As I reflect on my first year as dean of VCUarts, I am overcome with a sense of pride.

Our faculty and staff spent hours reimagining courses and spaces to accommodate new modes of learning. Our students approached a year of uncertainty with flexibility and openness. And, our community of artists displayed incredible resiliency as the pandemic upended our way of life, time and time again.

The last year also reaffirmed the far-reaching necessity of creative practices—and how VCUarts prepares students to reshape our world. In these pages, you will read about students who reconsider the art museum experience and explore the relationship between sustainable fashion and human rights. You will see how faculty articulate the role of trans women in ballroom culture, and study how improvisation can reduce homelessness. You also will learn about VCUarts’ new programs that support students who want to delve into the intersection of fashion and business, or explore the magic behind visual effects. On our campus in Doha, students and faculty are applying art and design practices to improve human health and exploring the benefits of experimental and emerging technology.

As we move forward as a school, it is important to acknowledge the foundation on which it was built and the individuals that fostered its progress. It is my honor to share that VCU has named the fine arts building after our former dean, Murry N. DePillars, Ph.D., who oversaw a 20-year period of impressive growth and increased recognition of the School of the Arts. In this issue, we detail recollections of Dr. DePillars’ legacy as an artist and educator from those who knew him best. They remark on his role as a preserver of Black culture and art, and as a leader dedicated to bringing together a diverse public. History has shown that the VCUarts community is one of excellence and resiliency, with a commitment to improving the world—and I am both fortunate and honored to stand alongside you as we take our next steps into the future.
Noah Simblist, associate professor in the Department of Painting + Printmaking, co-curated the exhibition Commonwealth with Stephanie Smith, former chief curator at the Institute for Contemporary Art at VCU. The exhibition was the result of two years of research and community engagement, including collaboration with partner organizations at the Philadelphia Contemporary and Beta Local in San Juan. It featured nine newly commissioned projects, including several collaborations with VCUarts faculty, students and alumni. Commonwealth opened at the ICA in September 2020.
Designing for a designer

A furniture design by VCUarts Qatar student Maryam Yacoub AlKuwari has been chosen by world-renowned fashion icon Diane von Furstenberg to be incorporated in her apartment in Doha. AlKuwari’s work was handpicked from a selection of proposals submitted by her and her fellow classmates after Oliver Gattensmann, von Furstenberg’s interior designer, invited students to collaborate with him to decorate the apartment.

“I still remember my emotions when our class first heard the brief—and who the client was,” AlKuwari says. “We knew we had to bring our A game. And, it turned out to be a tough competition with many other beautiful designs created by my fellow classmates.”

Bringing the magic to life

The older versions of Brad Pitt’s face in The Curious Case of Benjamin Button, menacing dragons breathing fire as they fly through the air in Game of Thrones, Rebels battling Imperial forces on a snow-covered planet in Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back. The floating feather in Imperial forces on a snow-covered planet in Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back. The floating feather in The Curious Case of Benjamin Button. Monstrous dragons breathing fire as they fly through the air in Game of Thrones. Rebel battles Imperial forces on a snow-covered planet in Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back. The floating feather in Forest Gump.

“If you watch any movie, television show or commercial, chances are, there are visual effects in it,” says Matt Wallin, the theoretical,” says Matt Wallin, professor and chair of the Department of Communication Arts. “It’s the huge, bombastic scenes, but it’s also the small details that make a character come to life, help tell a historical story or make you feel like you can see and experience the scenes.”

This academic year, Communication Arts launched a new visual effects concentration and minor. The six-course sequence combines art and technology to provide students with broad experience in the artistic, technical and narrative production of digital visual effects for live-action footage. The program aims to meet a growing need for artists in an industry that has seen a rapid expansion as new virtual production technologies emerge. For example, in 2019, all of the top 10 highest-grossing films were either visual effects movies or computer-animated films.

“This knowledge is vital to my future job—it’s not just theoretical,” says Odette Brister, a Communication Arts major. “I’m looking forward to using the programs and software that are the industry standard and being able to take an object and warp it or transform it with textures or create special characters.”

Fast track

This fall, VCUarts launched two new accelerated bachelor’s to master’s degree programs—one in Fashion and Business, and one in Art History. These new programs enable high-achieving students to earn both a bachelor’s and master’s degree in only five years. Graduates also are more competitive as they apply for jobs and admission to doctoral programs immediately following graduation.

Fashion students earn a BA with a concentration in fashion merchandising and are eligible to take graduate courses in marketing, accounting and finance. At the graduate level, students earn an MS in Business with a concentration in marketing management.

The new Art History program makes VCUarts one of only 13 public universities in the country to offer an accelerated bachelor’s to master’s program in this field. Students receive a BA and MA and, at the graduate level, have the option to concentrate in either historical studies or museum studies.

