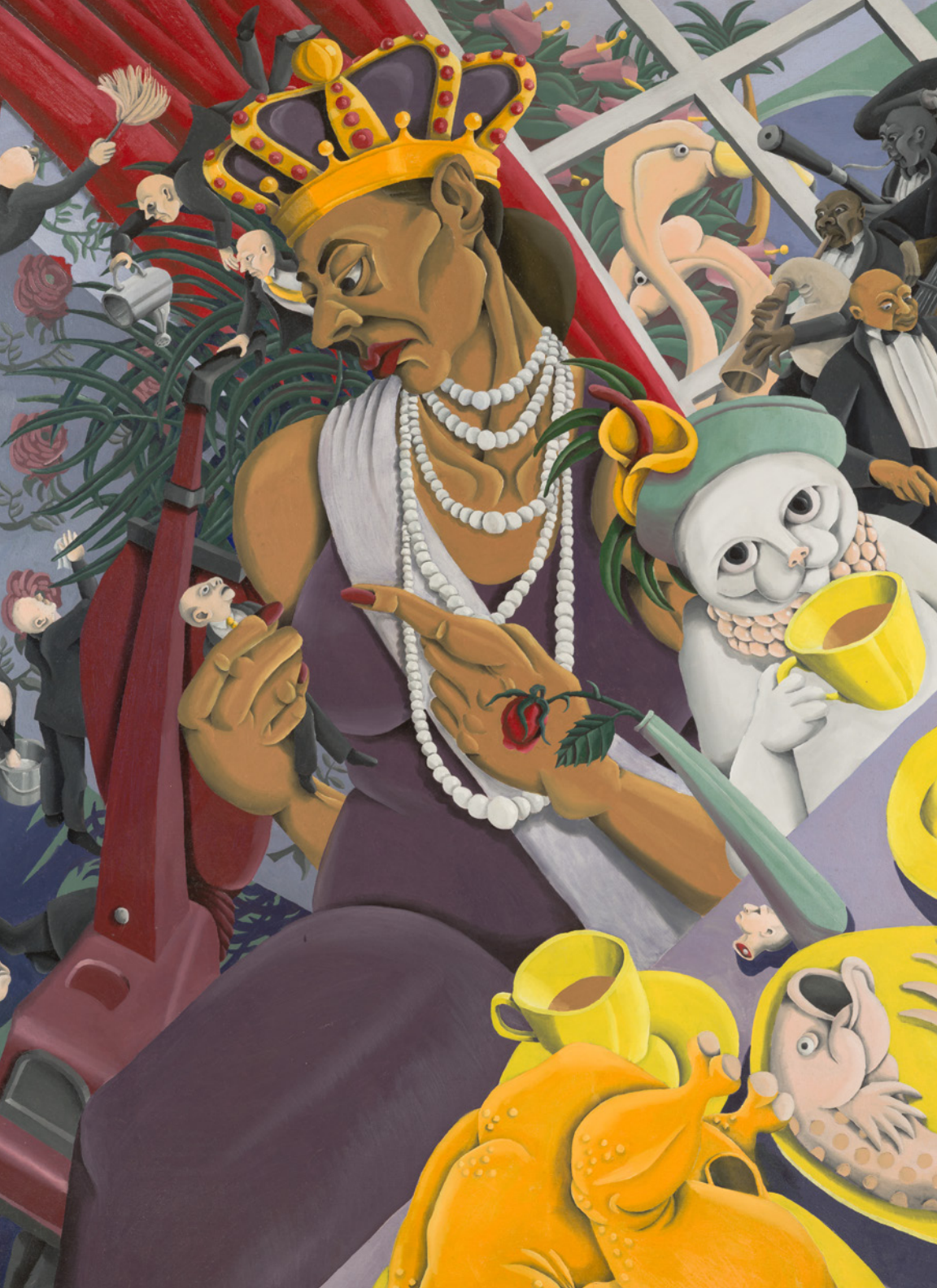

SISTAH GRIOT The Iconoclastic Art of BARBARA BULLOCK

"I just want the world to be a better place."[1]

