a local historical strategist and founder of UntoldRVA, they pulled issues from Richmond’s past into the present through publications, movement and interactive installations, and made connections to the contemporary media landscape.

“The students started to understand just how effective facilitation is,” Taylor says, “and how that can be a powerful tool as an artist.”

As Taylor and Abadoo were creating space for dialogue about racism, another graphic design professor, Nontsikelelo Mutiti, was challenging students in her Research as Practice topics course to uncover the voices that are often missing in contemporary design.

The exploration led to As, Not For: Dethroning Our Absolutes, an exhibition curated by MICA faculty Jerome Harris featuring his research archiving the work of African American graphic designers from the last century. Students designed the space and the installation, which included works ranging from W.E.B. Du Bois’ data portraits to magazine ads and Spike Lee movie posters, alongside student dissections of contemporary design textbooks.

“As a queer, transgender and mixed Asian student,” says Rin Kim (BFA ’19), “this class helped educate me to other designers of color throughout the diaspora and gave me invaluable resources about designers within my own marginalized identities. I think my practice is a lot more mature [as a result]. There’s a new care and consideration of all aspects of cultural production and research evaluation.”

While As, Not For brought certain voices to light, Mutiti says it’s still limited to the perspectives of a single individual. She wants to see hundreds more of these projects initiated by faculty and students around the country.

“Works produced from a range of cultural contexts and time periods can be included in the discourse around graphic design,” she says. “We need a more holistic image of what’s going on in the world, especially in this moment, when we have the capacity to travel like never before. We can access archives, glean things from the Internet and work out of our own experience to reflect the reality of the rich cultural production that exists now and in the past. Yes, we are in this location, but this location and our community is a lot more complex and there are a lot more layers.”
MK Abadoo performs a collaborative work created during her shared practice with Wes Taylor.
Inspired by Qatar’s distinctive location as part of international trade routes linking the Central Islamic lands, the Mediterranean, and the Indian Ocean, the eighth biennial Hamad bin Khalifa Symposium on Islamic Art will foster discussions touching upon some of the most vital questions raised by these vibrant and rich interchanges of the arts.

The Hamad bin Khalifa Symposium on Islamic Art is the leading international conference on Islamic art and architecture. Find out more at islamicartdoha.org.