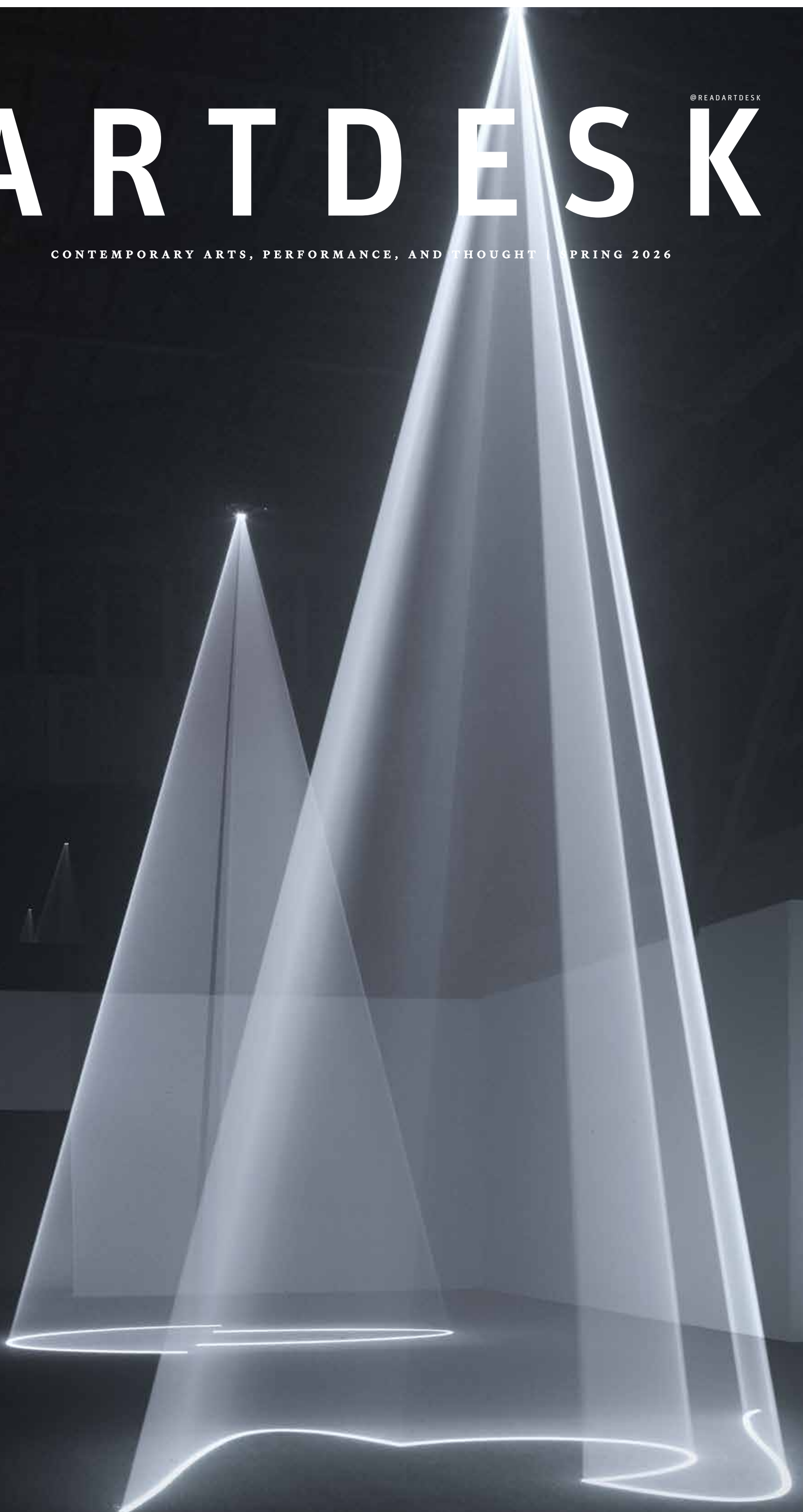


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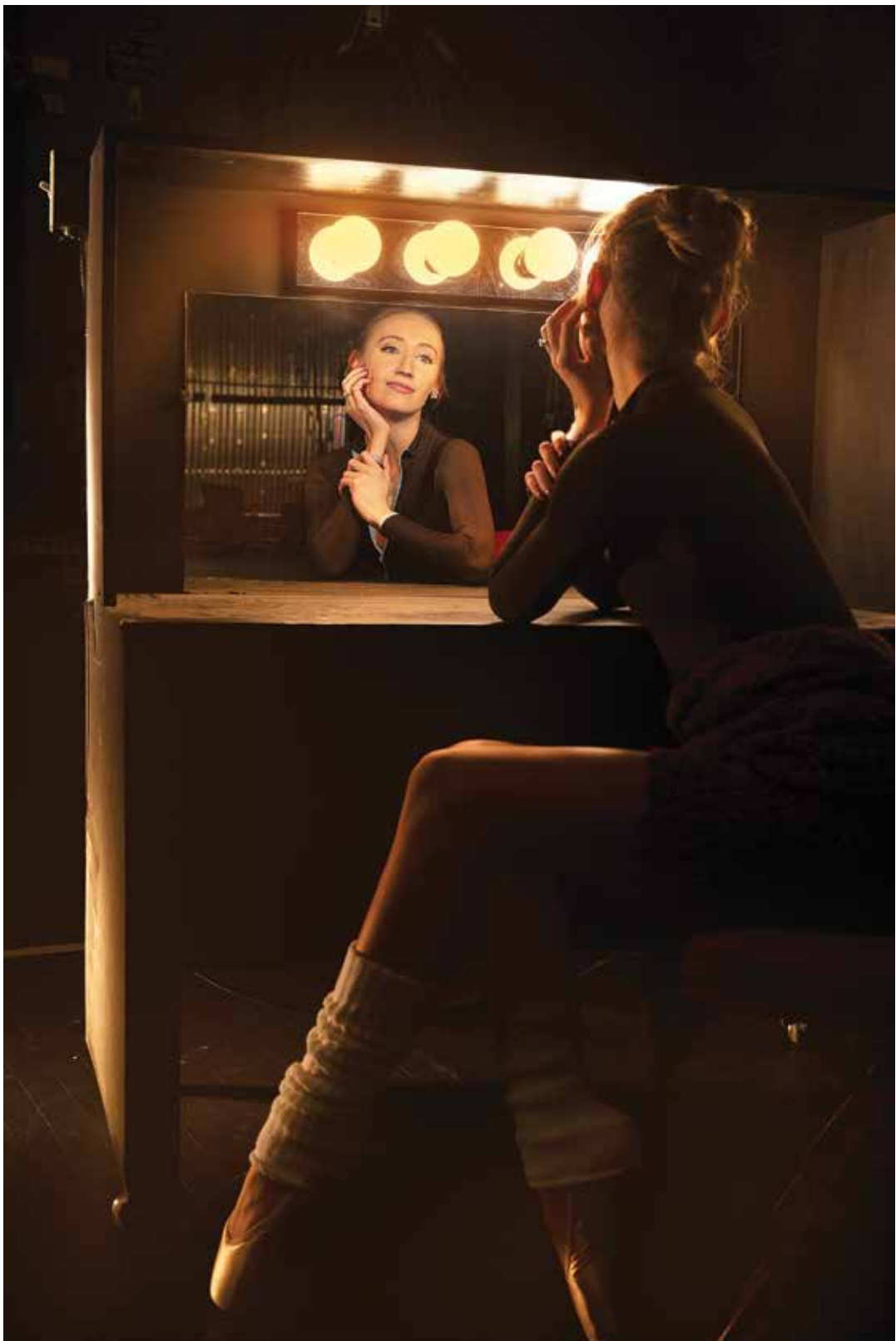
CONTEMPORARY ARTS, PERFORMANCE, AND THOUGHT | SPRING 2026



Installation view of Anthony McCall's exhibition
Solid Light Works (2018) at Pioneer Works in
Brooklyn, New York.



ANA MARÍA HERNANDO
Déferlante (Flood) (2020)
Hernando's exhibitions *Seguir cantando (Keep Singing)* will be on view at MCA Denver in Denver, Colorado until July 5, 2026 and *Cantando Bajito (Singing Softly)* at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center at Colorado College through July 3, 2026.



◀ Kara Troester Blythe backstage at the historic Civic Center Music Hall in Oklahoma City.

The Last Dance

BORN AND RAISED in Oklahoma, **Kara Troester Blythe** has stayed close to home for most of her career. As a member of the **Oklahoma City Ballet** for nearly a decade, she has performed in roles ranging from the regal Sugar Plum Fairy in *The Nutcracker* to a menacing vampire bride in *Dracula*. Now planning to retire at the end of this season, Blythe joined **Larry Keigwin**, choreographer and *ArtDesk*'s dance editor, for a conversation on what's next.

LARRY KEIGWIN: Hi, Kara. So good to see you. Is it true that you are the only Oklahoma City-born dancer in the company?

KARA TROESTER BLYTHE: Right now, yes, I am the only one. My whole family is here, and getting to have my family come to every show throughout the year without traveling, it's just really lucky, because a lot of other dancers don't get that.

I've always loved dancing in Oklahoma City because I've always known someone in every audience, and that's a special thing.

LK: I love that. That's a beautiful link. Tell me about the trajectory of your career. How were you introduced to ballet?

KB: I have been dancing since I was four years old. I was not super-serious about it. My parents put me in sports, band, dance, all the things. I was doing a summer program in New York City, and I think I was twelve or thirteen and someone told me I had what it took to become a ballet dancer. For me, being from Oklahoma, I didn't know that I could be a ballerina. I just didn't expect to do anything with ballet. From that point on, I started taking my training seriously. I homeschooled

for a year to train full-time with my teacher.

When I was seventeen I did a summer intensive in Kansas City. I was a junior in high school, and the director there offered me a job. I had two weeks to decide and move to Kansas City and just start a new life—and at that time I'm not even an adult yet. My parents let me do it, and I danced in the Kansas City Ballet for two years.

LK: I think that there are some amazing characteristics that are universally inherent in all ballet dancers, and that's the discipline, the drive, the sense of responsibility, and, honestly, the bravery. Moving to Kansas City at seventeen, that takes a lot of courage to go to the unknown.

KB: Yes. In 2017, I ended up auditioning for the Oklahoma City Ballet. I started in the studio company, and then I was promoted into the corps de ballet, where I've been for the last six or so years. In Oklahoma City, I've danced everything from the corps to Odette in *Swan Lake*.

LK: What are you looking forward to this season?

KB: I'm excited for [the choreographic

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHEVAUN WILLIAMS



BACKSTAGE BOOGIE
“For me, being from Oklahoma, I didn’t know that I could be a ballerina,” says Kara Troester Blythe. Her career has taken her to Kansas City and then back to her hometown of Oklahoma City. She will retire in May 2026 to pursue a degree in physical therapy.



MODERN MOVES

NEW AND NOTABLE AT THE OKLAHOMA CITY BALLET

There are two opportunities to experience fresh choreography with the Oklahoma City Ballet this spring. From March 13–15, 2026, at the Susan E. Brackett Dance Center and March 20–22 at Oklahoma Contemporary, *Future Voices* offers an intimate staging of short works, many of which are choreographed by company dancers. On May 8–10, *Shorts: A Night of Premieres* on the Civic Center stage will feature an edgy take on the classic *Romeo and Juliet* soundtracked by Radiohead and a soulful ballet set to Otis Redding’s music. In July, the Oklahoma City Ballet will be the presenting dance company at the 2026 Green Box Arts Festival in Green Mountain Falls, Colorado. —ALLISON MEIER

showcase *Future Voices*]. I am choreographing for the first time.

LK: Can you tease us with any ideas you’re working on?

KB: I am using some gospel-type music, and I want to mimic the kind of movement of a choir. I want to use ten dancers, which I know is ambitious, but I am excited for it. Might as well go for it.

LK: I look forward to seeing that. Do you ever teach dance or have a role in mentoring younger dancers?

KB: I do teach. I love it. I teach the adult ballet class here at the ballet. I find that as such a gift because I taught kids for so long, and it is so fun to teach kids and guide them, but it’s also so hard.

