

ARTnews

Rose B. Simpson: "Ruth Foundation for the Arts Announces New \$100,000 Artist Awards"

By Maximiliano Durón

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The inaugural Ruth Awards recipients (from left): Kite, Candice Lin, Joe Minter, and Rose B. Simpson.

COURTESY RUTH FOUNDATION FOR THE ARTS

The Milwaukee-based Ruth Foundation for the Arts has launched a new artist prize, called the Ruth Awards, which will go to four artists based in North America each year. The award's inaugural are Kite, Candice Lin, Joe Minter, and Rose B. Simpson, who will each receive \$100,000 of unrestricted funds.

Ruth Arts launched in 2022 with a \$440 million endowment from the late patron Ruth DeYoung Kohler II and a goal to dole out \$20 million annually. One of its hallmark programs is the Artist Choice grant, which goes to arts nonprofits of various sizes across the country, and each organization is nominated by an artist. The Ruth Awards were not initially planned as part of the foundation's grantmaking but grew organically out of its work over the past two years.

"It is a full circle moment," Karen Patterson, the organization's executive director, told ARTnews. "We guide all our grant programs through artists, so it felt appropriate and exciting to provide no-strings-attached funds to artists. ... We wanted to make sure that that amount would have an impact to their lives."

Kite (aka Suzanne Kite) is an Oglála Lakǰóta artist, academic, and composer who is best-known for works that use machine learning and AI to engage Lakǰóta mythologies and knowledge. She will also be featured in this year's Whitney Biennial in the film program.

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Lin is a multidisciplinary artist known for creating large-scale installations that look at the histories of colonization. Her work is frequently displayed in different biennials, including the 2023 and 2021 Gwangju Biennales, the 2022 Venice Biennale, Prospect.5 in 2021, and the 2018 Made in L.A. biennial.

Minter is an artist and cultural historian who is best-known for his sprawling didactic artwork African Village, which he created on the land adjacent to his home in Birmingham. His work has been collected by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and the Minneapolis Museum of Art, among others, and was included in the 2023 exhibition "Souls Grown Deep like the Rivers: Black Artists from the American South" at the Royal Academy of Art in London.

Simpson is a mixed-media artist who is based in Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico, and is known for sculptures that filter Indigenous and matrilinear themes into organic clay forms. Her traveling survey, "Counterculture," is currently on view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin.

"There is an endless amount of imagination with these artists," she said. "Their work has an exponential quality to it. With an award that is unrestricted to artists who have an exponential way of thinking, it's just exciting and an honor to see where they go and what how we can support them."

Patterson also said in creating the Ruth Awards, the foundation wanted to add something to the crowded field of artist awards. In selecting these four artists, whom she said make work that is "bold and sensitive at the same time," the organization wanted to look at artists who think beyond the finished art object and instead focus on their process. They also wanted to highlight interdisciplinary practices, or more specifically "artists who are adept at applying their imagination to a variety of materials," she said. "We also wanted to acknowledge the fullness of an artist's practice." (Though there are no specific age requirements for winning the prize, the artists were selected in recognition of their existing body of work.)

Patterson continued, "We did want to honor Ruth's vision of artists, too, which was that artists bring about structural change if you include them in the process. We did ask that of our nominators to think about what type of change the artists are influencing in the world that we see."

The winning artists were nominated by a group of 12 curators: Dan Byers at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts in Cambridge, Massachusetts; Ryan N. Dennis at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston; Adrienne Edwards at the Whitney Museum in New York; Lauren Haynes at the Queens Museum; Katherine Jentleson at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta; Bana Kattan, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; Wanda Nanibush, an independent curator who most recently worked at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto; Sara Raza, an independent Curator; Reuben Roqueñi at Portland Institute of Contemporary Art in Maine; Victoria Sung at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; Gaëtane Verna at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus; and Angelik Vizcarrondo-Laboy, an independent curator and writer.

"We thought about how special that relationship is between a curator and an artist," Patterson said. "We really thought carefully about curators who've gained a reputation with their exhibition-making—being thoughtful and thought provoking—but also who take a relational approach to their curatorial process. We wanted that to come through."

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By way of example, Patterson pointed to "A Movement in Every Direction: Legacies of the Great Migration," which Dennis co-curated and has been traveling the country since it debuted at Mississippi Museum of Art and is currently on view at California African American Museum in Los Angeles. "Thematic exhibitions can be very difficult to pull off," Patterson said. "They take a lot of research but also a lot of intuition—how works speak to each other. I think Ryan's exhibition demonstrates that."

Each curator could nominate up to two artists, and the foundation wanted to make the nomination process easy, with prompts that could easily elicit a response about the curators' relationship with their selected artists. Those questions, Patterson said, were along the lines of "How does this artist's character contribute to an understanding of their work?" and "What does it feel like to see that artist across the room at an event?"

Reflecting on how important hearing from artists has been to Ruth Arts's past two grant cycles, Patterson said the foundation wanted to find a way to give back and support artists anew.

"We always believed that in supporting artists, you're supporting structural change," she said. "That can feel very vast and vague and, in some ways, unplaceable, but when we placed artists at the decision-making table for Artist Choice, it changed how we work [and] how we were support organizations."

She added, "The artists have given us so much in this, and now it's our chance to say thank you."

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