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Milwaukee Arts Board announces 2026 Artists of the Year, Friends of the Arts Award honorees

MILWAUKEE – The City of Milwaukee Arts Board (MAB) is announcing the 2026 Mildred L. Harpole Artists of the Year and 2026 Friends of the Arts award recipients. These honorees recognize and celebrate excellence and exceptional service in Milwaukee’s arts community.

Artists **David Najib Kasir** and **Ojumire Dounfola Charleston** were named the 2026 Artists of the Year, while **Ferne Yangyeitie Caulker** and **Karl Kopp** were named the 2026 Friends of the Arts.

2026 is the fourth year that the Milwaukee Arts Board accepted award nominations from the public, seeking nominees whose work aligns with the Arts Board purpose as defined by the Code of Ordinances. **All award recipients will be honored on June 9, 2026, at 4:30 p.m. in the City Hall Rotunda.** Local arts organizations receiving MAB-sustaining grants will be recognized as well.

“Milwaukee’s artists tell the story of who we are as a city, which is creative, resilient, and deeply connected to community” said **Mayor Cavalier Johnson**. “The 2026 Mildred L. Harpole Artists of the Year and Friends of the Arts honorees have each made a lasting impact on Milwaukee’s cultural landscape. I celebrate their contributions and commitment to enriching our city through the arts.”

“The Milwaukee Arts Board is honored to recognize individuals whose creativity, leadership, and advocacy strengthen our community in meaningful ways,” said **Alderwoman Milele A. Coggs, Chair of the Milwaukee Arts Board**. “This year’s recipients reflect the talent and

dedication within Milwaukee, and their work continues to inspire cultural understanding and artistic excellence across our city.”

More information on this year’s honorees is below.

- **David Najib Kasir, 2026 Mildred L. Harpole Artist of the Year**

Kasir interrogates the role Western media plays in constructing cultural narratives, while centering a caring lens on the destruction of Syria, the Middle East, and its people through large-scale paintings. The work starts from a personal place. “Iraq was my father’s country, and Syria is my mother’s as well as the second home of my youth. It’s where my extended family were living. It’s where there were buildings I slept in and streets where I played tag and other games as a child. I’ve witnessed years of destruction of my countries from US invasions, with no regard from Western media of civilian casualties. I entrap the Syrian landscapes in Arab mosaic patterns, not as a backdrop, but as a culture of people trying to hold up their structured environment as best as they can with little to no help from others.”

- **Ojumire Dounfola Charleston, 2026 Mildred L. Harpole Artist of the Year**

“Ojumire” Charleston is the founder of Drums Up Guns Down 414 (DUGD414) and has become deeply dedicated to her purpose of using West African drumming, dance, and culture to uplift youth and strengthen community resilience. Beginning on the drums at age 9, her journey grew from church and school bands into a lifelong commitment to cultural arts, community performance, and mentorship throughout Milwaukee and beyond. From a young age to now, Ojumire has consistently provided drumming and cultural performance for many of Milwaukee’s community gatherings, cultural celebrations, youth programs, ceremonies, festivals, and healing spaces, becoming a familiar presence in the city’s cultural arts community. Through DUGD414, founded in 2023, she leads culturally rooted programming that gives youth and families opportunities to study West African drumming, dance, rhythm, leadership, performance, and cultural history in safe, healing spaces centered around mentorship, social-emotional development, cultural identity, community engagement, and creative expression. Through performances, workshops, drum circles, rites of passage programming, and community outreach, Ojumire continues using the arts as a pathway toward healing, empowerment, unity, and positive change throughout Milwaukee.

“A child who hears the drum of purpose will not dance to the noise of destruction,” Charleston said. “Through DUGD414, I pour into the youth so that they may know their value, honor their roots, and become the strength of the next generation for the community of Milwaukee.”

- **Ferne Yangyeitie Caulker, 2026 Friend of the Arts**

Dancer and choreographer Ferne Yangyeitie Caulker was born in Sierra Leone and studied with the National Dance Company of Ghana at the University of Ghana. In 1969, Caulker founded the Ko-Thi Dance Company with a vision to develop, educate, showcase, and preserve African, Caribbean, and African American dance and music in Milwaukee. Under her direction, Ko-Thi has introduced African and Caribbean dance, music, history, and traditions to over ONE MILLION children through school residencies and community collaborations.

“I am deeply honored to be an artist. To be able to share these delicious art forms from the continent of Africa, in a world which needs to celebrate the vast array of human expressions of self affirming and historic values, is a gift. The arts must continue to be sustained and flourish as they remain at the heart of our human experience on the planet, a connective tissue to human history and roots from which we can all bloom.”

- **Karl Kopp, 2026 Friend of the Arts**

Karl Kopp’s leadership and advocacy have strengthened connections between artists, patrons, and the broader public. When Karl opened Elsa’s on the Park on New Year’s Eve, 1979, he made a decision that instead of owning a private collection, he would indulge and delight his patrons with a sensory experience that included a contemporary art collection of five installations yearly, including his famous avant-garde Christmas tree collection. These installations are presented only to be experienced, not sold, and are photographed, made into postcards and presented to the diner with the bill. Elsa’s covers the postage ensuring an unexpected secondary life for the stationary artwork. While diners may come for a drink, they are exposed to curated and sophisticated art. With these collaborations, Mr. Kopp weaves contemporary art into a part of daily life.

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.