Lend a hand

Through the Hand Medal Project, students, faculty and alumni from the metals program in the Department of Craft/Material Studies extended their appreciation for the service of frontline workers during the pandemic. The project was conceived by friends and artists Iris Eichenberg and Jimena Ríos and was inspired by the idea of ex-votos—handheld objects of devotion that honor a gratitude or a wish. Eichenberg and Ríos organized a network of 145 “Hand Keepers” who collected the medals from makers across 66 participating countries. Approximately 70,000 medals were then passed on to “Hand Givers,” who presented them to their local medical communities in early November.

“Art museums are traditional and quiet—a temple full of objects where you have to keep your hands to yourself and not talk too loudly. But when you go to the science museum, they have kids running back and forth and touching things. Why is science fun and crazy and art has to be quiet and serious?”

—Charlotte Torrence, an Art History graduate student, held an assistantship position at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, supported by the Shawky Whitfield Fund. She worked with Ta Thongnopnua in the museum’s education department to collect, manage and interpret visitor data related to the Treasures of Ancient Egypt: Sunken Cities exhibition. In her master’s degree qualifying paper, she stated that she hopes to reimagine how museums can engage with visitors.
VCUarts Dean Carmenita Higginbotham awarded $30,000 in grant funding for faculty research in the 2020–21 academic year. Projects include a web-series documentary comprising short animated stories by queer women recounting experiences in gendered spaces; an online streaming platform for live performance art that is not available on commercial streaming platforms; a body of imaging experiments combining landscape photography, motion capture, and drone surveillance of the U.S.-Mexico border; an experimental documentary short film in Kathmandu, Nepal about Buddhist nuns who practice Kung-Fu; and a book exploring how Africa helps African American artists express their identity in the context of American art.

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

In Filipe Leitão’s Film and Media Scoring class, students learn to heighten drama or bring levity to a scene through their own compositions. The course is part of a collaborative curriculum in composition and sound design for cinema, games and motion media that Leitão is developing as an assistant professor in both the Department of Music and the Cinema Program.

Every two weeks, Leitão breaks down a film genre and explains how musical scales, instrumentation, range and rhythm bring a director’s vision to life. After reviewing tools and techniques, Leitão assigns a short clip from an existing film and students compose their own score using a digital audio workstation, or DAW, sample audio libraries, and MIDI instrumentation.

“ar convey action, we could have some bass drums, staccato strings with fast rhythm. For drama, we could use a drone in a low register, and fill notes with piano,” Leitão says. “I give them the feeling of how we could achieve that mood using our musical tools.”

Prior to the pandemic, Stacey Sharpe, a violin performance major, anticipated using the summer between her junior and senior year to visit different universities she was considering for graduate school.

“Since my plan was not possible, I chose a different route,” she wrote in a blog post for Violinist. “I emailed multiple professors asking them if they would be willing to give me a virtual lesson. To my surprise, every professor returned my email and were more than happy to give me a virtual lesson. To my surprise, every professor returned my email and were more than happy to give me a virtual lesson. They were more than happy to give me a virtual lesson. They were more than happy to give me a virtual lesson. They were more than happy to give me a virtual lesson.

“I learned so much about my personal playing and the teaching style of the different professors. This helped me to narrow down my list of schools that I would eventually apply to. Now that I am in the process of receiving decision letters, I am also receiving emails from the professors that I studied with to check in on me and keep me updated with the process.”

In Megan Siepka’s BFA ‘20 senior capstone project last year, A Cleansing in Three Acts, the dance major explored concepts of isolation and connection as a result of external forces—ideal themes for a dance film released eight months into a global pandemic.

Siepka also discovered new facets of choreography in the transition from a stage performance to a film project. For example, in the final segment, she filmed each dancer individually in the Grace Street Theater against a black backdrop with simple lighting.

“The image I was going for was a black hole, this vast, empty plane,” she says. “It was kind of ethereal and looked like they were floating. The plain background made it easier for me to layer the dancers over one another and achieve the illusion of everyone being in the space in the way I wanted them to be, of people coming together and performing in a time when we can’t do that.”

In a film, everything from the lighting, composition and editing, to music, pacing and dialogue coalesce to set a tone.

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A joint effort to advance sustainable fashion

This spring, students at VCUarts and George Mason University launched digital education and advocacy campaigns in support of Fashion Revolution Week 2021. It was part of Fashion Revolution’s global movement to create a more sustainable fashion industry. This year’s theme focused on the interconnectedness of human rights and the rights of nature.

Nine student teams launched campaigns on their institution’s respective Instagram accounts @fashionrevolution and @fashionrevolutionvcu using #FollowClothTheLast.

The posts celebrate each student’s individual history and love of a special garment or pair of shoes to emphasize the need to reject “fast fashion” by practicing gratitude for clothing items, emphasizing proper caretaking and encouraging the purchase of items that are ethically and sustainably sourced, manufactured and sold.

