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Milwaukee Arts Board announces 2025 Artists of the Year, Friends of the Arts Award honorees

MILWAUKEE – The City of Milwaukee Arts Board (MAB) is announcing the 2025 Mildred L. Harpole Artists of the Year and 2025 Friends of the Arts award recipients. These honorees recognize and celebrate excellence and exceptional service in Milwaukee’s arts community.

Artists **Amal Azzam** and **Aaron Boyd** were named the 2025 Artists of the Year, while **Nakeysha Roberts Washington** and **Symphony Swan-Zawadi** were named the 2025 Friends of the Arts.

2025 is the third year that the Milwaukee Arts Board accepted award nominations from the public, seeking nominees whose work aligns with the Arts Board’s purpose as defined by the Code of Ordinances. **All award recipients will be honored on June 10, 2025, at 4:30 p.m. in the City Hall Rotunda.** Local arts organizations receiving MAB-sustaining grants will be recognized as well.

“Milwaukee’s arts community is essential to shaping a stronger, more connected city,” said **Mayor Cavalier Johnson**. “I congratulate the 2025 Artists of the Year and Friends of the Arts for their outstanding achievements. Their passion and dedication to our city are a true investment in creating a vibrant, inclusive, and thriving future for all Milwaukeeans.”

“The Milwaukee Arts Board is proud to recognize this year’s honorees. Our arts community is a cornerstone of Milwaukee’s identity,” said **Alderwoman Milele A. Coggs, Chair of the Milwaukee Arts Board**. “We honor Amal Azzam, Aaron Boyd, Nakeysha Roberts Washington, and Symphony Swan-Zawadi for their voices, vision, and service in shaping and elevating Milwaukee’s vibrant arts scene.”

More information on this year's honorees is below.

- **Amal Azzam, 2025 Mildred L. Harpole Artist of the Year**

Amal Azzam is an artist from the Midwest. Her work reflects the layers of trauma, freedom, and misconceptions she carries within her identity. Through a multidisciplinary approach that includes wearables, screen printing, found objects, and photography, Amal explores the inner struggles of identity, belonging, and cultural preservation. Her practice centers the narratives of SWANA (Southwest Asian and North African) and Muslim communities, using art and storytelling as tools for resistance, collective healing, and unapologetic self-expression.

“Receiving this award is a meaningful reminder that supporting artists who give back to their communities is essential to the overall health and vitality of our cities. I'm grateful to be recognized for work that is rooted in care, cultural expression, and collective healing.”

- **Aaron Boyd, 2025 Mildred L. Harpole Artist of the Year**

From Milwaukee's Williamsburg Heights to the East Side, for five decades, Aaron Boyd has practiced his craft and called Milwaukee home. Falling in love with art at five years old, Boyd knew by six what he would do with his art - make children's books. Filling every scratch of paper and time with art as a kid, when it came time for college, Boyd looked no further than our own Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design, receiving a BFA for Illustration in 1993. Through his winding creative journey, Boyd's art now harkens back most to those earliest of mediums: watercolor, crayon, paper, and found objects as he seeks to touch that child in us all while sharing the beauty and color of our world. From his first book *Juicy Peach* (Lee and Low Books 1999), to his first written and illustrated book *Giving Good* (Albert Whitman 2024), and to his latest *Valiant Vel Phillips and the Fight for Fairness and Equality* (Wisconsin Historical Society Press 2025), Boyd is always grateful to share his art first and foremost with his hometown of Milwaukee.

“To receive this award from my home, my friends and neighbors, the people who know me best, is one of the highest of honors one can receive. So much of who I am as an artist and a person comes from Milwaukee. The colors I use, the streets I capture, and the faces of the people that grace my art all come from Milwaukee. Simply, I wouldn't be me without my city, and I am grateful for this and I am grateful for this award. Thank you.”

- **Nakeysha Roberts Washington, 2025 Friend of the Arts**

Nakeysha Roberts Washington, M.S. Ed, is a multidisciplinary artist, writer, Creative Director, and Arts Curator whose work bridges education, storytelling, and social advocacy. As the Founder of Genre: Urban Arts (GUA), she has created a dynamic global platform that amplifies underrepresented voices through publishing, exhibitions, and arts-integrated education.

As a mixed media creative, Nakeysha's work explores themes of identity, life, and cultural resilience. Through mentorship, curriculum innovation, and creative expression, she continues to redefine the future of inclusive education and the arts, ensuring that storytelling and artistic excellence remain at the heart of transformative learning experiences.

“For 10 years, Genre: Urban Arts has nurtured a global community of artists, writers, and creative minds through our publications, exhibitions, educational offerings, and cultural events. Still, there is truly no place like home.

“To be honored for my arts advocacy here—where my inspirations were first born—is an immense and humbling gift. Creativity is divinity.”

- **Symphony Swan-Zawadi, 2025 Friend of the Arts**

Symphony D. Swan-Zawadi is an interdisciplinary artist, educator, and arts advocate dedicated to fostering creativity, arts and cultural preservation, and community engagement. With over a decade of experience in arts education, philanthropy, and nonprofit leadership, she is the Founder and Executive Director of THE CR8TV HOUSE, a project-turned-nonprofit designed to provide space for radical imagination, support, and collaboration.

What if a house could heal, create, and inspire?

THE CR8TV HOUSE is about transforming her childhood home into an exhibition space and community archive for artists and storytellers. Her efforts have not only earned national recognition but also support from the Greater Milwaukee Foundation. Rooted in wellness and artist workforce development, her work emphasizes the power of art to create sustainable opportunities for creative professionals while fostering healing and belonging.

Symphony is a Gener8tor Art Fellowship recipient and currently serves as a Board Trustee for the Milwaukee Art Museum. She was named the 2013 Shepherd Express Milwaukeean of the Year and has been recognized as a notable arts and culture leader in Milwaukee by BizTimes Milwaukee. Committed to creating lasting impact through art

and advocacy, she continues to shape spaces that honor memory, inspire radical imagination, and empower communities to reclaim their narratives.

“I am truly honored to receive the 2025 Friend of the Arts Award. This recognition means so much, as it reflects the spirit of collaboration and care that guides my work through THE CR8TV HOUSE and beyond. Thank you for celebrating the power of community, imagination, and the arts. I remain committed to uplifting Milwaukee’s creative voices and am grateful to walk alongside so many brilliant artists and advocates in shaping a more vibrant and inclusive cultural landscape.”

The Artists of the Year program was inaugurated in 1995 by former Alderman and MAB Chair Wayne Frank. The Artists of the Year Award was renamed in 2020 in honor of the late, beloved arts board member Mildred L. Harpole. Each recipient receives a \$1,500 cash award. Funds used to launch the first award included a memorial bequest in honor of Milwaukee artist and former MAB member Jim Chism. Additional funds for the award come from MAB members.

Established in 2012, the Friends of the Arts Award is given to individuals who, often behind the scenes, have distinguished themselves through exceptional service to Milwaukee’s arts community.

The MAB sustaining grant program is funded by the City of Milwaukee, with support from the Wisconsin Arts Board, the State of Wisconsin, and the National Endowment for the Arts. MAB also awards matching funds annually for public art conservation.

More information is available at milwaukee.gov/MAB.