LK: The adult ballet class is different. They are coming to the studio for a genuine interest versus, you know, a child who might be going because a parent is encouraging them.

KB: It’s been really fun to teach adults and help these adult dancers find the joy of ballet again because there’s no pressure. That’s why I’ve gravitated toward teaching adults. I know you do this, too. It’s just so fun seeing people dance for the joy of it.

LK: It takes a huge amount of bravery, courage, —gumption—when adults go back into class, because it can feel awkward, but it’s in those awkward places that we continue to grow. For someone who hasn’t touched dance in a decade or two, going back is where that growth happens.

So let’s fast-forward. I’m curious if you’ve given any thought to what your post-dance life looks like.

KB: I am going to go to physical therapy school in June. It’s a big transition, but I’m really excited.

LK: Have you been thinking about that for a while?

KB: I have. In 2020, during the pandemic, I started taking classes. My undergraduate degree is in exercise science. I’m very grateful because I get to decide for myself. I didn’t let an injury force me into making a decision. I’m hoping to savor the next few months knowing that the end is near.

LK: Wow. I love this. What a wonderful pivot, and what an opportunity in disguise. So you were a full-time dancer and studying in the evenings and whenever you had time.

KB: It was very hard, but it was worth it. I’m hoping eventually I will be able to work myself back and work at the ballet again.

LK: I think all dancers are so acutely aware of their own body. And you can probably give intuitive therapy because of how long you’ve been in-body.

KB: Yes, so much of it just made sense to me. I have twenty-plus years of experience training my body in a very specific way. It’s helped me a lot, and it’s only going to continue helping me.

LK: Do you have a retirement performance date?

KB: It will be that last weekend of shows for the season, May 8–10, 2026.

LK: Kara, how wonderful! A final performance before you transition into yet another beautiful career.

KB: Thank you. I’m very excited.

Necessities

LUNA, Humboldt County, California

On December 10, 1997, Julia “Butterfly” Hill climbed up a 1,000-year-old coastal redwood. She lived for 738 days on a platform 180 feet above the ground. This bold act of civil disobedience protected the tree, nicknamed Luna, and its surrounding grove from clear-cutting. A vandal with a chainsaw cut Luna’s trunk in 2000, but it survived. It’s now cared for by the nonprofit Sanctuary Forest, and stands as a reminder of what one person, and one tree, can do.

OUR GREAT TREES
LOOKING UP

TREES ARE QUIET witnesses to our history. Essential to biodiversity and the quality of the air we breathe, they also have lives that span centuries of cultural, environmental, and societal shifts. Yet deforestation continues to have devastating consequences, including recent executive orders to remove

protections against logging. Climate change and invasive pests threaten the survival of our street and park trees. Historic trees rarely receive the same attention as historic buildings, leaving them vulnerable to development and vandalism. As the naturalist Aldo Leopold wrote, “When we see land as a

community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.” These great trees, each notable for its own reasons, are living connections to our heritage. Caring for them creates a bridge into the future, an act of hope for a world that we will not see.
—ALLISON MEIER



THE SURVIVOR TREE, *Oklahoma City National Memorial, Oklahoma*
Planted circa 1920, this American elm tree was largely overlooked until the April 19, 1995, terrorist attack that killed 168. Battered by the blast and scarred with shrapnel, what is now known as the Survivor Tree was nearly cut down. Still, it endured, thriving at the memorial site as a symbol of resilience. Its seedlings are now planted around the world, from the Fort Hood Memorial in Texas to the White House.



GENERAL SHERMAN TREE, *Sequoia National Park, California*
There are taller trees and those with wider trunks, but none rivals this giant sequoia’s volume. It’s around 2,200 years old and towers more than 274 feet. A utopian colony at the site in the 1880s anointed it Karl Marx. Following their expulsion to make way for a national park in the 1890s, it was rechristened after the Civil War general. Threatened by California’s wildfires, in 2021, General Sherman was wrapped in foil to protect it from a devastating blaze.



EMANCIPATION OAK, *Hampton University, Hampton, Virginia*
Beneath this live oak in 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation was read in the South for the first time. Free Black woman Mary Peake had started leading classes under it in 1861 amid the Civil War, defying bans on the education of Black people. The tree became a haven for enslaved people who escaped Confederate territory. Those roots grew into Hampton University, with the branches of the old oak still sprawling further each year.



CREEK COUNCIL OAK TREE, *Tulsa, Oklahoma*
This post oak overlooking the Arkansas River was an important gathering place for the Muscogee people in 1836 after the Trail of Tears. Ashes were taken from the final Muscogee ceremonial fires in Alabama before this forced relocation were placed here. In 2025, the tree was part of a repatriation of land by the city to the stewardship of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation.



MOON TREES, *Various locations*
When Apollo 14 circled the moon in 1971, it carried a container of 500 seeds. These space travelers were planted across the U.S., mostly at community sites. The sycamore above, planted in 1976 at Lincoln State Park in Spencer County, Indiana, is one of the many earthside links to the ingenuity of space exploration. The program was largely forgotten until NASA planetary scientist Dave Williams began tracking down moon trees in the mid-1990s, identifying around 100.



LAHAINA BANYAN TREE, *Maui, Hawaii*
The largest banyan in the U.S. had just marked its 150th birthday when a deadly wildfire swept through the town of Lahaina in August 2023. Its trunks which spread over a city block, were charred; its green canopy was a lifeless gray. Yet tree experts noticed that its lower trunks still had living tissue. By September, new leaves were on the tree. Its care is now part of a reforestation initiative to bring back Maui’s native trees and cultivate community healing.

Author Herman Hesse once wrote, “Trees are sanctuaries. Whoever knows how to speak to them, whoever knows how to listen to them, can learn the truth.” Do you have a favorite tree? Send a photo to us at editor@readartdesk.com to be included in a future issue.

DOSSIER

By Christian Keesee

LONDON CALLING



SHAKEN, NOT STIRRED
DUKES Bar is a haven for precision-crafted cocktails. The bar's signature martini has been engineered to perfection. Bartender **Alessandro Palazzi** is as classic as the drinks.

ART-FORWARD ▶
Begin at the **Chancery Rosewood** hotel in the former home of the U.S. Embassy. Accompanying interiors newly designed by Joseph Dirand, is a collection of 700 pieces of artwork curated for the hotel by the London-based art consultancy Cramer & Bell curated and featuring emerging and established artists in a range of mediums. The space also features eight bars and restaurants with global talent, and an events schedule oriented around creative exchange.



BOUNDARY BUSTING ▶
It's fitting that departing director Maria Balshaw's final project at Tate Modern is her curation of *A Second Life*, the landmark exhibition of **Tracey Emin's** artwork. Both women have made groundbreaking strides, and the show caps Balshaw's fantastic career at the museum. Emin, known for raw autobiographical work, will show forty years of paintings, videos, textiles, neons, writings, sculptures, and installations, including works never before exhibited.



LONDON IN OKLAHOMA ◀
Making its North American debut, the Tate exhibition **Anthony McCall: Solid Light** opens at Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center on March 13, 2026. McCall uses light as sculpture, inviting interaction. His piece *Line Describing a Cone* (1973) unfolds over time, offering an ever-changing gallery experience. Join us!



IN BLOOM ▼
Mark your calendar for the **Royal Horticultural Society's** renowned **Chelsea Flower Show**, May 19–23, 2026. "The pinnacle of horticultural excellence," the show speaks to current gardening trends and issues, featuring cutting-edge landscaping. Gardeners and florists compete for medals with show-stopping displays.



BEST SERVED COLD ▲
French high society with a side of revenge? Sounds like theatrical fun. Christopher Hampton's ***Les Liaisons Dangereuses***, directed by Marianne Elliott, will bring sex, lies, and manipulation to the National Theatre from March 21–June 6, 2026. Watch out when scheming allies—masters of seduction and power—turn against each other.



STARRY-EYED ▶
End your evening with a reservation at my favorite Indian restaurant, **Tamarind**. The first Indian restaurant in London to receive a Michelin star serves dishes with a modern twist. On a beautiful evening, eat under the whispering trees on the terrace, or indoors, near the open kitchen centered on the tandoor oven.



O, WONDER! ◀
Shakespeare specialist Kenneth Branagh plays leading man and magician Prospero in ***The Tempest***, directed by Sir Richard Eyre at Royal Shakespeare Theatre. Branagh returns to the same company where, at age twenty-three, he played the role of Henry V to much acclaim. See the magic from May 13–June 20, 2026.

LATEST AND GREATEST ▶
Walking through **Berkeley Square**, take a peek into the **Jack Barclay Bentley** dealership to see the latest offerings. The promise of springtime makes convertibles all the more alluring.



FRIDAMANIA ▲
Also at Tate Modern is **Frida: The Making of an Icon**. More than thirty of **Frida Kahlo's** most iconic works will be accompanied by her garments, jewelry, photos, and memorabilia, plus more than 200 works by her contemporaries and artists she later inspired. The show, which runs from June 25, 2026–January 3, 2027, explores Kahlo's fandom and global brand.



Questions? Comments?
DM me @christian.keesee

CABINET CAT ◀
Say hello to **Larry**, the brown-and-white rescued stray tabby who has served as the official Chief Mouser to the Cabinet Office of the United Kingdom at 10 Downing Street since February 2011. He has outlasted six prime ministers—Cameron, May, Johnson, Truss, Sunak, and Starmer—and remains a prominent, often disruptive resident during high-profile political events. Larry turned nineteen in January.

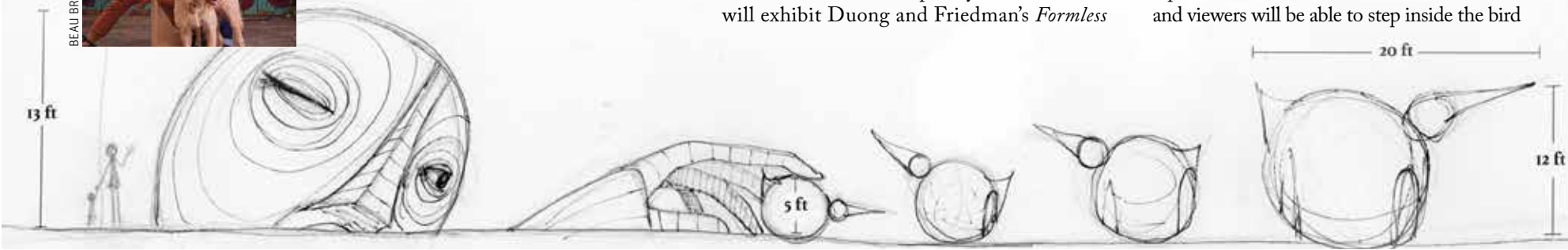


Thinking Big

Artist duo Gabe Friedman and Denise Duong embark on their largest project yet.

WHEN DENISE DUONG and Gabriel Friedman considered potential sites for their latest sculpture collaboration, the deciding factor was simple. "We're like, 'We'll take the biggest one,'" Friedman says. "Denise and I both enjoy pushing ourselves and making bigger and weirder things." Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center will exhibit Duong and Friedman's *Formless*

Matter and Its Devastating Gestures, which will have its debut in Campbell Art Park in Oklahoma City on May 28, 2026. This is the artists' largest collaborative work to date, featuring six sculptures, including a nearly thirteen-foot-tall head constructed from cedar and four bird-like spheres woven from steel rods. Apertures in the head will reveal smaller scenes, and viewers will be able to step inside the bird

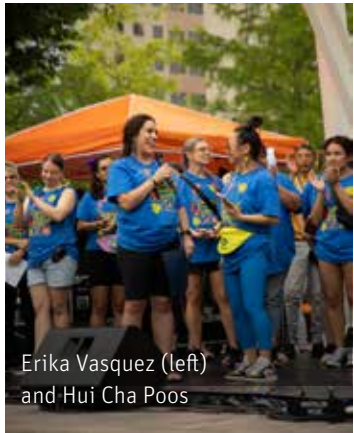


GAVYNN REDD



Scenes from the 2025 Calderón Dance Festival in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

ON THE STAGE AND IN THE PARK DANCE CONNECTION



Erika Vasquez (left) and Hui Cha Poos

THE CALDERÓN DANCE Festival, now in its fifth year, was born out of heartbreak. It was 2014 and Shannon Calderón-Primeau, the wildly talented, vivacious forty-five-year-old seasoned performer and founder of the Everything Goes Dance Studio in Oklahoma City, was dying of cancer. Armed with a list of plans she knew she would never complete herself, Calderón-Primeau called upon family and friends and began

handing out assignments. Two people, Calderón-Primeau's niece Erika Vasquez and the choreographer Hui Cha Poos, had been paired off by Calderón-Primeau for the same task, they just didn't know it—yet. Poos recalls a visit to Calderón-Primeau during her illness. “I don't know what made me say it, but I said, ‘Hey, what do you feel like you haven't gotten to do?’ And she said, ‘A community-wide free dance festival for this city.’”

