



Reference Guide Arts Innovator Award (AIA)

Artists can use this guide to see how previous Arts Innovator Awards recipients put together a successful application.

Application Materials

Discipline Statement (50 words or less) describes your artistic practice. It can be as simple as “I am a poet” or give a more detailed explanation of your practice.

Artist Biography (150 words or up to 1.5 minutes of audio/video) tells your story as an artist. It provides details about you and your work, such as where you were born or grew up, your training, career development, accomplishments, or other information that may not be found elsewhere in the application.

Innovation Statement (400 words or less or up to 3 minutes of audio/video) should describe how your work is innovative in your field. Consider how your work is developed, experiments with new ideas, takes risks, and/or pushes the boundaries of your discipline.

Artist Resume (8 pages or less) is an overview of your arts and professional experience, accomplishments, education and/or training, and other information about your artistic career. It’s much like a job resume, except its focus is your art.

Impact Statement (150 words or less) explains how this award will make a difference for you. What will the funding and recognition do for you, your work, and your practice? How will you use the money?

Mikaela Shafer (2025 Recipient, Visual)

Discipline Statement

I am a Visual artist and poet focused on Mixed media textile paintings. A combination of sewing and collage on paintings was used using watercolor and acrylics. Materials sources are salvaged, found, and sourced in daily life. My poetry accompanies the paintings

Artist Biography

I am an abstract expressionist artist who blends techniques of sewing, painting, weaving, and occasionally beading to create evocative and emotionally charged pieces. Pairing my art with poetry helps narrate personal stories and bring my paintings to life. My connection to the materials is deepened by my involvement in every aspect of my work, from dyeing fabrics to crafting natural pigments, often incorporating found items.

Each work begins with a memory or feeling, often resulting in mini-series of 2-6 paintings to capture the evolving nature of memory. My intuitive and wild process feels dream-like as I create.

Currently, I am focused on a project about matrilineal storytelling, reflecting my journey reconnecting with my Hopi culture and addressing mother wounds. This ongoing series of mixed media paintings includes sewn elements and is painted on the mesas, symbolizing the stories of women in a matriarchal culture and our bond to the land.

Innovation Statement

My innovative approach to artistry strays far from traditional norms. A significant aspect that defines the innovation in my work is its tethering to ancestral land. My art is deeply rooted in my connection to the land and my people. I want to create pieces that reflect this relationship and I do that by painting and sewing outdoors, carrying a generator out to places that inspire me and painting outdoors. In this way, I share the histories of my matriarchs, I imagine their experiences of survival and I dream of our future. By using unconventional materials—such as kombucha leather, woven fabric, seaweed paper, and found items gathered from the land—I bring elements of my environment into my artworks well.

I also incorporate poetry and storytelling to create a multi-dimensional experience for my audience. My poetry is interconnected with my paintings, weaving together stories that resonate with many people. Each painting has a poem that connects to it.

Through these unconventional methods, materials, and interdisciplinary approaches, my work pushes the boundaries of traditional visual arts. It creates a space where history, resilience, and tradition converge to tell vivid, often underrepresented stories. This innovative perspective offers fresh insights into abstract art, deeply resonating with Indigenous people and the art world at large.

In blending visual art with poetry and personal history, I strive to create a dialogue that transcends a gallery space. My work is not only an exploration of creativity but also a testament to the enduring ties that bind us to our land and cultural heritage. In this way, my art tells a story—a story of connection, healing, and the celebration of imperfection.

Artist Resume

[Click here to review Mikaela's resume \(pg. 1\).](#)

Impact Statement

For me, as an indigenous woman and artist, art is a way of connecting with my cultural roots and expressing the complexities of my identity. However, the cost of creating art can be prohibitive. This grant will allow me more freedom to create and exhibit my work. It also means that I can share my work with more people, especially fellow reconnecting indigenous people. Ultimately, this grant will not only support me as an artist but will also help me to connect with my community, tell our stories, and bring healing to those who need it. I will continue to make art regardless, but imagine what I could do with funding and with the audience to share a collective journey of generational healing.

Kassa Overall (2023 Recipient, Performing)

Discipline Statement

Kassa Overall is a Grammy-nominated musician who melds avant-garde experimentation with hip-hop production techniques to tilt the nexus of jazz and rap in unmapped directions. A virtuosic drummer, his music is conceptualized through his versatility as a producer with an unruly passion for finding connections between analog and electronic music-making.

