



# michigan arts

2025



**michigan arts**

DIGITAL EDITION  
MAY 2025

## 2. ACCESSING THE ARTS

*Enriching the student experience through arts programming*

## 6. ARTS HONORS CORDS

*The Class of 2025 shows their pride*

## 8. CULTURE CORPS

*Connecting students to arts internships across the state*

## 10. VR OPERA

*Creating the first ever VR opera for the visually impaired*

## 12. ARTS JOURNALISM

*A conversation with Knight-Wallace Arts Journalism Fellow, Anastasia Tsioulcas*

## 14. STUDENT PARTICIPATION

*Learning to advocate for the Arts*

## 15. CARE ACROSS CAMPUSES

*Student art exhibition centers healing & connects communities*

## 16. ARTISTIC FUTURES

*The works of recent graduates Leah Crosby, Kara Roseborough, and sara faraj*

## 18. FINDING HER VOICE

*How one student found the Arts at the University of Michigan*

## 20. LESSONS LEARNED

*Q&A with U-M Artist Residents: Rbiannon Giddens & Rick Lowe*

## 24. THE ARTS AT MICHIGAN

*By Sara Blair, Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs & Arts and Humanities*

## 26. STATE OF THE ARTS

*The Symphony Band on tour*

## LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The University of Michigan has been a magical place for me. It is a community of creative thinkers and doers that propels every area of human inquiry forward. It has also inspired my own growth. I received my BA in music and art history from U-M and was lucky enough to return to campus as a faculty member in musicology. I've witnessed firsthand how the arts here don't just complement our academic mission—they elevate it.

In disciplines from architecture, creative writing, dance, and design to film, music, theater, and the visual arts, I see faculty and students doing profound and pioneering work that leads to influential careers. Our University of Michigan Museum of Art (UMMA) and performing arts presenter the University Musical Society (UMS) are second to none and bring the very best of the arts to our community. They create space for thoughtful dialogue to engage everyone with the arts on a deeper level, connect us to one another, and simply make life more meaningful.

At the U-M Arts Initiative, our focus is to amplify and animate this campus culture of art and creativity and make it even more central to our lives as learners, scholars, and citizens. We are committed to supporting programs that connect the arts to student mental health and wellbeing. We promote creative research in fields like robotics and engineering. We also connect our talented undergraduates with hands-on experiences through internship opportunities with nonprofit arts organizations across the state of Michigan.

What I love most about this work is the spirit of artistic dynamism that drives it—a spirit of curiosity, service, and the pursuit of excellence. It is this spark that inspires our faculty, staff, and students to be among the leaders and best—to break through boundaries of the possible and bring something new to the world. It is a spirit of creativity that is no less vital to our poets and composers than it is to our computer scientists and cardiologists.

I hold a core belief that the arts are for all. They should be collaborative, courageous, and full of joy. I want every member of our community to have meaningful and plentiful opportunities to engage with the arts, whether as a maker, an audience member, or someone simply open to being moved by a new perspective.

Together, I believe we are building something truly special: a vibrant and sustainable Michigan arts ecosystem that enriches our university and serves as a model for arts education and community engagement worldwide. The stories within this magazine are a celebration of some of our recent work—I hope they inspire you to join us on this journey.

Sincerely,



Mark Clague  
Executive Director  
U-M Arts Initiative



*Hear from  
Mark Clague*

# Accessing the Arts

## ENRICHING THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE THROUGH ARTS PROGRAMMING

By Natalia Holtzman

Joe Levickas and Adrienne Frank often think of students as wearing one of three hats: there's the artist or art creator hat, the audience member hat, and the student leader hat.

If those first two hats seem fairly self-explanatory (they're for those "who are practicing art" and those "who are going and engaging with art," respectively), the student leader hat is for those who are "supporting arts organizations and entities on-campus" in other ways. That's according to Joe Levickas, who serves as director of student engagement for the U-M Arts Initiative.

In their work on student-facing programs with the Arts Initiative, Levickas and Frank aim to support students wearing all three hats.

As program specialist for student engagement, Frank manages various arts programs, student art competitions, and exhibitions. Frank also coordinates outreach to students, including curating a weekly email of 5 different arts-related events taking place on campus or in Ann Arbor.

Frank describes her position as "a balance between managing programs" and "a lot of engagement with students." She is quick to



**JOE LEVICKAS**

Director of  
Student  
Engagement  
*Arts Initiative*



**ADRIENNE FRANK**

Program  
Specialist for  
Student  
Engagement  
*Arts Initiative*

point out that programming is designed for students of all majors: "We want to make sure that if you're studying engineering or nursing that there's opportunities for you to engage with the arts as well."

"We all engage with art all the time, whether it's the music we choose to listen to or the clothes we put on in the morning," Frank says.

She understands her own role as "helping students see that they already are engaging with art, that they already love art," and then guiding them through the transition from being "a passive observer or a passive participant to really engaging purposefully in the arts."

As director of student engagement, Levickas manages a slew of other arts programs, including Passport to the Arts, which provides students with vouchers to arts events; a mini grants program for students; and Course Connections, a faculty-classroom engagement program.

Frank and Levickas agree that their work centers on, in Frank's words, "thoughtfully curating experiences where students can connect with one another over the arts."

Adrienne Frank with students during a 2023 Art Outta Town trip to the Toledo Museum of Art →

## “MEET US AT THE BUS STOP” ART OUTTA TOWN

By asking students about the movies they watch and the music they listen to, Adrienne Frank hopes to point out that “everybody loves art, whether or not they think of themselves as an artsy person.”

Her larger goal, she says, is “helping them see that art is for everyone”—and not just something that belongs in, say, the rarified world of a museum.

Frank manages Art Outta Town, an Arts Initiative program for which “we take groups of students on a bus outside of Ann Arbor to explore the arts in other cities.”

In the past, Frank has led trips to Motor City Comic Con in Novi and a screening of *Spider-Man* accompanied by a live orchestra at the Fisher Theater in Detroit, as well as more conventional trips to the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn.

The trips are available at low cost to both undergraduate and graduate students; Frank says her team tries to plan six trips per academic year with a wide range of artistic mediums, from visual art to theater and beyond.

