

McKNIGHT FOUNDATION



2026 McKnight Composer Fellowships

Information session 2 | Tuesday, November 11, 2025



Brian Dowdy
Community Director



Dell Paulsen
Advocacy Manager



Questions → Chat



The intent of the McKnight Artist and Culture Bearers Fellowship is to recognize and support artists and culture bearers who are beyond emerging and have sustained experience in their area of practice. Fellows demonstrate achievement, commitment, and high-level proficiency in artistic and/or culture bearer practice that contributes to their field and impacts and benefits people in Minnesota.

The addition of culture bearer acknowledges that the McKnight programs support creative leaders in Minnesota from cultures that don't use the word "artist" (such as Native American and Hmong), as well as those who center the transmission and preservation of cultural lifeways.

Key Evaluation Criteria



A. Artistic craft:

1. Strong sense of the creator's voice
2. Technical proficiency* necessary to achieve the artist's desired results
3. Quality of work samples*



B. The applicant has clearly reached beyond early practice, as evidenced by the following:

1. Significant body of work
2. Creative achievement
3. Sustained contribution to their artistic field and Minnesota's arts ecosystem

**ACF staff members do not contribute to decision-making or selection of awardees beyond pre-screening of applications for eligibility and completeness. Selection of awardees is done by our panel of four music creators.*

Selection Process:

Prescreening by ACF staff

- Eligibility and completeness
- Panel support and adherence to discussion guidelines
- ACF staff members *do not* contribute to decision-making or selection of awardees

Panel Review

- Four music creators & advocates
- Two phases
 1. Independent Review
 2. Group Review with two rounds

Artist's Statement

Video or Text

The artist statement may take any of several directions at your discretion with information about:

1. Your background
2. The development of your work
3. Your interests as an artist or your aesthetic position
4. Your future artistic direction
5. Any other information you would like to present to the panel

Work Samples & Written Descriptions

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graph TD; A[Work Samples & Written Descriptions] --> B[Work Sample 1<br/>Makes the most critical impression on the<br/>panelists & should represent your most<br/>distinctive and compelling musical example]; A --> C[Work Sample 2 (& optional 3)<br/>Complements the previous work samples]; B --> D[• Choose a sample that connects directly to<br/>your Artistic Statement]; B --> E[• Demonstrate the particular significance of<br/>this sample with an additional written<br/>description]; C --> F[• Choose a sample that, in combination with<br/>other samples, demonstrates the depth<br/>and/or breadth of your artistic practice];
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Work Sample 1

Makes the most critical impression on the panelists & should represent your most distinctive and compelling musical example

- Choose a sample that connects directly to your Artistic Statement
- Demonstrate the particular significance of *this* sample with an additional written description

Work Sample 2 (& optional 3)

Complements the previous work samples

- Choose a sample that, in combination with other samples, demonstrates the depth and/or breadth of your artistic practice



Queen Drea
2022 McKnight Fellow

“I enjoy being in the uncomfortable space. If my compositions invoke visceral responses in the listener, then I’ve done my job.”

photo by David Lee Glasgow

Queen Drea

Artist's Statement

[excerpt]

I make worlds with my compositions. Glitchy vocals, guttural cries, scratchy sounds, ear-piercing ground loops, and off-kilter rhythms are what I do. Everything is intentional, yet improvisational in nature. I do not seek to create smooth surfaces. Small nodules and light abrasion awaken the mind. I enjoy being in the uncomfortable space. If my compositions invoke visceral responses in the listener, then I've done my job.

I spent my 20's and 30's in pop, alternative, and funk bands as a singer/songwriter. But something just wasn't right. It occurred to me that I'm not an RnB singer. It didn't fill all of my internal musical spaces, and I didn't want to be contained by a genre. My music bubbles from the ground and flows in many directions. So I took a 10-year break from music to contemplate who I was as an artist, while the imposter in me said, "I'm not trained in theory, and I don't play an instrument, how can I be a composer?" Turns out, my voice was my instrument, and I was always a composer.

Through the wonders of vocal effects, I transform my voice into the rings of Saturn, an alien predator, and shattered glass. Without effects, hums, tongue clicks, inaudible text and back of mouth gurgles are layered. Looping technology places each sound in a cycle, like life. Complete with interruptions that make your heartbeat repeat, scatter and flicker, like life. Each texture specifically chosen for the composed world it will live in. I call myself a sound alchemist. Mixing potions of voice, rhythm and Sage...

