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WOMEN IN THE ARTS AWARDS LUNCHEON

Thursday, March 10 • 12pm-2pm • University of Richmond Jepson Alumni Center
Tickets: \$45, available for purchase online at www.styleweekly.com/womeninthearts
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Page Bond | Melissa Burgess | Mary Flinn | McLean Jesse | Elizabeth King
Robyn O'Neill | Pamela Reynolds | Eva Rocha

An Evening With

Judy Collins

Fri. April 1 • 7:30pm



Judy Collins,
*The Healing Power
of Art and Music*

Sat. April 2 • 7:30pm



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A wonderful whirlwind is swirling in Richmond. As the city's art reputation grows (see its new galleries, the Quirk Hotel and the forthcoming Institute for Contemporary Art), more artists are drawn here. They, in turn, become part of a lively arts community, attracting even more energy.

The 2016 Women in the Arts are not only accomplished in their respective fields, but have contributed their talents to encourage other artists and burnish Richmond's reputation as a creative center. As associate artistic director for TheatreLAB, actress McLean Jesse helps new actors and playwrights present new work. Actress Robyn O'Neill not only shines on stage, but takes professional portraits of theater colleagues.

Artist Melissa Burgess found her calling in documenting the city's old, and often threatened, architecture. Multimedia artist Eva Rocha invited Richmonders to touch and respond to her work at the wildly successful 2015 InLight exhibition. Gallery owner Page Bond gives new and established artists alike the opportunity to show their work in a prestigious place.

Virginia Commonwealth University is the creative home for several of this year's honorees. Sculptor Elizabeth King spent 30 years teaching students at the School of the Arts. And Mary Flinn, senior editor of VCU's Blackbird, has given hundreds of poets, playwrights and authors the opportunity to be read by a wide audience.

Last but in no way least, philanthropist and style icon Pamela Reynolds has long been a fairy godmother to the city's arts organizations, making their wishes come true through energetic fundraising and volunteer efforts.

Style Weekly salutes this year's Women in the Arts honorees. We can't wait to see what they do next.

WOMEN in the ARTS



Pamela REYNOLDS

ARTS SUPPORTER, VOLUNTEER,
PHILANTHROPIST

It's hard to imagine Pamela Reynolds as anything less than a force majeure in the Richmond arts scene. But, as Reynolds will gently remind you, she was once new at this too. Once, years ago, she submitted a fundraising proposal only to see the recipient tear it up in front of her and throw it in the trash.

Reynolds was stunned. "You are so wonderful, and thank you for seeing me, and I am so sorry," she managed to say before retreating through the door.

Yet she refused to be discouraged. Since that day, Reynolds has become a tireless advocate for Richmond's arts organizations.

In September 1996, Reynolds was chairing the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts' grandest-ever fundraising event: the Fabergé Ball. London-based designer Michael Howells directed teams of volunteers and staff as they installed 30,000 flowers, 400 man-made trees, 200 giant Styrofoam eggs and 100 yards of artificial snow, the Times-Dispatch reported. Dignitaries were arriving, cameras were rolling – and then Hurricane Fran crashed the party.

The event still went off without a hitch, netting \$1.2 million and creating an endowment for the museum that's used to this day. Reynolds won't take credit, however. "Everything that I've ever done," she says, has been because of the people who supported her.

In addition to more than 25 years of service on the VMFA board of trustees, Reynolds is, or has been, a board member of Monticello, the Richmond Ballet, the Richmond Symphony, the Virginia Opera, The Valentine and many more. She was instrumental in the \$170 million fundraising effort that turned the VMFA from a regional institution into one of the top 10 art museums on the East Coast.

In 2015, Reynolds and Richmond Ballet Board Chairwoman Selina Rainey co-chaired the "Road to China," a cultural exchange initiative that sent the ballet on a multi-city tour from Beijing to Shanghai and brought guest artists from the National Ballet of China to Richmond. The ballet's Chinese New Year gala raised over \$1 million.

Reynolds confesses that she worries about the Richmond arts community, because the number of locally based corporations that support them has dwindled. Individuals and local foundations must step up to fill the void, she says; "To me, it doesn't matter what you support, as long as you do support."