And while Frank and her team handle all the logistics, “students just meet us at the bus stop,” she says, where they can enjoy a “smooth experience.”

“One of the strategies we use is to provide an access point that feels familiar to take students to the unfamiliar,” Frank says.

The *Spider-Man* trip, for example, provided a familiar comic-book character as a launching pad to something less familiar: “Students showed up dressed

like Spider-Man,” Frank says. “They were super excited about it. But then when we were leaving, so many of the students were saying, ‘I’ve never seen a live orchestra.’ I’ve never seen a movie with orchestral accompaniment.”

Frank’s larger goal is “to create multiple access points... so that students of all different interests and backgrounds see themselves in the programs we offer.”

The Art Outta Town trips, she says, are “transformative experiences for students, and they add to the educational experience at U-M in a way that I think is more subtle and really fun” compared to the typical classroom experience.

Frank believes that the benefit of the arts—if those benefits can be quantified—come down to our well-being.

“Engaging with the arts helps us holistically,” she says. “It helps us emotionally; it helps us mentally; it helps us to become more empathetic people.”

These are crucial aspects of a student’s education, too, Frank insists, alongside all the harder skills that might be easier to list on a resume. Ultimately, the “broadening of worldview” that students can experience through art may allow them to become “more well-rounded...[and] more curious about the world.”





## “WOULD YOU WANT TO GO TO THE OPERA?” PASSPORT TO THE ARTS

Joe Levickas agrees that guiding students through an engagement with the arts—or even just initiating that engagement—can help to cultivate new skills in those same students, and he specifically mentions “appreciating diversity” and “exploring new cultures” as examples.

But Levickas also goes further: “Understanding that you’re able to express ideas [in] complex ways...[is] one of the great abilities of art,” he says.

Among the programs he manages, Levickas says his favorites are Passport to the Arts and the Student Mini Grants, which support student art projects—anything from an event put on by a student organization to a student publication, student-made film, or other individual project.

In the past, Mini Grants, which are available in amounts of up to \$1,000 each, have provided funding for various dance performances, improv shows, and the fashion/pop-culture *SHEI Magazine*.

Meanwhile, through his work on Passport to the Arts, Levickas provides students with a deceptively simple way to gain entry to nearby arts events.

The program works like this: on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of each month, vouchers are distributed across campus, each of which provides access to 5 or 6 different events, ranging from student productions staged on campus to performances at venues unaffiliated with U-M, like the Ark or the Michigan Theater.

Students can trade in a voucher for a ticket to one of the corresponding events, and while Levickas estimates the cash value of the tickets at “somewhere in-between

five and twenty dollars [each],” they’re available to students at no cost.

Still, Levickas insists the value of the vouchers goes beyond the financial.

“Students have lots of things that they could spend their money on...[and] that they’re being asked to spend their money on,” he says.

By removing the financial burden, students are faced with “an opportunity... to try out something they might not otherwise have been comfortable going to or wouldn’t have wanted to pay for.”

Levickas offers the following example: “I feel confident saying most students have never been to an opera,” he says. “If asked, ‘Would you want to go to the opera?’ it seems safe to assume that many students would respond warily, assuming that those tickets might be too expensive, especially for an art form they’re not quite sure about.”

But removing the financial burden entirely, Levickas says, “really changes the dynamic and the decision-making process there”—and students seem to be much more willing to try out new experiences.

In fact, on the occasions when Passport to the Arts has offered access to an opera through its voucher program, “we’ve actually had really strong attendance,” Levickas says.

After attending an on-campus production of *Julius Caesar*, one student remarked that they wouldn’t “usually go to events like this but I saw it on the voucher and decided to give it a shot...Thank you for this fantastic program.” **M**



1. A *Royal Rumble* drag performer in September 2024—one of the events students could attend using the Passport to the Arts
2. Dancers at Artscapade 2024
3. Drummers at Artscapade 2024
4. Dancers at Artscapade 2024
5. Passports are available at multiple locations across campus
6. Students connect at the 2025 Student Arts Org Summit
7. *Julius Caesar*, presented by the School of Music, Theatre & Dance in September 2024—another event featured in the Passport

“

We all engage with art all the time, whether it's the music we choose to listen to or the clothes we put on in the morning.

—ADRIENNE FRANK



©Peter Smith Photography

# Class of 2025 Arts Honors Cords

In a sea of caps & gowns adorned with maize and blue sashes and tassels, over 600 members of the University of Michigan Class of 2025 proudly added some hot pink to their commencement wardrobe. Launched this year by the U-M Arts Initiative, the Arts Honors Cord recognized Wolverines who wove the arts into their academic journey. Students that earned the cord didn't just study during their time at Michigan—they danced, designed, directed, composed, and created their way through it.

2025 LSA graduate Amira Said explained what it meant to her to wear the Arts Honors Cord, “I have completed two classes in the arts, participated in an art making workshop, attended UMS events, student arts [performances], was part of an Art Outta Town trip, and have used many of the Passports to the Arts.

**These initiatives on campus have brought art back into my life, and I like the cord as a physical reminder to keep going with it, even after graduation!”**

Congratulations to the Class of 2025—good luck in all you do, make art an ongoing part of your life, and Go Blue! **M**



*Emily Dean, a 2025 U-M School of Kinesiology graduate, poses with her Arts Honors Cord.*

211 ARTS MAJORS

34%

416 NON-MAJORS

66%

# 628 24 3

TOTAL APPLICANTS *from* SCHOOLS & COLLEGES *across* U-M CAMPUSES

## ARTS HONORS CORD APPLICANTS BY SCHOOL



- MEDICINE 1
- KINESIOLOGY 2
- ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY 3
- RACKHAM SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES 6
- PUBLIC HEALTH 6
- ARCHITECTURE 14
- INFORMATION 20
- MUSIC, THEATRE & DANCE 48
- ART & DESIGN 86
- LITERATURE, SCIENCE, AND THE ARTS 268
- ENGINEERING 85
- BUSINESS 24
- UM-FLINT 123 4
- UM-DEARBORN 45
- PUBLIC POLICY 7
- DENTISTRY 6
- EDUCATION 6
- NURSING 4
- PHARMACY 2
- SOCIAL WORK 1