Years later Poos and Vasquez were serving together on the Plaza District board. Poos, remembering that fateful conversation, called Vasquez, wondering if it was the right time to launch the dance festival. “And she's like, what are you talking about?” Poos says. “And I said, ‘I had a conversation with your aunt seven years ago about a dance festival, and I think this is the time to do it.’”

Soon after, Vasquez, who had just moved into a new house, was unpacking her office and happened upon a notebook she and Calderón-Primeau had shared. “I was scrolling through the pages, just kind of really loving to see her handwriting. Toward the end, I had a lot of things circled and one of the things was ‘talk to Hui Cha about the dance festival.’” Cue the goosebumps.

With that, the pair got busy. They cleared the idea with the rest of Calderón-Primeau's family and pitched the dance festival idea to the Plaza District board. The inaugural Calderón Dance Festival was staged in 2022.

Today, the Calderón Dance Festival, funded in part by OK Let's Dance, an initiative of the Kirkpatrick Family Fund, is a daylong adventure for anyone and everyone: non-dancers, the dance-curious, professional dancers, kids, and adults.

There are free classes in many genres, dance studio showcases, and an evening street dance battle. Music performances include local guitarist extraordinaire Edgar Cruz and renowned flamenco artists ReVoSo.

Andrea Lodico, co-founder of OK Let's Dance, has been a part of the festival for two years and applauds its celebratory, inclusive energy, which aligns with that of OK Let's Dance. “Our aim is to fuel the efforts of local dance programs and organizations in their vital work to engage more Oklahomans in the art form and support a vibrant, dynamic dance landscape,” Lodico says. “Calderón Dance Festival embodies and advances this vision.” —CHRISTINE EDDINGTON

The Calderón Dance Festival will take place on Saturday, May 16, 2026, at the Myriad Botanical Gardens in Oklahoma City.
► calderondancefestival.org



Gabriel Friedman welding a sculptural frame in his studio.

sculptures, which range from five to twelve feet in diameter, to view interrelated metal figures. “The perspective of the viewer changes drastically when you're dwarfed by a thing,” Friedman says. “The idea is that you can find yourself inside the art.” The artists often find new ideas inside works-in-progress. “The evolution of our 3-D pieces is, once Gabe has made the shape and the frame, we think it's finished,” Duong says. “But then once we're inside of it, we can sit in there and contemplate if this should be added to it or this should shift or move.” The doorways through the birds in *Formless Matter* will lead in a direct line to the head's open eye. The work, inspired by the artists' five-year-old daughter, explores

the human desire to create order. “When she was an infant, she was constantly lining up grapes or pebbles or, you know, dead bugs or whatever it was,” Friedman says. “And we always found that really poignant.” Any resemblance between the artists and the family depicted in scenes throughout the work is not entirely coincidental. “It isn't specifically autobiographical, but I think it's hard to avoid connecting the dots to yourself when you're an artist,” Friedman says. —JEREMY MARTIN



To keep up with Oklahoma Contemporary, become a member

The BOOK REPORT

BY ALANA RUIZ DE LA PEÑA | PHOTOGRAPHY BY BAILEY WALKER

Great Art Explained

James Payne, \$40

James Payne’s wildly popular YouTube channel of the same name has nearly 2 million followers. In every video he dissects a work of art or a movement in art history using clear language, making art accessible to the curious and providing new insights for the seasoned museum-goer. The book is no different: Payne brings straightforward analyses to thirty masterpieces, delving into not only the works themselves, but also the life and times of the artists behind them.

The Man Who Slept with the Mona Lisa

Roberta Downs, \$25

This is a riveting historical novel of the man who saved the art world, written by his stepdaughter, author Roberta Downs. Gerald Van der Kemp was an art scholar, a soldier, a French Resistance hero, and behind the restoration of the palace of Versailles and Claude Monet’s home and garden in Giverny, France. During his service in WWII he was able to save important artworks, including Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, from destruction by hiding them in his bedroom.

Slow Looking: The Art of Nature

Olivia Meehan, \$100

Skipping the usual chronological narrative of many art books, *Slow Looking* organizes artworks by land, water, and sky. This creates a meandering look at art inspired by our natural world. Large images paired with minimal text lets the reader make their own connections with the artworks, with nature, and with the artists. A particular stand-out is Charles-François Daubigny’s beautiful *Apple Trees in Blossom* (1874).

The Prado Masterpieces

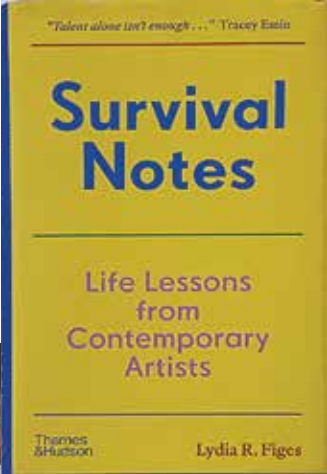
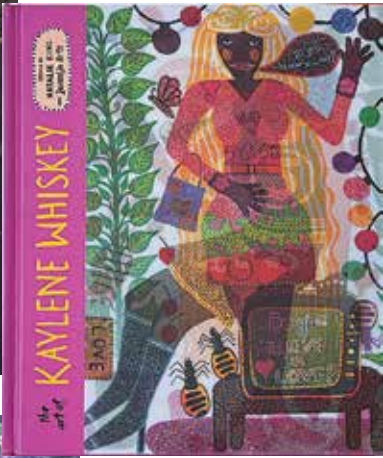
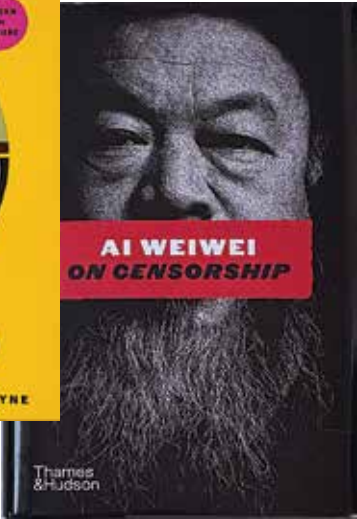
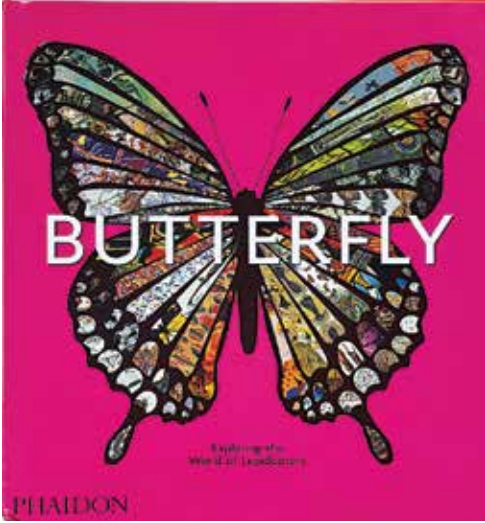
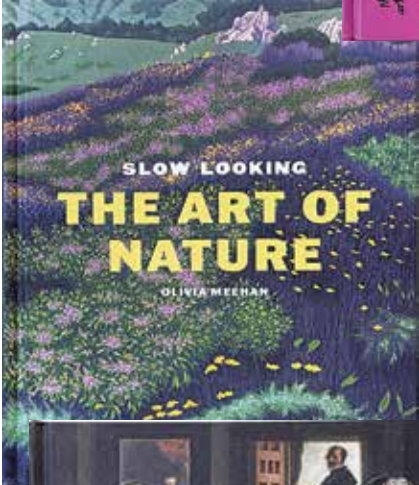
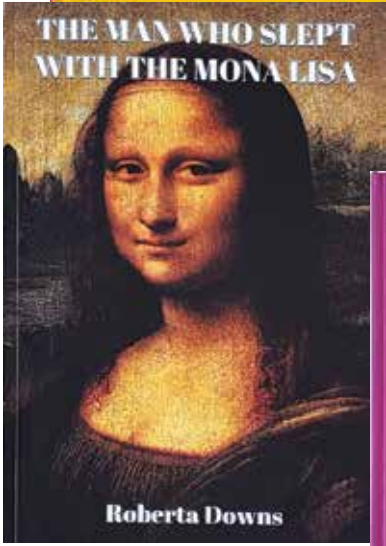
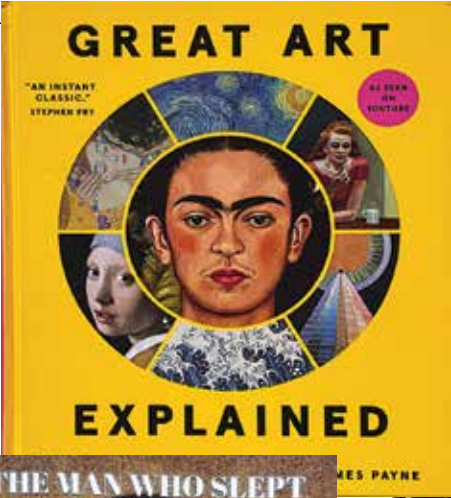
Museo Nacional del Prado, \$65

If you ever find yourself in Madrid, a visit to the Museo Nacional del Prado is a must-see. Opened to the public for the first time in November 1819, the storied institution houses a collection of artworks ranging from the twelfth to the early twentieth centuries. This gorgeous book encapsulates the museum beautifully, showcasing greatest hits like Diego Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* in this vast collection of European art.

Butterfly: Exploring the World of Lepidoptera

Essays by Dr. David G. James, Tamar van Riessen, and Nate Moss, \$60

Across the globe, butterflies and other lepidoptera symbolize endless themes throughout cultures—transformation, resurrection, and renewal, to name a few. Throughout more than 250 entries, this survey examines the ways in which these winged insects add their own magic to art and life, from the vibrancy in literary classics such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* to Frida Kahlo’s use of butterflies in artworks like *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird* to represent rebirth following her debilitating accident and tumultuous relationships.



On Censorship

Ai Weiwei, \$16

Artist and longtime critic of the Chinese government, Ai Weiwei has created a unique perspective on censorship through his life story and career trajectory. In his third book, he shares his thoughts on censorship not only in China but also across the world. “The essence of censorship is the control of thought—it is the exercise of power over intellectual space, involving the suppression and elimination of dissent,” Ai writes in the powerful opening essay. “It can be described as both an indispensable tool of mental enslavement and a fundamental source of political corruption.”

The Art of Kaylene Whiskey: Do You Believe in Love?

Edited by Natalie King and Iwantja Arts, \$50

Aboriginal artist Kaylene Whiskey’s vibrant pop culture portraits, which once adorned New York City bus shelters, are presented in the artist’s first major monograph. In Whiskey’s magical, dot-rendered world, iconic women, real and fictional, are brought together: Wonder Woman, the Virgin Mary, Whoopi Goldberg, Tina Turner, and a lot of Dolly Parton. The book also features an in-depth interview with Whiskey, and includes contributions from such notable creatives as Taika Waititi, Jazz Money, Zoé Whitley, Clothilde Bullen, and April Phillips.

Survival Notes: Life Lessons from Contemporary Artists

Lydia R. Figes, \$100

Aspiring creatives seeking advice and insights on being successful as an artist will find a wealth of inspiring perspectives from internationally acclaimed artists such as Anish Kapoor, Shirin Neshat, Tracey Emin, and Shahzia Sikan-der, who offer counsel on thriving in a highly competitive art world. Author Lydia Rachel Figes uses her expertise as a writer, editor, art historian, and curator of digital art at Contemporary Art Society to weave together a narrative that is hopeful and realistic, something more important than ever given the challenging climate for creatives across all fields.



Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds: Honor Song

Pablo N. Barrera and AnnaVittoria Pickett; David Levi Strauss; Suzan Shown Harjo; and Shanna Ketchum-Heap of Birds, \$60

Published in concert with the 2025 retrospective, *Honor Song* spans more than forty years of the work of multi-disciplinary artist Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds. A member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Nation, Heap of Birds has produced a body of work centered around Indigenous rights. The 2025 exhibition of the same name at Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center in Oklahoma City drew national acclaim.



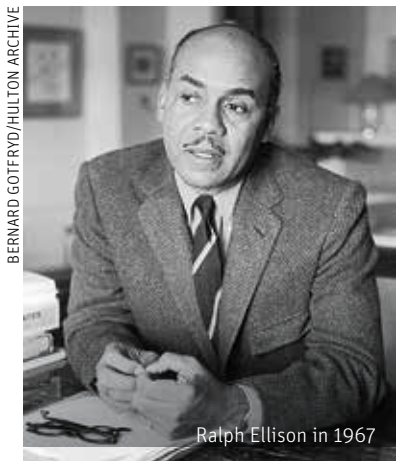
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KENNON BRYCE

▲ The Ralph Ellison Library in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS WELL REPRESENTED



Ralph Ellison in 1967

RALPH WALDO ELLISON burst onto the national scene in 1952 with his first novel, *Invisible Man*. It won the National Book Award in 1953, immediately establishing Ellison as a serious and seminal author and cementing his name in the international literary canon. From 1955–57, the Oklahoma City-born Ellison spent two years in Rome as a Fellow of the American Academy and then returned stateside, teaching at Yale, Rutgers, New York University, Bard College and the University of Chicago.

Back in Oklahoma City, a library re-named for him in 1975 now houses the State’s Black History Collection, which includes a copy of *The Carleton Miscellany*, a renowned quarterly literary magazine published by Carleton College from 1960–1980, publishing pieces such as *Going to the Territory* by Ralph Ellison, alongside academic analysis of *Invisible Man*.

The Collection has grown to 3,624 items, which can be searched online or at the library.

One of those is author and poet Quraysh Ali Lansana’s children’s book *Ralph Ellison: More Than Invisible*, which launched at the Ralph Ellison Library in January 2026. The biography celebrates the life of Ellison while introducing conversations about race, history, and identity.

“It means a great deal to me to have my books alongside Ellison’s work,” says Lansana, who has authored twenty-five books of poetry, non-fiction, and children’s literature. “I am attempting to make sure that Oklahomans, as well as the nation, honor his brilliance, but also understand his complexities... [He] wrote what many folks consider the most important novel of the twentieth century.”

The Ralph Ellison Library is the only branch in the Metropolitan Library System that is named after a single person, says Judith Matthews, special collections librarian. Its origins date back more than a century, when the Oklahoma City Library Board voted in 1921 to segregate the Carnegie Library, then the only public library in the city.

In response, the Dunbar Library was created that same year in the Slaughter’s Hall building in the Deep Deuce area, becoming Oklahoma City’s Black-only library. The library system stayed segregated until 1953. After a new location was found in the 1970s, officials began to search for a new name.

“It was originally going to be called Creston Hills, which is a neighborhood around there,” Matthews says. “But when Creston Hills was platted, it had covenant agreements making it

illegal for African Americans to live there. There was a great community uproar that we should not be naming a library with that sort of legacy. The community pitched around ideas, and Ralph Ellison was an easy choice to go forward.”

Ralph Ellison Library has, fittingly, become a cultural hub. The Society of Urban Poets hosts free monthly programming at the library, including open mics, film screenings, and guest speakers, and provides opportunities for students to win scholarships, school supplies, and cash prizes.

“Any program we ask to do, the library supports us in whatever way they can,” says Billie J. Bowen, president of the Society of Urban Poets, which started in 1992 when the late Ronald Brownlee published an advertisement looking for other interested poets.

“[Ellison] loved poetry, and he wanted to develop his same level of poetry throughout our community,” Bowen says. “People who might not normally enjoy poetry come out and they write poetry and read poetry.”

Plans for 2027, the seventy-fifth anniversary year of *Invisible Man*, are underway.

“We are starting that conversation,” Matthews says. “Asking all of Oklahoma City to read *Invisible Man* is a tall order, but there are other, more accessible, and shorter things that we hope capture the spirit of Ellison and that show a reflection on his childhood here.”

—MICHAEL KINNEY

The Ralph Ellison Library is located at 2000 NE 23rd Street in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

► metrolibrary.org

HAPPENINGS

NEW AND NOW IN ART & PERFORMANCE | BY ALLISON C. MEIER



WHITNEY BIENNIAL 2026

Whitney Museum of American Art / New York, New York

The *Whitney Biennial* is a bellwether of American contemporary art. This eighty-second edition is global in its perspective, with twenty-one of its fifty-six artists born outside the U.S. Some have mainly engaged with the country abroad, like photographer Mao Ishikawa in Okinawa, Japan, who documented Black American soldiers in the 1970s, and Aziz Hazara in Afghanistan, who chronicled the heaps of trash left behind by American troops. Some work has been created for the event, including sculptor Kelly Akashi’s monument to those killed in the Los Angeles wildfires, based on the chimney that survived from her own lost Altadena home. *Through August 23, 2026.* ▶ [whitney.org](#)

MOMENTUM 25TH ANNIVERSARY

The Yale Theater / Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
This annual showcase of visual art by Oklahoma creators under thirty is marking twenty-five years of uplifting emerging talent. Organized by the nonprofit Oklahoma Visual Arts Coalition (OVAC), it’s always a lively event that offers many of these artists their first opportunity to present their work professionally. A select group of artists is further supported with funding to develop new pieces to debut during the Momentum weekend, with this year’s participants collaborating on their ideas with guest curator Kristin Gentry. *March 27–28, 2026.* ▶ [ovac-ok.org](#)

“TELL CLYFFORD I SAID ‘HI’”: An Exhibition Curated by Children of the Colville Confederated Tribes

Clyfford Still Museum / Denver, Colorado
Early in his career, Clyfford Still was an instructor at what is now Washington State University. In the late 1930s, he helped with a summer art program involving the Colville Confederated Tribes. For this exhibition, curatorial control was handed over to children of the present-day tribes, ages three to fourteen. They were asked to choose works they connected with, including selections of the sketches he made of the people and landscapes of their home. Everything from the arrangement of objects to the gallery text is the

result of their collaboration. *Through May 10, 2026.* ▶ [clyffordstillmuseum.org](#)

ANA MARÍA HERNANDO: *Seguir cantando (Keep Singing)* ▲

MCA Denver / Denver, Colorado
Many exhibits are organized chronologically; this one is arranged chromatically. Ana María Hernando has, since 2018, created diaphanous cascades of colorful tulle that transform a material associated with frilly femininity into something powerful. These installations seem to erupt through the hard surfaces of walls and floors. Along with this MCA Denver show, the

Argentine-born, Colorado-based artist has a concurrent show at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, through July 3, 2026, offering another chance to experience her exuberant textiles. *Through July 5, 2026.* ▶ [mcadenver.org](#)

EDMONIA LEWIS: *Said in Stone*

Peabody Essex Museum / Salem, Massachusetts
When Edmonia Lewis left the U.S. for Rome in 1865, she was doing something radical by daring to become a marble sculptor at a time when women, let alone those of Black and Indigenous heritage, were largely excluded from the field. In expressive neoclassical work, she drew international acclaim for her portraits and antislavery sculptures. This exhibition brings together thirty sculptures by the trailblazing artist along with new research into her life and legacy. *Through June 7, 2026.* ▶ [pem.org](#)

HOMEWARD TO THE PRAIRIE I COME: *Gordon Parks Photographs from the Beach Museum of Art*

Philbrook Museum of Art / Tulsa, Oklahoma
Gordon Parks was born into poverty in Fort Scott, Kansas, at a time of segregation. Without access to a professional education, he taught himself photography. He became the first Black American staff photographer at *Life* magazine, documenting everything from the civil rights movement to fashion. In 1973, he made a gift to Kansas State University of more than 100 of his photographs, most dating from the 1940s to ’70s. This touring show highlights that collection in his home state, pairing selections with his lesser-known poetry and prose. *Through June 19, 2026.* ▶ [philbrook.org](#)

RADICAL AMERICANA

Various Locations / Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
The 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence is being recognized with events around the U.S. in 2026, each navigating how to mark the country’s founding while reckoning with its complex history and current fractious state. *Radical Americana* is a series of exhibitions going deep on 1776 and the subsequent commemorations in the city where that document was debated and signed. The ceramic center Clay Space is partnering with institutions across Philadelphia for artists to research in their archives and present their responsive work. *April 9–July 5, 2026.* ▶ [theclaystudio.org](#)

BEYOND MYSTICISM: *The Modern Northwest*

Seattle Art Museum / Seattle, Washington
In the Northwest of the U.S., modernist art was shaped by the distinctive light of the landscape and an earthy palette of colors. In 1953, *Life* magazine anointed four of this school’s progenitors—Guy Anderson, Kenneth Callahan, Morris Graves, and Mark Tobey—as the “Mystic Painters of the Northwest.” This exhibition investigates how Indigenous art, the nature of Puget Sound, industrialization, and urbanization informed an undersung strain of twentieth-century American art. More than 150 pieces by local creators, as well as international figures like Salvador Dalí, Marsden Hartley, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Yves Tanguy, are featured. *Through August 2, 2026.* ▶ [seattleartmuseum.org](#)



MATISSE’S JAZZ: *Rhythms in Color* ▲

Art Institute of Chicago / Chicago, Illinois
After a 1941 surgery, Henri Matisse spent months in bed, unable to create the brightly colored paintings that had brought him global fame. With limited mobility, he started making paper cut-outs, drawing on a lifetime of memories, from Paris music halls to travels to Tahiti. The book publisher Tériade encouraged him to push this pastime into a new body of work. It became *Jazz*, a landmark artist’s book based on these collages, published when Matisse was seventy-seven. The Art Institute of Chicago acquired *Jazz* in 1948, and *Rhythms in Color* is the first time these works are presented in their entirety, joined by pieces from across his career. *Through June 1, 2026.* ▶ [artic.edu](#)

ISAMU NOGUCHI: “I am not a designer” ◀

High Museum of Art / Atlanta, Georgia
Isamu Noguchi spent decades designing playgrounds, but the only one he was able to realize in his lifetime is in Atlanta’s Piedmont Park. Called Playscapes, it has colorful, sculptural pieces that encourage kids to explore and use their imaginations. Coinciding with its fiftieth anniversary, this retrospective on the artist’s design career delves into this and other projects that made art accessible, like stage sets and furniture. Some of the nearly 200 objects are on public view for the first time. After its debut, the show will travel to the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, and the University of Rochester in New York. *April 10–August 2, 2026.* ▶ [high.org](#)

LIVES AND LITERACY IN ANCIENT EGYPT

Harry Ransom Center / Austin, Texas
There was more to ancient Egypt than the pharaohs. This exhibition sheds light on the everyday lives of ordinary people. The focus is on manuscripts thousands of years old, written on papyrus, made from the stems of the *Cyperus papyrus* plant, and preserved by the dry Egyptian climate. These range from personal letters and medicinal recipes to magical charms and religious texts. On view in North America for the first time is the earliest known fragment from the New Testament. The materials show a multicultural and multilingual society, providing a vibrant insight into daily life in antiquity. *April 11–August 3, 2026.* ▶ [hrc.utexas.edu](#)





GET IN THE GAME: Sports, Art, Culture ▶

Pérez Art Museum Miami / Miami, Florida
With the World Cup and Formula 1 Grand Prix on the horizon for Miami in 2026, this is a timely stop for a touring show all about how sports are part of our culture. Pieces from PAMM's collections expand a gathering of more than one hundred works by an international group of artists. They grapple with race, gender, fandom, and other facets of competition, from painter Ernie Barnes's depictions of basketball courts as community spaces to Shaun Leonardo's haunting charcoal drawings of the brain scans of athletes. *March 19–August 23, 2026.* ▶ pamm.org