This exhibition showcases the incisive and still-timely work of Nashville artist Barbara Bullock (1949–1996). Known for her precisely rendered graphite illustrations and boldly colored paintings, Bullock was active in the Nashville art community in the 1980s and 1990s, until she passed away from cancer in 1996. To understand her provocative art more fully, in the following essay the artist's friend and this exhibition's curator, Carlton Wilkinson, addresses the question: WHO WAS BARBARA BULLOCK?

EARLY YEARS

Barbara was born on November 10, 1949, as Barbara Banks.[2] She was adopted by her mother's older sister and her husband, who raised Barbara as their own in Buffalo, New York. She was not aware until later in her life that she was adopted. As a child, Barbara was a talented musician and performed for her family, church, and community. She trained as a classical cellist and played the piano and other instruments. She was also a gifted visual artist, but her adopted mother was not supportive of her interest in pursuing art as a career. Barbara continued to draw and paint despite her objections.

During her youth, Barbara's world primarily included her family members and trusted friends. Although she was well-liked, Barbara craved time for herself and her creative pursuits, which included observational self-portraits. These were moments of growth and exploration. Barbara also suffered bouts of depression during this period, as she would for much of her life.

After graduating from high school, Barbara moved to Washington, DC, where she felt more freedom to explore and express her visual art skills. She resided with family members in a creative community where she met and befriended artists such as Sam Gilliam. This exposure gave Barbara the courage to embrace the liberated person she saw herself becoming rather than the society woman that her family expected her to be. Instead of marrying a successful man and becoming a homemaker, Barbara chose to attend American University during her years in the DC area.

In 1969, Barbara moved to Nashville to reconnect with her biological mother. Her stepfather, a professional musician and educator at Tennessee State University, also became a parent figure during this time. Music City brought new adventures. Barbara enrolled in and

attended Peabody College (now part of Vanderbilt University) to further her studies in art. Barbara was inspired by a range of artists, from Flemish painter of everyday life Pieter Bruegel the Elder to M. C. Escher, who used complicated perspectives to illustrate his compositions, to Mexican painter Diego Rivera, whose works often contained biting social and political commentaries.

Barbara's love for reading also helped build her visual vocabulary. As a voracious reader of Western prose and poetry, she often combined classic European tales and contemporary society in her work. Literature gave her more insight into the perspectives of white culture. Barbara rarely addressed African or African American subjects in her early work, which was common among young Black artists at the time who were trained in Western-focused teaching institutions. But this soon changed as she grew as an artist and life brought her new experiences and new cultural links. This educational journey expanded her mind.

AWAKENING

Barbara worked various jobs in Nashville until she suffered a major stroke when she was thirty-six years old, which dramatically changed her life path. She lost the ability to see correctly in one eye and had to wear a patch, which she recorded in several self-portraits (fig. 1). (Later, surgery corrected Barbara's vision.) Unable to work a traditional job, Barbara turned to art as a method of healing and began taking art classes at the Watkins Institute (now Watkins College of Art at Belmont University). Barbara studied the anatomy of wrestlers, street pedestrians, dancers, and performing artists and made detailed contour line drawings. At times, she adopted a more animated caricature approach to her subjects. All of this was aimed at rehabilitating her hand-eye coordination.