- <sup>1</sup> INNOVATION & TECHNOLOGY 1
- <sup>2</sup> MANAGEMENT 2
- <sup>3</sup> ARTS, SCIENCE & EDUCATION 21
- <sup>4</sup> BUSINESS 1
- <sup>5</sup> ARTS, SCIENCE LITERATURE 12

(All numbers accurate as of May 2025)



M | ARTS INITIATIVE  
**CULTURE CORPS**

# Culture Corps

CONNECTING LOCAL NONPROFITS & U-M STUDENTS  
FOR PAID ARTS & CULTURE INTERNSHIPS *By Jessica Jenks*

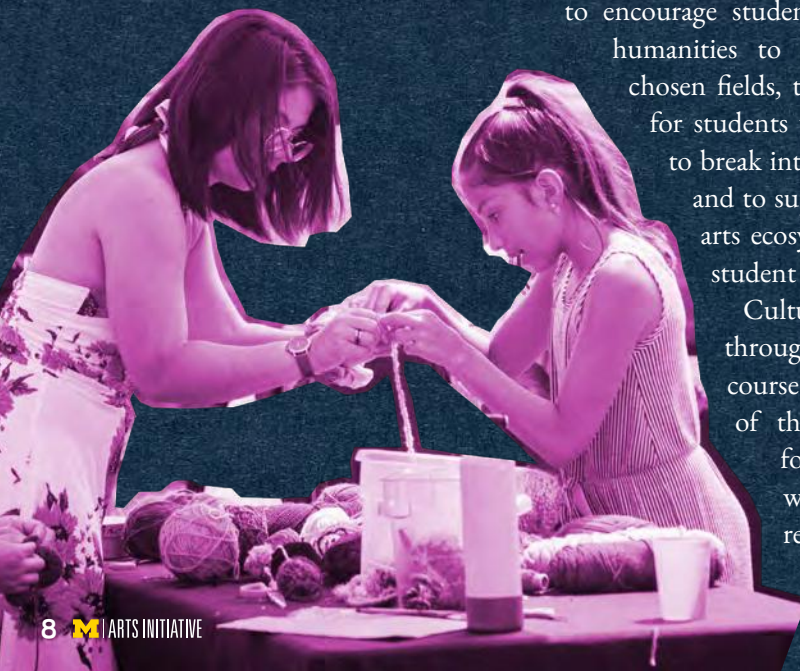
Laura Scales, CEO of Living Arts Detroit, has hosted five University of Michigan students through a partnership with Culture Corps, a U-M Arts Initiative program that matches undergraduates with internships in arts and culture organizations across Michigan.

Scales said the partnership led to the launch of a new internal 9–10 month internship program at Living Arts Detroit. “Working with the Arts Initiative and the Culture Corps program has been easy and seamless. It’s great to fill out a form in February and then have interns in the summer.”

**“They’re U of M students, so of course they’re all beautifully inquisitive and arrive eager and ready to learn.”**

The Culture Corps program goals are: to encourage students majoring in arts and humanities to explore careers in their chosen fields, to provide an entry point for students who may not know how to break into arts and culture careers, and to support the region’s vibrant arts ecosystem by sponsoring paid student interns.

Culture Corps prepares interns through an Arts Initiative mini-course before placement at one of the 20 host organizations for the summer. A fair wage and transportation reimbursement aims to



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**CULTURE CORPS**



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make the program inclusive and accessible to all U-M students and even some regional community college students through LSA's Transfer Bridges program.

Partners hosting internships include the Detroit Public Theatre, InsideOut Literary Arts, the Arab American National Museum, Detroit Opera, and many more across Metro Detroit, Dearborn, Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti, Grand Rapids, and as far north as Marquette in the Upper Peninsula.

Living Arts Detroit, a nonprofit located in southwest Detroit, provides art experiences and arts-integrated education to youth aged 3 months through 18 years. Their programming ranges from artist residencies and dance classes to an animation studio and after-school activities.

Scales highlighted the diverse experiences offered at Living Arts Detroit, allowing interns to explore various day-to-day aspects of nonprofits such as program management, behind the scenes administrative work, and budgeting. "All of them have sleeves rolled up, and they're all in," she said. "They're U of M students, so of course they're all beautifully inquisitive and arrive eager and ready to learn."

The quality of U-M interns has consistently impressed Scales.

"We've had five now, and all have been just as incredible as the next," she said. "They're really just excited to learn more about the process, and that's not always the case with every intern we get."

U-M pre-law student and Living Arts Detroit administrative intern Ron Burgaj called the Culture Corps program: "A hidden gem at U of M," and said he "would love to see more programs like this at U-M that offer students a real learning experience."

The program was launched after a 2021 research phase supported by the Humanities Collaboratory Equity Initiative Grant, which examined best practices for mutually-beneficial internship models, quality student experiences, and how to build connections with arts institutions working to diversify their staff and teams. The program was then sustained through a generous donation from the Tisch family.

"It's easy to forget that the arts offer not just entertainment, but professional opportunity for Michigan residents, with an economic impact measured in billions of dollars and more than 100,000 jobs," said Arts Initiative Executive Director Mark Clague. "The U-M Arts Initiative likewise contributes not only to the cultural enrichment of our campus and community, but to the economic goals of the state and the professional aspirations of our students." **M**

*If you'd like to become a donor or if you are a U-M student interested in joining Culture Corps, please contact Alison Rivett [alibyryne@umich.edu].*





The First  
**VR OPERA** *for the*  
Visually Impaired

*By Jessica Jenks*

In an original fusion of technology and opera, assistant professor Dr. Julie Zhu at the University of Michigan's School of Music, Theatre & Dance is spearheading an innovative project alongside her co-principal investigator, NYU's Dr. Aoshuang Zhang. Their innovative Arts Research: Incubation & Acceleration (ARIA) project challenges traditional notions of accessibility in performance. "Talking Pupils," which may be the first virtual reality (VR) opera created specifically for visually impaired audiences, ventures into largely unexplored artistic territory.