ROY LICHTENSTEIN IN THE STUDIO ▶

Dallas Museum of Art & Nasher Sculpture Center / Dallas, Texas
To mark the centennial of the birth of the late Pop artist, the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation donated works to several museums. The Dallas Museum of Art and Nasher Sculpture Center jointly received more than fifty pieces, with this dual exhibition pairing selections with sculptures, works on paper, and maquettes. These reveal the process behind the artist's borrowing of images from comic books and advertisements, as well as how he brought the flatness of two-dimensional drawings into three-dimensional space. *Through August 16, 2026.* ▶ nashersculpturecenter.org

SELF-MADE: A Century of Inventing Artists ▶

American Folk Art Museum / New York, New York
Marcel Basoulard in Bourges, France, spent three decades creating photographic portraits of himself in dresses of his design. Sister Gertrude Morgan in New Orleans painted herself in white as the "Bride of Christ" as part of her self-appointed religious mission. Their stories, and those of numerous others, are part of this expansive exhibition on how self-taught artists have represented themselves, especially in ways that reinforce identities marginalized by society. Among the ninety or so artworks on view are many that are rarely seen or were recently added to the museum's collections. *April 10–September 13, 2026.* ▶ folkartmuseum.org



RASHID JOHNSON: A Poem for Deep Thinkers

Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth / Fort Worth, Texas
After debuting at the Guggenheim, this survey of Rashid Johnson's richly eclectic practice arrives in Texas, able to spread out more than it could on the concrete ramp of the New York museum. It takes in the scope of the Chicago-born artist's career thus far, from his early photography to his signature installations of shelves of plants, books, and ceramics. These works reveal an artist still experimenting with



media in ways that thoughtfully examine how Black identity is formed and represented; his *Contemporary Black Male Literature Starter Kit* (2003) has a pallet of shrink-wrapped books. *Through September 27, 2026.* ▶ themodern.org

NICK CAVE: Mammoth

Smithsonian American Art Museum / Washington, D.C.
Remembering one's past can be like sifting through the remains of an extinct age. Nick Cave takes that idea to a colossal scale in *Mammoth*, the largest commission from a single artist by the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Reflecting on his childhood in Missouri, the artist best known for creating wearable Soundsuits in response to police violence uses that same transformative approach to his and his country's roots. A centerpiece is a huge light table with objects from everyday life—such as his grandmother's thimble collection—elevated into artifacts. *Through January 3, 2027.* ▶ americanart.si.edu

TIMELESS MUCHA ▶

Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art / Kansas City, Missouri
The development of the lithographic poster at the end of the nineteenth century made advertising into an art. A leader in the poster craze was Czech illustrator Alphonse Mucha, whose feminine figures with long hair and

flowing clothes framed by ornamental flourishes sold everything from cigarettes to champagne. Although he came to define the graphic style of Art Nouveau, "le style Mucha" became its own fad. The more than one hundred works in this show add historical context that sometimes gets lost with the familiarity of his art, as well as pieces demonstrating his influence well into the twenty-first century. *April 18–August 30, 2026.* ▶ nelson-atkins.org



Contemporary art, performance, and thought subscribe here

Green Sce

THE TRANQUIL TOWN of **Green Mountain Falls**, a former resort stop on the Colorado Midland Railroad, has a strong sense of its own history. Homes are passed down through generations, historic structures stand well-preserved, and little has changed of the town's layout since its earliest days. For two weeks every summer, the town transforms from a quiet haven into a bustling arts spectacle during the **Green Box Arts Festival**. The town's farm stand fills with picnics and kids camps and brass band performances; the cozy community center hosts prestigious ballets, concerts, and multimedia performances; and artists from around the world take over a historic inn that long ago retired its logbook.

This year's eighteenth annual festival kicks off **July 4, 2026**, with a full day of live music and a small town parade drenched in Americana, a celebration of the country's 250th birthday. Here is what visitors can expect to see during the two-week-long festival this year, an artful blend of traditions old and new.



Join us this summer in Green Mountain Falls!
Become a member of Green Box Arts



Genre Jumpers

The four-piece ensemble **Quarteto Nuevo** is known for putting together surprising and diverse programs, blending classical music, folk, Latin, and jazz. For the Green Box Arts Festival, Quarteto Nuevo will play a collection of American composers—from Aaron Copland to Bob Dylan and plenty in between—during a one-night-only show in the Green Box Studio at the Sallie Bush Community Center. ◀

Reading Rainbow

This open-air, surround-sound reading of classic American novels gives new meaning to the phrase “literary landscape.” Sections from six novels, selected by Green Box and performed by local actors, are recorded and assembled by sound artist Jean-François Alcoléa as the latest—and only American—iteration of his international literary experience, *Les Inattendues (the Unexpected)*. ▼



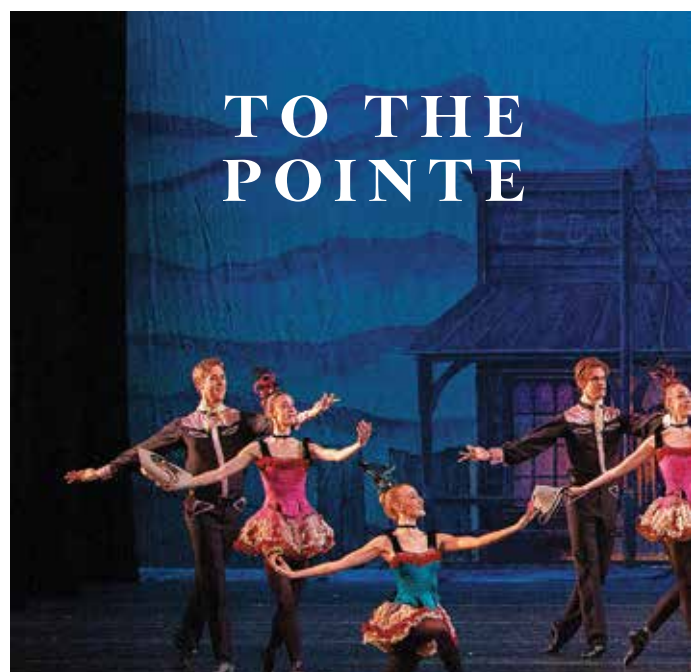
Phone Home

It began as a way for a Japanese gardener to grieve: a defunct rotary phone set outside by Itaru Sasaki to speak to his dead cousin. The concept caught on, and now “wind phones” can be found all over the world—in deserts, on mountains, at graveyards and public parks. A new, semi-permanent **wind phone** installation in Green Mountain Falls joins that roster, installed on a serene landing in the foothills where visitors can quietly connect. ▲



Starlit Sopranos

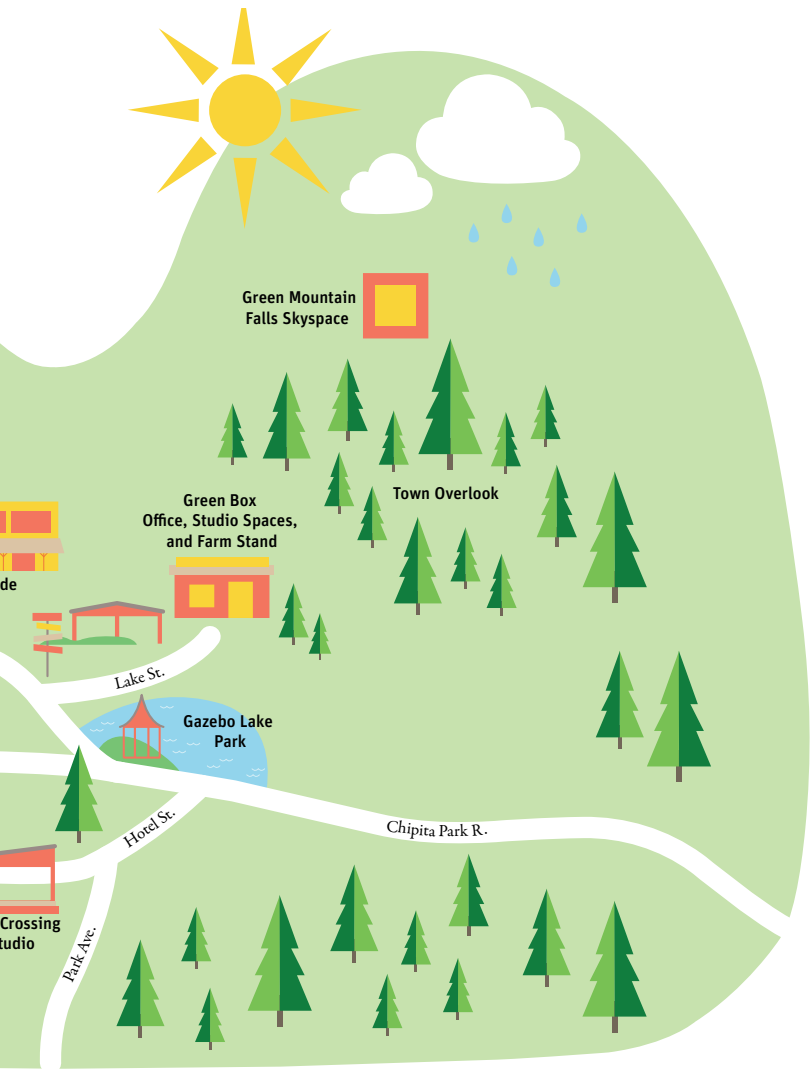
Two screenings of the **Santa Fe Opera's** *La Bohème* performance, the nineteenth-century story of a Bohemian seamstress and her artist circle in Paris. The show marks the first time the Santa Fe Opera will be seen outside of New Mexico, and will be preceded by the classic Santa Fe tradition of a pre-opera tailgate party. ►



ene

Set and Setting

New Mexico-based artist **Billy Joe Miller** takes his cues from the natural world, creating public sculptures and installations that touch on themes of sanctuary and transformation. Miller was commissioned by Green Box to create a permanent work for the Anderson Trail, a creekside connector between Green Box HQ and the Sallie Bush Community Center. ◀

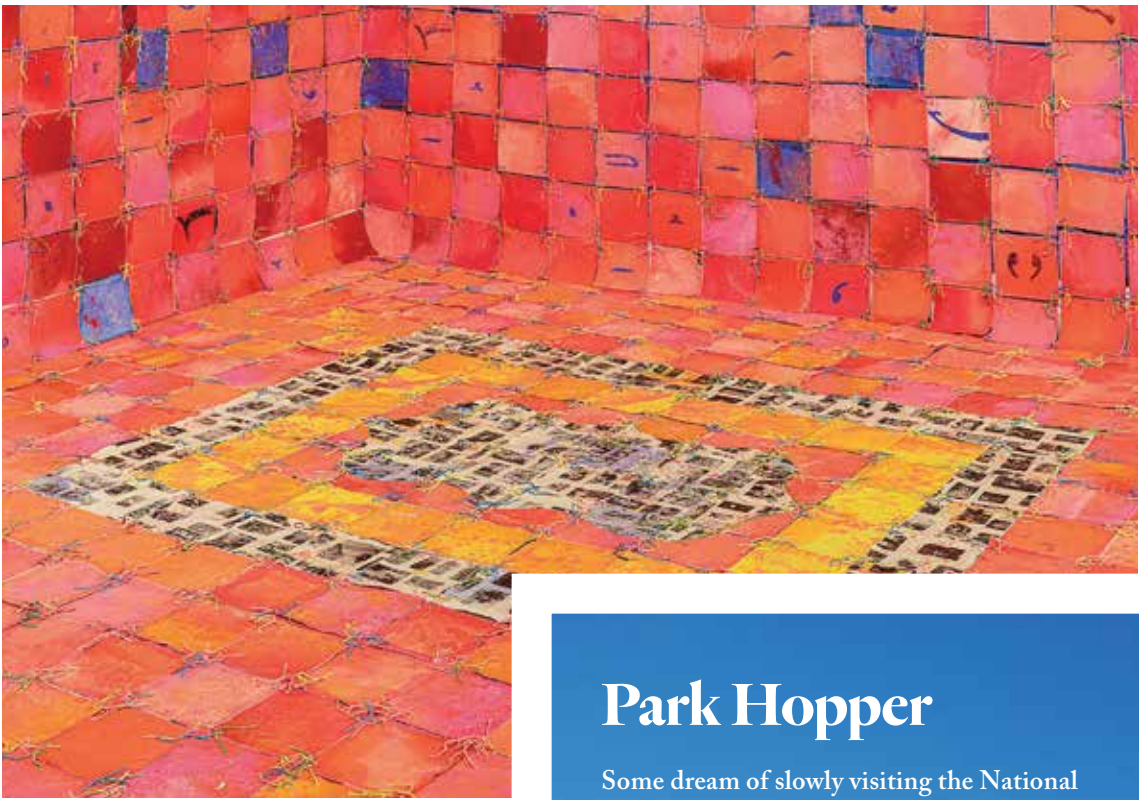


In Dialogue

Join *ArtDesk* for ArtDesk Conversations, a series of in-person events about contemporary art, performance, and thought.