The power of improv

Researchers from the VCU schools of the Arts and Medicine received a $25,000 grant to study the use of improvisational techniques to decrease homelessness. The Applied Improv to Impact Homelessness program has two intertwined goals: strengthen self-advocacy and problem-solving skills among individuals affected by homelessness, and reduce the stigma of homelessness among health care professionals while strengthening caretaking and encouraging the purchase of items that are ethically and sustainably sourced, manufactured and sold.

The research project is led by principal investigators Elizabeth Byland, instructor and head of improv performance in the Department of Theatre, and Alan Dow, MD, MHS, interim division chief of hospital medicine and assistant vice president of health sciences for Interprofessional Education and Collaborative Care. They are joined by Cherie Edwards, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the School of Medicine and the Office of Assessment, Evaluation, and Scholarship.

“Whether it’s giving a future or current health care worker the confidence they need to advocate for underserved populations to reduce health disparities, or empowering those moving through homelessness with the tools they need for a successful transition,” Byland says, “I firmly believe that improv has the power to change lives.”

The 18-month grant is one of eight awarded by the Association of American Medical Colleges to U.S.-based member medical schools and teaching hospitals. The work is partially funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The ethnography of ball culture

Julian Kevon Glover, Ph.D., assistant professor in the Department of Dance + Choreography and VCU’s Center for Curated Initiative, excavates in combining topics that don’t often go together. Glover studied communications, music and sociology and earned a Master of Public Affairs. She then earned a Ph.D. in African American studies at Northwestern University with a dissertation that examined the performance ethnography of Black and Latinx trans women in the ballroom cultures of Chicago and London.

Her interest in ballroom culture—where young LGBTQ+ African and Latinx Americans mix performance, dance, lip-synching and modeling—has connections to her own life.

“I grew up in the rural Midwest. My parents are very strict Pentecostals,” she says. “When I came out, they told me to leave the home.”

At the train station, Glover met three trans women of color who provided her with shelter, food and an introduction to ballroom.

Glover’s desire to articulate the role that trans women play in ballroom culture felt important, not just for her own needs, but to document it for the academic record. This past April she hosted Queer Art Matters—a symposium where artists, scholars and activists discussed how their work resists white supremacist, anti-Black, patriarchal and classist exclusion by offering creative visions of future possibilities.

“When you are a multiply-marginalized person, the response is to appeal to institutions for inclusion, citing exclusion as marginalization,” she says. “But what might it mean to think differently about recognition? I realized I was beginning to conceive of a new way of thinking, not just about Black queer embodiment, but what it means to cultivate a meaningful life as a Black, queer person, despite all the different ways we’re subject to annihilation for anything at any moment.”

A lot of people were giving Watchmen a lot of credit for bringing attention to Black Wall Street.

Well, people in the Black community have been talking about it for years.

“The posts celebrate each student’s individual history and love of a special garment or pair of shoes to emphasize the need to reject “fast fashion” by practicing gratitude for clothing items, emphasizing proper caretaking and encouraging the purchase of items that are ethically and sustainably sourced, manufactured and sold.”

—Paul Rucker, VCUarts curator of creative collaboration, on NPR’s Morning Edition. Rucker’s latest project, Three Black Wall Streets, brings attention to the vibrant Black communities of Tulsa, Oklahoma, Richmond, Virginia, and Durham, North Carolina, that were prosperous and self-sustaining, but no longer exist. The project is a partnership between VCU, George Washington University and Arizona State University, which plans a physical exhibit of the project this fall.
Advances in travel, technology and infrastructure development have made it possible for universities to set up branch campuses in regions of the world where students, historically, had to cross countries and continents to gain internationally renowned qualifications.

The buzz surrounding the establishment of branch campuses, however, has never been solely about access to globally recognized degree programs. By engaging with and embedding within a community, these educational partnerships also build expertise that can be adapted to meet local needs.

Founded in 1998, VCUarts Qatar follows an arts and design curriculum that is reminiscent of its home campus in Richmond, yet adaptable enough to foster innovation in Doha and the Middle East. The institution has contributed to the country’s efforts on substantive issues both in the region and across the globe, from sustainability, to health care, to emerging technologies.

In the two decades since its founding, VCUarts Qatar has nurtured an expanding community of artists and designers who now work with organizations and individuals across Qatar. They are considering questions that have a collective bearing on—and are at the core of—humanity.
In recent years, the fashion industry has faced increased scrutiny for its environmental impact. From fast fashion and disposable clothing, to overproduction and waste, to non-sustainable and beautiful. Speakers included master leather craftsman Rino Magnani from Italy, Bill Curtin, the founder and sustainable and beautiful. The series aimed to show that luxury fashion can be both innovative materials were often points of discussion at VCUarts Qatar, particularly through the Eco-Luxury Laboratory, a new online workshop series led by the Department of Fashion Design. The series aimed to show that luxury fashion can be both sustainable and beautiful. Speakers included master leather craftsman Rino Magnani from Italy, Bill Curtin, the founder and owner of Blueprint Denim in New York, Brooklyn-based fashion illustrator Richard Haines (BFA ’73), and designer Helen Kirkum from London.