The 20-minute VR production draws inspiration from the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese folktales of writer Pu Songlin, and showcases a journey of visual impairment in a modern context. **In this adaptation, the protagonist loses their vision and encounters mysterious "pupil beings" who encourage a self-awareness and playfulness that opens new possibilities and worlds.**

What makes "Talking Pupils" revolutionary is not just its subject matter but its multisensory approach to storytelling and design. The team is also developing their own custom haptic cane component of the VR experience which will provide real-time, tactile feedback to the user synchronized with the opera's audio elements.

"Just having a cane is a sense of safety for many with visual impairments, even if it's virtual," Zhu notes. The haptic device will produce realistic sound effects that correspond with what the user is seeing in the virtual reality.

This project exemplifies cross-disciplinary collaboration at its most innovative. With Zhu leading from U-M and Zhang contributing her immersive design expertise from NYU, the team has created a narrative experience that unfolds "inside the pupil." Incorporating insights from their fieldwork with students at China's TaiYuan School of the Blind last summer, Zhu and Zhang have developed sophisticated

spatial sound designs that guide audiences through the protagonist's gradual journey toward visual recovery.

The project's core team operates from U-M, while collaborating artists from across the country have traveled to Ann Arbor for recording sessions and motion-capture work. U-M associate professors in Performing Arts Technology Dr. John Granzow and Dr. Anil Çamcı are developing the haptic-VR feedback device, while Dr. Sile O'Modhrain—who is part of the visually impaired community herself—serves as both an advocate and sound design consultant, lending her expertise in haptic devices for the blind.

The performance aspects are equally interdisciplinary and collaborative, featuring vocalist Sarah Grace Graves, PhD candidate at University of California, Berkeley, for singing; VR dance choreography by Tzveta Kassabova of U-M and Sarah Silverblatt-Buser of Barnard College of Columbia University; and percussionists from the Chicago-based collective Beyond This Point.

Funded through an ARIA grant, in partnership with the Office of the Vice President for Research and the U-M Arts Initiative, this project aligns with U-M's Vision 2034 goal of fostering creativity and innovation across disciplines. The grant supports the team through May 2026, with plans for performances in Michigan, San Francisco, and New York upon completion.

While the full production is slated to premiere in summer 2026, the team hopes to develop two versions: one for live performances and another distributed through Meta's platform, making this U-M work accessible to a global audience.

"We'd like to create a version anyone can experience," says Zhu, "and a live-performance version that incorporates the haptic cane."

This dual approach underscores the project's core mission: to push artistic boundaries while creating meaningful accessibility—not as an afterthought, but as the central organizing principle of the work itself. **M**

*Full list of researchers & collaborators: Dr. Julie Zhu, Assistant Professor, Performing Arts Technology, SMTD, U-M; Dr. Aoshuang Zhang, Immersive Designer, Adjunct Faculty at New York University Tisch school of the Arts Undergraduate Film and TV, Assistant Research Scientist, NYU-Courant Future Reality Lab Computer Science Department; Dr. Sile O'Modhrain, Associate Professor of Music, SMTD, and Associate Professor of Information, School of Information, U-M; Dr. John Granzow, Associate Professor, Performing Arts Technology, Faculty Director, ArtsEngine, SMTD, U-M; Dr. Anil Çamcı, Associate Professor, Performing Arts Technology, SMTD, U-M; Tzveta Kassabova, Associate Professor of Theatre & Drama, SMTD, U-M; Sarah Grace Graves, singer and composer, PhD candidate at University of California Berkeley; Adam Rosenblatt, co-artistic director/percussion of Beyond This Point; John Corkill, founder/co-artistic director/percussion of Beyond This Point, Lecturer of Percussion at the University of Chicago; Percussion Ensemble Director at Loyola University; Stephanie O'Malley, Associate Director, Adjunct Lecturer, Emerging Technologies Group, Duderstadt Center, U-M; Theodore W. Hall, Extended Reality Software Developer, Emerging Technologies Group, Duderstadt Center, U-M; Richard Whiddington, Writer, Journalist for Artnet; Sarah Silverblatt-Buser, Adjunct Lecturer, Dance Department, Artist-in-Residence, Barnard Movement Lab, Barnard College of Columbia University, Freelance Director, Dancer and Choreographer; Dr. Zeynep Özcan, Assistant Professor of Music, Performing Arts Technology, SMTD, U-M; Taiyuan School of the Blind, Shanxi, China.*

# Exploring the Future of Arts Journalism

A CONVERSATION WITH INAUGURAL KNIGHT-WALLACE ARTS JOURNALISM FELLOW,

# Anastasia Tsioulcas

By Jessica Jenks

Anastasia Tsioulcas has been covering music news and writing curatorial pieces for as long as she can remember. She has spent the last three decades working for major media organizations such as National Public Radio (NPR) and *The New York Times*. Her long and impressive arts journalism career bridges the print to digital transition, working as a freelance music journalist and critic for outlets such as: SONY, *Billboard*, *O* (The Oprah Magazine), NPR Music's Tiny Desk Concert series, *Travel + Leisure*, and *National Geographic*. Tsioulcas was named the inaugural Knight-Wallace Arts Journalism Fellow in a joint effort between the University of Michigan Arts Initiative and the Wallace House Center for Journalists one year ago. Tsioulcas is the first journalist to simultaneously



serve as a correspondent at NPR and as a music critic at *The New York Times*, and she alternates seamlessly between longform profiles, investigative reporting, breaking news, and engaging explainers.

Tsioulcas saw this fellowship as a “gift” and a rare moment to step outside the daily grind at NPR and fully immerse herself in a research-focused, interdisciplinary environment at U-M.

As a Knight-Wallace Arts Journalism Fellow, Tsioulcas has devoted the year to studying diversity initiatives at regional arts organizations in southeast Michigan. This research proves especially timely as state and federal funding continues to rapidly

continued, “While racial and cultural diversity are vital, socioeconomic and geographical diversity is huge too! And this fellowship in Michigan is exactly the right kind of place to be doing this type of research. Michigan is a great microcosm of what’s going on in lots of areas across the country right now.”