It's the 1980s. It's winter in Montana. A young woman, Beth, has suffered a traumatic brain injury at the hands of her abusive husband. As costume designer for Cadence Theatre Company's production of "A Lie of the Mind," McLean Jesse faced an intriguing question: What would Beth wear?

Jesse, who also played Beth and served as production manager, had a vision: a mismatched ensemble of clothing Beth had acquired over the years, including a '70s floral shirt and a leopard-print pencil skirt. In essence, she was wearing her memories. A costume should reveal things about a character that the audience would never know otherwise, Jesse believes. This ability to reveal through clothing "is a power that everyone has," she says. "I just like to use it on other people."

In 2012, Jesse began working with TheatreLAB, the boundary-pushing theater startup founded by DeeJay Gray and Annie Colpitts. Joining a theater company in its infancy was an invaluable experience, Jesse says, because "instead of walking into someone else's world, we got to create our own." She has worked as an actress, director, designer and production manager for TheatreLAB, and is now associate artistic director.

Jesse recently launched the Cellar Series with TheatreLAB, an accompaniment to the main stage season that puts on new plays with a smaller cast and smaller budget. "Because sometimes all you need is a good story and a good actor," Jesse says. "You don't need a spectacle."

She continues to act as well, both in film and on stage. Jesse was named Best Actress in 2015 by the Richmond Theatre Critics Circle for her performance in 5th Wall Theatre's Iraq war drama "The Human Terrain."

And that's not the end of her creative pursuits. Jesse also paints colorful close-ups of varied subjects: a flamingo, a seagull, watermelon. It's a different kind of challenge, she says: "When I'm acting, I have found a certain part of myself and attached it to someone else, the character, for the audience. When I'm painting, I take a part of myself and just leave it for anyone's interpretation."

McLean JESSE

ACTRESS, ASSOCIATE
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR AT
THEATRELAB, ARTIST



Melissa Burgess was having coffee in her West Manchester house one Sunday morning about eight years ago when her dog began to bark – "an unusually alarming bark," she recalls. When she looked outside, she saw flames shooting up the side of a nearby vacant house, engulfing an upstairs room.

The firefighters seemed to be moving in slow motion, she remembers; "it was almost like a dance, or a play, or some theatrical event." Burgess captured the choreography with her camera and then began to paint the scene, catching the house in its last moment of life.

That's what Burgess does: She preserves Richmond's old buildings in painted portraits. "Richmond has such a diverse palette of architecture. I feel it's a job to keep up with buildings before they're knocked down or gentrified or burned down, or whatever their demise may be."

She specializes in the city's often-overlooked vernacular architecture, mostly in the Hull Street and Manchester areas. Burgess finds poetry in the ramshackle rear porches of a Fan apartment building; in mattresses leaning against a Hull Street storefront; in fire escapes, rusted guardrails and a trumpet vine running rampant on a wall.

Her father was a Richmond architect, and her grandfather was a photographer who shot workboats on the Chesapeake Bay. These passions – documentation, architecture and preservation – come together in her work.

Burgess has been an artist for more than 30 years, painting not only landscapes but also portraits and interiors. She spent eight years in Boston and has also painted scenes from her travels in Korea and Venice.

She sometimes paints using photographs as a reference, but her work has the feeling of paintings done en plein air. That's because, she says, she seeks to paint not only the structure but the atmosphere – spring breeze or summer haze? – and her remembrance of the smell, whether exhaust fumes or sweet grass. The result is a record of Richmond at a particular time, a moment which will never pass again.

Melissa BURGESS

ARTIST

Mary FLINN

SENIOR EDITOR, BLACKBIRD

Literature, Mary Flinn says, is “like one giant living room that everyone can go into.” People arrive at different times, and talk about different things, but for a moment they all share the same space.

Consider Flinn a greeter in this grand room, someone who welcomes everyone to the conversation. She is that rare thing in the literary world: an editor who, while not a writer herself, derives “the greatest pleasure” from supporting writers of all kinds.

“A life in letters is not, certainly, about money,” Flinn says. Rather, the reward is “a great underlying fulfillment and happiness if you spend your time there, and you get to see a much broader world.”

As an undergraduate at Hollins University, Flinn never took a creative writing class. But she met Louis D. Rubin, champion of Southern literature and later founder of Algonquin Books, and under his auspices she entered a literary world.

