

WHO'S NEXT.





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Northeast Ohio's art scene is vibrant and diverse. It's also constantly growing, a dynamic fueled in part by the region's art schools and area galleries that showcase and support up-and-coming artists' work.

Canvas believes it's important to champion emerging talent, too, which is why we're proud to introduce "Who's Next," a section that aims to celebrate and call more attention to artists early in their career.

To select the artists featured, we tapped local gallery directors – both independent and university-affiliated – for their expertise and insight. The end result is a group of rising stars who are putting in the work and whose art we feel you should see any time their names are affiliated with an exhibition.

Their disciplines include painting, photography, sculpture, drawing and fiber arts. There's even some stage acting involved. What they have in common is that they all represent the next generation of talented artists in Northeast Ohio.

Profiles & photography by Michael C. Butz



AMBER N. FORD

Years 23 • **Lives** South Euclid • **Creates** Cleveland • **Degrees** BFA in photography from Cleveland Institute of Art

Amber N. Ford wants to correct the narrative. Two of her most prominent photography projects thus far, “In Between” and “By Force & By Choice,” have gained notice throughout Northeast Ohio for the way in which they challenge head-on mainstream media depictions of people of color.

“In Between,” which stemmed from her BFA work at the Cleveland Institute of Art, is a powerful collection of images that portrays African-American men as themselves, wearing what they’d wear on a typical day in a space comfortable to them. The works seek to widen the narrow scope through which black men are characterized – often only as criminals or victims – in the news.

Similarly, “By Force & By Choice” invites viewers into the homes of refugees and immigrants – in kitchens, on couches, at doorsteps – portraying them as the neighbors and community members they are. The photographs serve to dispel notions one might construct if his or her only exposure to immigrants and refugees comes from news coverage.

At a time when instances of racism are on the rise and inequalities must be confronted, Ford’s work is vitally important.

“I want people – when they see my artwork or read my artist statement or have a conversation with me – I want them to, after that, think about these interactions they have with people, or these preconceived notions they have of people,” she says.

“I don’t really want to just be making pretty pictures. I want to make thought-provoking work, and work to start conversation – and not just conversation, but for people to want to do something about situations they’re passionate about or things that are going on in Cleveland.”





"By Force & By Choice" accomplished just that. When it debuted in April 2017 at the former ZAINA Gallery at 78th Street Studios, the show included a fundraiser for the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants. When the show moved to The Temple-Tifereth Israel in Beachwood that September, several congregants who saw it started volunteering at the Cleveland Metropolitan School District's Thomas Jefferson International Newcomers Academy, Ford says.

"It's nice to have a platform to use my art to be able to say something, and then see someone else be inspired by what I'm saying or be interested in what I'm saying and then take that further," she says.

Ford's work has been in high demand. It's been on view at places like Heights Arts in Cleveland Heights, Zygot Press in Cleveland and the Florence O'Donnell Wasmer Gallery at Ursuline College in Pepper Pike.

Further, she was recognized in 2017 with an Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award, and recently, "Insufficient Ink," a wall-sized collection of silkscreen images of a young African-American man that provided further commentary on media portrayals specific to print, was added to Dalad Group's permanent collection at Worthington Yards in downtown Cleveland.

Ford is now seeking to expand on her work, both technically and in terms of her subject matter. In a recent series of photographs, she experimented with how she posed her subjects and shifted her focus to hair culture. Those works were on view in January as part of a group show, "Beau•ty," at PopEye Gallery at 78th Street Studios.

"I'm interested in hair culture – the number of products that are advertised to us and how we just buy into this adver-



Previous page, top: Amber N. Ford in her Cleveland studio.
Previous page, bottom: "Snakes in the Grass" (2017). **Left:** "Braid Out" (2018), one of her photos that explore hair culture.
Above: "Sister Sister" (2017) from "By Force & By Choice." Artwork courtesy of the artist.

tising because someone says you have to have this but there's a million different companies that are all saying the same things. Now you have 10 shampoos, and it's like, why?" she says. "How can I explore that topic, whether it's through photographs, whether it's video or using the scanner as my camera? I'm trying to branch out a little bit and show people some different stuff."