Artist Biography

A Seattle native, Kassa Overall attended Washington MS and Garfield HS. A child drum prodigy, he taught himself to make beats on an MPC and an ASR 10 he acquired at a Seattle Police Department auction. He attended the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, where he studied with NEA Jazz Master Billy Hart. After graduation, Kassa moved to NYC, and was mentored by Wallace Roney. Kassa established himself as an in-demand jazz drummer, touring and recording with Geri Allen, Jon Batiste, Theo Croker, Yoko Ono, and Macarthur Geniuses Steve Coleman and Vijay Iyer, among others. In 2019 and 2020, he released two critically acclaimed studio albums under his own name, and later three mixtapes of jazz remixes. In 2020, he was called “one of modern jazz music’s most audacious futurists” by Pitchfork. That same year, he returned to Seattle. He will release a third full-length album in May of this year.

Innovation Statement

My work intervenes in the black musical continuum by evolving the languages of jazz and hip hop in two critical ways:

1) Rhythmic innovation

As a jazz drummer, I toured and was mentored by some of the most rhythmically advanced musical thinkers, including Steve Coleman and Vijay Iyer. To take on gigs like these is to bear witness to an endangered tradition and to be entrusted with a protected knowledge that isn’t given to just anybody. My current practice applies many of the same advanced techniques I developed under their tutelage, including polyrhythm, metric modulation, and odd meter, into hip-hop production and vocal patterns. While seeds of these rhythms have been present in rap music since its foundations 50 years ago, my work aims to evolve and bring to the forefront the rhythmic complexity of popular black music, illuminating unseen connections between the genetically related traditions of hip hop and jazz.

2) Improvisation, technology and sampling

The origins of hip-hop are connected to the practice of sampling jazz records and other forms of black music in a simple loop of often just four bars, evident in songs like “Cool Like Dat” by Digable Planets, which samples a recording by drummer Art Blakey. As a musician who is fluent in the techniques of both hip-hop production and jazz improvisation, I have sought to evolve the relationship between live music and sampling further through a distinct multi-step performance-production compositional approach that involves the following steps

- A. composing, creating and recording live performances;
- B. chopping and cropping that material as a producer;
- C. using that edited material as the basis for compositions in subsequent live performances;

- D. editing this material a second time into a new track;
- E. adding live instruments and vocals in subsequent recording sessions;
- F. rinsing and repeating until I'm satisfied.

This process allows me to overcome the limitations of sampling in a creative, kaleidoscopic way, resulting in an end product that is connected to the traditions of jazz and hip hop, but has its own, entirely new sound.

Artist Resume

[Click here to review Kassa's resume \(pg. 4\).](#)

Impact Statement

This grant will sustain my artistic practice in two key ways:

Recorded music. In addition to helping with ordinary anticipated costs for recordings, including musician fees and studio time, an Artist Innovator Award will allow me to incorporate orchestral arrangements in compositions on my next record, as hiring an orchestra to perform arrangements can be costly. This grant would allow me to create an album that captures the limits of my imagination.

Live performances. I have not been able to afford to bring a sound person on the road, which has been a huge obstacle to incorporating technology in our live performances. With this grant, I would invest in bringing a sound person on the road, who would help us develop a live show that matches the innovation of the recorded material. Additionally, the grant would help us afford to bring another musician on tour, further enhancing the live experience.

Brent Watanabe (2022 Recipient, Media)

Discipline Statement

I am a visual/new media artist combining a background in traditional materials and practices (drawing, sculpture) with emerging technologies (computer programming, electronics), creating computer controlled gallery installations, real-time online experiences, exploring an artistic field still being defined and discovered.

Artist Biography

My body I was born and raised in the Pacific Northwest, spending my formative years in the woods, which slowly transformed into suburbs. In the early 1990's I created hundreds of hand illustrated posters for rock and punk shows, which was my first introduction to the arts. I received a BFA in painting from the University of Washington, and then moved into animation and video, where my work was recognized by the American Film Institute and shown internationally. I took a job for a large tech company in 2000 as an animator and taught myself to program computers, which found its way into my art practice. I've been creating interactive installations, experimental simulations, and animations for over 15 years.