Ethan Tapper, author of *How to Love a Forest*, travels west from his New England home base to talk with *ArtDesk* magazine about the contradictions and counterintuitive actions of truly caring for the natural world, lessons learned from his years spent as a wilderness guide, professional forester, and owner-restorer of a 175-acre forest he calls Bear Island. ▲

The **Douglas Land Conservancy** and its partners will discuss the Greenland Overpass, a decades-long effort to preserve a section of land between Colorado's two largest cities, while balancing the needs of habitat preservation and population growth. ▲

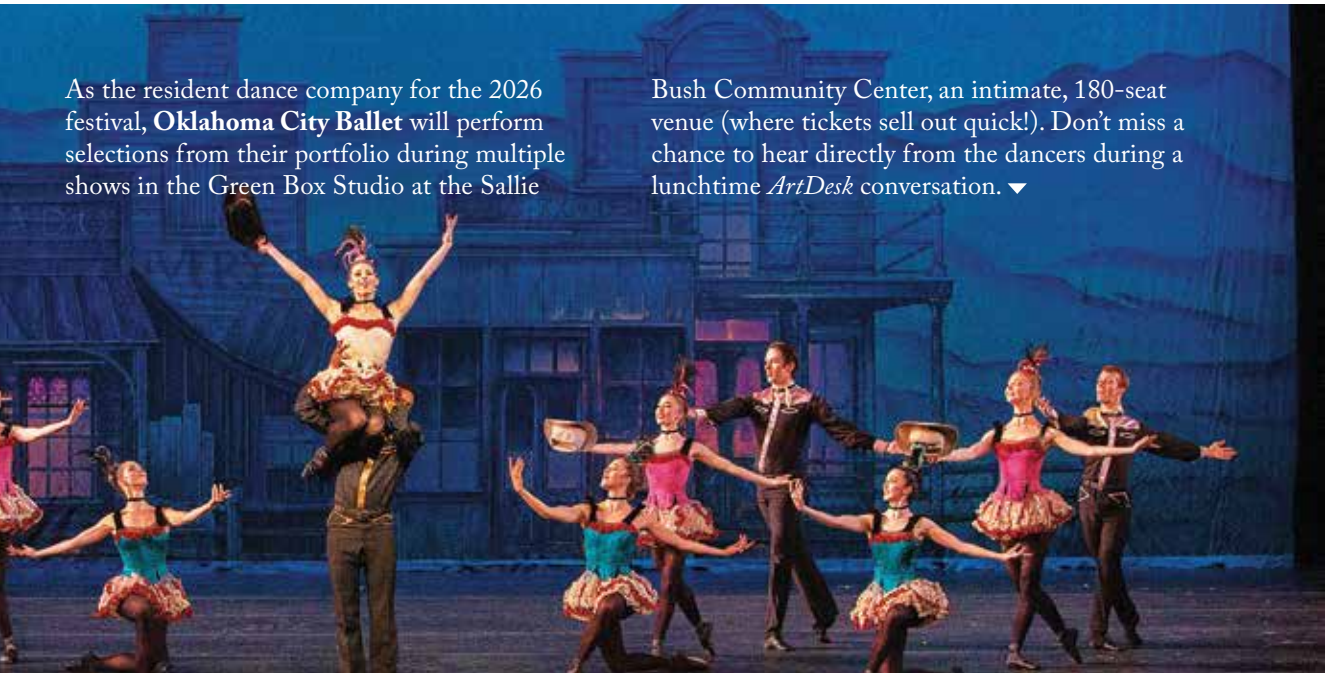


Living Textiles

Artist **Ziba Rajabi** has said that working with textiles correlates to her experience as an Iranian in America, nodding to the “lightness, foldability, mobility, and malleability” of everyday experiences, as she told the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. As a 2026 Green Box artist-in-residence, Rajabi has made floating and shifting forms that take over Lakeview Terrace and will remain on display throughout the festival. ▲

Park Hopper

Some dream of slowly visiting the National Parks over their lifetime; others wait until retirement to take the road trip of their dreams. Mikah Meyer was approaching thirty and decided to go for it all. In visiting every National Park Site—that's parks, monuments, seashores, reserves, and more—he became the first person to see all 419 sites in a single (three-year-long) journey. During this hour-long show, *Parks Unknown*, Mikah sings about and shares his tales from across the country.



As the resident dance company for the 2026 festival, **Oklahoma City Ballet** will perform selections from their portfolio during multiple shows in the Green Box Studio at the Sallie

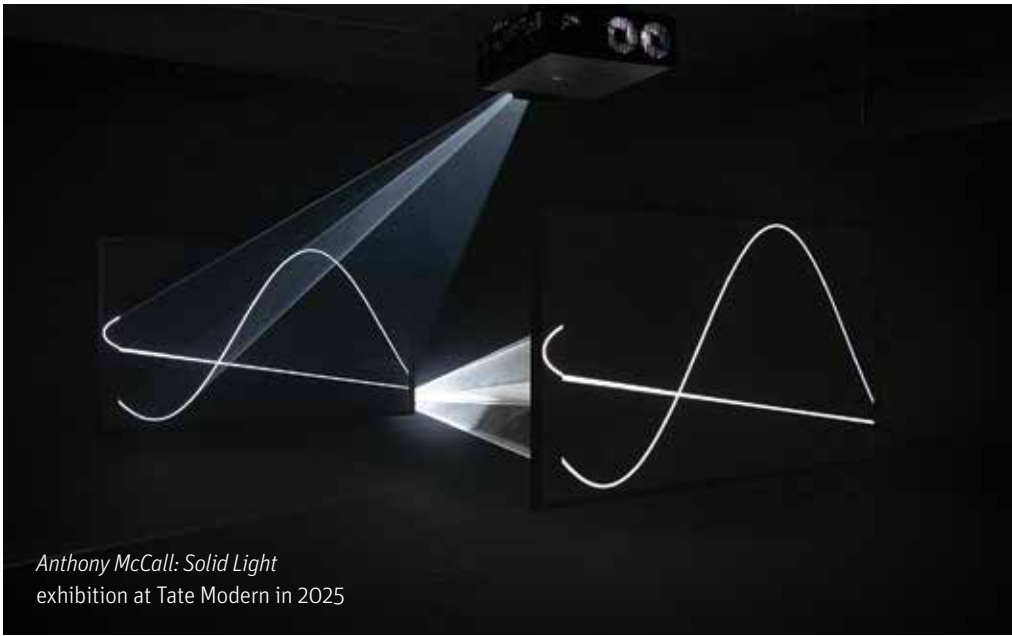
Bush Community Center, an intimate, 180-seat venue (where tickets sell out quick!). Don't miss a chance to hear directly from the dancers during a lunchtime *ArtDesk* conversation. ▼

T U R N O N T H E *Bright Lights*

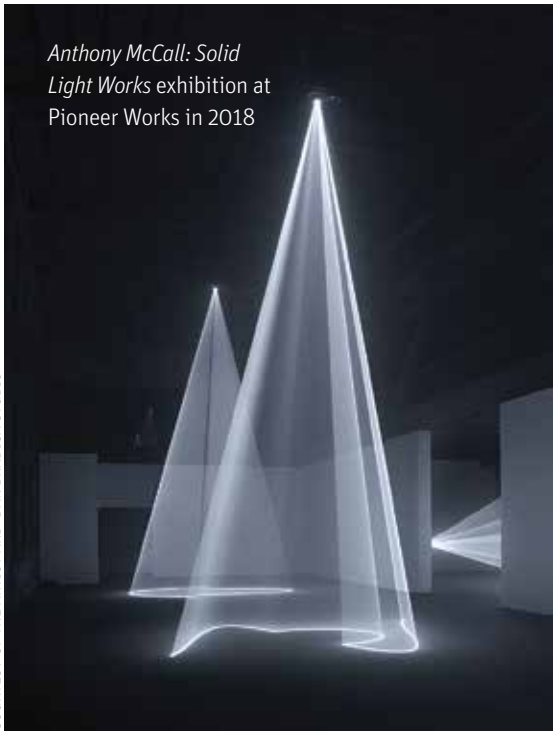
AN ARTIST LIKE NO
OTHER, **ANTHONY
McCALL** PRODUCES
WORKS THAT MEET AT
THE INTERSECTION OF
FILMMAKING, SCULPTURE,
AND DRAWING.

By Kelly Rogers

Anthony McCall: Solid Light exhibition at Tate Modern in 2025



Anthony McCall: *Solid Light* exhibition at Tate Modern in 2025



Anthony McCall: *Solid Light Works* exhibition at Pioneer Works in 2018

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND DAN BRADICA STUDIO



ANDER GILLEN/AEP

Anthony McCall in *Split Second (Mirror) IV* (2024) during the exhibition *Split Second* at the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum.



Anthony McCall: *Solid Light* exhibition at Tate Modern in 2025

THIS SPRING, A monumental exhibition arrives at Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center in Oklahoma City. *Anthony McCall: Solid Light* invites us to challenge our ideas of contemporary sculpture and our ways of looking.

British-born artist Anthony McCall is a master of abstraction and creating with the intangible. In his works, light becomes solid, space becomes structural, and time disappears. *Solid Light* comes to Oklahoma City by way of London in a collaboration with Tate, marking the exhibition's North American debut.

"It's quite a special thing to get into a room of the solid light works. They're relaxing and mystical to be with," says Gregor Muir, Tate's director of collection, international art. "There is this moment of realizing you can really interact with them...and this tests you and the parameters of your freedom. What you could do, what you shouldn't do."

These works require a uniquely specific environment—a darkened room primed with a soft, misty haze for the projected light to travel across. It's an intriguing departure from your typical museum visit,

and one that relies heavily on a curious audience. Follow the beam of light to its end, and you'll find its "footprint," or a two-dimensional version of the "solid" work as it appears on a surface. McCall says the sculpture's footprint is equivalent to the significance of a blueprint for an architect, and he constructs these works in a similar way. Beginning in 2-D with pencil and paper, he creates the line drawing that eventually becomes a 3-D sculpture, made of light.

McCall began creating solid light works in 1973 with *Line Describing a Cone*, a film that serves as the anchor point for this exhibition and marks a pivotal moment in the artist's oeuvre. In this film from Tate's collection, a projected dot of white light gradually draws a circle on the screen over the course of thirty minutes.

In the space between the projector and the screen, a giant cone of light begins to take shape out of thin air. Slowly and dramatically, a sculpture is built right in front of our eyes. This work came just a year after McCall's first film, *Landscape for Fire* (1972), a documented performance of fires lit according to

precise choreography in the dusky light of an old airfield. It was this film that led McCall to the solid light concept.

"I had become much more interested in the process of filmmaking, film audiences, and projection than I was with what happened in front of the camera," McCall says. "I began to think it would be interesting not to make a film of a performance but to somehow make a film as a performance."

