A year of change


But at its core, the year 2020 was one of change. At VCUarts, we have not been immune to crises and shifting tides. In the spring, we rose to the challenge of a global pandemic. In just two weeks’ time, our faculty pivoted to online instruction, with improv workshops and music performances on Zoom, fashion design assignments using fabrics found at home, and virtual galleries and exhibitions. Meanwhile, creatives of all kinds leveraged their skills to design and construct masks, build decontamination equipment, and even reimagine systems for manufacturing personal protective equipment.

But as we all know, the COVID-19 pandemic was hardly the only test we faced in the last year. The Black Lives Matter movement and demonstrations—both in Richmond and around the country—brought necessary conversations about systemic racism to the forefront. At VCUarts, we are committed to the work of looking critically at our policies and processes, our student recruitment and faculty retention practices, our curricula, our culture and values—and enacting demonstrable changes to make our community more equitable and inclusive.

We’re proud of our community members who are already doing the work to change the hearts and minds of our society. In these pages, you can read about alumni and faculty who are using their creative practices and leveraging their platforms to tackle societal issues like racism, ableism, opioid addiction and equity in education. You’ll also find students who are expanding their perspectives through global experiences that shift their understanding of the world they live in.

As we began a fall semester unlike any other, we remained hopeful for changes yet to come. On Sept. 15, Carmenita Higginbotham, Ph.D., an art historian and prolific scholar, joined us as dean of VCUarts. We are excited for her leadership and guidance during these unprecedented times.

The last year has tested our creativity, our resilience, our energy—and we still have work to do. But we know that our community will never stop finding ways to connect with, care for and inspire one another.

“IT has been my honor and privilege to serve as interim dean this last year. The experience has affirmed the awe-inspiring creativity and dedication of every member of our multifaceted, dedicated, and engaged community.”

For the past year, Nancy Scott has served as interim dean of VCUarts. While Scott has served in several faculty and administrative positions in both Richmond and Qatar for more than two decades, there was no playbook for navigating the confluence of this spring’s COVID-19 pandemic, the subsequent economic fallout and transition to virtual learning, and national and local social unrest.

Despite these challenges, Scott remained steadfastly focused on the school’s future promise by overseeing the highest undergraduate enrollment and leading a strategic planning process that will shape the trajectory of VCUarts for years to come. She also served on the advisory boards for VCUarts Qatar and the Institute for Contemporary Art at VCU. This fall, Scott launched the school’s Faculty Lecture Series, and a joint online lecture series with VCUarts Qatar and the ICA.

Scott looks forward to working with Carmenita Higginbotham, Ph.D., the new dean of VCUarts.
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Blue sky to red skies

Cover: “Street Portrait: George Floyd” by Eric Millikin, a Kinetic Imaging graduate student. Read more about Millikin’s portraits of victims of police violence on page 17.
VCUarts Qatar hosted the exhibition Color Lab, which explored the shifting face of color, inviting the observer to participate in a series of chromatographic journeys through chromatography, cyanotypes, photograms, and pigments of provenance, sourced and apportioned to denote a sense of place. The exhibition was scheduled to open March 11, but shifted to an online model due to COVID-19. It was curated by Melanie McClintock (BFA ’96) and featured work by McClintock, Liz Nielsen and Vanessa Donoso López.

“Color Lab is a collection of moments in which science playfully traverses art through exploratory experiments with color. The artists created chromatic responses through water, light and dust responding to significant questions of the meaning of life, our place in the universe, our relationship to places and feeling connected—themes so relevant to our time.”

—Amir Berbić, Dean, VCUarts Qatar
An unexpected first year

In summer 2019, design expert Amir Berbić was named dean of VCUarts Qatar. While this would be a year of transition under normal circumstances, Berbić also led the school as it made an overnight pivot to online instruction after the Qatar government closed all schools and universities on March 10.

“T o say that my first year was not what I was expecting would be an understatement,” Berbić says. “However, I can assure you it was still a rich and vibrant experience that showed the true colors of an art and design community like no other.

Although we could not be together in person, we managed to create, to bond, and rise to the occasion in service to the community. Our faculty and students found innovative ways to teach and learn, with faculty creating their own resources for virtual teaching practically overnight, and our students bringing studios to life in their homes.

We worked collaboratively with our partners in Qatar and our colleagues in Richmond, learning from each other’s experiences. What seemed impossible was in fact wholly possible and was an expression of how creative minds respond to adversity.”

Welcome Carmenita Higginbotham, Ph.D., dean of VCUarts

Carmenita Higginbotham, Ph.D., an art historian whose research examines 20th century American art, was named dean of VCUarts effective Sept. 15. She previously served as chair of the McIntire Department of Art at the University of Virginia.

Higginbotham is a prolific scholar whose research examines how notions of “the city” have had an impact on representation. She has lectured extensively on the history of American art, popular visual culture and art film, and has been a featured scholar and consultant on several documentaries. Her book, The Urban Scene: Race, Reginald Marsh, and American Art, offers a significant and innovative reassessment of the ways in which race is deployed and read in interwar American art.

Top of the list

U.S. News and World Report ranked VCUarts #4 on its list of Best Master of Fine Arts Programs. Our Sculpture program retains the #1 ranking. Kinetic Imaging is ranked #5 in the Time-Based/New Media category—the first time the department was ranked by U.S. News. Several of our specialty programs have risen in the rankings, including Graphic Design at #4 and Printmaking at #2. Our Painting program is also ranked #12.


Kinetic Imaging instructor Rob Carter’s exhibition Smoke Screen opened at The Highpoint in Richmond. Through photographs showing the story of tobacco from seed to cigarette, the exhibition explores the irony of society’s apparent death wish, the beauty and grandeur of bright leaf tobacco plants, and the beguiling quality of smoke. The exhibition was supported in part by a VCUarts adjunct faculty grant for research and creative work.

Carmenita Higginbotham, Ph.D., dean of VCUarts
New programs in visual effects

This fall, the Department of Communication Arts launched a new concentration and minor designed for students seeking a specialization in the artistic, technical and narrative production of digital, visual effects for live-action footage. The visual effects track includes courses in 2D and 3D software, digital filming, compositing, motion-capture and applicable post-production workflows, as well as the mechanics of screenwriting as a foundation for interpreting narrative storytelling into a visual effects storyboard. “The minor and concentration in visual effects is an opportunity to engage with and utilize state-of-the-art techniques and technologies to facilitate narrative storytelling on a much higher level,” says Matt Wallin, professor.

Students, faculty and alumni among VMFA Fellows

Of the 26 artists who won a 2020–21 Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Fellowship, 17 had ties to VCUarts.

Undergraduate student fellows, who each received $4,000, included Photography + Film majors Tatyana Bailey, Emma Carlson and Nicolas Fernandez; Communication Arts major Erika Masis Laverde; Painting + Printmaking major Amuri Morris; first-year Art Foundation students Megan O’Casey and Zoe Pettit; Sculpture + Extended Media major Sarah N. Smith; and Graphic Design major Elizabeth Yoo. Graduate student fellows, who were each awarded $6,000, included Katie Revilla from Craft/Material Studies and Abed Elmajid Shalabi from sculpture.

Professionals won $8,000 and included current painting graduate student Paul Finch; photo alumni Emma Gould (BFA ’19); Communication Arts professor Sterling Hundley; sculpture instructor and shop technician Abigail Lucien (above left); and assistant chair of photography Jon-Phillip Sheridan.