In Richmond, Rubin connected her with noted author and editor

Virginius Dabney, who hired Flinn as executive editor of the New Virginia Review. The review was a statewide nonprofit that published an annual journal of contemporary literature. Then, in 2001, the New Virginia Review partnered with VCU to launch an online literary magazine, Blackbird.

Blackbird was a pioneering publication, says sculptor Elizabeth King, one of the journal’s first contributing writers. “They brought literature and art to the web in a way that has proved itself to be one of the most stable, beautifully archived, accessible and innovative online journals of any that I’ve seen then or since,” she says.

Traditionally, literary journals were governed by an editor’s own aesthetics and tastes. But from the very beginning, Flinn says, Blackbird was shaped not by one person but by an ever-changing and collaborative cadre of students and staff.

In a single issue a reader might find a futuristic, epic poem or a video essay inspired by a haiku collection inspired by the “Peyton Place” soap opera. Blackbird publishes some 120 authors a year. The intention, Flinn says, is to “provide a snapshot of the work we find most interesting that comes our way.”



photo by Terry Brown

Elizabeth KING

SCULPTOR AND AUTHOR

In the Smithsonian Institution’s archives resides something quite remarkable: a 15-inch high clockwork monk. Made sometime around 1560, the monk is astonishing not so much for its appearance – which is dour, even sinister – but for what it does. It moves in a square pattern, strikes its chest in atonement, moves its mouth in prayer, turns and nods its head, rolls its eyes, and occasionally raises a cross to its lips and kisses it. All of these movements are driven by a key-wound mechanism of iron concealed beneath the monk’s robes.

This automaton fascinated sculptor Elizabeth King, who has spent more than 15 years researching the mechanical monk and the legends associated with it. With co-author W. David Todd, the Smithsonian’s Conservator of Timekeeping emeritus, she’s writing a book about the monk, aiming for publication by a university press next year.

“Clearly it was designed to be marvelous and frightening and even intimidating,” King says. “Everyone

who sees it is unnerved by it.” You might say the same of King’s own work, which combines movable, jointed figurative human sculptures with stop-motion animation. “All my career, posing the pieces has been just as important as making them,” she explains. Some of her pieces resemble small mannequin heads – they are actually precise self-portraits at half life-size – while others are articulated fragments of the body.

King has been making these haunting pieces since the 1980s, and they reside in permanent collections including those of the Hirshhorn Museum, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She’s preparing to mount a solo exhibition in 2017 at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art.

A teaching position in the VCU Department of Sculpture and Extended Media drew King to Richmond in 1985. Her husband, Carlton Newton, also teaches in the department.

“I never would have imagined myself being in Virginia,” she says, but the department “absolutely won my heart.” For 30 years, until her retirement in 2015, King relished the camaraderie and competition of her colleagues and students. “There’s no place else I wanted to be,” she says.



“Artists inspire me,” Page Bond says. As the owner of the Page Bond Gallery, she works with them all: emerging artists, mid-career artists and well-established artists alike. Bond is particularly drawn to those who can eloquently speak about their work: “It’s sometimes intellectual and sometimes sensual, but it’s always such a privilege.”

Bond’s career as a gallery owner began with simple serendipity. While in Nantucket with her husband in 1999, Bond noticed a “for rent” sign on a Main Street gallery. “You might enjoy it,” the owner suggested. Bond stayed for the summer and mounted a new show every other week.

At summer’s end, when she returned to Richmond, Bond couldn’t let go. “You’re still talking about it,” observed her husband Sanford Bond, a noted architect. So in 2001, Bond started a small gallery in the basement of their home on West Avenue. In 2006, Bond moved the gallery to its current home, a converted garage at 1625 West Main St.

The secret to running a gallery, Bond says, is being “a good connector.” She connects buyers with artists by presenting the work in various ways: in books, on the walls and even by letting collectors bring pieces home for a tryout. She connects young artists with the Richmond art community by hosting an annual “Emerge” exhibition for graduate students at VCU. Bond has also served on the board of the VCU Foundation since 2010 and the board of the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts since 2001.