“The past few years have seen VCUarts Qatar focus on innovating current and future fashion students with a clear understanding and appreciation of the responsibility of designers towards sustainable production processes,” says Christopher Fink, chair of Fashion Design. “Eco Lux Lab was a solid step in that direction.”

In 2021, the university launched a new course, Foundation in Art Therapy, designed for students considering a career that allows them to use their creative talents to support the wider community. The program is one of the first of its kind in the region and is being led by Sara Powell, the founder of ARTIC, a psychological and counseling center in Dubai.

The course is a significant step as, globally, the integration of the arts, design and health care has been on the rise.

Leading Qatar’s health care initiatives is the Ministry of Public Health that aims to help its residents understand the concept of health and illness prevention with the help of VCUarts Qatar, Astrid Koenesinger, chair of Graphic Design, Peter Martin, assistant professor of Graphic Design, and Byrdy Yeend, assistant professor of Liberal Arts and Science, along with alumni and students, worked with MoPH officials to streamline complex health messages so they resonate with the public. Guided by faculty and using research in graphic design and visual communication, Graphic Design students Aisha Al-Abdullah and Anza Allawd pitched concept narratives to the leadership of Qatar Foundation’s Health that aims to help its residents understand the concept of health and illness prevention with the help of VCUarts Qatar, Astrid Koenesinger, chair of Graphic Design, Peter Martin, assistant professor of Graphic Design, and Byrdy Yeend, assistant professor of Liberal Arts and Science, along with alumni and students, worked with MoPH officials to streamline complex health messages so they resonate with the public. Guided by faculty and using research in graphic design and visual communication, Graphic Design students Aisha Al-Abdullah and Anza Allawd pitched concept narratives to the leadership of MoPH, including Director of Public Health Shiekha Al-Hamad Al Thani.

The collaboration led to Allawd and Alyssa Alvarez, another Graphic Design student, being offered an internship at the MoPH. The departmental rotations and industry-based experience will help them gain an understanding of the complexity of modern health care, and how to use design to simplify and inclusively communicate MoPH messages to diverse audiences.

“Anza and Izza have been deeply engaged in cultural literacy and actively applying their skills to aide accessibility and inclusion,” Koenesinger says. “This wonderful partnership with MoPH shows just how central design is in the wider context of community development, and how supportive the MoPH is in recognizing this.”

In another demonstration of the intersection of arts and health, alumni Zainab Al-Khayan, Ayah Elmore (BFA ’20), and Salma Ansar (BFA ’20) held supervisory online workshops for people with Down Syndrome from the Qatar chapter of Best Buddies International. During the sessions, which took place over a six-week period in late 2020, participants created watercolor paintings, collages, prints and 3D artwork in an effort to boost confidence, creativity and social skills.

The sessions were part of a pilot program jointly conducted by volunteers from QF partner universities VCUarts Qatar and Weill Cornell Medicine-Qatar and Sidra Medicine, the Qatar chapter of Best Buddies International and ATIC Psychological and Counseling Center in Dubai. “It was lovely to see my son blooming,” says Hanan Abdallah, another Graphic Design student, being offered an internship at the MoPH. The departmental rotations and industry-based experience will help them gain an understanding of the complexity of modern health care, and how to use design to simplify and inclusively communicate MoPH messages to diverse audiences.

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Innovation labs in Qatar are working to harness artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies across a number of sectors, from transportation, health care and logistics, to sustainability and sports. These initiatives indicate the extent of digitization in the country—and offer VCUarts Qatar the opportunity to apply new technologies in a variety of contexts.

One project, led by Adjunct Instructors Sherin Hesham Karawia and Mariam Rafehi, along with Mona Youssef Kassem, academic technology specialist, proposed a forward-thinking instructional model that leverages virtual reality. Reimagine Education Beyond Covid-19 with Virtual Embodiment uses digital learning strategies and VR-based collaboration tools to enhance student engagement in a remote or hybrid learning environment. The research also employs virtual embodiment theory to investigate 21st-century emotional skills, such as resilience, creativity and optimism, in higher education.

Funded through a Hamad bin Khalifa University Innovation Grant, this project is currently in development with faculty at Northwestern University-Qatar and VCUarts Qatar. Workshops are being held with students from both institutions, and entities from the local pre-university sector have expressed interest in future collaborations.

Experimental art and technology are also seeing growing enthusiasm and momentum in Qatar and the Gulf region. Adding to the mix is Sonic Jeel (Jeel means “generation” in Arabic)—a collective started three years ago by Michael Heredia, associate professor of Graphic Design, and Art Foundation Director Simone Muscolino. Conceived as both a research project and an education endeavor, Sonic Jeel includes an elective course, Sonic Exploration, for students interested in learning sound design.