Usually, I am the only musician performing my compositions, but currently, I am learning how to compose for ensembles through Zeitgeist New Music Group's Sounding Ground Fellowship. I'm learning how to better express the larger vision in my head, notating music using visual symbols, a set of rules or text. I'm excited to be challenging myself to create work that will be performed by multiple musicians alongside me. My aspirations are to compose an evening-length operetta, with an all Black cast, and all Black musicians, set in a technologically advanced and more hopeful African diasporic future.

G.T.F.O.H.

- 0:00 - 34.32

“GTFOH” was written for the Minneapolis community album The Art of the Revolution immediately after the murder of George Floyd.

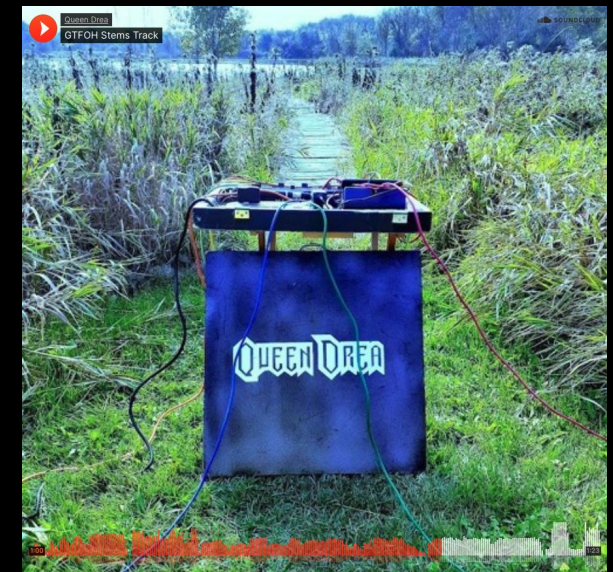
The video is recorded at the same time I was recording my lead vocals and performing what sounds like DJ scratching but is me using the vinyl flick, and other effects on my loops using my Boss RC505. I recorded the main vocal loops and instrumentation at home and sent the stems to Rob so I could record everything else at his studio during the video shoot. Afterward, he sent me the new stems. At home, I cut up all of the stems from the recording session and placed them where I wanted them in the composition. I ran some of the vocals back through my TC Helicon to add additional layers of effects, pre-mixed each track, and sent it to Holly for the final mix and master. GTFOH starts with what sounds like giggling. Mainly because we laugh to keep from crying. Then drums that sound like military or... Taps. This precedes the heavy sighing that serves as the root of the composition. During the recording session, I recorded several tracks of me cutting, modulating, and scratching the loops I had laid down. All of this is done live while the video is being recorded.

Because this is an improvisational-based composition without a notated score, I am hoping I am allowed to offer a short 1:23 min track as the score, that includes some of the individual pieces separated out so you can see what GTFOH is composed of. If so allowed, you may access it here....

In GTFOH, I politely request that Thee proverbial “Man” get his hand out my pocket, his laws out my womb, his gaze off my face, his foot off my neck, and GTFOH.

Queen Drea

Work Sample1 &
Written Description





Mary Ellen Childs
2022 McKnight Fellow

“[I’m] a composer who is interested in all the senses, and I base my work in real experiences and visceral phenomena – time, temperature, movement, light, sight, sound.”

photo by Laura Blanchi, courtesy of the Bogliasco Foundation

Mary Ellen
Childs
Artist's Statement
[excerpt]

As a composer, working over the last 35 years, I have amassed a large body of instrumental concert work for a variety of musical forces... I frequently use traditional instruments in non-traditional ways (multiphonics, extreme registers, tone colors) to create distinct and unusual sonic worlds. I often describe myself as a composer who is interested in all the senses, and I base my work in real experiences and visceral phenomena – time, temperature, movement, light, sight, sound.

A composer at heart, I grew up playing flute and piano, but I was also dancing and making dances, working in theater, and avidly interested in visual art and film. As a result, my musical thinking has always been infused with a multi-disciplinary approach. In addition to my concert music, I have many works that incorporate visual material or architecture or movement for the performers...

I am currently at work on two new pieces...inspired by my experiences aboard an Arctic-bound sailing vessel. Departing from the international territory of Svalbard, a mountainous archipelago 10 degrees from the North Pole, I lived aboard a Tall Ship sailing the fjords, making landfall daily to experience the terrain and collect recordings and imagery. I came away with profound artistic impressions of the spare, often subtle, and occasionally violent sounds of the Arctic, and the overwhelming breadth of the landscape...

In the last several years I have added a new interest: combining music and scent. I engaged in extensive background study in smell (detailed in my bio), have set up a scent lab in my composition studio, and created exploratory projects, including a series of scent dinners at my home. In the coming year I will delve more deeply into smell/music by premiering a major gallery installation Smell Hear in Buenos Aires this summer...