Regarding the positive response her art has received, Ford says she's felt "overwhelmed, but in a good way."

"If you would've asked me four years ago, what would I be doing now and what would I be talking about, I would've never guessed this is what I'd be doing," she admits. "I feel like everything has been very unexpected, but it's been nice. People have been super-generous, whether it's been introducing me to people or giving me the opportunity to show in their spaces or buying work or letting me take their photograph." 📷



"The first time I became aware of Amber Ford was in a picture in a local magazine. What struck me the most was her quiet confidence and determination. She wasn't smiling and was not looking into the camera. She didn't appear to be concerned at all what you think of her or who she should be. ... Amber is already making iconic images. She has a brilliant way of capturing the beauty and resilience of the human spirit."

Anna Arnold, director, Florence O'Donnell Wasmer Gallery at Ursuline College | Photo by Rosaria Perna

ON VIEW

- Amber N. Ford will be in a show with Juliette Thimmig from **May 18 to June 15** at Cleveland West Art League at 78th Street Studios, 1305 W. 80th St., Suite 110, Cleveland. An opening reception will be held from 5 to 9 p.m. May 18.
- "Wonder: Alternative Processes and Photo-Based Prints," featuring work from Amber N. Ford, Tatana Kellner, Yana Mikho-Misho and Bellamy Printz, will be on view from **Oct. 19 to Nov. 21** at the Morgan Conservatory, 1754 E. 47th St., Cleveland. An opening reception will be held from 6 to 9 p.m. Oct. 19.



ANTHONY WARNICK

Years 35 • **Lives** Cleveland • **Creates** Cleveland • **Degrees** BFA in web and multimedia environments from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design; MFA in sculpture from the Cranbrook Academy of Art

The body of work Anthony Warnick has been building in recent years can be traced back to 1865, the year slavery in America was abolished. It's a clause in the middle of the 13th Amendment – “except as a punishment for crime” – that fuels his practice because he feels that set the course for today's disproportionate incarceration rate of African-American men.

“There's a history there that is, for me, the thing we need to be wrestling with as a country right now,” he says.

Warnick grapples with it – and wants to make view-

ers grapple with it – through his art. Specifically, his work scrutinizes for-profit prisons and the overlapping interests of government and the prison industry.

“All of the research and writing talk about how much worse it is in for-profit prisons, which essentially are trying to save as much money as possible and are extracting as much wealth out of those incarcerated as possible,” he says. “So, there are all of these small things being born out of this beast.”

This ongoing series of work was first shown in December 2016 at SPACES Gallery in Cleveland's Ohio City neighborhood and was most recently on view, with new pieces, in April as part of a Window to Sculpture Emerging Artist Series 2018 Exhibition at The Sculpture Center in Cleveland's University Circle neighborhood.

“Broadly in my work, I'm interested in social systems – places where we as a society have made systems that we use to organize ourselves or control things,” he says. “Typically, I'm looking for places where those systems do more harm than good – and how often we make a system as a society and then are crushed by it.”

Warnick's research-heavy creative process often includes purchasing things through Ohio Penal Industries, the state organization through which things manufactured in prison are sold. In the studio, he then embarks on determining how to best present the intellectual with the aesthetic so that it resonates with viewers.

“The thing art can do that very little else in our lives can is unsettle us to the point where we might start thinking about things,” he says.

“The works I've been making in this vein are unsettling and not the sort of things, hopefully, that you can walk away



from and say, ‘Oh yeah, I’m glad that exists.’ They’re immoral objects in that they are the product of me purchasing something through a system that exploits people – and I’m the first to admit that makes me complicit in that system.