Mutual admiration society

As summer concerts ground to a halt, jazz students and nearby residents came together for a new performance series. From May to September, Fan residents offered up their front porches and garages for weekly concerts by small jazz combos from VCUarts. The benefits were two-fold. Neighbors had a reason to leave their homes and enjoy music in the socially distant company of friends. Meanwhile, jazz students had access to performance experience, a chance to make up for lost income, and an opportunity to get to know local residents.

“By late April, I wondered if some performances outside might be possible, but had no time to pursue the option, as we were shoulder-deep in emergency remote-teaching at VCU,” says Antonio García, professor of music and director of the Jazz Studies program. “When area residents approached me with the invitation, it was a glorious moment.” Jane Carlson, a Fan resident and long-time supporter of the Jazz Studies program, says she and her neighbors are fortunate to have VCUarts—and the school’s talented students—within walking distance.

“During Covid, I can’t tell you the difference it made,” she says, “when people brought their beach chairs out and sat on the sidewalks, and applauded. It was heartwarming.” Carlson recently included the Jazz Studies program in her estate plans. Read more and learn how you can support VCUarts at arts.vcu.edu/giving.

Wavelength is a virtual lecture series, developed by VCUarts, the ICA, and VCUarts Qatar in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. A dynamic group of artists, designers, curators and scholars will share their work throughout the 2020–21 academic year. Tuesdays at 12 pm (Richmond)/7 pm (Doha) on Zoom.
Kudos

Students from the Department of Fashion Design + Merchandising netted 11 wins in the annual Fashion Scholarship Fund case study competition. Winners by discipline include fashion merchandising students Jane Terrell, Katelyn O’Neal, Samantha Son, Morgan Golden, and Ebonique Little, fashion design students Kylie Carroll, Christopher Pleasant, Shana Cave and Elyse Richey; supply chain student Delawit Assefa; and marketing student Katherine Pham. Terrell and Assefa were also named among the top eight overall.

Erin Freeman, director of choral activities, performed on two albums that were part of a portfolio of work by Marina A. Ledin and Victor Ledin, who received a Grammy nomination for Producer of the Year: Classical.

The Institute for Contemporary Art at VCU was voted one of the Best New Museums in USA Today’s readers’ choice awards.

Coding Beats: Learning Computer Programming by Coding Hip Hop Beats, a public school-focused curriculum designed by Kate Sicchio, assistant professor in the departments of Kinetic Imaging and Dance + Choreography, Taylor Barnett, assistant professor of music, and David Shepherd, associate professor of computer science, received a $1,400 prize in VCU Ventures’ Next Big Idea Competition.

The proposed curriculum, developed with the nonprofit CodeVA and hip-hop artist Nickelus F, will use culturally relevant projects to teach coding and programming to 40 middle school students from underrepresented groups.

Pamela Lawton, professor of art education, was named one of 10 commissioners of the National Art Education Association’s inaugural Commission on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion.

RVA Street Singers, a community choir for those affected by homelessness and allies co-founded by the Department of Music, was recognized by the American Music Therapy Association for their contributions to building community, respect, value and unity through music.

Communication Arts professor Sterling Hundley received a Gold Medal in the book category of the Society of Illustrators Annual Exhibition for his series of illustrations of Abraham Lincoln in Robert Burleigh’s O Captain, My Captain.

The Virginia Art Educators Association named Courtnie Wolfgang, assistant professor of art education, the 2019 Higher Education Art Educator of the Year. A letter of recommendation says Wolfgang “creates a classroom where people can laugh and be relaxed while also still thriving and expanding.”

Cultural ambassadors

Colleen Connolly (BFA ’20), a recent Graphic Design graduate, and Emma Cregan (BFA ’17), who studied Kinetic Imaging, were selected as Fulbright student scholars for 2020–21. Connolly also received a Critical Language Scholarship, and plans to travel to China to research how signage and exhibition design can create spaces that are accessible to people of different cultural and language backgrounds. Cregan will go to Indonesia to study wayang—an ancient style of theater encompassing puppetry, dance and mask performance—and create a short animated film.

To keep you warm

A collection of quilts made by students in the Introduction to Textiles class will do more than warm your body—they just might warm your soul, too.

In the Craft/Material Studies class, Hillary Waters Fayle aims to teach a range of techniques like felting wool; spinning yarn for structures like tapestries; and dyeing, cutting, sewing and embellishing fabric. Last fall, Fayle added a larger group project to the curriculum. Over five weeks, seven groups designed and created a quilt, from cutting shapes and stitching them together, to adding batting and backing and hand-stitching the binding to secure the edges. At the end of the semester, the quilts were mounted in an exhibition at the Anderson and then donated to the palliative care unit at VCU’s Massey Cancer Center.

The planned end use led to a number of conversations about the meaning of quilts and what the patients might be experiencing. “We talked about how powerful quilts can be as a way to bring together ideas, memories, fragments from another time, from people we love into something much greater than any of those individual pieces,” Fayle says. “As the pieces are brought together to create the quilt, so are the makers.”

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Funding the next big idea

VCUarts Interim Dean Nancy Scott awarded $25,500 in grant funding for faculty research in the 2019–20 academic year. The program provided $7,500 for exploratory grants, which support research at the developmental stage, and $18,000 for research grants for work in the final stages that has been invited or endorsed by peer review. Projects include oral histories documenting the educational experiences of LGBTQIA+ artists and educators; digitally recreating border sites as 3D virtual landscapes; a multimedia exhibition, book, and community event examining Puerto Rican identity and humanitarian crisis; and following the journey of two young gay men seeking protection in the U.S. after leaving Israel and Nigeria.

Faculty research grants are made possible by the Pollak Society. Find out how you can support scholarships, travel and research while getting insider access to VCUarts at arts.vcu.edu/pollaksociety.
The subtlety of sound

In Pixar’s Toy Story 4, two main characters share a tender moment when Bo Peep lays her hand on her friend Woody’s cheek. But the noise the audience hears isn’t the cold-clack of ceramic and plastic colliding. Instead, it’s a delicate layer of sounds, of toy fingers and human hands touching, that complements this single gesture.

“We tricked you into thinking, you know, you’re hearing ceramic but really you’re hearing a human hand and ceramic,” says Shelley Roden, an Academy Award winner whose sound track carefully constructed audio for beautiful scenes like this throughout Toy Story 4.

For decades, Roden has devoted her career to the art of Foley: human engineered sounds that recreate and enhance the world of live-action and animated storytelling. Now, in her new role as an affiliate faculty member with the VCUarts Department of Kinetic Imaging, she hopes to share her knowledge this fall through visiting artist lectures, workshops and consultations.

Creativity on campus

In December 2019, VCU was named an Adobe Creative Campus, which recognizes colleges for incorporating problem solving into their curricula and fostering 21st-century methods of teaching and learning. VCU is the first school in Virginia to earn this designation. While VCUarts was instrumental in working with Adobe, the entire university benefits from the arrangement, which includes a 75% discount on Adobe Creative Cloud for students from all disciplines. The Adobe Creative Campus designation also comes with a $50,000 gift, which will be used for student scholarships.

Young, scrappy and hungry

When the hit musical Hamilton came to Richmond in November 2019, the departments of Theatre and Music didn’t throw away their shot to get a few pro tips from Edred Utomi who plays the titular character in the touring production.