The Sonic Jeel collective, in collaboration with Hadeer Omar, assistant professor of Art Foundation, also performed at Printed Matter Virtual Art Book Fair in New York, with a pre-recorded performance filmed in unique locations across Qatar.

“VCUarts Qatar has several strong art and design programs that have helped shape the creative community in Doha for more than 20 years,” Heredia says. “Within these programs we have been expanding toward new forms of emergent media, from creative coding, through sound exploration, to virtual reality and projection mapping.”

It takes time, trust, and a thorough understanding of the wider community for a branch campus to feel relevant in and engaged with the country where it is situated. In the two decades since VCUarts Qatar was established—and with the support of the Qatar Foundation, VCUarts, local stakeholders and Qatari leadership—the institution’s presence and influence in the region have grown. The breadth and impact of its programs, and the commitment of its faculty, staff, students and growing alumni body, have helped VCUarts Qatar anchor itself in the country.

“Our partnerships with various governmental and non-governmental entities, such as Qatar Museums, DIDD (Doha Design District), and the Doha Film Institute; our collaborations with renowned artisans, craftspeople, designers, and industries from the region and abroad; our classes and workshops that give us the opportunity to share our expertise and resources with the public; our curricula that can be adapted to suit evolving local and cultural contexts—all steadily built up over the years—have helped this nation move steadily toward its aspirations of developing a thriving art and design community.”
“Where there is no informed discourse you can never have a resolution to a problem.”

—Past VCUarts Dean Dr. Murry N. DePillars in his testimony before a U.S. House Appropriations Subcommittee, making the case for the value of public funding for the arts.
Murry N. DePillars, Ph.D., oversaw a period of tremendous growth as dean of the Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts from 1976–95, nearly doubling enrollment and elevating the school’s national reputation. Now, VCU is recognizing the longtime educator, who died in 2008, by naming a School of the Arts building on West Broad Street in his honor.

The dedication, authorized by a Board of Visitors resolution passed in September 2020, renames the fine arts building at 1000 W. Broad St. the Murry N. DePillars Building. The 114,000-square-foot facility houses the Craft/Material Studies, Kinetic Imaging, Painting + Printmaking and Sculpture + Extended Media departments.

“Dean Murry DePillars’ legacy as an artist, an educator and an advocate for our university community—and for Richmond—is profound,” says VCU President Michael Rao, Ph.D. “He brought diverse communities together to learn, to create and to engage in needed conversations. VCUarts grew and achieved well-earned worldwide recognition during his time as a leader.”

VCU was only eight years old when DePillars was named dean, following the 1968 merger of Richmond Professional Institute and the Medical College of Virginia. At the same time, Richmond was changing. The year 1977 marked the election of the first majority Black City Council in almost 30 years, along with the city’s first African American mayor.

As dean, DePillars was determined to use the arts to forge a bold, unified spirit in Richmond. Over the next 20 years, VCUarts flourished, growing to become one of the largest arts schools in America with expanded performing arts facilities, campus and city jazz festivals and high-profile fashion shows. Those events—many organized largely by DePillars himself—realized his goal of bringing a diverse public together.

“Murry was a bigger-than-life presence,” says Joseph Seipel, who served as dean of VCUarts from 2011–16. “I’ll always remember his graciousness, his sense of humanity and his love of the School of the Arts. The sweet aroma of his pipe tobacco and his hearty laugh always let you know that the impeccably dressed dean was near. Generous with his smiles, he was a friend to so many of us on the faculty as well as our leader.”

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Vanessa Thaxton-Ward, Ph.D., first met DePillars in the early days of her career. At the time, she was working at the Penn Center, an African American historical institution located on St. Helena Island in South Carolina. The center had submitted a grant to the National Endowment for the Arts’ folklife program and DePillars was assigned to review their application.

“We were very nervous that we were getting this visit from an official,” Thaxton-Ward says. “But I see this man, he has on all white. He’s this beautiful dark-skinned brother. And he was so very nice and genuine and down to earth.”

In 2002, she had an opportunity to curate a solo exhibition of DePillars’ work at the Hampton University Museum and Archives where she now serves as director.

Beyond the Fixed Star: The Art of Murry DePillars spanned his career, from 1962 to the present day, and included oil and acrylic paintings and pencil and ink drawings.

“I wanted to present [his skill and mastery of his medium and the direction his work went], which was very African American-centered,” she says. “There was a basic evolution, but he was consistent. He was not an artist that changed, that painted based on what was popular. He was true to himself and what he wanted to share.”

“‘He uplifted us’
As a child growing up in Hampton, Virginia, Suzanne Boone Gwathmey (BFA ’82) watched her older siblings and relatives set off to college. Despite the challenges ahead of her, Gwathmey was committed to do the same.