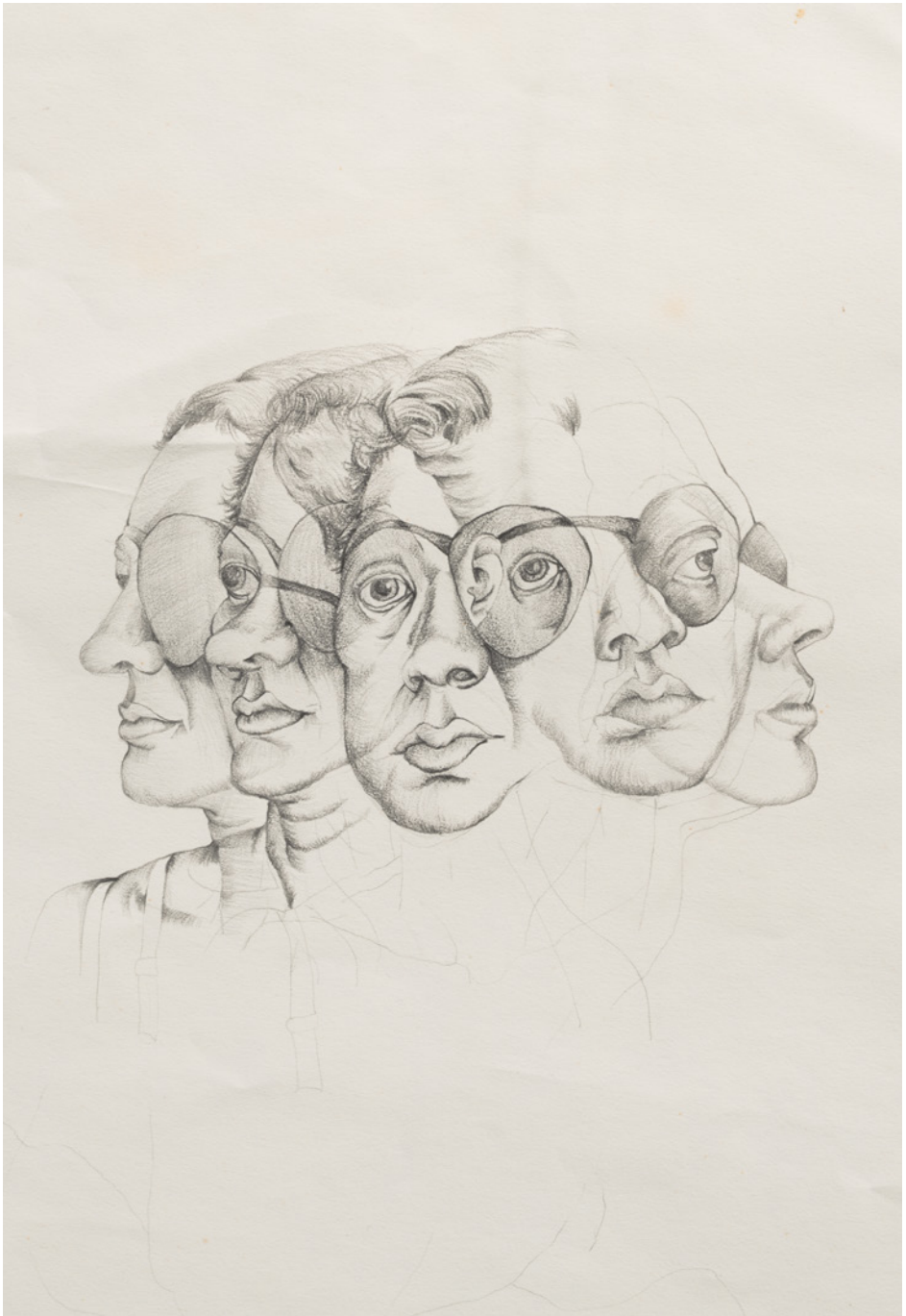

Figure 1

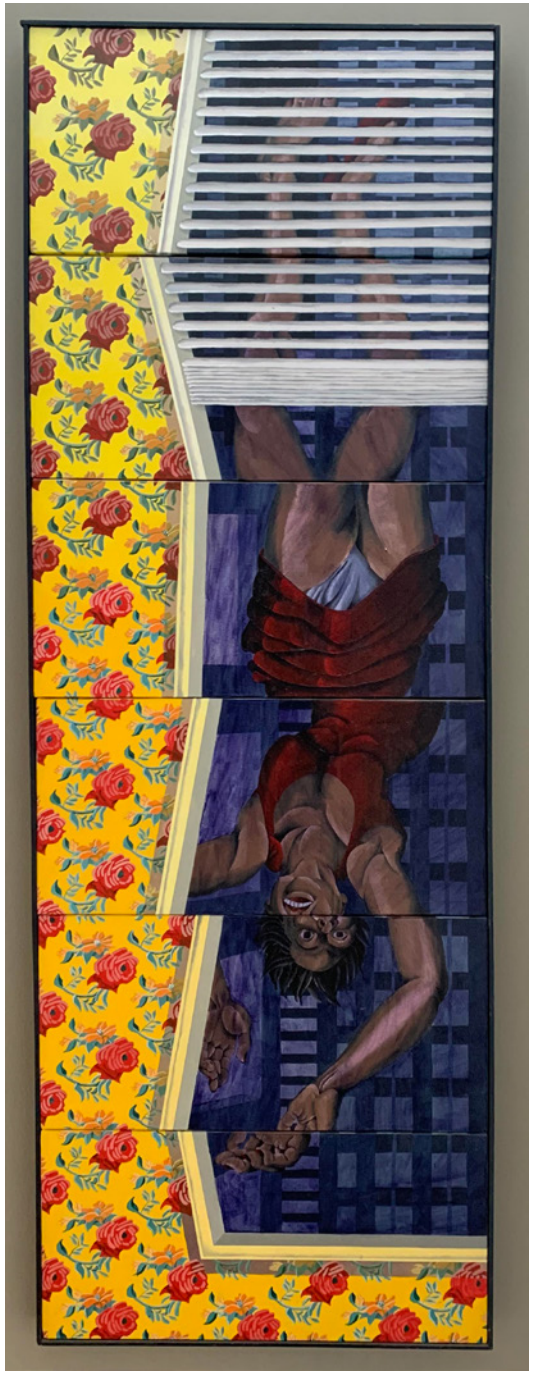

Figure 2

Barbara also went through a painful divorce and eventually moved to a studio apartment in the Belmont neighborhood. Being close to the various universities in this area allowed her to interact with people involved in those academic communities, including Marilyn Murphy and myself at Vanderbilt University and Victoria Boone at Belmont University. With more time and space to herself, Barbara shifted from drawing on paper pads to painting large-scale oil or acrylic works on canvas, even though her apartment was small.

In Nashville, Barbara found her creative home and could express herself without judgment, and she saw her time here as a creative renaissance. She embraced the organization N4Art (Nashville African American Art Association) as a creative community and was an inspiration to its other members, including Samuel Dunson and David Cassidy.

CREATIVE EXPLOSION

After this awakening, Barbara was determined to focus her creativity only on what she found important, from very personal life experiences to the societal ills she observed. She began to address the discomfort she felt with the life of privilege she had growing up in Buffalo. Her time in Washington, DC, had allowed her to further experience the Black bourgeois lifestyle; although she was well-read and exposed to the finer things in life, Barbara felt she did not belong in that rarefied world. Some of her images reflect this discomfort. One depicts her falling off the stairway balcony of her home—suggested by the dainty flower-pattern wallpaper of the living room—when she was a teenager (fig. 2). Barbara's cousin has suggested that she may have jumped as she dealt with her depression.

Barbara's focused eyes and loud voice couldn't be ignored or silenced, and her artwork increasingly reflected her observations of the dynamics of gender,

race, and class. She boldly addressed social discord and became a champion for underserved Black communities, using historical and metaphorical figures and characters from her studies to illustrate her commentary. For example, *The Hate that Hate Produced* pictures the psychological complexity of the experience of racism. Because the subject seems to have internalized the delusion that his life is worthless, he projects this self-hatred outward onto those like him and aims at their destruction (fig. 3).