This Knight-Wallace Fellowship marks the latest collaborative effort from U-M’s Arts Initiative to expand access to the arts on and off campus, and to strengthen the arts ecosystem in Michigan. As a Fellow, Tsioulcas has also spent the last year leading a series of student-focused workshops for budding U-M arts journalists.

Thirteen U-M *art[seen]* writers

from students across all three of U-M’s campuses: Flint, Dearborn, and Ann Arbor.

Tsioulcas meets with the same group of thirteen students every two weeks. She selects three different students’ pieces of written work and they discuss it as a group, offering feedback.

“I’m so happy to say it is such a thoughtful, compassionate, and kind group of students who are really invested in each other’s growth and success. It’s really gratifying to see,” said Tsioulcas.

Workshops are interspersed with talks from guest lecturers, including a curator from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City,

## "This feels like even more dynamic & important work now than when I proposed it even a few months ago."

decline, transforming the landscape for these institutions. Tsioulcas says she’s begun asking new questions of regional organizations, and says, “For me this feels like even more dynamic and important work now than when I proposed it even a few months ago.”

Tsioulcas plans to turn her research into a radio series with companion articles for NPR, and she is talking to everyone from grassroots artists and organizations to legacy organizations in the region such as Detroit Opera, the Ann Arbor Symphony Orchestra, and the University Musical Society (UMS). What diversity looks and feels like to each of these organizations is vastly different. “A lot of diversity outreach is to rural areas that are otherwise culture deserts in Michigan,” Tsioulcas notes. She

have gotten the chance to learn and study under Tsioulcas through a biweekly arts journalism workshop, which provides hands-on experience, career coaching, and one-on-one mentorship with the fellow.

U-M *art[seen]* writers are student journalists who review arts events on and off campus, such as UMS performances and Stamps Gallery exhibitions. “I’m really happy to say I’ve gotten a lot of great feedback both from the students and university organizations,” said Tsioulcas, “They’re really excited to have a student-focused outlet that students are writing arts reviews for.”

The program, hosted by the Knight-Wallace Fellow in collaboration with the Arts Initiative, has drawn enthusiastic participation

NPR’s chief movie critic, and a professor from the Berklee College of Music. This winter 2025 semester, Tsioulcas expanded the program to include students from UM-Flint, broadening the reach of her work and the *art[seen]* program.

“We’ve had such incredible engagement from students, not just in writing but in providing thoughtful critiques of each other’s work,” she said. “It’s inspiring to see how invested they are in growing as arts writers. I have seen such an evolution in their writing abilities and how they’ve grown as individuals.”

Tsioulcas has set a new bar for university integration, going beyond workshop hours to mentoring students over coffee, collaborating with faculty and staff across multiple

U-M departments—including the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts and the School of Music, Theatre & Dance—and engaging UM-Flint and UM-Dearborn students to connect all three campuses. She is also actively participating in U-M courses, from ceramics in the winter semester to political science and history courses she took last fall. Tsioulcas has fully immersed herself in U-M’s culture, inspiring collaboration; supporting student growth; and advancing our mission of education, research, and public service to address society’s needs today and into the future by cultivating the next generation of arts writers. **M**

Tsioulcas narrates  
*Of Thee I Sing* at the  
Michigan Theater,  
November 2024



Hear more from Anastasia Tsioulcas on the *U-M Creative Currents* podcast.



Read reviews from Tsioulcas' cohort of student journalists in [\[art\]seen](#)

## STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN THE ARTS

By Caitlyn Bogart, *[art]seen* writer 2023–2025, *BMA Voice Performance*, *Minor in Musical Theater Composition*

I’ve always been obsessed with live music and theater—experiencing it, appreciating it, and of course, the post-show debriefs. And since I arrived in Ann Arbor’s vibrant arts community four years ago, I’ve attended some sort of event at least once a week. It’s no surprise that my job as an arts critic for the Arts Initiative’s *[art]seen* blog has been a dream come true.

I never anticipated being a writer outside of personal practice, so the position was at first intimidating. With challenges too come unexpected gifts, catapulting my interest in arts journalism. As I was publishing reviews each month, the work not only honed my writing abilities but deepened my artistry, developing clarity and confidence in my opinions. I loved my job, but was eager for more.

This year, Anastasia Tsioulcas became a mentor to the writers

at *[art]seen*. She’s known for her beautiful reviews for *The New York Times* and her wide-ranging career at NPR. She’s the only journalist ever to assume both positions at once, which makes her even more awesome. Under her guidance, our cohort of *[art]seen* critics met every other Monday during the semester. She shared writing tactics specific to reviewing and provided her insight on the arts journalism industry. We even got to speak with some of her fantastic colleagues, including Bob Mondello, Mark Mobley, and Lara Pellegrinelli.

Anastasia’s deep understanding of the craft, as well as her encouraging presence, inspired me deeply. An arts writer’s responsibility is more than answering “Is the performance worth your ticket price?” It’s an exploration of the cultural significance and purpose of human

creativity. We faced more demanding questions like, “What is the goal of the work? How does it fit into this specific community? Why is this performance happening right now?” Anastasia motivated us to investigate and remain constantly curious, which added a refreshing depth and complexity to my pieces.

Anastasia opened my eyes to the importance and necessity of art criticism to our communities. The first Monday we met she said, “Arts Criticism *is* Arts Advocacy”, and I have carried that nugget of wisdom with me since the first meeting. To review a piece is to share a moment with the artists performing to document a specific moment in time. **The essential experience of interacting with live performance is something I will never take for granted, nor the joy of advocating for it. **M****



# Care Across Campuses

STUDENT ART EXHIBITION CENTERS HEALING & CONNECTS COMMUNITIES

By: Scott Mooney

Oftentimes, self-care can appear like a solitary, even selfish practice. Likewise, art can often seem like a very isolated, individualistic endeavor. But a recent Arts Initiative exhibition emphasized the ways in which healing, artistic expression, and community can break down these false barriers, foster connections, and imagine new ways to envision and build our world.

The “Take Care” student exhibition featured almost one hundred pieces of art created by U-M undergraduate and graduate students, all centering around the themes of care and resilience, especially in the face of challenging times. It was open to all students across the three U-M campuses, including those with formal training in the arts and those without. The exhibition was displayed at both Riverbank Arts on the UM-Flint campus and the Duderstadt Center Gallery at the UM-Ann Arbor’s North Campus.