Utomi took questions from a crowded room of students in the Broadway Seminar class, taught by Kikau Alvaro, assistant professor of musical theatre and movement. Students then performed a song of their choice, and Utomi coached them on singing, movement and acting.

“I tried to do as many performing jobs as possible, so I could still be in the world and still be working on my craft,” Utomi told the class. “Even working as a jester, it helped me improv. It taught me how to be quick on my feet. It helps me if I forget my lyrics. I was always thinking outside the box about what jobs I could do, because [acting is] a muscle and I didn’t want to be flexing a different muscle during the day while letting [my acting] muscle get weak.”

The department of Theatre was included among the Top 30 College Theatre Design and Tech Programs for 2019–20 by OnStage Blog.

Pedal steel player Michael Grigoni and electronic artist and Kinetic Imaging chair Stephen Vitiello’s album, Slow Machines, was named one of NPR Music’s top 10 albums of February.

Khaled Saoud, a physics professor in the Liberal Arts and Science Program at VCUarts Qatar was awarded a Technology Development Fund grant from Qatar National Research Fund to develop an aerogel resin for 3D printing. The technology will allow the production of personalized medical products and devices such as prosthetic hands, legs, joints, dental implants, and hearing aids.

Paul Rucker, a visual artist, composer and musician, has been appointed Curator for Creative Collaboration at VCUarts. He also recently received an Art for Justice grant from the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation. His first project is the socially engaged installation “Banking While Black,” which will address the destruction of the three Black Wall Street communities: Richmond, Virginia; Durham, North Carolina; and Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Fashion design student Chris Pleasant was one of the two winners of the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) Design Award, earning a $25,000 scholarship for his fashion collection and portfolio submission to the contest. Kylie Carroll received an honorable mention.

The National Endowment for the Arts approved more than $84 million in grants as part of the Arts Endowment’s second major funding announcement. VCUarts received a $15,000 Art Works grant to support the production of Untitled Bruce Conner/Soul Stirrers Project, a documentary film by Art Foundation and Photography + Film professor Sasha Waters Freyer.

In memoriam

Melanie Buffington, associate professor and interim chair of Art Education, died Sept. 16. She joined the VCUarts community in August 2006 as an assistant professor and graduate director, and also served as a service-learning faculty fellow and a translational research fellow. She was a prolific researcher, author, an accomplished educator, and a treasured mentor and friend.

Ellis Marsalis, former coordinator of Jazz Studies in the Department of Music, died April 1 at age 85 due to complications from COVID-19. The patriarch of jazz’s royal family, he served as Commonwealth Professor of Music at VCU from 1986 to 1989 before returning to his hometown to become the first Coca-Cola Endowed Chair of Jazz Studies at the University of New Orleans.

Paul Petrie, founding director of the Shaqquad College of Design Arts in Doha, Qatar—now known as VCUarts Qatar—died on May 2. Petrie first came to VCUarts in 1984 when he accepted a position as professor and chair of VCUarts’ interior design program. He later served as Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at VCUarts from 1995–97. In 1998, he became the founding director of the university’s new campus in Education City, Doha, and continued to steer VCUarts Qatar in its early years as an associate dean, professor and area head of their interior design program.

William “Bill” A. Royall Jr., former vice rector of the Virginia Commonwealth University Board of Visitors and benefactor to all facets of the university, died June 25. He helped strengthen the legacy of the VCU School of the Arts through private giving and facilitating community support in Richmond and beyond. Royall and his wife, Pam, followed the careers of alumni and were active collectors of their artwork.
The wild and unexpected semester

In a scene many are now familiar with, a grid of faces stares out from a computer screen.

Theatre professor Elizabeth Byland tells the assembled group—all students in the Running AMok improv troupe—about their next assignment.

“We are throwing a quarantine party,” Byland says. “Somebody start.”

One after another, they build on each other’s ideas to create a scene. One student describes a tower of sandwich bread. Another adds a floor made of toilet paper, and a hot tub full of hand sanitizer. They imagine VR headsets and a wall of FaceTime calls connecting them with the outside world while, inside the room, they all stand six feet apart.

This is a party in the era of social distancing. And this is VCUarts faculty and students, continuing to teach, learn, connect and celebrate in the wake of shutdowns following COVID-19.
Rewriting the syllabus

Improvisation
Instructor: Elizabeth Byland, Theatre

The syllabus: In many ways, Byland’s improv exercises are a metaphor for education during the COVID-19 pandemic. She uses interactive exercises to practice acceptance, active listening, following impulses, and collaborating as an ensemble. Byland found new exercises that work better online, with the added benefit of on-camera experience.

Lessons learned: “Improv teaches us to accept all things with gratitude,” Byland says. “We take the given circumstance, no matter how wild and unexpected it might be, and we make it work. So, while it’s a time of uncertainty and frustration for many, we’re learning to lean into this moment and discover the joy of virtual learning and virtual performance.”

Musical Theatre Performance
Instructor: Kikau Alvaro, Theatre

The syllabus: Earlier in the semester, Alvaro’s students rehearsed the variety of music styles a contemporary musical theatre performer must be fluent in—from pop, rock and hip-hop to country and poetic songs. Alvaro was just beginning to focus on preparing students to self-tape video submissions, when remote instruction began. He used the same technology to coach students from a distance.

Lessons learned: Student Kat McMahan says, “It was weird to sing into what I call ‘the abyss.’ However, in our industry this is something we are expected to do a lot. There will be a lot of self-tapes that we have to send in for auditions, and I’m being prepped for that.”

Digital Music Production
Instructor: Filipe Leitão, Music

The syllabus: Digital instruction isn’t new terrain in Leitão’s teaching music production class. Using digital audio workstations, students learned about virtual instruments, loops, recording and manipulating audio, and working with video. After moving to a remote environment, Leitão asked students to take one of his own short film projects and develop a new score and sound design. Leitão also presented a workshop on the basics of audio editing, recording and music production for Antonio García’s Jazz Orchestra class in lieu of traditional rehearsals.

Lessons learned: “Nowadays,” Leitão says, “every music student needs to have a notion of music production and recording techniques, so they might at least record and mix their own performances, or the performances of their ensembles.”

Mastering the Masters: Copying as a Tool for Self-Discovery
Instructor: Stephen Alcorn, Communication Arts

The syllabus: Alcorn encouraged students to draw every day in their sketchbooks. He challenged them to see the pandemic as an opportunity for immersion in their work in defiance of modern-day difficulties. He also used self-portraits by Käthe Kollwitz to demonstrate the role of quiet contemplation and thoughtful introspection in the process of self-discovery.

Lessons learned: “I have encouraged my students to see the social distancing and isolation they are currently experiencing as an opportunity to reflect upon the role that solitude has played throughout the history of art in the creative process,” Alcorn says.

Menswear
Instructor: Kim Guthrie and Cate Latham (BFA ’10), Fashion Design + Merchandising

The syllabus: Students are typically tasked with designing and producing original garments, from patternmaking and mockups to fitting and finishes. Without access to sewing machines, dress forms and fabric, however, students had to construct garments by hand, or modify patterns to fit themselves or a person they were isolated with.

Lessons learned: Latham also said the department worked to acquire proper fabric, but she encouraged students to be resourceful and creative. “I told them, ‘This is the time to upcycle any of your own garments you don’t wear anymore, and potentially cannibalize similar fabric to use for your project,’” she says.