“I was determined. Don’t tell me no,” Gwathmey says. “I started researching. I had no idea where I was going to go, what I was going to major in or how I needed to pay for it. But I knew for sure I was going to go.”

Gwathmey later enrolled at VCUarts where she earned a degree in Interior Design. She often looked to her mentors for guidance on navigating college and life beyond—including DePillars.

“Whenever I felt stressed, or just needed a mentor, I stopped by his office, unannounced,” she says. “I was never, ever turned away. I was in awe that he was there, that I could speak to him, that he was on the level of students, but uplifting us at the same time.

“He had a love for young people—but even more so for Black students, to help engage us, educate us, to make us proud, to grow, to know our Black heritage.”

“It has been said of Murry DePillars that art was his passion and education was his vocation.”

—Rev. Dr. Iva E. Carruthers, excerpted from the eulogy she delivered in honor of DePillars at the eta Creative Arts Foundation in Chicago, June 28, 2008.
Some images of the document:

- "Four Moments of the Sun" by Murry N. DePillars.

- A man of principle

- "A change agent"

- "We were kindred spirits"

- "He saw the vision"

...
How would you describe your personal imprint on films you have worked on at Pixar?

Inside Out was the first time I really was able to give a lot of myself to the project. I remember when, as a story team, we were trying to figure out what happened to the main character, Riley, and the story of what caused joy to fall out of headquarters. I related a story of when I was in sixth grade, one of the worst things that happened was crying in front of the whole class and being so embarrassed because I didn’t know any of these kids and it was this whole new, big environment. And my colleagues at Pixar were like, “That’s great!” And it ended up being the inciting incident in the film.

In Toy Story 4, we had to basically re-invent Bo Peep. She became another character that I felt very strongly about, how she represented and guided her. A lot of that poured directly into making the short film Lamp Life. I worked on Toy Story 4 for so long, it felt like there were a lot of ideas left on the cutting-room floor. And I was able to bring them back in a funny way into the short film. Playing with the toy character who also represents a working mom, a character who, when things get hard, picks herself up, keeps going and re-invents herself. She’s got these little sheep she has to care for. They become a partner to her; she’s also responsible for them. So, in a sense, when I was making that short film, it paralleled my own life experience of being an artist, being a filmmaker, but also being a woman and a mom. All these aspects of my life that I’m balancing and navigating in an industry with few women in it.

What is a typical day like for you?

I bounce between drawing, having conversations with people to spark ideas or going down some internet wormhole exploring something, whether that’s a science article or watching films. I do a lot of reading when I can, whether that’s fiction or nonfiction. Now that I have an idea for a new project, moving forward I’m collaborating with a writer and it’s starting to take shape. I still draw to get ideas across, but I also lean more toward writing. When I was in the role of story supervisor, I started to focus on understanding the process of crafting a screenplay and writing.

Do you feel pressured to hurry up, or are you given the space to go through the whole process?

Animation is definitely something that you have to be in for the long haul. There’s this level of endurance and patience. There’s a part of me that wants to hurry it up, and just get to the right story and answers. But I know that I’ll have to keep iterating and changing the story for it to really work. At Pixar there is an understanding that it will have to be crafted to that level, which takes iterations and time.

What inspires you?

The creative process for me involves drawing inspiration for different aspects of the story. The first thing may be a spark for an idea for the world (we are animating), tapping into that part of myself that is a kid, thinking outside the box and can play. I may read a science article, a fiction book, or just walk around and suddenly ask myself a question about the world. I’m curious and then pose my own funny or clever answer to a question. For example, in Inside Out, the question was, “What’s going on in a kid’s head? What if you could actually go inside her mind?” And the director, Pete Docter, imagined an entire world inside the mind, where emotions are characters.

For inspiration for characters, I pull from the relationships I’ve had in my own life, people I know and from “ah-ha” or epiphany moments I’ve had in life. That’s where the emotional core and inspiration for a story usually lives.

There’s also the more conceptual, deeper meaning of a story, which is the theme, or, “What are you saying with this film?” This one is tougher and seems to morph with discovering the character in the world. But I’m pulling from all these things. An idea really forms for me when I feel I’ve hit three in a row, I feel there’s potential. When the world where it takes place, the relationship and theme all fuse into a story.

What advice would you give to a student aspiring to enter into animation?

A big part of being a story artist or a director in animation is developing your narrative storytelling and drawing skills. Find the way to gain those skills, whether that’s going to college, going to a university that has a program that can help you get there, along with reaching out to people online and engaging in study on your own. Apply for internships. There’s a lot of people out there really and willing to help mentor and encourage. Also, don’t forget to live! Engage with people, or what will you have to tell a story about?
Craft/Material Studies alum Lindsay Miś (BFA ’06) is the executive director of the Massachusetts Design Art & Technology Institute (DATMA) in New Bedford.

In 2019, Miś launched DATMA’s inaugural program season, Summer Winds, which features cultural and educational offerings. The season highlights wind, a natural element of the local geography that once pushed the sails of whaling ships and now drives wind turbines and New Bedford’s 21st century economic growth.