Solid Light features three other projected light installations, including *Doubling Back* (2003) and *Split Second (Mirror) I* (2018), showing the evolution of McCall's solid light concept over time as he began to incorporate other materials, like mirrors, and more projectors into his work. Muir says the focus on the action of projection, as its own medium, reverses our traditional gaze, compelling us to look back into the light itself.

In addition to McCall's formative early '70s films, archival photographs and sketches from the artist's notebooks, which he's kept since the beginning of his practice, will contribute a deeper examination to the exhibition.

These materials provide intimate snapshots of McCall's work as it evolved over a nearly fifty-year period, revealing the influence of experimental film, performance, and architecture on his creative process.

There is a continuity to his developing body of work, McCall says, as each work presents some kind of new problem for the next.

Over the past year, *Solid Light* has exhibited in museums around the world, from La Reggia di Venaria in Italy to Shenzhen Bay Cultural Park in China. Now it's Oklahoma City's turn to experience McCall's atmospheric scenes.

"To fully know any one of these works, you have to explore them, go inside them, around them, under them, and behind them," McCall says. It becomes a dance with the viewer, as each solid light work slowly changes shape around you—it's up to you if you choose to let it lead. [X](#)

Anthony McCall: *Solid Light* will be on view at Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center in Oklahoma City through July 27, 2026.

Book Borrowing

CAN OKLAHOMA BE CONSISTENT
ENOUGH TO ACHIEVE THE SO-CALLED
MISSISSIPPI MIRACLE?

By **ELIZABETH CALDWELL**

Illustrations by **BRYCE YZAGUIRRE**

When Addison Sams was in the third grade in Chandler, Oklahoma, she had trouble with rhyming, spelling, and memorization. She struggled to read; there were tears. In the classroom, she was assigned shorter books than other students. “That didn’t feel too good, as a little kid,” Sams says.

Sams and her mother, Alisha, sought outside testing. They found that Addison had dyslexia, a learning disability that makes it more difficult to process language while reading and writing. They started working with tutors who use techniques known as the science of reading. These methods worked.

Sams, who was reading far below her grade level, caught up to her peers. At fourteen, she doesn’t love reading now but can do it. “She can read longer passages quicker. She doesn’t fatigue as easily,” Alisha Sams says. “The frustration is a lot less.”

Crystal Whelan, a former special education teacher, is a reading specialist in Tulsa employing the same methods that worked on Sams. Whelan says when children who have doubted themselves learn to read, it’s like magic. She remembers a particular student who would avoid assignments while telling lengthy stories. “Now he’s reading chapter books to me. He says, ‘Reading’s easy.

Just give me a book and I’ll read it to you.’ It’s amazing. It’s an amazing change to watch,” Whelan says.



Sams’ and Whelan’s experiences mark a shift in thinking about public education efforts, because the science of reading techniques that worked for them are shown to work for almost everyone. Public educators have largely relied on a strategy called “cueing,” which teaches students to use different sources of information (like context clues and visuals) in order to guess the word. But cueing alone is an incomplete approach.

Studies have shown that special attention to the words themselves is a major key to successful readers. This is a core pillar of the science of reading, which is taught according to five main categories: phonics (the study of letters and their sounds), word sounds, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Implementing this practice involves sounding words out so that they map onto your brain, allowing you to recognize them on the page in an instant. Once a word is mapped to your brain, there isn’t

much, short of brain damage, that can remove it.

The science of reading is touted as the miracle in the so-called “Mississippi Miracle,” a term that refers to the dramatic improvement of reading instruction in the state over approximately the past decade. Mississippi’s fourth-grade reading scores rose ten points between 2013 and 2019. By 2023, the Magnolia State, one of the poorest states in the country, had the ninth-highest scores in the nation.

Insiders call it the “Mississippi Marathon,” emphasizing that it took many years of uniform and consistent effort within the public school system and among its supporters to achieve results. And those results aren’t uniformly accepted. Mississippi eighth-graders still read far below the national average, a fact critics point to as proof there hasn’t been meaningful lasting change.

Still, other states are looking to replicate Mississippi’s success. Texas began mandating research-based literacy training in 2019. In 2021, Arkansas was the first of eight states to ban a teaching model based on guessing words from clues, while New Mexico launched science of reading initiatives. In 2024, Kansas passed comprehensive reading reforms with goals to incorporate the science of reading into teacher education.

Locally, the stakes are high: Only 27 percent of Oklahoma third-graders met the mark as proficient or advanced in reading in the 2024–2025 school year. The question now is, can Oklahoma create a unified, disciplined plan to implement reforms that are proven to work, even with children who have learning disabilities?

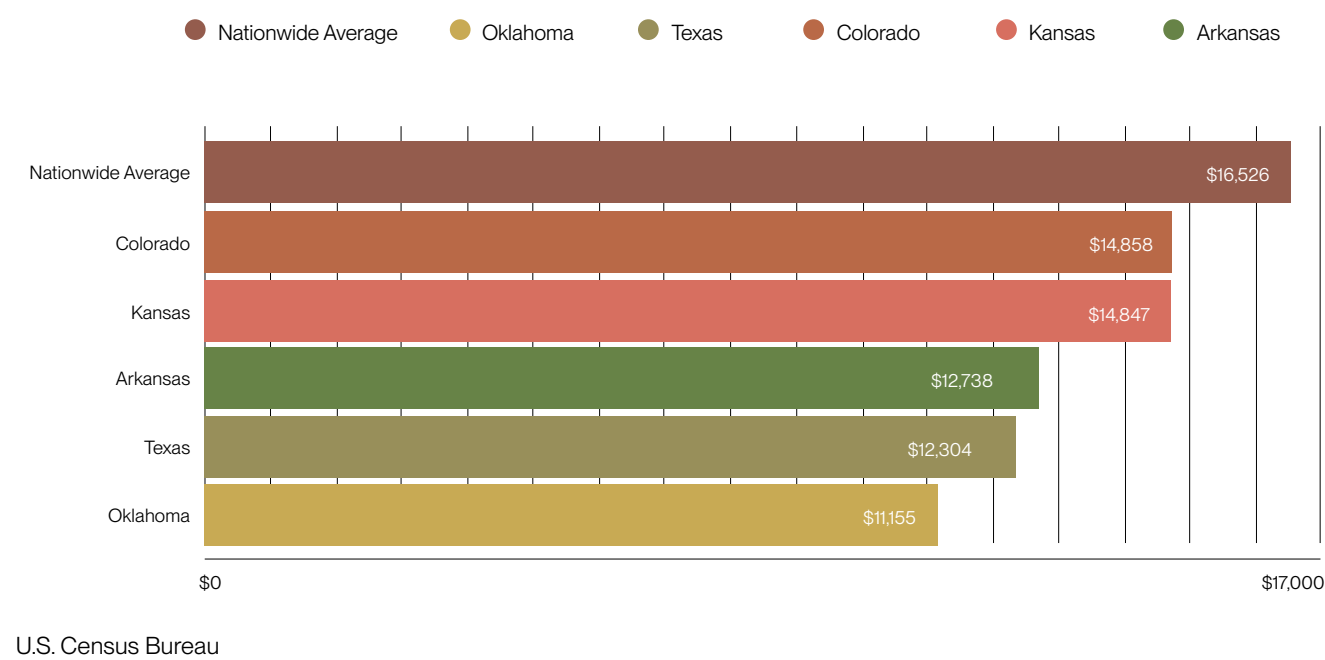


“I think if we’re wanting to replicate what Mississippi did, we need to replicate all of it, and not just portions of it,” says Melissa Ahlgrim, the literacy, policy, and programs director at the Oklahoma State Department of Education.

Ahlgrim described a piecemeal application of various efforts and, in some cases, the elimination of a policy that Mississippi has touted as essential. The “third grade gate” is a pillar in Mississippi; it means any child who isn’t reading at level can be retained, or held back. Oklahoma had a similar policy but pared it down, as thousands of children were at risk of being held back, and eliminated the initiative in 2024 with the Strong Readers Act.



Per-Pupil Education Spending (2023)



PHILANTHROPY STEPS IN

The Barksdale Institute was pivotal in Mississippi’s success

In the late 1990s, Netscape CEO Jim Barksdale decided to work on Mississippi’s literacy crisis. After researching efforts at training teachers in the science of reading, he and his wife, Sally, committed \$100 million to public education. But there were stipulations. The money would be independently controlled, not handled by the state, and tied to measurable academic results. The Barksdale Reading Institute was created in 1999. Over the next two decades, the institute worked to promote its ideas across the state. It was active in the public school system, university teacher training courses, and politics. Corresponding legislation was passed, including a policy that mandated struggling third-grade readers be retained, or held back. The resulting turnaround that saw test scores shoot up became known as the “Mississippi Miracle”. Critics of the miracle say if it were real, Mississippi students would also score well on tests when they’re older, but Magnolia State eighth graders continue to read below the national average. Boosters say continued literacy investment is needed in upper grades.

While critics of the retainment policy say it’s ineffective and cruel, especially without adequate preparation, others say Oklahoma needed to stay the course. It’s inconsistency that’s keeping Oklahoma full of struggling readers, according to doctor of education Mary Dahlgren, an educator of more than forty years. Dahlgren spoke at an October 2025 interim study, a research session hosted by the Oklahoma House of Representatives.

Dahlgren pointed out that in 2013–2014, Oklahoma employed fifty-eight literacy coaches, who worked with school staff around the state on learning the science of reading. Test scores subsequently rose five points in 2015. Funding for the coaches, who figure large in Mississippi’s model, was cut from Oklahoma’s budget by Janet Barresi, then state superintendent of public instruction. National Assessment of Educational Progress test numbers, which measure academic achievement in reading, have continued to slump since 2015.

“Oklahoma can do it,” Dahlgren says. “We made some great gains in just a short period of time. If we had stuck with that model, we would be able to continue to do that.”

Now there are new efforts in Oklahoma’s statehouse to shore up literacy, Mississippi-style. Senator Adam Pugh (R-Edmond) filed Senate Bill 1778 to require summer school for struggling early learners.

Two other lawmakers are touting the Oklahoma READS Act, or House Bill 2944, which proposes that reading coaches be assigned by the state depending on need within districts. Both bills would reinstall the third grade gate.



But where the money will come from is unclear. A Mississippi philanthropist pumped millions of dollars into similar initiatives as the state was setting up for the miracle, but Oklahoma’s purse is not settled. The Oklahoma State Chamber, an advocate for “school choice,” or tax dollars going to private schools via credits for families, also supports third-grade literacy efforts this year. State chamber president and CEO Chad Warmington says Oklahoma’s philanthropic community will take note. “With literacy at the forefront this legislative session, we expect that generosity to continue and grow,” Warmington says.

Oklahoma State Representative Rob Hall (R-Tulsa) authored the Reading Excellence through Accountability, Development, and Standards (READS) Act, and says he expects debate around paying for this legislation. “The funding will

definitely be something that plays out over the legislative process,” Hall says. “I think it’s entirely possible that there’ll be money devoted toward the literacy coaches in particular, and I’m of the opinion that literacy coaches should be funded, hired, and trained at the state level.”

The distinction between who holds the money and training rights is important: in Mississippi, districts are less involved with how funds are spent than in Oklahoma, where money is doled out directly to school districts to use as they see fit. Ahlgrim says that having one entity at the helm (like the state) helps with steadiness, as opposed to a collection of city districts.

Oklahoma’s superintendent, Lindel Fields, was appointed by Governor Kevin Stitt in October after the previous chief of schools resigned. Though Fields has about a year left on his tenure and is not seeking election, he says literacy is a priority for him and that he will support legislation that addresses those problems. “How quickly those policies can be enacted is yet to be determined,” Fields says.

The latest legislative session in Oklahoma began February 2, 2026, and runs through May. Alisha and Addison Sams say they hope whatever needs to be done will be done to help the science of reading take consistent shape across the state, pointing to how it changed their lives.

“I think it’s about confidence and knowing you have the tools,” Alisha Sams says.

The future of Oklahoma readers remains to be seen. For now, all eyes will be on the state’s legislature as it convenes through May. [X](#)

This story was produced in partnership with the nonprofit newsroom *Public Radio Tulsa*.



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Preview



Y'all Ready?

