



# STATE OF THE ARTS

written by Ashley Wilson Fellers

How Roanoke is leveraging creativity to build stronger communities ... and to tackle tough conversations.

Maggie Perrin-Key, the 2023 Emerging Artist for Roanoke's Open Studios tour, is shown here in her downtown studio. "I never thought Roanoke would be a place I could have a career in art," she admits. "But I'm doing it."

ASHLEY WILSON FELLERS

**I**t's difficult to think of a more explosively productive season in Roanoke's arts scene. In the last 12 months, giant, handmade puppets have bobbed down parade routes, and big, bold murals have been splashed across buildings. Meanwhile, crowds thronged performance venues for the first time since COVID. But while it's easy to track Roanoke's splashiest arts moments, perhaps some of the most important work has happened in quieter – and perhaps less quantifiable – ways.

Neighbors met together to build those big papier-mâché puppets ... and learned they had more in common than they thought.

Communities tackled tough conversations, using art to acknowledge painful histories ... and to trace a path forward.

Perhaps Roanoke's arts scene is becoming a place not just for sparkle and splash, but a nexus for connecting people.

"We're really trying to look at that intersection between the artist and the community," says Doug Jackson, Roanoke City's arts and culture coordinator. "We're looking for a space where everybody can make a difference, where you can have an idea – you can want to improve the area around you, your organization, your community, you name it – and your neighbors are going to cheer you on ... But how do we create that?"

In the past year, creatives across the valley have been working to answer that question.

## FOSTERING CREATIVE COLLABORATION & BUILDING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

In May, under deep-blue lights at Mill Mountain Theatre, two dancers skim across the stage, then round their arms and reach toward each other, joining their bodies like links in a chain. To some, these motions might look like simple balletic gestures, but for audience members from the Deaf community, they mean something more – they're visually resonant of the American Sign Language sign for "linked" or "connected."

This innovative ballet, "The Lark Ascending" – created by Will Smith, who recently retired from Roanoke Ballet Theatre as a principal

dancer – was just one piece of a night of arts performances specifically geared toward the local Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing community. There was poetry, song and even a film preview, all thoughtfully interpreted, and funded by an Art Matters grant from the City of Roanoke's Arts Commission, with support from the National Endowment for the Arts.

"I didn't know there were so many artists, let alone local, hearing artists, that cared about reaching the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community," admitted Betsy Quillen, a passionate advocate who served as the evening's ASL coordinator, and who worked alongside Smith to choreograph the ballet step-by-step. "Sometimes it feels like you're an island trying to reach this community, or trying to convince others that it's important to reach this community. But to collaborate with others who also had this vision ... it was inspiring."

Quillen, who experienced significant hearing loss as a teenager, remembers how excited she was when Smith first reached out to her about his idea: could he create a ballet that incorporated the language of ASL into the shapes the dancers made with their bodies? Absolutely, answered Quillen: "I could already see it."

The collaboration that resulted was just one example of many creative connections sparked in Roanoke in recent months – something encouraged by the Arts Commission's meet-ups and workshops in its "Year of the Artist" initiative.

"The cross-pollination we've gotten through YOTA ... we've learned about so many events and artists we wouldn't have known about otherwise," agrees Julie Kinn of Kinnfolk, a local Celtic-music duo who also won an Art Matters grant.

And that kind of cross-pollination is critical, because art can be lonely work.

Eva Lynch-Comer, a newcomer to the valley and Roanoke's 2023 Writer by Bus, agrees. Prior to receiving her grant – a project funded by Ride Solutions, Valley Metro and the City of Roanoke Arts Commission – the New York native and Hollins student labored over her work alone, often writing about trauma or her personal thoughts.

"Usually I write poetry and send it to lit mags, and that's it," she says. "I write it in a vacuum and send it out into the void... I don't

have much engagement."

But this project – which gave Lynch-Comer a stipend to ride the bus and compile her notes into a poetry chapbook to release this fall – forced her to chat with other riders, scribble her ideas on the fly and engage with her community face to face.

"It's real. It's tangible ... It's out [for] the world to see, which comes with its fears, but also with its moments of connection," she explains. "This is pushing me to take more risks, to write about brighter things and different things ... I'm finding new entry points into writing."

## NURTURING EMERGING ARTISTS

On a balmy Friday night in midsummer, gallery-goers crowd into Art on 1st – one of Roanoke's newest art spaces, tucked into the shady corner of First and Kirk.

In many ways, this looks like any ordinary art opening. Artists hover near their works, shifting foot-to-foot. There's a little of that first-night frisson crackling through the air, with passersby pressing faces to the plate-glass windows. But in an important way, this opening is different, because many of the artists are relatively new to the art scene, with some showing work for the very first time. And that, says gallery co-owner Rick Sheridan, is perfectly fine by him.

"It's very satisfying when you find an artist who's finding their voice and finding a way to express themselves," says Sheridan. "You help them along that journey."

Sheridan founded the gallery last December with his partner, painter Annie Schultz. Together, the pair introduced a business model that's relatively unique in the Valley. In contrast to galleries that show work by member artists, or by special invitation, Art on 1st frequently posts open calls for work that responds to a theme – "Transparency," for instance – with anyone invited to submit. The model has made space for a diverse group of artists at a wide variety of experience levels.

"We've had someone show the very first piece of art they ever made," says Schultz. "It's exciting."