Freshman Repertory
Instructor: Scott Putman, Dance + Choreography

The syllabus: After learning choreography in a collaborative studio with hands-on instruction from Putman, students had to adapt to online video instruction and rehearsals at home. Putman instead focused on broader performance skills, such as the relationship to music and cuing, and how to modulate energy in different spaces.

Lessons learned: Putman is also working with the class to develop a new work exploring themes of isolationism, ostracism, and othering. “I felt the rehearsal process might act as a space for individual reflection and connection as a community to help navigate their personal challenges they are facing in addition to assisting with their engagement in the work.”
While the strategies to combat COVID-19 seemed to change on a minute-to-minute basis, masks were eventually recognized as a universal protection for those in public spaces. But getting a mask to all citizens—even just essential workers who consistently have contact with others in their communities—was a massive undertaking.

That’s where the artists came in.

A collective of skilled artists and makers, known as the Richmond Arts and Cultural Workers Coalition, banded together to produce protective face masks for medical staff at VCU Health; home and public health care workers; bus drivers; and other essential workers. Jon-Phillip Sheridan, one of the coalition’s organizers and assistant chair in the Department of Photography + Film, says they also received requests from Richmond Behavioral Health Authority, the Richmond City Health District, and Bon Air Juvenile Correctional Center.

The coalition was supported by Studio Two Three, 1708 Gallery and the Visual Arts Center of Richmond, in collaboration with VCUarts and with funding from the VCU da Vinci Center.

Volunteers signed up to use sanitized workstations at Studio Two Three, and were provided with protective equipment. They began with an initial donation of 500 yards of medical-grade fabric from u-fab, an area fabric and furniture store, and produced approximately 5,000 durable, reusable and washable masks.

“Richmond’s creative community is well suited to serve our frontline workers in moments of crisis,” says Kate Fowler (BFA ’13), director of development at Studio Two Three. “Our local arts community is supportive and we share many of the same volunteers, staff, teaching artists and hopes for Richmond. This effort is a natural extension of the relationships we’ve been building with each other for a long time.”

Sheridan says the coalition is also a real-life representation of his own teaching theory: that artists are, fundamentally, makers and creative problem solvers.

“Learning to make art is learning to create solutions with limited resources,” he says. “We are exceptional at teaching ourselves new skills, and learning to use new materials. [We also know how to] activate social economies: if I don’t know how to do something, I have a network of artist friends who can teach me how, or who will do it for me.”
At VCUarts Qatar, the Fabrication Lab produced protective face shields for health care workers. Sterling Hundley, a Communication Arts professor and artist-in-residence in VCU’s Department of Surgery, brought together teams from VCUarts, the College of Engineering, the Department of Chemistry, VCU Libraries and the da Vinci Center to explore new manufacturing processes for PPE and medical devices. Hundley says the team could fill gaps should VCU Health’s needs outpace existing inventory and traditional suppliers.

Faculty and students in the Department of Fashion Design + Merchandising coordinated with VCU Health to make washable fabric masks that could be worn with N95 masks.

Craft/Material Studies students Colin Knight (BFA ‘20) and Davis Boshears (BFA ‘20) made 40 workbenches for local artists who lost access to their workspaces.

More makers

Through a joint micro-residency program, local artists used workspaces and supplies provided by Studio Two Three to create work in response to COVID-19. The work was displayed in the windows of the Institute for Contemporary Art at VCU, and then archived at the Valentine.

Local artist Keith Ramsey (BFA ‘98) created frames to help VCU Health implement a new process for decontaminating N95 masks.

Cate Latham (BFA ‘10), an instructor in the Department of Fashion and owner of Van Herten Outerwear, partnered with the VCU School of Pharmacy to design and prototype an all-in-one PPE gown made from .7 mil plastic.

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A virtual display of creativity

The ICA builds virtual studios

Studio visits are an important part of the graduate art student experience, and in an effort to replicate that in-person opportunity, the Institute for Contemporary Art at VCU participated in virtual studio visits for graduating MFA students in Painting + Printmaking, Graphic Design, Sculpture, Kinetic Imaging, and Photography + Film. They were paired with curators from a number of prestigious institutions, including the Hammer Museum and National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Celebrating teachers

Seniors in the Department of Art Education shared their student teaching experiences on Instagram, attaching images of student work and memories of their classes. The student teachers served in public school systems across Richmond and the counties of Henrico, Hanover and Chesterfield.

woke! me! up!

Dance major Sara Dellinger created a performance video from home, titled “woke! me! up!” Using editing techniques to create unique compositions of movement and setting, Dellinger leaps and tumbles around the room as it rotates and mirrors itself.

Spring at VCUarts is the culmination of a year’s worth of study, practice, planning and hard work. From end-of-year exhibitions, senior recitals and theatrical performances to the annual fashion show and commencement, the season is a big finale for students—a chance to show off everything they’ve learned.

It’s no surprise, then, that VCUarts students didn’t let the coronavirus-driven lockdown prevent them from bringing more art into the world. Here are just a few of the ways that classes and departments took their final projects and calendars of events online.
Pomp in unusual circumstances

The VCUarts May 2020 Commencement ceremony went online, with a multimedia site that introduced new ideas to the traditional event. In addition to a recorded video address by Interim Dean Nancy Scott, graduates and their families and friends were offered words of encouragement from four previous commencement speakers: Sophia Li (BA '13), Jarvis Jefferson (BFA '82), Elizabeth King and Michael Hearst (BM '95). The scheduled May speaker, advertising executive Jayanta Jenkins (BFA '94), who helped shape the modern identities of Gatorade, Beats by Dre and Twitter, also sent his congratulations to the Class of 2020. The commencement website featured a searchable listing of all graduates, with customized slides and audio announcements, as well as a social media feed highlighting stories of student accomplishments.

Inside the virtual “white cube”

Students in the Painting + Printmaking class Paint, Practice and Theory were able to exhibit their work in an interactive online facsimile of a traditional white wall gallery—complete with realistic sunlight and seating. Assistant professor Ron Johnson used the web-based software Artsteps to stage other student exhibitions for his Art and Athletics class.

International exhibition

A virtual exhibition showcased nearly 70 thesis projects by undergraduate students in the VCUarts Qatar fashion design, graphic design, interior design, and painting and printmaking programs, alongside graduate design students. From animation, textile design and typography to digital painting, programming and lithography, this special exhibition made the work of Qatari students more accessible than ever before.

Simulating the Anderson

Using 3D computer graphics software, Kinetic Imaging students replicated the Anderson gallery, with digital gallery walls for sharing installation-based work, and a virtual theater for online screenings of single-channel video and animation work. “The Virtual Capstone experience,” says Chase Westfall, curator of student exhibitions and programs, “is a gesture toward innovation, invention, accessibility, and a new kind of hyper content as a countercurrent to some of the stasis experienced elsewhere in our moment.”

Broadway on Zoom

In lieu of the cancelled opening night performance of Spring Awakening—a rock musical take on a 19th-century German play—the cast each sang their parts of “Song of Purple Summer,” which was edited together for a Zoom performance. Kikau Alvaro, assistant professor of musical theatre, led the cast and other classes in adapting their performances to the video chat program.

Graphic Design goes ON(THE)LINE

The Department of Graphic Design transposed their annual senior show to a 24/7 web exhibition, ON(THE)LINE, where student projects took on new lives in the forms of community gaming hubs, mind-boggling computer generated sculptures and personalized web pages.