Ephemeral Geometry (Points and Lines)

- Round 1 start/end times: 0:00 - 5:00
- Round 2 start/end times: 6:00 - 9:15

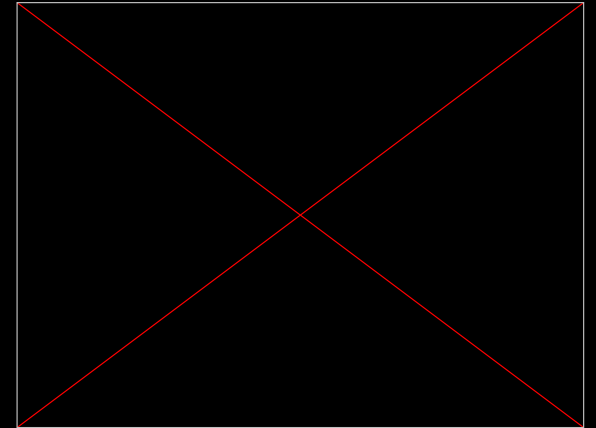
Commissioned by and written for ETHEL string quartet, Ephemeral Geometry is part of ETHEL's Documerica project, inspired by photographs from the Environment Protection Agency's Documerica, a series of photographs taken by photographers throughout the U.S. during the 1970s, documenting a myriad of images across America relating to the environment.

Of the many wonderful photos in the EPA Documerica collection, I gravitated to those that lean to the abstract – a tall electrical tower with lines in geometric patterns, a bird silhouetted against the big red ball of the setting sun, an extreme close up of a puffy dandelion – each one a real thing made to look slightly unreal through the photographer's eye. By looking so close up, or from an extreme angle or through dramatic lighting, our sense of reality is altered just enough for us to see something unexpected. As I wrote the music, I kept these photographs loosely in mind, sort of sitting at the back of my brain below conscious thought. I wanted each of the movements of Ephemeral Geometry to have a completely different flavor. These particular photos gave me a place to connect musically where image and sound came from the same impulse, with music capturing the dramatically different energy of lines and dots – the abstracted sense of the real things in these photos.

I submit these samples to show my interest in: textures and layered lines; combining fully written out passages with improvisation; as well as to show how similar material can sound distinctly different in different contexts. The second of these two movements, Lines, the string players lend their own sung voices at 8:10.

Mary Ellen Childs

Work Sample 1 &
Written Description



EPHEMERAL GEOMETRY
POINTS
A Symphonic Quartet in 4/4
Mary Ellen Childs

Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Cello

Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Cello

Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Cello

© 2014 Mary Ellen Childs



Mary Prescott
2021 McKnight Fellow

“I am a Thai-American interdisciplinary artist, composer and pianist based in Minneapolis and New York City who explores the foundations and facets of identity and social conditions through experiential performance.”

photo by Bill Phelps

Mary Prescott

Artist's Statement

[excerpt]

I am a Thai-American composer, pianist and interdisciplinary artist who explores the foundations and facets of identity and social conditions through experiential performance. My work grapples with social dissonances and systemic injustice, with an aim to inspire renewed introspection and understanding of the human condition and deeper connectivity of the human spirit...

I am a self-taught interdisciplinary artist, composer and improviser. Though I received formal musical training as a classical pianist, my experience of the traditional classical music world emphasized a hierarchical structure that inherently limited my voice, visibility and participation. Thus I shifted my practice toward generative work to exercise and value my creative voice, ask and investigate questions that are relevant to me and my communities, and bring awareness to urgent and underexplored subject matter.

My embodied experiences as an Asian-American woman living in a patriarchal society heavily influence my work. I frequently deal with women's identities and relationships to systemic violence, suppression, silence, and conformity. The concept of motherhood and my own mother appear over and over in my work, a role I find to be as beautiful as it is fraught with complexity, baggage and distress.

Explorations in music improvisation, movement, installation, film and theater resulted in several music-based interdisciplinary works focused on themes of social justice, illness and marginalization...

I will continue to develop my opera, Alma, an original story and libretto inspired by a malevolent Thai spirit who died as a result of systemic misogyny, and who carries a curse with her to inflict her fate upon others for all eternity: an allegory for self-perpetuated shame and violence against women. And I will compose a commissioned 4-hand piano duet for Duo Harmonia, a Twin Cities based piano duo, based on my mother's adaptation of a Thai folktale that intertwines her own story of immigration from Thailand to Minnesota...

"RIP" and "Wrapping" from Songs Between Life and Death

- **1:12 - 3:40**

“RIP” and “Wrapping” are two movements from Songs Between Life and Death, an 80-minute performative song cycle about conscious spiritual existence unattached from the physical body,

Throughout the song cycle, fabric is used as a physical, musical and symbolic tool.