Barbara often featured herself as the main character in her work, along with friends and acquaintances in her social circles. She even used her beloved cat, Lucy, in some of her paintings as her trusted sidekick. She also looked for inspiration to history and mythology, including the story of Egyptian deities Osiris and Iris, and related her struggles with her health to the ordeals of medieval saints and martyrs. Her compositions were sometimes complicated, requiring the viewer to define figures, space, and symbolism.

CONCLUSION

I met Barbara in 1989 at the urging of Professor Boone and was instantly moved by her powerful visual stories and finely crafted images. We became close friends. At the time, I owned a gallery called In the Gallery in Nashville's Germantown neighborhood. We chose to work together because we were both dedicated to the social purpose of art making. Acquiring Barbara's paintings was not about decorating one's home; it was a commitment to support the messages that she conveyed with her powerful compositions.

Although her work was not always accepted for exhibitions and the press sometimes suggested an "angry Black woman" trope, Barbara saw her practice as an attempt to heal the ailments of society. She

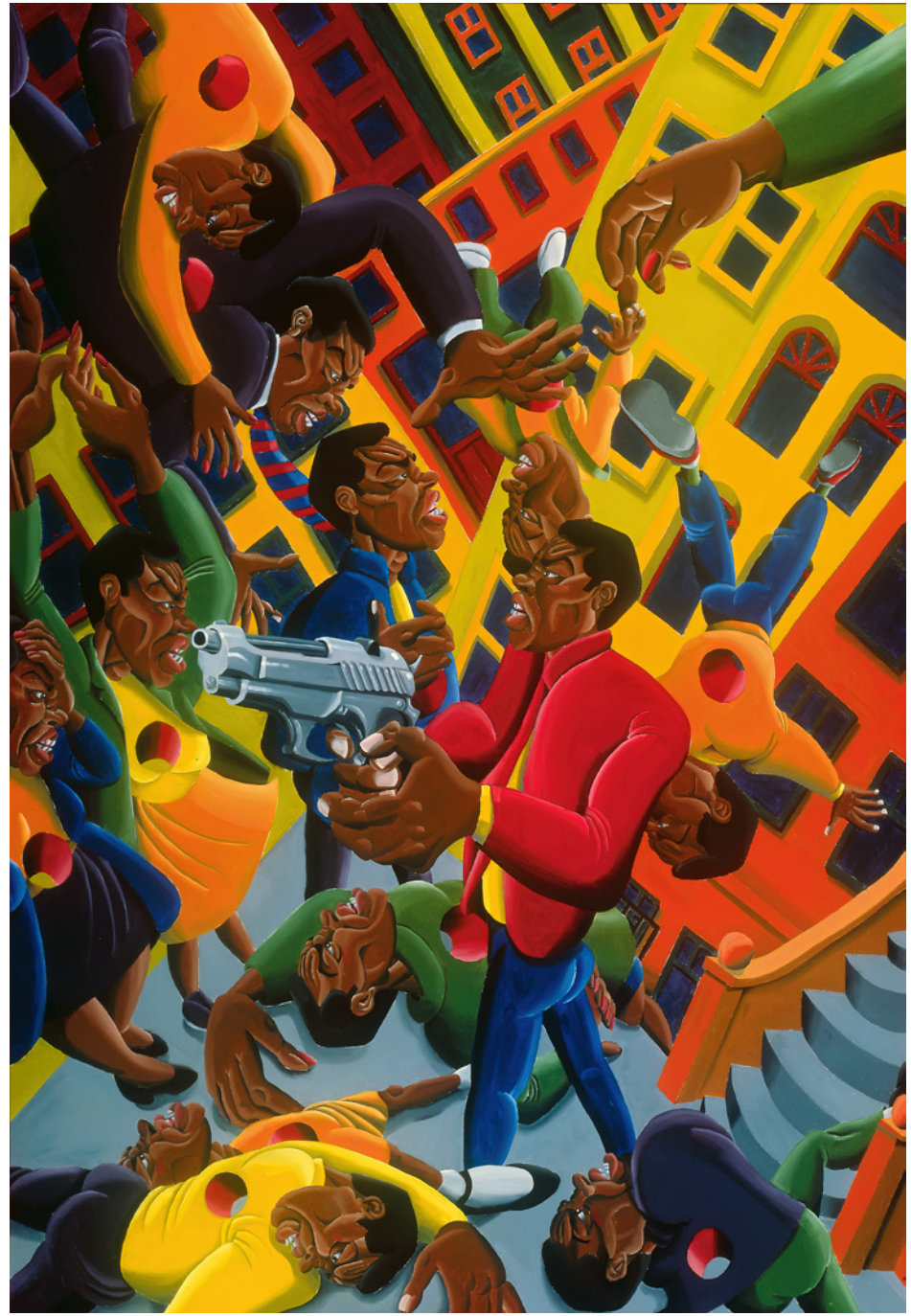

Figure 3

wanted positive change, although she often felt frustrated by the lack of humanity in what she had witnessed and experienced in her lifetime. She chose to engage with the structural challenges of society by rejecting the seemingly charmed life she experienced growing up. Living modestly was Barbara's truest form of spiritual awakening.

But life gave her another challenge to confront. Diagnosed with an aggressive form of lung cancer in 1995, Barbara passed away the following year, leaving behind a body of work that continues to resonate throughout Nashville's art community. Her fight was over.