Photo/Film takes to Twitch

The Department of Photography + Film celebrated the end of the year with an awards ceremony titled “Island,” which was livestreamed on Twitch and Instagram. Students also received special awards from Candela Books and Capital One. “Island” featured the work of undergraduate and graduate students, in addition to a DJ set performed by Justin James Reed, interim department chair.

Simulating the Anderson

Using 3D computer graphics software, Kinetic Imaging students replicated the Anderson gallery, with digital gallery walls for sharing installation-based work, and a virtual theater for online screenings of single-channel video and animation work. “The Virtual Capstone experience,” says Chase Westfall, curator of student exhibitions and programs, “is a gesture toward innovation, invention, accessibility, and a new kind of hyper content as a countercurrent to some of the stasis experienced elsewhere in our moment.”

Broadway on Zoom

In lieu of the cancelled opening night performance of Spring Awakening—a rock musical take on a 19th-century German play—the cast each sang their parts of “Song of Purple Summer,” which was edited together for a Zoom performance. Kikau Alvaro, assistant professor of musical theatre, led the cast and other classes in adapting their performances to the video chat program.
As protests and rallies moved throughout the city of Richmond this summer, Rae Fines (BFA '20), a Photography + Film and Art Education graduate, was there to document the scene from a protestors point of view.

“I wanted to show the anger, the dedication and love that are out on the streets every day,” Fines says. “But I am not solely at these protests to photograph. I am also chanting, marching and getting tear gassed like everyone else. When I saw the video of George Floyd’s murder, I saw my dad. I saw my little brother’s future if we don’t make a change.”

Fines is one of many VCUarts students and alumni who have been creating new work and leveraging their creative platforms to advocate justice for Black lives. Eric Millikin, a Kinetic Imaging graduate student, has been making portraits of victims of police violence since 7-year-old Aiyana Jones was killed in Detroit in 2010. Each is a continuous line through the streets of the city where they were killed, connecting key points in their lives, deaths and afterward. His portraits of George Floyd (cover) and Breonna Taylor were selected for juried exhibitions this summer and fall.

“These are meant to serve as reminders of human beings whose lives have been cut unnecessarily short,” Millikin says. “They also serve as reminders of how much more we need to do. If we don’t want our cultural conversations about race to be dominated by racists using lies and propaganda to strengthen these racist systems, then it’s important for anti-racist artists to speak up through our artwork and otherwise.”
The change makers
As artists, we all believe in

the power of art
to inspire conversation,
to bring complex ideas to light,
to creatively tackle the issues
that plague our society.

But sometimes, the work
takes on a life of its own,
allowing an artist to pull
the wider community into the movement.

Here are four VCUarts faculty members and alumni
who are using their research, their creative work
and their platforms
to reshape society,
from stemming the tide of opioid overdoses
to shifting representation in the classroom
to using advertising to change our
understanding of racism in America.
In one of Procter and Gamble’s most talked about ads, there isn’t a product to be found. No one pours laundry soap into a pristine washing machine, or wipes up a spill with paper towels, or glides a razor across their face.

Instead, through a glance, a flinch, a slow pan of the camera, the nearly 2-minute film—titled “The Look”—shines a light on unconscious bias directed at Black men.

“The Look” was developed by Saturday Morning, a creative collective that leverages the reach of global brands to shift perceptions on racial bias, injustice, immigration, education, and the environment. The group was founded by fashion design alumnus Jayanta Jenkins (BFA ’94), along with leading advertising industry executives Deja Cox, Geoff Edwards, Keith Cartwright and Kwame Taylor-Hayford.

Saturday Morning formed in the summer of 2016. Troubled by the number of police shootings targeting Black men, Cartwright texted Jenkins and Edwards. The three had worked for some of the most powerful and prolific brands, helping them earn billions of dollars in revenue.

Cartwright wondered: could they use the same skills to promote a message of peace?

“When we can take brands like Procter and Gamble, and utilize their massive reach and tell a story of inclusion or unconscious bias or gender or sexuality,” Jenkins says, “we’re going to reach millions of people.”

Soon after, Saturday Morning issued a peace brief, a public letter calling on ad industry leaders to join them.

Major brands reacted. Saturday Morning developed a yearlong campaign for Spotify, celebrating the influence of Black artists in music. Then, Procter and Gamble approached them about building on a previous film, “The Talk,” which had received praise for portraying Black families in ways that were rarely represented on a broader scale.

Yet, the campaign was also criticized for its lack of men, thus perpetuating a stereotype of absent Black fathers.

“The Look” follows a Black man as elevator doors close in his face and store clerks monitor his movements. In the closing scene the camera pans around a court scene, pausing as he takes his seat at the judge’s bench.

“This, for me, was so personal and so visceral,” Jenkins says. “The challenge in the advertising industry, like the entertainment industry, is authenticity. It would have been very easy to tell that story in a way that felt superficial. We have to channel a lot of thoughtfulness in approach when making a piece of communication like that.”
When Vessel opened in March 2019, Thomas Heatherwick’s honeycomb-like building featuring a lattice of staircases was greeted with equal parts criticism and acclaim.

Among those criticizing Vessel was Emily Sara, a disabled, interdisciplinary artist, designer, and adjunct instructor in the VCUarts Art Foundation program and Department of Graphic Design.

In an article for Hyperallergic, she argued that the structure’s 154 stairways—intended to bring people together and interact with the work—prevent people with disabilities from doing just that.

Vessel, she wrote, is hardly an exception within the art world. Sara challenged artists, curators, museums and institutions of higher education to look beyond making spaces ADA-compliant and instead evaluate how to make their facilities inclusive.

Her article hit a nerve, sparking conversations in online communities for people with disabilities. Discussions showed that people aren’t looking for earth-shattering changes, but rather modifications like designated parking spaces, multiple accessible building entrances, chair-height tables with seating, and awareness of sensitivities to temperature and smells.

“It’s about how disabled individuals feel when they come into a building,” Sara says. “Are they actually welcomed?”

Sara will be posing this question to graphic design students this fall in her newly designed course, “Experiments in Accessible Design.” In addition to inclusive design standards, Sara will cover topics like accessible typography, designing for screen readers, and experimenting with accessible technologies. She will also highlight disabled artists and designers who have not been a part of the conventional art historical canon.

“It’s exciting to develop a class that’s essentially the first of its kind in the United States,” Sara says. “We’re definitely seeing a large uptick in people paying attention to ableism and the consequences it has on our society. My personal opinion is that some of the best art and design is when we are able to make positive changes in the way we exist and take care of each other.”

Still, Sara argues one of the biggest steps an organization can take is ensuring representation. “There are not a ton of disabled artists, curators and professors,” she says. “Articles are one thing, but hiring disabled professors or having disabled curators, and trying to work with students who have disabilities are going to make the improvements.

“But it starts with education; if we make these spaces accessible, then [those students] grow up to be artists, and then those artists become professors and it cycles into itself.”
For the last several years, Photography + Film associate professor **John Freyer** and members of Rams in Recovery, VCU’s collegiate recovery program, have been riding around campus on a custom-built cherry-red bicycle, outfitted with a pour-over coffee maker. In the five minutes it takes them to brew a cup of coffee, they share their experiences with addiction in hopes of helping others better understand substance use and recovery.

Last fall, Rams in Recovery and the city of Richmond received an AmeriCorps grant to jointly address issues related to the opioid crisis. That’s when Freyer and other members saw an opportunity to use that same five minutes to train people to use naloxone to reverse an opioid overdose.