“Hopefully, what that does is it produces objects that are sort of like, ‘Oh, why would someone do this? This is terrible.’ But then, in an ideal situation, with some reflection, (people) realize that many of us are the beneficiaries of this system.

“The sort of thing that makes the work unsettling should make us unsettled with the system,” he says.

Growing up, Warnick was more interested in public affairs than art. The Washington, D.C. native’s father, before becoming a pastor, worked in politics, and as he grew up and his family moved to Los Angeles and later Kansas City, Mo., Warnick’s interest in political machinations never waned.

“I was definitely interested more in politics and social issues, and then I found art in the time after high school but before going to college,” he says. “I sort of bummed around in coffee shops for a while and realized one of the places where you can have interesting, rigorous conversations that aren’t quite as discipline-based as college would be around the arts.”

As conceptual as his art can be, it was the physicality of making something with his hands that drew him to art. He pursued sculpture, then, in part because it allows him to engage in his areas of interest.

“I’m in sculpture because it’s an open and inviting space, and also, it’s a space where the public sphere and politics have always been intertwined,” he says. “From ancient token sculptures to equestrian sculptures in Europe, there’s always been some sort of understanding that what we make goes into and engages the public sphere.”

When he isn’t making art, Warnick, on two fronts, is helping shape the work of young artists in the area. For starters, he lectures on matters of sculpture and expanded media at the Cleveland Institute of Art.

Further, he and his partner, fellow artist Kelley O’Brien, oversee The Muted Horn, a project space that hosts solo exhibitions for early-career artists. The 700-square-foot gallery is in the basement of the couple’s home – one of several units in a renovated former seed factory – in Cleveland’s Detroit-Shoreway neighborhood.

“It gives a space that is more experimental and doesn’t have some of the same pressures as a commercial gallery or a large institution, where hopefully things can be more open and experimental,” he says. “Often, especially early in your career, just having places to show work and get people to talk about it is the hardest part.”



“Anthony Warnick, a sculptor and performance artist with a strong abhorrence of social injustices, is already making significant contributions to Cleveland’s arts community. Much of his past work paid homage to artists whom he admires, particularly Francis Alÿs, another man of deep conscience. With Anthony’s current concerns about the injustices of the

American incarceration system and the, in all forms but name, modern slave labor that the inmates provide, he has come fully into his own as an artist.”

Ann Albano, executive director, The Sculpture Center



Previous page, top: Anthony Warnick in his home studio in Cleveland. **Previous page, bottom:** “You May Choose” (2017). Prisoner-produced off-set prints from the Pickaway Correctional Institution in Orient, Ohio. **Above:** “Infinite Sleep” (2018). Prisoner-produced pillows, dimensions variable. **Below:** “The Pen” (2018). Neon, 12 x 15 inches. Artwork courtesy of the artist.





KAETLYN McCAFFERTY

Years 30 • **Lives** Lakewood • **Creates** Lakewood
Degrees BFA from the Cleveland Institute of Art, where she majored in drawing and minored in photography

It's difficult to decode Kaetlyn McCafferty's art, but that's by design. The subjects depicted are steeped in mythology, the multiple settings in which they're placed jumble generations and the pieces' cryptic titles throw viewers off the trail of discovery.

On those levels and others, her art intrigues. Her most recent works – on view in March in her solo show, “Gods and Fighting Men,” at PopEye Gallery at 78th Street Studios in Cleveland – engrossed viewers and had them seeking meaning.

“I never want to give away the answers,” McCafferty says. “I want people to have to work, and I also want them to know there isn't a right or wrong. I use references that are very mixed and things that look like they add up but don't.”

Take for instance “The Vorpall Blade,” a piece that drops the ancient statue Venus Callipyge (literally, “Venus of the beautiful buttocks”) on The Strip in mid-century Las Vegas but with a modern-day peach emoji covering her derriere. Colorful, multilayered, engaging and mysterious, it's representative of her larger body of work.