The Page Bond Gallery shows contemporary paintings, sculpture, photography, printmaking and ceramics. “The work that moves me is work by artists who are motivated, skilled, fearless and engaged in their practice,” Bond says. “What drives me is the hope that visitors to the gallery are transformed in some way by our program and exhibitions, and that their visual vocabularies are expanded by the idea that art can be many things.”

Page BOND

OWNER, PAGE BOND GALLERY



“I was kind of one of those kids who didn’t fit anywhere,” Robyn O’Neill says – until she discovered theater in high school. She studied at the conservatory at Shenandoah University, worked a few theater jobs in North Carolina and Florida, and moved to New York City.

Then, while visiting Richmond with friend Julie Fulcher in 1987, O’Neill saw “Little Shop of Horrors” at the Swift Creek Mill Theatre. It was an epiphany. “Why are we living in New York?” she asked, when Richmond held such abundant acting opportunities.

O’Neill had a talent for tap-dancing, and “that’s how I got my foot in the door,” she says. She remembers performing 14 days in a row to sold-out houses. “This is where I was supposed to be. I knew it almost immediately,” she says. “This is where I fit. My people are here.”

O’Neill became a fixture in the Richmond theater scene, performing in more than 50 professional productions over 20 years. In 2005, she was awarded a Theresa Pollak Prize for Excellence in the Arts. The capstone of her career was playing Rose in Virginia Rep’s production of “Gypsy” this past winter.

“Gypsy,” the story of burlesque performer Gypsy Rose Lee’s childhood and rise to fame, was one of the first shows O’Neill ever loved. As a child, she listened to her grandmother’s recording over and over. Often played as loud and abrasive, stage mother Rose is also charming and sexy, O’Neill says. “She’s so complicated... it’s so much fun to find all the different layers.”

O’Neill has multiple layers, too. Several years ago, some theater friends asked her to shoot their headshots – “and they were horrible,” she says. “And I was then determined to learn how.” She discovered she had a knack for making actors feel natural in front of the camera, and soon became the go-to photographer for theater headshots. So much so, she says, that younger actors sometimes don’t realize she’s an actress, too. “And so you have to do ‘Gypsy,’ so they remember.”

Robyn O’NEILL

ACTRESS AND PHOTOGRAPHER



Eva ROCHA

MULTIMEDIA ARTIST

Amid all the installations at the 2015 InLight art exhibition, one seemed to fascinate people more than any other. Eva Rocha's "Object-Orientalis" was a collection of wooden crates filled with packing materials onto which moving images of nude, curled-up women were projected. Crowds pressed close to touch the images, to sculpt the sand around them, to poke them with objects and sometimes turn away.

"I was not sure what would be the reaction of the audience but I was not concerned with acceptance," Rocha says. "I wanted a reaction of any kind - of being bothered, of being discussed, of being sensually attracted, or feelings of compassion. I wanted the viewer to feel something beyond a mere contemplation of a cold object."

Nothing Rocha creates is merely an object; rather, her multimedia artwork explores the idea of objectification, particularly human trafficking. The art

world often discourages artists from tackling politics and personal topics, she says, but "art is always representing the thoughts of a time period. If through our art we are not expressing any aspect of humanity, we are allowing ourselves to be objectified."

Born in rural Brazil, Rocha had never visited a museum or gallery until she was 19 and moved to São Paulo. She met her husband, Spencer Turner, while he was studying in Brazil and later returned with him to Richmond. For three years, Turner and Rocha ran the Virginia Center For Latin American Art, a mobile art gallery and outreach program. In 2015, Rocha was awarded the Theresa Pollak Prize for Excellence in the Arts as an Emerging Artist.

Rocha is now in the final semester of her Master of Fine Arts program at VCU. She continues to work on pieces where, she explains, "I explore my thoughts on dehumanization, taking place not only in art but in many contemporary aspects: in media and the ways we are becoming data; in our spiritual loss; in our distance from death; and in our collective fight to see ourselves not as objects but as subjects."

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YOU KNOW THEM BY ART.

PAGE BOND | MELISSA BURGESS | MARY FLINN
MCLEAN JESSE | ELIZABETH KING | ROBYN O'NEILL
PAMELA REYNOLDS | EVA ROCHA



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*Meet these iconic women and celebrate how they are moving the arts forward in Richmond.
For more information, contact Melanie at 358-0825 x331 or melanie.roupas@styleweekly.com.*