For Benjamin Gaydos, associate professor of communication and visual arts and the director of Riverbank Arts, connecting multiple communities is an integral part of the collection’s message. “At UM-Flint, we are acutely aware of the structural and cultural divides that exist within the University of Michigan system,” he said. “By traveling between campuses, ‘Take Care’ challenges the often unspoken hierarchies within our university and affirms the value of creative voices.”

The works themselves also transcended division and classification, using a multitude of media to explore caring and self-expression. From paintings and printworks to sculpture and fiber arts, “Take Care” invited visitors to consider their own healing from a variety of perspectives. For a reception at Riverside Art, UM-Flint dance instructor Emma Davis and the Detroit Dance Collective

shared a dance performance they choreographed especially for the event. The reception was also part of the Arts Initiative’s Art Outta Town program, which offered students on the UM-Ann Arbor campus free transportation to and from the event.

For the students included in “Take Care,” their art became a way to bridge the gap between self and community care, between individual expression and community engagement. “‘Take Care’ underscores the necessity of art as a means of fostering connection,” observed Gaydos. “This message holds particular weight in Flint, where creative expression has long been a tool for navigating not just challenges—but crises—as well as functioning as a tool for envisioning a more just future. It reminds us that care is not just about self-preservation but about the relationships we cultivate and the spaces we build together.” **M**

# Artistic Futures

By Scott Mooney

For **sara faraj**, MUP '24, a master's degree in urban and regional planning was the perfect pairing for her artistic ambitions. A self-taught photojournalist, faraj noticed in her studies the disconnects between urban planners and the communities they serve. These observations became the root of a multifaceted arts project, "The Art of Knowing Your Power and Place." The endeavor "aims to cultivate space for emancipatory practice and process and liberatory education," says faraj, "and plant the seeds for social change."

The project found a home at the Arts Initiative's Creative Careers Residency program, a unique transitional program that supports recent masters-level U-M graduates, allowing them crucial time for self-directed creative practice. As a recipient, faraj spent the 2024–2025 academic year facilitating photovoice workshops for marginalized individuals, which taught them photography skills while helping them hone their voice as chroniclers of their own experiences.

"This work holds a lot of power for folks to have access to photography, and to get to recenter and reframe who is the expert not just in urban planning, but generally," faraj says. **"Creating space for folks to tell their own stories is rare."** With the support provided by the residency program, faraj has also been able to engage with local participants and create photovoice materials for facilitation to share with grassroots organizations and community organizers on the ground. "I've never had an experience like this," she says of the program, "and truly having that time has been invaluable."

For artists transitioning from the life of a graduate student to the life of a working artist, the structure and support offered by the Creative Careers Residency goes beyond just time. For nine and a half months, participants receive a stipend, health care coverage, feedback sessions, media support, and engagement with the public and U-M campus.



SARA FARAJ, MASTER OF URBAN PLANNING '24  
TAUBMAN COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE & URBAN PLANNING

For resident **Kara Roseborough**, MFA '24, these connections with the local community have been essential to the development of her piece. Roseborough's project, "La Vie en Rose," is a Motown ballet that follows a Black waitress from a small town who follows her dreams of dancing in New York City. In collaboration with local musicians, Roseborough set the work to new and existing Motown-inspired songs, giving the piece a distinctive identity unique to southeastern Michigan.

**"Part of what I hope...that people take away is this understanding of appreciating all of the richness that is within your own community and not needing to necessarily go out to some place that you put on a pedestal,"**

says Roseborough. "You can build that for yourself anywhere." And in her time in the Residency, Roseborough has done just that, collaborating with the Prison Creative Arts Project and teaching campus workshops on bomba, an Afro-Puerto Rican dance. In the future, Roseborough hopes to keep choreographing and found her own dance company in southeastern Michigan.

Participant **Leah Crosby**, MFA '24, has used the program as a laboratory to explore both artistic forms and their own creative future. "My project is a three-part, experimental audio storytelling situation that looks at three marine creatures...as symbols to understand identity co-formation, care, and caregiving," Crosby says. The project's audio was released serially on WBCN,

Ann Arbor's community radio station, culminating in a final live performance of the entire audio series at the Ann Arbor District Library.

"I don't think I would've made work like this in the container of an MFA program," Crosby says, noting that the program trusted them to make their own artistic decisions. They had the freedom to design workshops through the program that helped them build their skills for their future, in which they want to run arts programs for community organizations. **"I feel totally confident that I will continue to live an artistic life,"** they say, "and it's just been such a gift to be able to do that full-time for this year." **M**

KARA ROSEBOROUGH, MASTER OF FINE ARTS '24  
SCHOOL OF MUSIC, THEATRE & DANCE

LEAH CROSBY, MASTER OF FINE ARTS '24  
STAMPS SCHOOL OF ART & DESIGN



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community at U-M and seeing the same familiar faces again,” she noted. Wei emphasized the importance of these “micro opportunities” for building confidence as a writer or poet, particularly appreciating the interactive student components and the chance to win prizes.

“There are so many arts opportunities here, and these smaller events really help build your confidence as a non-arts major,” Wei said, “I think this Pierpont Commons event is a small example of how many arts opportunities there are at U-M. Something that’s really defined my time at Michigan is the arts.” She also pointed out that many non-arts majors actively participate in the Arts Initiative’s workshops, highlighting the program’s broad appeal across disciplines.

For Wei, participating in these programs has been a transformative experience. Looking back at her freshman-year self—uncertain of whether she could truly call herself a writer—she sees just how much she has grown in her four years on campus.

“I started submitting to competitions, and now I write for myself all the time,” she says. “Even if I’m not sure what purpose a piece serves at the moment, I know I might submit it to something in the future.”

That mindset has shifted her long-term goals as well. While her business major will ultimately guide her career path after graduation, she remains committed to writing and submitting work to literary journals. Her post-graduation plans reflect the transformative experiences she’s had at U-M: first, spending 45 unplugged days immersed in the U-M New England Literature Program, followed by a corporate internship this fall in New York City.