Miś maintains her metalsmithing practice at Hatch Street Studios in New Bedford.

“I like that my position allows me great flexibility. I get to teach courses in many areas, including theatre history, acting, directing, voice, movement and performance studies. I also get to serve as the artistic director for the collegiate theatre company, while teaching and shaping curriculum.”

Painting + Printmaking alum Keith Ramsey (BFA ’98) is creating Not-So-Little Free Libraries throughout Richmond. The libraries resemble miniature houses and are painted to reflect their surroundings.

“Finding connection through disconnection

Mental health and well-being might be a trending search term, but for VCUarts Qatar alumnus Mohammad Jawad (BFA ’15, MFA ’19), it is a personal mission. He designs products that help people disconnect from the digital deluge around them and reconnect with themselves and their natural environment.

“There was a time when the word ‘addiction’ was ascribed solely to substance dependency or abuse,” Jawad says. “Now it is also applied to the intoxicating allure of social media and how it leads to a constant craving for gratification and pleasure, enveloping users in a sense of addiction.”

Jawad’s self-reflection, coupled with his background in biology, and extensive research into human psychology, led him to explore the topic of art and medicine during his BFA studies. Later on, during his MFA studies, he delved deeper into the intersection of art and health, developing a series of wearable devices that drive home the need to curb digital dependency.

“Once you're immersed in the digital world, it’s difficult to step out of it,” he says. “But if you’re wearing a helmet that enables you to take a step back, you can see the world around you, which is just as rich.”

“One of these products is Virtual Bubble, a wearable device much like a light-weight helmet with a collapsible structure. The piece, inspired by the armadillo, covers one’s face when you’re engaged in a phone conversation, preventing others from interacting with you as they normally would—symbolic of the psychological and social barriers that digital dependency creates in relationships.”

“The use of digital devices cannot be completely deleted from our lives,” he explains. “But our dependency on them has led to something rather ironic—in our haste to get technology to respond to human touch, the value of touch, by itself, is forgotten.”

36 Days of Type

Graphic Design alum Katrina Navasca (BFA ’18) participated in the 2021 36 Days of Type challenge, designing a letter or number each day for 36 consecutive days. 36 Days of Type was launched in 2014 by a graphic design studio in Barcelona, Spain, as a way to engage designers, illustrators and graphic artists to represent the same symbols from thousands of different perspectives.

Navasca is a Filipino-American designer and illustrator based in Richmond. She designs full-time for an content marketing agency while also freelancing and creating personal work.

“Tell us why you participated in 36 Days of Type. I decided to take part this year to challenge myself—I wanted to see if I could actually get into the habit of creating something every day. Food has always been my favorite thing to draw, so I thought it’d be fun to try to deconstruct these everyday items and give them new forms to live in.”

How do you approach your work and how do you continue to evolve and improve your practice? The most important thing to me is that I’m making things that reflect who I am. I try not to illustrate things just because they might be popular on Instagram. I’d rather stay true to what I actually want to make and use my own voice—it’s more valuable and definitely more fulfilling.

— Diego Villada (MFA ’08) is the director of theatre, dance and performance studies at New College of Florida in Sarasota.

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**Larry Horne: 50 years of designing for politicians and dignitaries**

C. Larry Horne (BFA ’89) was a teenager when he first visited the nation’s capital in the early 1960s. He was participating in a 4-H Citizenship Short Course that allowed him to meet his representatives in Congress, tour city monuments and learn about the government. Little did he know, the trip was also an introduction to the people and places that would be central to his nearly 50-year career as an interior designer.

Horne graduated from the VCUarts Interior Design program, which he notes had more of a residential focus while the professional field was more commercial. He then began his career at W.J. Sloane, a large furniture store in Washington, D.C., where he built a clientele that followed him when he launched his own interior design firm in 1982.

Over the years, Horne designed homes, hotels, palaces, and high-end commercial interiors. His clients included well-known political figures, kings, princesses and CEOs around the world.

"As a designer, you get to know them. It’s almost like you become a member of the family," he says. "You share their emotions and their thoughts. You’re working for them; you’re part of their world." Horne says the book was meaningful for the people and places that he launched his own interior design firm in 1982.

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"As a designer, you get to know them. It’s almost like you become a member of the family," he says. "You share their emotions and their thoughts. You’re working for them; you’re part of their world." Horne says the book was meaningful for the people and places that became central to his nearly 50-year career as an interior designer.

Larry Horne says, "and I admired her." Horne worked with Collins on three residences in Washington as a result of referrals from her, including several princes who were coming to American universities and buying townhouses where they needed to entertain guests.

Ebitam Al Suwaiyel, ambassador to the U.S. After the Saudi Arabian ambassador passed away in 1977, Horne completed several projects for her wife, Ebitam. Madam, as Horne called her, recommended him to Saudi students for years. Because Ebitam was a diplomat’s wife, she was the one to hire him to design the interior.