Innovation Statement

I work primarily with new media and technology, and I believe my work is innovative in that it leads with the emotional, the sympathetic, and the spiritual in a field that often focuses on the technology itself. My work is influenced by a variety of fields, including game theory, animal psychology, mythology, communication, musical composition, and computer science. For the last fifteen years I have been creating computer-controlled gallery installations populated by kinetic sculpture, drawing, projection, and sound. During this time, I've created a Morse code system that communicates through bells, chirps, and flapping wings, a collapsing room made from paper, motorized birds made of typing paper and controlled by microprocessors, video game engines, holographic animals, floating cats, malfunctioning pastoral landscapes, and playable paintings. These installations are in constant flux and change. Nothing is predetermined. The characters, drawings, and sculptures rely on one another, communicating through means as simple as light or sound sensors to complex custom programming, circuitry, and Internet networking. Each element of the show has its own logic, intelligence, scoring, and goals. These elements include everything from the smallest robotic sculpture to projections and soundscapes enveloping the gallery. The installations also react to elements from their immediate environment, which have included police scanner radio feeds, gallery visitors, passing traffic, and the weather. Each new project introduces unique challenges and risks. I am continually challenging myself conceptually and pushing the bounds of my technical skill and knowledge in many fields, including drawing, sculpture, programming, physical computing, sound, communication, and electronics. My experiments and works are driven by an obsession with systems that regulate themselves, creating and exploring the truly unknowable, fallible, and life-like. My work connects with a diverse audience through unconventional and unexplored artistic mediums, such as live streamed simulations, video game interventions, and social VR experiences. I am fascinated by the projects I work on largely because they surprise me, from the initial studies to the final piece. I can sit with them as they change and move, struggle and malfunction, succeed and fail, and try and try.

Artist Resume

[Click here to review Brent's artist resume \(pg. 11\).](#)

Impact Statement

I have been consistently expanding my practice into larger, more ambitious projects, but often in smaller steps. This award would allow me to work on projects that were previously unfeasible, due to lack of time and resources. It would allow me to hire other artists and artisans to expand the robotics, programming, and choreography for an upcoming museum installation in 2024, which involves factory farming, Virtual Reality, and site-specific robotic creatures. Most importantly for me, it would allow me to continue my exploration of technological systems as a poetic medium. Additionally, the award would provide financial help with living expenses, allowing me to focus more of my energy on creating. It would also provide much needed funding for equipment, supplies, software, training, and research materials.

Tessa Hulls (2021 Recipient, Literary)

Discipline Statement

I am a multidisciplinary storyteller illuminating the connections between the present and the past. I fuse writing, painting, comics, portraits, interviews, performance, illustration, historical research, educational activism, and solo wilderness exploration to create genre-defying projects that challenge viewers to explore how history intersects with culture, gender, race, belonging, and power.

Artist Biography

As the mixed-race daughter of two first-generation immigrants who landed in a town of 350 people, I was born into the isolated wake of a diaspora I never knew how to claim. My family lacked TV and the internet didn't exist, so I grew up without models of how I fit within American culture— but there was a tiny library, and its two rooms set me free. I spent my formative years hiking alone through the hills with a backpack full of books, and this fusion of research, narrative, and solo wilderness exploration remains the foundation of my extremely multidisciplinary creative practice.

The silence of the backcountry made me a constant ethnographer, able to keenly observe but never belong. So I pursued broad inquiry instead of specific creative discipline, building myself—and art—around central questions: How are we accountable to our histories? What does it mean to belong? What is home?

Innovation Statement

As someone born between binaries of both race and culture, I live within interstitial spaces. My ache to belong has carried me, both geographically and creatively, across an enormous amount of ground, and the breadth of my territory allows me to connect dots in unexpected, immersive ways. I combine visual and literary arts with deep historical research and educational activism to guide viewers through the dense palimpsests of power that inform the present.

This is best explained through example: In a 2019 solo show, I explored the story of Santa Cruz's destroyed Chinatowns, creating six paintings based on the region's Chinese American history and displaying them against a backdrop of archival photographs, artifacts, and primary documents that provided their broader context. I turned the gallery into a continuous 3,800-word hand-lettered timeline tracing Chinese immigration and xenophobia from the 1500's through the present, weaving in local and national history that in turn fused with my own family's immigration narrative. This timeline bled into in-progress pages from my graphic memoir, *Feeding Ghosts*, and ended in a replica of my studio where participants could look through the books from my research library. For my artist talk, I took attendees on a bicycle tour of important sites in the region's Chinese American history. I wove paintings, writing, research, interviews, and a bicycle tour into a show that placed my own family's trauma within a larger migration narrative, asking viewers to think deeply about invisible wounds while educating themselves about erased history: this epitomizes how I innovate as a storyteller. I have never been able to fit cleanly within any single category—Writer or visual artist? White or POC?— and I've found my creative home by embracing a voice that is simultaneously both

and neither. Whether it's lecturing about late-1800s communications technology giving rise to a cohort of female activist adventurers, illuminating the 150-year history of the bicycle as a tool for social activism, or spending six years excavating my matrilineal trauma and contextualizing it within inflection points of Chinese history, my work unearths unexpected through-lines that challenge the false simplicity of binaries. I ask viewers to interrogate broad systems of power, to mine the complexities of the past to find both the accountability and the grace we desperately need in the present. I roam widely across disciplines, but am always shining light on the intersections of history, culture, gender, race, and power.