“Whenever we would bring the coffee bike to a naloxone training, it created a natural bridge, a natural break,” Freyer says. “It gave people enough time to, while they’re waiting, get trained on naloxone.”

Freyer says naloxone is a classic harm reduction strategy for preventing deaths among people who are at risk of overdosing. Putting naloxone in the hands of first responders is an obvious step, but Freyer says the real impact is when friends and family members are trained to use the life-saving medication.

Members of Rams in Recovery have trained and distributed doses to more than 1,000 VCU students, faculty and staff members. But communities across the city were harder to reach. So, Freyer designed a new bike: this time a teal electric-assist bicycle equipped with a lockbox, table and a CPR mannequin.

“It’s a beautiful object. Like the coffee bike, it commands a certain level of attention,” he says. “Whenever I ride it, people ask, ‘What is naloxone?’ It creates space for conversation, but the purpose of that conversation is to do the training.”

Freyer is also part of a new statewide grant from the governor’s office to bring his recovery-related social practice art projects—including the Free Naloxone Bike—to eight Virginia universities as they develop and broaden their on-campus recovery communities.

While the impact of Free Naloxone Bike is real and tangible, it marks a firm deviation from Freyer’s initial social practice projects, where he served glasses of water and hosted community meals in hopes of sparking organic conversation about addiction and recovery. In this latest iteration, community outreach and advocacy is the work.

“It’s important to break bread together, and it’s important to be in conversation together,” he says. “But having people leave with the ability to save a life—to me, in some ways, that was the missing piece.”
When Courtnie Wolfgang stepped into her first classroom in rural Georgia, she realized just how much she had to learn. She was teaching at a Title I school—meaning at least 40% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch—and had no budget for art education.

“It was a shock to me,” she says. “That was one of the first times I saw—not abstractly—that school resourcing is different depending on your community. And I had to find a way to make this work because I accepted this position, but also, these students don’t deserve less than the students five miles down the road who have funding. That was my first motivating experience that made me an advocate for public education funding and parity.”

Wolfgang spent five years teaching in public school. Each year, she says, introduced her to more students, which helped her develop a more empathetic approach to a variety of learners. She began researching justice-oriented pedagogies, with a particular focus on the experiences of students of color and LGBTQIA+ students.

This is the lens she now brings when teaching students in the Art Education program at VCUarts.

She begins by encouraging students to approach their learning with open eyes and an open heart, and a willingness to look back at fond memories with a critical eye. Wolfgang weaves in lessons about curriculum violence—how education systems were designed to support white men and boys with means, and today’s models perpetuate those traditions often at the expense of women, queer people, people of color, and people living in poverty. For example, she explains, the standards for good behavior and academic performance—from kindergarten through graduate school—are rooted in white middle class experiences.

“What I’m trying to help them do,” she says, “is shift philosophically from ‘This is how to do this thing, these are the important people, this is what good students look like, and this is what good art looks like.’ None of those things are actually true; we just feel like they are.”

Wolfgang says these culturally sustaining teaching practices aren’t just about undoing misinformation and creating a more equitable learning environment. She believes this approach is also the key to bringing people of all backgrounds into the arts and into education.

“I’m hoping that this kind of work has a ripple effect,” Wolfgang says. “Maybe we have a lot of white women in our program right now, but they go into classrooms with a more thoughtful approach. Maybe their body is not a body that looks like their students, but their students see themselves in the content in those classes, and the teaching practices value different kinds of learning and experiences. Maybe that shifts who sees themselves as an artist or an art educator, and we start to turn that tide.”

Many of the ideologies Wolfgang teaches in the classroom and cites in this article come directly from BIPOC and QTPOC scholars. See her recommendations for further reading.
International inspiration

VCUarts may be situated in the midst of a vibrant arts community, but sometimes a change of scenery is needed to revive creativity and bring a little fresh perspective. Not to mention, in today’s global climate, graduates need to understand how their work can translate across cultural and geographical lines.

That’s why VCUarts encourages students to spend time abroad, through faculty-led travel, exchange programs with universities in other countries, and grants that support international research and internships.

Before COVID-19 made our worlds a bit smaller, VCUarts students could be found in every corner of the globe from drawing Italy’s churches and piazzas, to studying the architecture of Doha, Qatar, to looking inward against the backdrop of Hong Kong.

Doha, Qatar

It only took a few weeks for Margarita Aleixo to fall in love with Qatar. The city’s unique and stunning architecture were a natural draw for the Interior Design major.

Aleixo spent the fall 2019 semester as an exchange student at VCUarts Qatar, the school’s campus in Doha’s Education City. While there, Aleixo took courses in light and color, ancient art history, graphics and studio work. A final project presented an opportunity to collaborate with graphic design students to propose a redesign of the school’s library that better reflects the institution’s creative spirit.

Read more about Aleixo’s experience in Doha on her [study abroad blog](http://studyabroadblog.com).
“The gift of studying abroad is that it gives you the ability to go outside of a culture you are used to. Additionally, this city is a designer’s paradise. I have seen innovations big and small that you cannot get in America.”

— Margarita Aleixo
During the course of this trip, I specifically focused on these myths: the stories of my father’s life in Hong Kong that I had slowly uncovered throughout my childhood from my father and mother, amalgamated with my imaginings and interpretations of them.

Being physically present in these spaces—seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, and touching them—allowed me to observe and explore their physical history, as well as become a part of it.

This desire and the need for people to visit and become a part of the specific places of their origins is something that not only impacts my life and informs my work on identity; I believe it affects everyone. Thus, one goal of my work produced from this trip is to highlight and discuss the importance of place and heritage to identity.

—Samuel Lo (BFA ’20), a recent graduate from the Department of Photography + Film, received a Dean’s International Research Grant to visit Hong Kong in summer 2019. There, he retraced his father’s history and gained a better understanding of his own identity.

Hong Kong

阿爸, Hong Kong, 2019.
Svalbard, Norway

“At no point did I ever think to myself that I was in a delicate place. The truth of the arctic that I witnessed was irrecconcilable with the arctic that I had been told about my whole life prior to my journey north; the fragile snow-globe falling dramatically towards the ground.

The arctic is harsh, it’s brutal, it’s all the hellish things I experienced and saw on my trip. And still, despite all of that, we are somehow destroying it. Humanity’s negative effects on the planet are so powerful, so dangerous, that they are having serious, deadly impacts on one of the toughest environments on earth.”

—Noah Thompson, a student in the Department of Communication Arts, received a Dean’s International Research Grant in summer 2019. He traveled to Svalbard, a group of islands about 600 miles north of Norway, where he explored how to use his artistic practice to engage in climate activism.

Florence, Italy

“My original concept for my sketchbook was for it to be reminiscent of the ornate illustration style seen in illuminated manuscripts. I was deeply inspired by the Limbourg Brothers and their incredible work in the *Très Riches Heures*.

When I finally saw the massive, handwritten leather-bound tomes in Italy, the idea that someone had illustrated each word and page by hand boggled my mind. I unfortunately had never learned how to write in cursive at my public school, so I taught myself for the first time during this process. I knew that I couldn’t compromise in the design of my text because I wanted to re-create the same sense of reverence and formality that I felt when I first looked at the *Très Riches Heures.*

—Soleil Becker, one of 20 students who participated in Florence Revealed: Drawing from the Wellspring of Renaissance Thought and Vision in summer 2019. This was the seventh summer that Communication Arts professor Stephen Alcorn led a group of students through his hometown. For one month, they explored the streets of Florence, Pisa, Arezzo and Siena in search of artistic inspiration. They wandered through Italy’s museums, churches, galleries and landmark piazzas, filling their sketchbooks with evocative illustrations and notes on their experience.
Painting + Printmaking alumna Torkwase Dyson (BFA '99) received a $25,000 award from Anonymous Was a Woman, and a $50,000 Joyce Alexander Wein Artist Prize from the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York.