“RIP” (0:00) incorporates fabric ripping and feet stomping as a rhythmic foundation. Ripping fabric symbolizes physical deterioration and separation of the body from the spirit.

“Wrapping” (2:24) represents isolation of the spirit from the physical world, preparation of the body for burial, and metamorphosis of the physical and spiritual self. Washing fabric symbolizes cleansing and purification of the body.

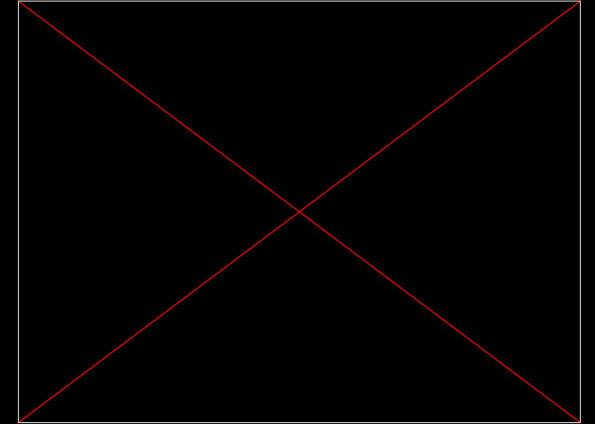
This sample is representative of my interdisciplinary work intertwining music, movement and theater. Songs Between Life and Death deals with themes of the body, death, identity, and our understanding of the self through a physical form.

I am the sole creator of this work, composer, choreographer and director. I am one of 7 performers. Performed by Nina Dante, Ariadne Greif, Sara Serpa (vocalists), Nick Dunston (double bass), Ilmar Gavilan (violin), Jonathan Finlayson (trumpet, and Mary Prescott (piano).

There is no written score for “Wrapping.” Instructions for this song were delivered verbally to performers.

Mary Prescott

Work Sample 3 & Written Description



Songs Between Life & Death: RIP (2019)

Vocals sing on "Abh" for the duration of the song.
C# indicates where singers *skip notes*. Sharp bar not sig.

Comptempo: strong beat on beats 1-3 & 5 of each measure, tempo is 8-9 and is 18-19 where first strong on every beat. No accents at all in as, 10-12 13.

By Mary Prescott

Voice 1

mf Abh. _____

Voice 2

mf Abh. _____

Voice 3

V1

V2

V3

12

V1

V2

V3

To Coda



deVon Russell Gray
2017 & 2023 McKnight Fellow

“I’ve known for an age that it can take an age for a composer to develop.” - 2017

“I’m now living in a window of time in which my artistic integrity & fear management are steadily being consulted & considered.” - 2023

deVon
Russell Gray
Artist's Statement
2023

I'm now living in a window of time in which my artistic integrity & fear management are steadily being consulted & considered. When I've had colossal failures it's been due to allowing my fear of failure to win out in that moment. Masterpiece syndrome say my friends. It's based on a false narrative that wants me to believe that perfection exists in art, in my art making. I acknowledge the truth that perfection has never existed & never will. No. We are perfect. We are made in the image of the creator & while we are here, it is up to us to use our gifts to better ourselves & our communities, & on the macro level, the planet. Art heals us when we allow it; everything we need or require we possess within. Learning to accept this truth can take a lifetime.

I've been using the analogy of myself as a sculptor, with the new techniques/skills I've been using/exploring over the last several years as varying mounds of clay. What do I mean? My last string quartet (2021) for example was written in Just Intonation. The sonic palette or playground in which I created the piece had far more colors than the twelve pitches of the equal temperament tuning system. There are so many notes between the notes as it were...

In a continuing effort to suss out my compositional voice & who I am as an improviser I'm steadily working to blur the line between composition in real time & improvisation slowed down. In recent years I've asked all of my performers/ensembles to both improvise within a provided framework & also to openly & freely improvise when instructed, whether they're graphic or traditional notation scores. I want truest deepest experiences of self expression for us all....

- 1:51 - 4:27

Written Description

Cognitive Dissonance

- 0:00 - 3:00

I was invited by one of my alma maters (Perpich Center for Arts Education) to come perform and speak with their current students. Covid prevented a live in person exchange and this performance film was the final form of the offering. Filmed and edited by Mychal Fisher.

deVon Russell Gray

Work Sample 3 &
Written Description

Application Deadline:

Wednesday, Dec. 17, 2025 at 11:59pm PST



Grace period:

If you start your application before the deadline, you will have a 24-hour grace period to submit your application. If you do use this grace period, you must submit your application before December 18, 2025 at 11:59pm PST. After this, we will not accept any applications, without exception.



Brian Dowdy
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Questions?

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