“The No. 1 question I get is, ‘What does it mean?’ But I suppose there isn't one single thing. I want them to sort of question the way they develop narrative and how they understand roles, archetype and character – and how do you sort of make sense out of an indeterminable or absurd situation?”

A clue to deciphering McCafferty's art can be found in her familial roots. She's third-generation Irish on her father's side, and that culture figures prominently in her work and titles. Mummerys – men cloaked in straw costumes who in Ireland would go door to door to perform plays, relying on just a few archetypal roles, and then demand money and leave – are in several of her pieces.

“Mummerys will barge into a situation and disrupt it, and that's what they're doing in the images as well,” she says. “It's masking



something, it's disrupting the understanding of something that would've been easier to access without it."

McCafferty also explores the notion of cyclical time, or the idea that history isn't necessarily in the past but rather is something with which societies are constantly re-engaging. Like "The Vorpall Blade," "The Spare Ribs of a Besom" combines the ancient ("Hercules Fighting the Centaur Nessos") with the mid-century ("Bambi," released in 1942) and the modern (a smartphone in Hercules' hand).

"These things are meant to be not so much anachronistic as they are a conglomeration of everything happening at once," she says. "They're not supposed to exist in a specific time or place. They're not even necessarily in the existing backgrounds (in the art). They're breaking out of them, they're standing in front of them, or they're half in them or half out."

It's worth noting that McCafferty's path to "Gods and Fighting Men" wasn't a straight line. After graduating from the Cleveland Institute of Art in 2012, she did a residency and internship but was saddled with student loan debt and living with her parents.

Sensing action needed to be taken, McCafferty followed in her father and grandfather's footsteps and entered the construction business as a pipe insulator. She held – and enjoyed – the job for three years before art again beckoned.

"Eventually, I left because it gnawed at me that there was this thing I'd devoted so much of my life to doing and I wasn't doing it," she says. "I had started making work again, and once that was all I could think about, I knew it was time to leave. I had to at least try to do something with my work and not get absorbed into the comfort of having a steady paycheck."

The transition back to making art is now complete, but it didn't come without challenges.

"It wasn't difficult to wake up in the morning and start doing things, but it was difficult to justify – and it was scary. I left something very steady and comforting for total uncertainty," she says. "It was hard to pick things up right where I had left off, which was my thesis work, and I'd lost touch with the community, too. So, it really did feel like walking around in the dark for a little while."

With her first solo show under her belt, she's looking forward to where her art goes next.

"I have some sketches and some photographic things in mind, but I won't know until I start making work – kind of trial and error to see what leads where," she says. "A good friend of mine and I are constantly saying 'work fixes work,' and it determines itself." 🍷



"One of our goals as a gallery is to host a solo show every year of an emerging artist with a stellar practice and body of work. So, I began to ask around – I talked to local artists, curators and even professors to learn whether there was an artist who had strong work but who hasn't been showing a ton around Cleveland.

We wanted someone fresh, a new artist

who could generate some energy in our space, and Kaetlyn McCafferty's name kept coming up. Once I looked at her website, I knew she was a perfect fit for our gallery. Her detailed archetype figures are so strong and powerful. I was shocked that I hadn't seen the work in the past."

Omid Tavakoli, owner and director, PopEye Gallery

Photo by Keliy Anderson-Staley



Previous page, top: Kaetlyn McCafferty in her Lakewood home studio. **Previous page, bottom:** "Bitumen" (2017). Watercolor, 24 x 34 inches. **Above:** "The Vorpall Blade" (2017). Watercolor and gouache, 34 x 30 inches. **Below:** "The Spare Ribs of a Besom" (2017). Watercolor and gouache, 24 x 30 inches. Artwork courtesy of the artist.





AJA JOI GRANT

Years 22 • **Lives** Garfield Heights • **Creates** Cleveland
Degrees Bachelor's in psychology, minor in studio art from Cleveland State University

To enter the world of an Aja Joi Grant composition is to engage in the mystical and journey into the mind. The imagery in her photographs – which frequently involves placing humans against the backdrop of nature – is subtle but powerful, and it reverberates.