With more than ninety galleries joining this eighteenth edition of the Dallas Art Fair, it's an opportunity to see some of the most exciting contemporary art from across Texas and far beyond. Diverse work in painting, photography, sculpture, and a range of other media from Paris, Bogotá, Osaka, and Mexico City joins art from Austin, Houston, and Fort Worth. The four-day event will also include talks and other happenings. It's not only

an opportunity for serious or emerging collectors but also a community gathering. Its growth over the years—with this year's addition of the Dallas Art Prize—further bolsters this region as an arts destination.

—ALLISON MEIER

The Dallas Art Fair will be at the Fashion Industry Gallery in downtown Dallas, April 16–19, 2026. ▶ dallasartfair.com

RSVP

SOCIALIZING IS AN ART FORM, TOO

This Land

Photographer and documentarian **Jakian Parks**' solo exhibition, *The Black Land*, opened on November 6, 2025, at **Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center**. In this exhibition, Parks turns his lens to the legacy of Oklahoma's Black rodeo culture. *The Black Land* represents the success, beauty, and significance of Black equestrian life as a living cultural and historical tradition. The exhibition will be on view through June 1, 2026.
► **Oklahoma City, Oklahoma**



Photography by Lone Mandoze



Gilded Evening

Guests of the Winter Ball benefiting Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center dressed to the nines and gathered at the Oklahoma City Golf and Country Club on January 31, 2026. The fundraiser, helmed this year by committee chair **Leigh Hefner Bentley** and co-chair **Katie Blaik James**, was founded in 1957. ▶ **Oklahoma City, Oklahoma**



Photography by Darwin Drake

Miami Moment

The art world came together for Miami Art Week, December 5-7, 2025. Friends, supporters, and patrons of *ArtDesk*, Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center, Keigwin + Co, and Green Box Arts joined the festivities during VIP days for Art Basel Miami Beach, Untitled Art Miami, and SCOPE Art Show. The group also visited the Bass Art Museum and the Design District, and enjoyed a lively dinner Gianni's at the Versace Mansion. ► **Miami, Florida**



Creative Spirit

Twenty-one people and organizations were honored for their contributions to the arts during the forty-sixth Oklahoma Governor's Arts Awards on January 20, 2026. The ceremony, held at the Oklahoma State Capitol, honored the nominated recipients for their devotion to community, for defining the spirit of the arts, and for their commitment to promoting the arts in Oklahoma. This year's recipients of the Governor's Award were **Jean Ann Fausser** of Tulsa, and **Glenna** and **Richard Tanenbaum** of Oklahoma City. This award recognizes individuals for longtime leadership and significant contributions to the arts across the state. ► **Oklahoma City, Oklahoma**



Photography by Oklahoma Legislative Service Bureau courtesy of the Oklahoma Arts Council



THE ANIMAL CONFERENCE

2026

September 18 & 19, 2026
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

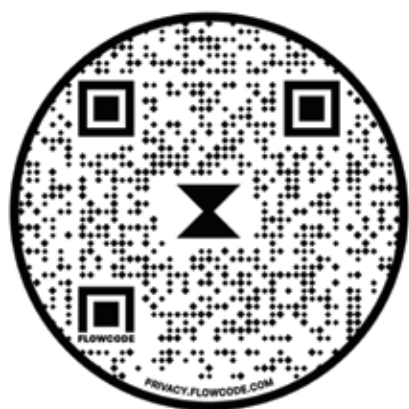
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Contributors



Before joining Public Radio Tulsa, **ELIZABETH CALDWELL** was a freelance reporter and a teacher. She holds a master's from Hollins University. Her audio work has appeared on KCRW and CBC's *The World This Weekend*, and in *The Missouri Review*. She is a South Florida native and a proud veteran of the U.S. Coast Guard, having served aboard the icebreaker USCGC *Polar Star* (WAGB-10).



SHEVAUN WILLIAMS is a national-award-winning photographer based in Norman, Oklahoma. She is known for a signature style that is executed with technical precision and thoughtful narrative. She loves the dynamics of teamwork and the creative process. Even after more than forty years as a creator, she says her dedication and love for the art of photography continue to grow.



BRYCE YZAGUIRRE is a graphic designer by day while maintaining a freelance career as an illustrator and comic artist. He works primarily with traditional materials such as ink and paper, and his illustration credits include *Image Comics*, *Fantagraphics*, *AfterShock*, and projects for independent publishers. Yzaguirre has a BFA in graphic design from Mississippi State University.



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DEDICATION

After sixteen years of volunteer service, we celebrated Rebecca McCubbin's retirement from Kirkpatrick Foundation's Board of Trustees at December's annual meeting.

Becky contributed to the foundation's meaningful investments at the Oklahoma City Zoo and Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center. When additional resources for animal well being were bequeathed to the foundation from Joan Kirkpatrick, Becky helped to guide the foundation's strategy and investments.

Thank you, Becky for your encouragement, commitment, and support.

OUR MISSION

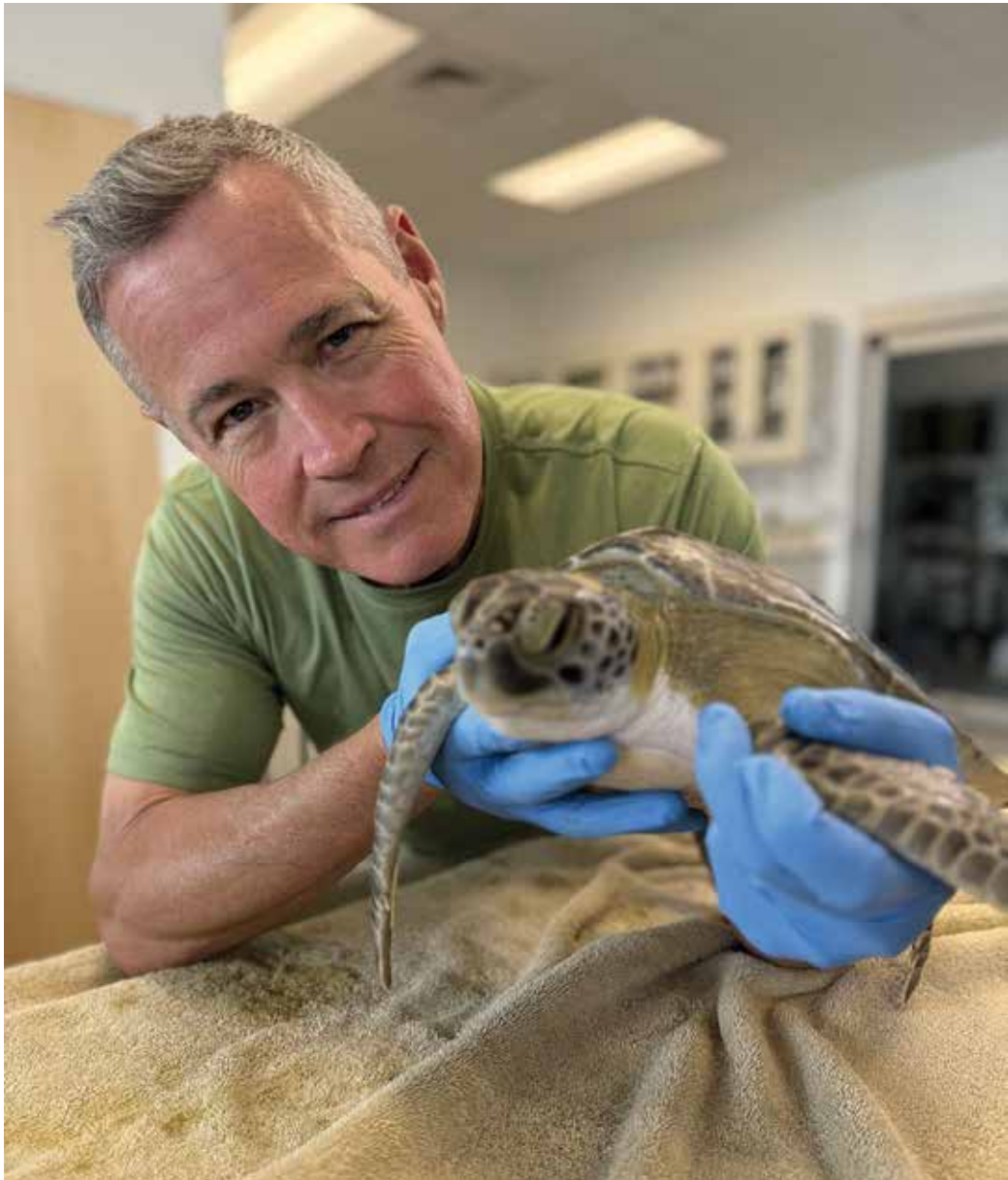
ArtDesk is a free, quarterly print and online publication devoted to contemporary arts, performance, and thought. We inform by focusing on regional and national events, exhibitions, and education, promoting creative literacy and art appreciation.



CONTACT US

Please direct letters to: editor@readartdesk.com or Editor, c/o ArtDesk, 1001 West Wilshire Boulevard, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73116.

Out of Office



Jeff Corwin in 2025 with a green sea turtle preparing to be released in the wild during filming for *Wildlife Nation*.

FOR JEFF CORWIN, the office is almost always outdoors, and his co-workers range from camera operators to king cobras.

Corwin is a biologist, wildlife conservationist, and television host. For more than thirty years, he has educated viewers about animals and the environment. Currently, he is the host of *Wildlife Nation with Jeff Corwin*, an Emmy-winning Saturday morning educational TV show on ABC.

His work has taken him to all ends of the globe, from Africa to Indonesia and the rainforests of South America. This fall he will come to Oklahoma City to discuss the threats to wildlife and the environment at the Animal Conference, September 18–19, 2026.



Corwin amid a burning rainforest in Indonesia for his 2009 NBC documentary series *100 Heartbeats*, about the race to save endangered species from extinction.

*I whisper to My Past
Do I have Another Choice*

TRACEY EMIN

I whisper to My Past Do I have Another Choice (2010)

Tracey Emin will be on view at Tate Modern in

London, England through August 30, 2026

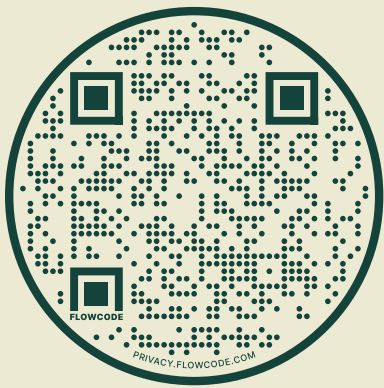
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ARTDESK

Arbor Day Events

OKLAHOMA CITY

APRIL 23–25, 2026



Join us in celebrating National Arbor Day.
Everyone is welcome.
Register for these free weekend events.

Or at bit.ly/ArborDayOKC

Red Ridge Nature Preserve

1–2:30 p.m. Thursday, April 23
5500 N Lincoln Boulevard, Oklahoma City

Be among the first guests to visit Red Ridge Nature Preserve, and take part in an honorary tree planting. Nature comes first at Red Ridge, and we are proud to protect and preserve this special habitat for the benefit of plants and wildlife.

Park House

5:30–7 p.m. Friday, April 24
1800 West Wilshire Boulevard, Nichols Hills

At Park House we celebrate trees, flower gardens, and wildlife. Join us for a short tour focusing on Oklahoma's native trees and the wildlife that call them home. Guests can also walk through the sculpture *Cloud City* by artist Tomas Saraceno. We invite you to paint your own birdhouse and enjoy light refreshments.

Mollie Spencer Farm

9–10:30 a.m. Saturday, April 25
1001 Garth Brooks Boulevard, Yukon

Join us at Mollie Spencer Farm to celebrate trees and honeybees! Enjoy a nature walk and a tree talk with the Oklahoma Department of Forestry, and visit our friendly farm animals in the petting barn, and visit our new aviary.

Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center at Campbell Art Park

11 a.m.–12 p.m. Saturday, April 25
11 NW 11 Street, Oklahoma City

Help our feathered friends! Visitors will build and paint a birdhouse inspired by Oklahoma Contemporary's iconic façade. The birdhouse project will take place at Campbell Art Park, next to Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center.