Meanwhile, the Arts Commission



## ARTS &amp; CULTURE

introduced a series of open calls, too, from a self-portrait project that attracted many newer artists, to more than 30 “Art Matters” grants, awarded to projects that advocated for community wellness, justice and inclusion.

“Those open calls are so important because they’re paid; that’s such a huge hurdle for [emerging] artists to go through,” says painter Maggie Perrin-Key, selected as the 2023 Emerging Artist of the Year by Open Studios Roanoke.

Perrin-Key knows a thing or two about life as a burgeoning artist. When she first started out, she says she lived in her family home to afford her studio space – something she sees as critical to her progress. “The biggest [challenge] is affordable art studios,” she says. “We need them, and they need to be subsidized.”

To help emerging creatives begin tackling the monetary aspects of their work, Katherine Devine – artist-in-residence for Roanoke Valley Sister Cities – hosted a series of free community workshops. Attendees could learn about grants, meet counselors from the Small Business Development Center and even sketch out visual business plans. “There are cultural myths that are obstacles to artists, and one is that to sell your artwork is ‘selling out,’” says Devine, who credits the SBDC with helping her carve out a living through her artwork. “If you’re selling your art, you’re a business owner, and there are resources to help you.”

And in the past year, new artists began to tap into them.

## TACKLING TOUGH COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

On a quiet Tuesday morning, Bryan Hancock hunches over the table at a favorite local coffee shop, Little Green Hive. As usual, he’s wearing chunky, noise-cancelling headphones, and he’s accompanied by a notebook for scribbling. Hancock has spent years holed up in cafes like this one, grinding away at various creative projects – from his work with hip-hop ensemble Harvest Blaque, to his efforts at leading Soul Sessions, an open-mic space for spoken-word poets.

Lately, however, he’s been creating something new – a Youth Poet Laureate program he’s helping to establish alongside the City of Roanoke and Soul Sessions.

“It’s all about legacy,” explains Hancock, who

hopes this new project will generate changes that echo beyond his own lifetime. Hancock says he can remember being bullied as a child, but finding healthy outlets for his emotions through the encouragement of several adults. He’s particularly grateful to an English teacher who nudged him toward writing.

Now, he’s attempting to pass on those gifts.

All summer long, he’s met with students at Melrose Library, where they workshop new writing. These efforts will culminate in a community poetry festival in October, when Roanoke’s first Youth Poet Laureate will be revealed. And while the writers are young, Hancock says, the topics they explore are often quite serious. And perhaps that’s exactly the point.

“We’re looking at a culture full of things we don’t have answers about ... Violence is leaking into everything,” says Hancock. “[So] we’re giving them a format to have those tough conversations through poetry or creative writing.”

Hancock’s efforts are just one way that Roanoke artists are proving their willingness – and sometimes even their hunger – to enter into important conversations through art. Take the work of artist Bryce Cobbs, who collaborated with sculptor Larry Bechtel to design a downtown statue honoring Henrietta Lacks – a Roanoke native and a Black woman whose HeLa cells, taken without her permission, have since proved invaluable to medical research. The statue, created as part of the Roanoke Hidden Histories initiative, is scheduled for unveiling this autumn.

“Being a young Black artist, I live in this world all the time,” Cobbs says. “[So] I didn’t realize how many people didn’t even know about Henrietta Lacks. I’m educating myself

on what others don’t know, and what I don’t know.”

Meanwhile, as an Art Matters grantee, Cobbs designed a large-scale mural for the side of the Berglund Center as part of its Heart of Gainsboro initiative – a highly collaborative project. The building was once the site of a thriving community in the Gainsboro neighborhood – home to many talented Black creatives, entrepreneurs and activists during segregation. To capture the stories of residents pushed out by urban renewal projects, Cobbs interviewed community members alongside historian-in-residence Jordan Bell, then painted a series of colorful, layered portraits of community elders, which he layered into a single piece.

Cobbs’ projects have attracted national media attention, with coverage in NPR and “The New York Times.” Still, he says, he meets many Roanokers who have never heard of the historic injustices affecting the Gainsboro neighborhood.

“We want to talk about the great things that happened, but we need to talk about these things, too,” he says. “It’s a duty of mine to help tell the story through the artwork.”

The artist says that, in engaging in these conversations, he’s felt a certain burden begin to lift, however slowly.

“It’s a relief,” he says. “Art is a common ground for people to come together on ... It makes people want to take initiative and acknowledge things, and that’s a step in the right direction.”

If the past year is a sign of what’s to come, then it’s safe to say that Roanoke’s creatives fully intend to keep stepping. ☆



COURTESY OF LAURA WHITE / COURTESY OF HEARTISE





Anette Martin Lloyd, an art educator at William Fleming High School, peers into the windows at Art on 1st, a downtown gallery where her sculptures were displayed.

BELOW, FROM LEFT: Dancers perform "The Lark Ascending," a ballet by choreographer Will Smith and American Sign Language consultant Betsy Quillen.

Participants in I Heart SE line up for the Daisy Art Parade – a community-led project that encouraged neighbors to come together and create large-scale art.

Josh and Julie Kinn of Kinnfolk, a Celtic music duo, received an Art Matters grant to create a body of songs capturing stories from Roanoke's history and geography.

Roanokers view the Heart of Gainsboro mural at the Berglund Center. Artist Bryce Cobbs created the piece to honor elders of the Gainsboro community.

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