Though she works in multiple mediums, Dyson describes herself as a painter whose compositions address the continuity of movement, climate change, infrastructure and architecture. For Dyson, these subjects in relationship to each other produce abstractions that explore the history and future of Black spatial liberation and environmental exploitation.

Craft alumna Emily Wicks (BFA '16), pictured left (standing), who co-founded Hand/Thrown, a community ceramics studio in Richmond, with Alexis Courtney.

“Both of us came into the space and said, this isn’t just a thing that you and I are doing. We’re going to give other people the opportunity to have the same space that we thought we needed.” — Emily Wicks

Photo by Gabe Souza
“When I started my art practice, I was really motivated by classic cartoons. I loved watching Fleischer cartoons and Looney Tunes. It was the thing that brings all people into Kinetic Imaging—wanting to animate.”

—John Sampson (BFA ’16), a graphic designer and art director based in New York City. A graphic design alumnus, Sampson previously held positions at several design studios, including Pentagram, DE-YAN, Timothy Goodman and Siegel+Gale.

“Very rarely are people going to hire you to do your dream project. Usually you have to make that happen yourself.”

—Kimberly Barnes (BFA ’14), a Boston multimedia artist working in animation, sound installation and video. In 2018, she earned her Master of Fine Arts degree from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University.

When you work on projects with people from other disciplines, and you participate in different mediums and practices, do you change the way you write or perform music?

I feel like I’m always looking at things that I do as the operator—the person who’s creating it, who knows what’s going on and what things are supposed to be—and also from the audience’s standpoint—the people who are experiencing it. I must ask: if I’m someone who doesn’t know what’s going on inside the creator’s mind, then what am I taking away from this? That helps me think about what I’m saying and how I’m saying it.

Of course, all of that really is influenced by different life experiences, and different ways of perceiving how things are in life. As humans, we are all storytellers. We create (seemingly logical) stories to connect events in our lives for the way we are experiencing the world at that moment in time. As soon as we have new experiences, new information or new perspectives, then we will see and create a new story that happens to fit the narrative that we’d like to believe in our lives.

What is your songwriting process? How does an idea come about for you, and how does it take shape?

It varies from composition to composition. For example, take the most recent group of songs I wrote: 17 original tunes based off of a variety of rhythms that are used in Candomblé ceremonies. Candomblé is an Afro-Brazilian religion based out of Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. I was in Salvador a couple summers ago studying these rhythms from an alabê (musical director). … I internalized these rhythms, decided how I emotionally connected to them, and then wrote music for each rhythm based on that feeling. Then, I rehearsed the tunes with my ensemble, and we performed them publicly. After the public performances, I decided what changes need to happen to make the tunes more effective as vehicles for communication—both amongst the band, and between the band and the audience.

As a result of this process, I have completely changed all the elements—save for the underlying rhythms upon which the compositions are based—of at least two of the 17 tunes. I’m always playing a game, and that’s improvisation at its core—play. I want to create different kinds of situations in which we can all play freely, whether it’s myself and other sound creators and musicians, or it’s myself and other non-musical artists. The point is to harness our collective energies and abilities to make choices as individuals in order to create something powerful together.

What is the biggest challenge of teaching music?

The biggest challenge is figuring out a variety of ways to assume different perspectives. I’m always practicing, always improving, always looking for ways to become better at communicating. As I’m teaching people who might have no experience with improvisation, I’m thinking, “How do I get them to understand this idea in a way that is not academic? How can I help this person figure out how to express their experiences and develop their language?” It’s a matter of explaining these various “rules” to people in such a way that they can understand them and can then be creative with it in their own way. Once they internalize it, they can put their own personality into it. Sort of like in English—we learn the rules of how to construct sentences so that we can choose if and when to obey or break those rules. The point is that language, both verbally and in music, is a tool. The point isn’t to construct perfect sentences. The point is to intentionally express ourselves in the most authentic way we know how.

Victor Haskins (BM ’13) is a multidisciplinary artistic creator, performer and teacher at the College of William and Mary. His work focuses on improvisation, especially with music. His original performance concept, ImproviStory, incorporates a variety of art forms—from dance and stage design to film—to create dynamic, immersive sensory experiences driven by sound. ImproviStory performances explore imagined and historical narratives through the prism of his personal experiences. VCUarts spoke with Haskins to learn more about his process and what he values in teaching.
“I think having Black teachers kept my heart in it and knowing that there was a legacy to carry on kept me motivated from the inside. I loved movement, but I also was obsessed with the meaning dance could make.”

—Dance alumna Christine Wyatt (BFA ’18)

Othman Khunji (MFA ’15) was named a VCU 10 Under 10 alumnus in a November 2019 ceremony recognizing the professional achievements and community service of alumni who graduated within the last 10 years. Khunji is a Bahraini interdisciplinary conceptual artist, and a VCUarts Qatar graduate who earned his master’s degree in design studies. His interactive creations invite a reawakening and exploration of social justice issues that will establish platforms for dialogue in the hope of generating new progressive schools of thought. His work has been showcased in Paris, Milan, Chicago, London, Berlin, St. Petersburg and throughout the Middle East, and featured in such publications as Harper’s Bazaar, Brown Book, Scarab and Domus.

Top left: Photo of Othman Khunji.

Photos by Katrina Taggart-Hecksher of Gianna Grace Photography.
“The strongest thing you can rely on is your belief system—the belief that you are talented, you are capable, and the belief that your weaknesses can be your strengths and actually your superpower.”

Sophia Li (BA ’13) was the December 2019 VCUarts commencement ceremony speaker. She is a New York-based multimedia journalist and video director whose reporting has appeared in CNN, VOGUE, and the United Nations.

The work of painting alumna Loie Hollowell (MFA ’12) has seen rising popularity in New York City’s art market. Her autobiographical work investigates the formal and intersectional qualities of the human body, arranged on canvas in abstract compositions that utilize careful geometry, gradient colors and symmetry.

This fall, Hollowell was included in the exhibition Perspectives at an online version of the Frieze New York art fair. Presented by Pace gallery, Perspectives featured Hollowell alongside fellow alum Torkwase Dyson (BFA ’99) and other leading artists around the globe.
you are capable, at your own pace, and actually your weaknesses can be your strengths and actually your superpower.

How a creeping clay sculpture shows we’re all connected

In February, Magdolene Dykstra (MFA ’18) was installing her latest work Polyanthroponemia (above) at the Gardiner Museum in Toronto. A hulking mass of clay resembling an infectious ooze, Dykstra planned to add segments and expand the piece over the course of the exhibition. But two months later, the Gardiner Museum closed and Dykstra was working out of a refurbished barn in Ontario—all because of a global pandemic.

The irony isn't lost on her, but she does see resonance between social distancing and the greater theme of her work. Dykstra, who earned her MFA from the Department of Craft/Material Studies, creates her by art pressing clay into molds. In moments, one mass of clay becomes hundreds, if not thousands, of smaller cells. Though they seem like individual bodies, in truth they share a single origin. In the same way, to combat the highly contagious COVID-19, we've had to collectively recognize how our actions can protect or harm others.