I began this essay by asking the question "who is Barbara Bullock?" In an N4ART newsletter, artist David Cassidy described her as a "griot," a term from West Africa for a master storyteller.[3] As a friend and creative contemporary, Barbara was our "Sistah Griot." She influenced so many artists in Nashville with her fearless and candid disposition. Her legacy is one of radical honesty, spiritual awakening, and a commitment to healing through art. That is Barbara Bullock.

Carlton F. Wilkinson

Notes

1. Barbara Bullock in conversation with her friend, the artist Jairo Prado, ca. 1989.

2. Barbara's last name was changed to "Bullock" upon her adoption. Barbara shares her name with an artist from Philadelphia, PA, who was born in 1938, which sometimes causes researchers confusion.

3. David Cassidy, "Sistah Griot: Sketching Barbara Bullock," *N4ART Newsletter*, May 1993.

Illustrations

Cover: Barbara Bullock. *If I Were Queen*, 1992. Acrylic on canvas; 51 x 43 in. Collection of Dr. Albert Holloway. Photo: John Schweikert

Fig. 1: Barbara Bullock. *Untitled self-portrait with eye patch* (detail), undated. Graphite on paper. Collection of Alan and Andrée LeQuire, Nashville. Photo: John Schweikert

Fig. 2: Barbara Bullock. *Falling or The Yellow Room*, ca. 1990. Acrylic on canvas; 72 x 24 in. Collection of Mervyn Warren, Los Angeles

Fig. 3: Barbara Bullock. *The Hate that Hate Produced*, 1992. Acrylic on canvas; 50 x 38 1/2 in. Collection of Dr. Albert Z. Holloway

January 29–April 26, 2026

Gordon Contemporary Artists Project Gallery

Organized by the Frist Art Museum with
guest curator Carlton Wilkinson

Part of the

TENNESSEE TRIENNIAL
For Contemporary Art

Supported in part by
Clay Blevins and the **Gordon CAP Gallery Fund**

The Frist Art Museum is supported in part by

THE FRIST FOUNDATION

TENNESSEE ARTS COMMISSION
Cultivate. Create. Participate.

METRO ARTS
NASHVILLE OFFICE OF ARTS + CULTURE

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT for the ARTS
arts.gov

Connect with us @FristArtMuseum

#TheFrist

Frist Art Museum

919 Broadway, Nashville, TN 37203
FristArtMuseum.org