Horne landed a number of projects in Washington and Saudi Arabia as a result of referrals from her, including several visiting students and diplomats visiting American universities. "She was a bold and strong leader," Horne says. "She was the first African American woman in Congress to win someone’s trust. Just like any other profession, if people don’t trust you, you don’t have a great relationship," Horne says. "I tried my best to be honest and approach the job with sincerity.

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Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. In 2001, Horne met Condoleezza Rice as she moved to Washington, D.C., to serve as President George W. Bush’s National Security Advisor. She purchased a condo at Watergate South. She told Horne she had a moving truck coming in one month and asked if he could design the interior.

"I called every contractor, workroom and supplier I had worked with over the years and called in every favor," Horne said. "I had to file a 10 trades installing moldings, painting, installing built-ins, flooring and lighting, remodeling bathrooms. It was organized pandemonium—but we did it."
Sound as an Interdisciplinary Medium

Stephen Vitiello, Kinetic Imaging

“The project I'm most well-known for, for probably hopefully the right reasons and unfortunate reasons, reasons that had nothing to do with what I would have known at the time, is the World Trade Center recordings. I had a Worldviews Residency through the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council in 1999 and six months to spend with 24-hour access in my studio in the World Trade Center.

“The basic thought for me was to take the sound from outside, inside. That was where I understood what it was to be my own artist. It was kind of a room of one's own. This is where I went from being a soundtrack collaborator to being my own artist.

“In the six months that I was there, it took me about two months to figure out how to get sound because the windows were sealed shut. And, eventually, I hit on contact mics.

“The first sounds I ever heard were church bells. I never heard them again. Later, I heard cars crashing, boats in the Hudson river. There was a giant kind of prey once outside that window in this kind of magical moment that was also never repeated. There were times I heard the building sound like an orchestra tuning up.

“And the recording most people have heard of, if they know this project, was the morning after Hurricane Floyd peaked. It was the second strongest hurricane to hit New York in the '90s, and it was the only time I ever walked into the space and could actually hear the building moving. I could hear what was going on outside without my microphones.”

The Malawian dugout canoe is ‘texxt’

Massa Lemu, Ph.D., Sculpture + Extended Media

“The dugout can therefore be read as ‘texxt’ about resistance. For example, it is a vessel used in the cross-border trade between Malawi and its neighbors, defined in greater part by smuggling.

“I argue that smuggling of commodities, such as shoes, cigarettes, alcohol, cooking oil and textiles from and into refugee camps or across the border exemplifies resistance by a people on the fringes, who have been marginalized in the global capitalist economy.

“its effects cannot compare in magnitude and impact to the perpetual massive corruption and plunder of national wealth by transnational corporations. In fact, the smugglers are enacting what I would call their own ‘under globalization’, operating under the radar of governmental regulation and control.

“After we had made the work, we just put the dugouts into a form of a pyre, because when we work with the dugouts, after we finish, we leave them on the shore and we give them to the fishermen who turn them into firewood. So, this is a pyre that’s speaking to the destination of these rotted dugout canoes but which we had transformed into decorated, as paintings, as colorful, just heightening the colors that we find on the surfaces of the canoe.”

From Shakespeare to Shange

Tawnya Pettiford-Wates, Ph.D., Theatre

“I had a lack of connection with my own cultural continuum and a basic knowledge of my authentic self, beyond a forced character portrayal or a behind-the-mask performance. I came to call that state that I was in ‘alienated acting.’

“I was an alien to myself, and my panic exposed a fragility about my own cultural construction of myself, and a deficiency and awareness that made me question who I was. So, that question is one that has to be addressed, I think, by everybody, actually.

“But if you are an artist of the dramatic form, if you are a performing artist, you especially need to address that question. And if you are an artist of color, it becomes even more important in this culture and the society in which we live. It cannot be ignored. Not by the artist who is a student, not by the artist who is a professional, and certainly not by the teachers and professors who teach those artists.”
VCUarts and VCU Career Services are cohosting a series of virtual workshops designed to assist arts students and recent graduates with searching for opportunities in creative industries, as well as using a variety of tools to craft professional portfolios and websites.

For more career development and other events, visit arts.vcu.edu/events.

Kickstarting your Job and Internship Search
Oct. 1 | 12–1 p.m.

Don’t Search Alone: How networking can transform your internship or job search
Oct. 15 | 12–1 p.m.

Building Advanced Portfolios and Websites with Editor X
Oct. 22 | 12:30–1:30 p.m.

Brand You: How to boost your chances of getting noticed by employers
Oct. 29 | 12–1 p.m.

Wix.com Workshop: Portfolios and more
Nov. 5 | 12:30–1:30 p.m.

Adobe Portfolio Workshop
Nov. 12 | 12–1:30 p.m.