Artist Resume

[Click here to review Tessa's artist resume \(pg. 17\).](#)

Impact Statement

The very things that make me innovative are also the things that make my work extremely hard to concisely explain; an AIA would validate a career that has at times been misunderstood because it has pursued unusual horizons. This money would fund the mundane life needs all artists have, but I also feel bound to the health of my larger community. Artists don't become innovative in a vacuum; our communities shape us, exposing us to ideas that challenge and inspire us, supporting us with opportunities and leaps of faith. I have a longstanding track record of turning my personal circumstances into interactive, community-engaged projects: I would use half this money to do just that, paying my innovation forward by providing twelve unrestricted gifts of \$1,000 to organizations—NWFF, Estelita's Library, OtB, Wa Na Wari, etc—that have either shaped my personal innovation, or have the power to foster the innovation of others.

Haruko Crow Nishimura and Joshua Kohl (2020 Recipient, Performing, Artist Team)

Discipline Statement

I am a dancer, actor, vocalist, theater director, choreographer and installation artist. My collaborator Joshua Kohl is a composer, musician and creative producer. Together we make performances, installations and rituals that bring together dance, theater, live music, technology and the visual arts.

Artist Biography

Haruko Nishimura and Joshua Kohl have been a creative team from an early age. Their work started in the 90s with the formation of a big-band-garage-orchestra The Young Composers Collective blending orchestral sensibilities with performance art produced in rock clubs. They formed Degenerate Art Ensemble (DAE) in 2000, with a focus on fully staged interdisciplinary performance work that is equal parts dance-theater and music. Each of their projects propose a new set of challenges that push their work and the genre into new territory, through new technologies, inventing new instruments, developing costume innovations and discovering new ways to tell stories. DAE's work has been shown in ten countries spanning collaborations with Kronos Quartet, Robert Wilson and many other notable artists, architects, and technologists. While their work culminates on the stage, there are many phases of development in which the public is asked to participate including rituals, art-making, and interactive experimentation.

Innovation Statement

We strive to create conditions for personal and societal transformation, inviting audiences to step into unfamiliar worlds and make transformative decisions. We celebrate the outsider encouraging them to make their own unique place in society. Our innovations in site transformation, technology, and audience interaction put viewers in the middle of the environments we create, prioritizing shared experience and personal responsibility. *Red Shoes*, 2011, reimagined Hans Christian Andersen's tale as the struggle to live a creative life in a profit-driven society. The performance featured a cathedral choir, a marching band, a string quartet, 150 volunteers, taking over Seattle's First Hill neighborhood populating the world with the audience as villagers who find themselves at the center of the story, at times encouraging, and at times taunting the protagonist. We explored how society fails to recognize the value of those who are different and how people can unwittingly cause harm, and yet how through great struggle the outsider can still find true purpose and meaning despite it all. *Underbelly*, 2012, explored the architecture of the Seattle Center, in collaboration with Olson Kundig Architects, transforming underused and interstitial spaces into places of wonder. We flooded the Opera House loading dock creating a lake in tribute to the natural landscape and indigenous cultures that once occupied the site. We were exploring how ordinary and familiar surroundings can be transformed and become settings for re-examining our history. *Predator Songstress*, 2015, was created in collaboration with homelessness support organizations in Seattle and San Francisco. It told the story of a rebellious girl, whose voice was removed by a fascist regime. Working in participatory workshops with formerly homeless people, we explored what it means to lose and regain

one's voice. In the performance, these collaborators interacted one-on-one with audience members sharing real-life stories of finding one's voice. We were examining how the themes of a work can translate into real-life discovery and transformation. All of these works use innovative approaches to subject matter, material, space, technology, and medium with the goal of providing our audiences with new perspectives and permission to re-imagine their lives and society.

Artist Resume

[Click here to review Haruko and Joshua's resume \(pg. 26\).](#)

Impact Statement

Our latest work Skeleton Flower will have its New York premiere and will also be featured at the International Festival of Contemporary Dance in Mexico City in 2020. Our next work Boy-mother / faceless-bloom will be in development throughout 2020 through its premieres at Colorado College and the Cincinnati Contemporary Art Center in 2021. Having financial support for us as individuals in such a demanding time would be tremendously life-giving. The funds would also make it possible for us to attend festivals, conferences, residencies, and other networking and research opportunities that we normally do not have the resources to attend. In addition, the credibility as Innovators that this award would give us could likely lead us to many new and unique opportunities to connect with new innovative collaborators from inside and outside of the performing arts realm. We would also set funds aside as a resource for pure experimentation.