As she prepares to leave Ann Arbor, Wei carries with her more than just a résumé of accolades and internships—she carries a sense of artistic purpose and personal empowerment. “Writing isn’t just something I do anymore—it’s part of who I am,” she says. Her story reflects the power of discovery that happens when students are given the space to explore their identities through the arts, even when they come from unexpected places. For Wei, the arts at Michigan didn’t just help her find her voice—they helped her own it. **M**



To read more from Wei, check out her writing minor capstone project—a series of interviews with Michigan-based Asian American creatives.

# CREATIVE CURRENTS

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# Lessons

*Rhiannon Giddens is an American-born, Ireland-based musician, composer, and banjoist creating eclectic folk music. A founding member of Carolina Chocolate Drops and the all-female group Our Native Daughters, she currently serves as artistic director of Yo-Yo Ma's Silkroad Ensemble. Giddens has released three solo albums and two collaborations with Francesco Turrisi on Nonesuch Records. Her recent work includes "American Railroad" with Silkroad Ensemble (2024) and the recently released "What Did the Blackbird Say to the Crow" with Justin Robinson (2025). In this interview, she discusses her fascination with antebellum American culture of the early-to-mid 1800s and why it's relevant today.*

3A

# Learned

*Rick Lowe is a Houston-based artist whose work spans traditional visual arts and pioneering community-based projects. In 1993, he founded Project Row Houses in a historically significant Houston neighborhood, and has since led similar initiatives like Trans-lation: Vickery Meadow, Dallas, TX, and Victoria Square Project, Athens, Greece. Lowe's work has been exhibited at major institutions including the Phoenix Art Museum; the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles; the Whitney Museum, New York City; the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA; the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, DC; and Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. It has also been featured in international exhibitions such as the Gwangju Biennale, South Korea; the Benaki Museum, Athens, Greece; Palazzo Grimani, Venice, Italy; and Venice Architecture Biennale.*

**WITH U-M ARTIST RESIDENTS:  
RHIANNON GIDDENS & RICK LOWE**  
*By Jessica Jenks*

## INSIGHTS FROM U-M'S INAUGURAL ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE:

Rhiannon  
Giddens

**D**uring her groundbreaking residency at the University of Michigan, Grammy Award-winning musician and historian Rhiannon Giddens has been mining the U-M Library archives, collaborating with two PhD students, and challenging conventional narratives about American music history. Her interdisciplinary approach offers valuable insights for both students and institutions. Here are three key lessons from her residency experience:

**JESSICA:** Your upcoming book project and your research during this U-M residency focuses on 18<sup>th</sup> century American music history. How did working-class musicians shape American popular music during this period, and do you see parallels between those historical cultural dynamics and contemporary issues?

**RHIANNON:** The underclass is generating the music that's then going into the music industry highlighting how working-class musicians across ethnic boundaries created the foundations for American popular music. My archival explorations uncover moments of cultural exchange that traditional histories often overlook. There are massive parallels to today. Minstrelsy, for instance, was massively popular—it has shaped American culture for over 200 years. It was a way of defining and marginalizing non-white people. If you want to understand the roots of cultural attitudes today, you have to look back.

**JESSICA:** Your work blends artistry and scholarship seamlessly—how do you see these two areas informing each other during this residency?

**RHIANNON:** The arts can connect the nooks and crannies of history making them live in a way that makes different aspects of history 3-D rather than 2-dimensional, so being able to dig into the archives at U-M is very much worth doing. You realize how much archive, history, and buried stories there are that are waiting to be told for people that can be accessible to people that may never visit the U-M archives. That's my job and opportunity: I've come to history from music, instead of the other way around.

**JESSICA:** One of the core goals of this residency is student engagement and creating pathways for students to learn from a professional artist. Your “Roots Music” U-M class visits have emphasized multiple approaches to understanding musical traditions and creating space for innovative thinking. What do you hope to share with U-M students, and what do you hope to learn from them?

**RHIANNON:** I hope to learn a way forward from these guys; answers are always in the youth. This reciprocal approach to mentorship encourages students to bring their perspectives and technological fluency to historical material. Campuses are supposed to be places where you question and you are shown different ways of thinking.

## INSIGHTS FROM U-M'S VISITING ARTIST RESIDENCY WITH THE INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH:

Rick Lowe

This residency is part of a broader commitment by the U-M Arts Initiative to foster collaboration between artists and scholars. Programs like the Creators on Campus initiative, which is currently hosting Houston-based artist Rick Lowe in partnership with the Institute for Social Research, exemplifies how artistic practice can intersect with historical critique and social change. Lowe, working alongside U-M students and faculty, uses art as a lens to explore community narratives.

**JESSICA:** Your creative journey started quite differently from many artists. Could you share how you discovered art and how that unexpected path has shaped your approach to creativity and education?

**RICK:** I've been developing this talk lately called “The Accidental Artist” because there's no reason that I should have become an artist.

*Giddens participates in a panel discussion for Take Care: Democracy, Art & Healing at UMMA in January 2025.*

Originally a basketball player with no formal artistic background, Lowe discovered painting through a college elective that “replaced basketball for me.” His story reminds educators that transformative learning experiences often happen when students explore fields outside their comfort zones—precisely what universities should facilitate.

**JESSICA:** I want to ask you a question about your artistic journey. How do you get from landscape painting to social sculpture to your award-winning Project Row Houses?

**RICK:** Well, I think social sculpture, inspired by the German artist Joseph Beuys, redefines artistic practice. It speaks to the way in which we shape and mold the world around us. Project Row Houses embodies this philosophy by integrating real estate, architecture, social services, education, and arts. Everything was kind of isolated and siloed before. My [work] demonstrates how academic disciplines can transcend conventional boundaries to address complex social challenges holistically.

**JESSICA:** How has the collaboration between the Arts Initiative and the Institute for Social Research influenced your work by bridging creative and analytical disciplines?

**RICK:** Working in the context of both arts and research has been really good for the Black Wall Street Journey project. It has given me access to diverse ways of looking at the issues and offered thought provoking challenges to the project and me as an artist, all while expanding the thinking about how research can be applied.

