UH Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center Awards Innovation Grants to Cutting-Edge Creative Projects

Every year, the University of Houston Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts awards Innovation Grants to cutting-edge projects from the UH School of Art, Moores School of Music, School of Theater and Dance, Creative Writing Program, and Blaffer Art Museum.

The Innovation Grants Program, created in 2012 with major funding from the Houston Endowment, Inc., was developed to spur imaginative, transformational programming and underscore the University’s role in generating new scholarly and artistic works. Now that UH has launched the new College of the Arts (CotA), the 2016-17 projects will not only elevate CotA’s departments, but will highlight the excellent work generated by arts students, faculty, and programs.

“The Innovation Grants Program showcases the truly forward-thinking qualities of the University of Houston’s arts departments,” said Karen Farber, Director of the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center. “UH is a hub for experimentation and invention in the arts, feeding the next generation of forward-thinking practitioners into our city’s arts landscape.”

The Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center awarded projects that explore history, literature, movement, and memory from the School of Art, the School of Theatre and Dance, Blaffer Art Museum, and the Moores School of Music.

Blaffer Art Museum, School of Art

The Blaffer Art Museum and the School of Art earned grants for two collaborative projects. The first project, a two-day international symposium called “Embodied Thinking. Painting Across Disciplines and Beyond,” investigates the vitality and relevance of painting in the 21st century. Looking at questions such as how, why, and by what means painting remains relevant, it approaches painting as an inherently conceptual form of material experimentation. Through lectures and roundtable discussions led by international and national speakers, the symposium also aims to produce cross-campus dialogue with various UH departments and programs ranging from English and Creative Writing to Women Studies, Philosophy, and Politics, among others.

The second project, spearheaded by the School of Art, is a lecture series organized in collaboration with the Blaffer, the local arts non-profit DiverseWorks, and the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. Led by Assistant Professor of Art History Natilee Harren, “Till Now: Contemporary Art in Context” brings together leading voices in the field of contemporary art to forge meaningful connections between artistic practice, curatorial strategies, theory, and scholarship. After an immensely successful first year, the second year of the series continues to ask fundamental questions about what it
means for performing and visual artwork to be contemporary. “It’s important to keep the term ‘contemporary’ in question to remind our students—the emerging artists, designers, critics, curators, and art historians—that they have a stake in defining the art world,” said Harren.

These lectures provide students and the Houston community an unparalleled opportunity to see creative luminaries, Harren added. “Presenters typically cover their works in progress, which are still open for debate and reworking. My favorite part of the evening is often the Q&A section, where we can see lively, scholarly debate in action.”

The fall 2016 speakers included Suzanne Hudson, Associate Professor of Art History and Fine Arts at the University of Southern California, and Douglas Crimp, Fanny Knapp Allen Professor of Art History and Professor of Visual and Cultural Studies at the University of Rochester. This spring, Gloria Sutton, Assistant Professor of Contemporary Art History and New Media at Northeastern University, and renowned Chicano artist and writer Harry Gamboa Jr. will present lectures at the UH Fine Arts Building. Gamboa’s lecture will also be featured in the Mitchell Center’s 2017 CounterCurrent festival. The Til Now series is free and open to the public. Prior to each lecture, attendees are invited to a welcome reception at the Blaffer, which includes extended museum hours and complimentary food and beverages.

School of Theatre and Dance

The School of Theatre and Dance also received support for two projects. One grant was awarded for the school’s upcoming production of “Animal Farm,” which offers a bold reimagining of George Orwell’s classic novel. Led by award-winning Chicago-based guest director William “Bill” Brown with the original text adapted for the stage by former UH Distinguished Visiting Professor of Theatre Sir Peter Hall, the performance will incorporate advanced mask work by guest artist Phil Nichols Jr., new musical arrangements performed by students and led by guest artist Jack Beetle, and choreography by Associate Professor of Movement Adam Noble.

“Our production of ‘Animal Farm’ will be very complex...and we really need an experienced pro like Bill to lead the large team of artistic collaborators. When he was casting the show this fall, it was clear from the way he worked with and challenged our students that he’ll bring out their creativity in really exciting ways,” said Rob Shimko, Director of the School of Theatre and Dance.

The school’s second grant is for a multi-generational, reflective dance project directed by UH Associate Professor Teresa Chapman called “Balance and Flow.” The project—developed in collaboration with Fonteno Senior Education Center, the UH Dance Ensemble, and Chapman Dance—explores themes of movement inspired by the work of Jae Ko exhibited at the CAMH earlier this year. “There is an abundance of movement
within Jae Ko’s sculptures and the environment the show created seemed to cry out for a dance performance,” Chapman said.

Over the past year, Chapman worked with the UH Dance Ensemble and seniors at Fonteno Senior Education Center in Sharpstown on a series of balance workshops designed to enhance physical stability through creative movement. She collected personal stories from both the seniors and dancers about times they felt balanced and unbalanced to guide the movements for “Balance and Flow.” “I like to develop dance sequences from stories and writings,” she said, adding that she hopes this project will help senior citizens share their rich stories with the community.

**Moores School of Music**

The Moores School of Music (MSM) was awarded a grant for “Memory Web,” an expansive and multifaceted performance created by MSM’s contemporary ensemble, AURA, in collaboration with Psophonia Dance Company. “Memory Web,” which debuts in March at the Midtown Arts Theater Complex Houston (MATCH), explores how episodic memory—an individual’s subjective recollection of an event—shapes long-term memory.

Memories from the vantage point of victims, witnesses, advocates, and liberated individuals will be presented through spoken word, dance, and music, inviting the audience to contemplate the beliefs and actions of others.

“We are looking at the connective tissue between multiple perceptions of a shared experience,” said Rob Smith, Professor of Composition and Director of UH’s AURA Contemporary Ensemble.

This is MSM’s third collaboration with Psophonia Dance Company.