“"The significance of an individual is based in the fact that we are connected,” she says.

Polyanthroponemia first took shape in September 2019 as a series of sketches drafted at the Gardiner Museum. When Dykstra first installed the work, she needed a powerful presence that could draw attention and provoke questions, but also leave room for expansion.

Dykstra’s sketches became scale drawings (or “scale blobs,” as she calls them). Back at her home studio, she built the work on armatures of wood and wire, building up the clay on each module before transporting it back to the museum. There, she added more clay and pigments around the edges to integrate the pieces into the walls.

This was all to imbue the work with movement—“to suggest a sort of living seepage,” she says, to show “that these growths were moving through a liquid of sorts, and that liquid was continuing to spread over the gallery walls as they drip down.”

Dykstra originally planned to have the piece crawl all over the gallery and even out the emergency exit. Now that the Gardiner Museum has reopened, Dykstra will continue to expand the installation until the show closes Nov. 8.

It’s been difficult to share her work during a pandemic. Her art is intentionally material; it defies the way we experience the world digitally in photo galleries and social media feeds. But losing access to a stimulating art community has been a bigger challenge.

“I really enjoy being a full-time artist,” says Dykstra, “but I really do crave the opportunity to talk with other creative people on a mature level about what it means to be doing what we’re doing, and the struggles and the joys of a creative life.”
“As I arrived in Cape Canaveral and stood in the shadow of the massive spacecraft in the rocket garden, I started where I always do: with a pencil and paper, and I began to draw.”

Blue Sky to Red Skies

By Sterling Hundley

The low ceilings and narrow halls of NASA Langley stood in stark contrast to the cavernous rocket facilities I’d seen at Kennedy Space Center. If Kennedy’s vertical constructs were designed to launch rockets, these walls were built to hold secrets. And I had seen them both.

In March 2019, I was at Kennedy Space Center to document the launch of SpaceX’s Unmanned Crew Dragon rocket, with support for my research coming from the School of the Arts Dean’s Office. At that time, there were no expectations of collaboration between VCUarts and NASA; no opportunities to work with NASA on an agency-wide autonomous drone project; no plans to build a pilot program to pair VCUarts students with NASA inventors; no expectations that they would go on to present their final projects to leadership from NASA headquarters; and no concerns that all of this would be framed against the backdrop of a global pandemic.

All of those things would unfold in the coming year, but as I arrived in Cape Canaveral and stood in the shadow of the massive spacecraft in the rocket garden, I started where I always do: with a pencil and paper, and I began to draw.

Through drawing, I hope to understand. If I can understand, I can explain. If I can explain, I can teach.

Over the past 10 years, my role as an artist has evolved from being a commercial illustrator who tells other people’s stories, to seeking out experiences that shape my own. As an embedded artist, both time and context play a critical role in the work that I make, and allow me to do more than simply observe and document; they allow me to participate. While the SpaceX launch was the highlight of the weekend—and led to this spring’s NASA/SpaceX launch of American astronauts from U.S. soil into space for the first time in nine years—my job was to explore, to connect, and to bring something back.

Over the course of that weekend, I drew, photographed, took notes and shared drawings with those who expressed an interest. I reached out to all of my contacts in an attempt to gather information with the hope of getting greater access to the launch. I introduced myself to NASA employees and spoke to other guests. Amidst all of the hustle and effort, I made a fortuitous connection with Jennifer Viudez, the sister of a former student, that would set into motion an extraordinary series of events. I returned home inspired, with a sketchbook full of words, pictures and ideas.

In the weeks that followed, I received a phone call. NASA was building an autonomous drone challenge course and they thought that I could help them.
I rallied my colleagues from within Communication Arts—TyRuben Ellingson and Jason Bennett—and we organized a response. By our second call, we had been invited to take part in a blue sky conversation on-site at NASA Langley, where Jason and I found ourselves as the only artists in a room full of NASA scientists, engineers, pilots and administrators. A short time later, we were in front of the group, drawing on whiteboards, understanding, explaining. By the end of the day, we had secured a contract and I proposed the potential of developing a new course that would partner VCUarts students with NASA inventors.

A year later, I traveled with students in my pilot Blue Sky to Red Skies course to Hampton, Virginia. We met Jennifer at the badging office. As the students were badged in, I realized that these passes were more than our proof of entry; they were proof that somehow I had been able to convince someone that this group of artists offered significant value to our country’s most storied agency.

As we were led through a series of patchworked and repurposed buildings, past compression tanks, schematic sheets, and engraved signs that read “authorized personnel only,” we found our way to a conference room where we engaged with a trio of NASA inventors. Our assignment: to make NASA patents and technology accessible beyond these walls. I asked the students to take written notes, photograph objects, interview the inventors, and hold the inventions in their hands. I encouraged them to draw, to understand, to explain.

After returning to campus, students formed four teams—Saturn, Earth, Mars and Moon—each focused on a particular problem and patent. They used their field notes, drawings, designs, illustrations, user interface concepts and animations to clarify scientific complexities and amplify NASA’s message for soliciting commercial applications.

On Monday, May 11, they presented their final discoveries to leaders from NASA headquarters and Langley. Their presentation generated so much excitement that several students were recruited to intern with NASA and continue their work.

They also confirmed my most ardent convictions. That, as artists, we are more than entertainment and emotion. That drawing and design are universal languages that have the capacity to give solidity to thought, and structure to abstraction. That we belong at the table with the scientists, engineers, policymakers, politicians, doctors and thought leaders.

“These passes were more than our proof of entry; they were proof that somehow I had been able to convince someone that this group of artists offered significant value to our country’s most storied agency.”
The new VCUArts Faculty Lecture Series offers an inside look at our faculty, and their research and creative works. Visit our website to watch past lectures and find out about upcoming events. All lectures begin at 5:30 pm.

**Sept. 1 | Sound as an Interdisciplinary Medium**
Stephen Vitiello, professor and chair, Department of Kinetic Imaging

**Oct. 6 | From Shakespeare to Shange: Reclaiming our racial and cultural identity within the study of performance and arts education**
Tawnya Pettiford-Wates, Ph.D., professor, Department of Theatre

**Nov. 10 | The Power of Improv: Panel discussion in partnership with the Center for Interprofessional Education and Collaborative Care**
Elizabeth Byland, director of applied health improv and associate professor, Department of Theatre

**Dec. 10 | Algorithmic Choreography**
Kate Sicchio, Ph.D., assistant professor, Department of Kinetic Imaging and Department of Dance + Choreography

**Feb. 2 | Patterns in Place: Panel discussion investigating methodologies of study used to examine regional and vernacular patterns**
Sara Desvernine Reed, Ph.D., and Emily Smith, assistant professors, Department of Interior Design

**March 2 | The Malawian dugout canoe is ‘texit’**
Massa Lemu, assistant professor, Department of Sculpture + Extended Media

**April 6 | Innovation and Application: Julius Watkins and the Jazz French Horn Genre**
Patrick Smith, associate professor and interim assistant chair, Department of Music

**April 20 | Banking While Black: Economic Violence Beyond the Black Wall Street Massacre**
Paul Rucker, curator for creative collaboration, VCUArts

**May 4 | Virtual Production, Visual Effects and the Future of Filmmaking**
Matt Wallin, professor, Department of Communication Arts