**JESSICA:** How has teaching alongside U-M political science professor Christian Davenport shaped your project, and what key insights have emerged from the class?

**RICK:** Working with Professor Davenport has been an incredible experience. His sound base in political science has challenged many of the project’s assumptions and rooted it deeply in thoughtful methods of research. A major contribution Professor Davenport and the class have brought to the Black Wall Street Journey project has been the introduction of complex analyses that force the project to broaden its scope beyond economic well being to encompass the many facets of life that impact the well being of a community. It was a bit of a surprise to see how the project unleashed his own artistic desires and interests too.

**JESSICA:** When you began this artist residency with the Arts Initiative, what goals did you set for yourself, and how have they evolved throughout your time at U-M?

**RICK:** The goal of the residency was to gain a deeper understanding of what Black Wall Street really means for Black people. Our engagement with the students helped expand what the project is all about and led to adding “Re-De-Imagining Black Progress” to the title. This helped take the focus off the singularity of money being the determining factor of the well being of the Black Community. **M**



*Professor Christian Davenport (L) & Rick Lowe pose during a workshop with U-M students.*



The *Arts* at  
**MICHIGAN**

*Aiming High*

Written by: **SARA BLAIR**

*Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs & Arts and Humanities*

*The Corridor of Colors, a new art installation from the Gifts of Art program at Michigan Medicine. Made possible with an Arts Initiative grant.*

In my work in the provost's office, I have the lucky chance of seeing the evidence, every day, of the robust collaboration that is a hallmark of U-M. Our campus is home to dozens of cross-cutting initiatives that draw on the depth and breadth of Michigan's excellence to tackle real-time challenges, from opioid addiction and inclusive city design to safeguarding water systems and understanding what it means to be human.

The Arts Initiative, like the arts themselves, serves in just this way: as a catalyst for transformative collaborations. Leveraging the world-class strength of our arts-centered schools and colleges, we aim to create opportunities for next-level arts practice, innovative inquiry, and arts engagement by students in every discipline and major.

This vision for the life of the arts at Michigan centers development of a thriving arts ecosystem. Working together across all 19 of our schools and colleges, and across our 50+ campus museums, galleries, libraries, exhibition venues, and performance spaces, we have the opportunity to connect more members of our community with the wonder, curiosity, and self-knowledge the arts foster.

We have a lot to build on and lift up. More than 250 student-led organizations are devoted to everything arts, from a capella and anime to radio journalism and urban wordsmithing; fully 81% of U-M undergraduates identify as creatives (artists or designers). In the moment of Vision 2034, we have a unique opportunity to pursue the arts as a foundation for our mission-driven commitments to life-changing education, well-being, democracy and engagement, and climate action and sustainability. Across them, we have the chance to explore the ways the arts promote shared experience, viewpoint diversity, the capacity for challenging conversations—and, no less important, joy.

Part of this exploration is through formal research and discovery, something U-M is justly celebrated for. An innovative grant program, itself a collaboration between the Arts Initiative and the Office of the Vice President for Research, supports creative practice research projects that center the transformative power of thinking with and through the arts—e.g., exploring restorative justice through dialogue between survivors and perpetrators of

violence, and designing reflective spaces to meet the needs of individuals experiencing grief.

In this work, we mean to aim high. How can health care clinicians and arts practitioners collaborate to promote mental health, thriving, and well-being? How can the arts be mobilized as a resource for scholarly and community exploration of our values and history, what it means to be American, across fraught political and social divides? Collaboration, if ambitious, should be risky and experimental, and the arts have a distinctive role to play in the kinds of collaboration that will matter most to our thriving.

Collaboration begins with convening, and the arts have exceptional power to bring people out and together. (I like to say: not just athletics—also aesthetics!) This fall, from September 25–October 26, 2025, we will roll out the first annual Michigan Arts Festival. This celebration of the arts will spotlight and amplify world-class opportunities happening right here on our campus, including a stunning opening exhibition at the University of Michigan Museum of Art (UMMA); a spectacular season launch at the University Musical Society (UMS); a vibrant student showcases at the School of Music, Theatre & Dance; a week of puppet performances at Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning; diverse arts-centered courses in the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts; and a rich array of exhibits at the Penny Stamps School of Art & Design. The Festival will highlight opportunities for all student creators—whatever their field of study—to participate in the culture of Michigan Arts. And it will highlight, in a showcase of recent projects, our growing strengths in arts research and creative practice.

This bounty will unfold against the backdrop of the 1,000+ performances presented at U-M every year across diverse disciplines. An exemplar of our broader ambition for the arts at Michigan, the Festival will lift up the diversity and depth of the creative potential that lives here, in our community and throughout our work. In a moment of extraordinary upheaval and precarity, the arts hold space for us to explore our assumptions, our differences, our blind spots—and possibilities for our shared future. That's a powerful and timely way to meet the University's enduring mission. **M**



If our students come back having had a good time, having had a community experience, and feeling really inspired about their own work, then that, as a teacher here, is my main mission for them.

—JASON FETTIG

*Director of Bands*



Learn more about the May 2025  
State of the Arts Symphony Band Tour

*Jason Fettig conducts the U-M Symphony Band at Troy High School on May 6, 2025.*



**THANKS TO:**

Sara Blair  
Mark Clague  
Greg Teachout  
Clare Croft  
Alison Rivett  
Joe Levickas  
Adrienne Frank  
Jennifer Carty  
Erika Larson  
Erin Flores  
Félix Zamora-Gómez  
Jamie Sherman

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**IMAGES COURTESY OF:**

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Michigan Photography (*p.1, 5, 14, 16-17, 23*)  
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Rick Lowe (*p.21*)  
Institute for Social Research (*p.23*)  
Gifts of Art (*p.24-25*)

**DISTRIBUTION:**

Audrey Bank  
Constance Burroughs  
Erin Flores

**PRINTER:**

Blurb

Printed: May 2025

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Your gift to the U-M Arts Initiative will expand access to the arts on campus and beyond, activate them in student learning and integrate the arts into research across disciplines. Your support strengthens the arts ecosystem of southeast Michigan while also shaping national and global understandings of how the arts can lead social change.

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