“I’ve always loved nature photography, but it’s hard for me to get that impact with just landscapes. So, I’ll try to get really good landscapes and really good portraits and see what fits together,” she says, explaining a process she’s experimented with since high school but honed only recently, as a student at Cleveland State University.

“I might have a photograph of a person and I’ll have a photograph of a river, and I’ll blend them together to show how seamless it can be,” she says. “They’re obviously two different things, but they also can vibrate on the same frequency.”

“Perception is usually, like, you see one thing and you label it and you see another thing and you label it. If you can bring them

together, then it doesn’t necessarily have a label – but you can see how they’re unified.”

That psychological component to her work isn’t accidental. Grant minored in studio art at CSU but majored in psychology, and the inner workings of the mind factor largely in her work.

“I like to make (art) really layered with my intentions,” she says. “Even in college, when we would have critiques and I would tell everyone, they’d be like, ‘Wow, that’s really deep’ because I’d go on for five minutes, ‘I was trying to do this, trying to show this, and it really represents this.’”

She doesn’t necessarily seek viewers’ understanding. In fact, in some ways, it’s just the opposite. She hopes they let go of understanding on their way to acceptance – an approach that, as it has for her, can apply to matters other than art.

“That letting go of understanding was really important to me because it helps you not get stuck on things,” she says of a lesson she learned both inside and outside the classroom. “I don’t understand why they did that’ or ‘I don’t get why somebody would say something like that.’ You don’t have to (understand why others do what they do). It’s their own process for something they’re going through.”

Balancing the psychological in Grant’s work is the Kemeti, which relates to ancient Egyptian mythology and deities.

“They had a strong connection to nature and astrology, and the natural type of rhythm that would go on, and that’s my main goal, personally, is to not get too swayed by outside forces,” she says. “My art helps keep me grounded, and that’s why I like to go back to that source for inspiration.”

She specifically credits her ruling deity, Het Heru, for the presence of water in so many of her works. Her creative process also involves a good deal of research before she composes her works.





"I really look into the elements I want to incorporate," she says. "Like, if I want to incorporate astrology or deities or other spirituality, or tarot or anything, I'll research those types of things to see what elements I can bring into a photograph to resonate with what I have in my head, like colors or shapes or symbols I can use."

Her work was most recently on view in March at the group show "Spitball" at Cleveland Print Room. The exhibition highlighted young, up-and-coming photographers – a characterization that adeptly describes Grant.

In addition to showing her work at Cleveland Print Room, Grant serves as a teaching assistant there, working to better the photography of fourth- to eighth-graders from Cleveland Metro-

Previous page, top: Aja Joi Grant outside and down the street from her Cleveland studio in the Waterloo Arts District.

Previous page, bottom: "Connexion," an image that highlights the parallels of the element of water in a personal experience.

Above: "Energy," an image that highlights the element of earth. Earth corresponds with our physical bodies, and the individual is shown with a very engaged posture, showing a sense of understanding and fully utilizing his physical presence.

Left: "Rise." Artwork courtesy of the artist.



"Aja's work really resonates with me. Her innovative use of space and implied emotional elements, as well as her integration of people with natural elements, speaks to her ongoing dialogue and challenges our place in the natural order."

**Shari Wilkins, executive director,
Cleveland Print Room**

politan School District's Campus International School.

"I love teaching. Ever since I decided to major in psychology, I've tried to work more with kids by teaching and tutoring. Being able to teach art to kids is probably the best part," she says. "I can kind of see myself in them because I remember being young and being introduced to photography."

She enjoys seeing students experiment and ask questions, and she's careful to provide answers open-ended enough to let them form their own ideas. The latter attitude stems from when she was a younger artist made to feel as if she had to "mold her work a certain way to fit into the art world." All in all, she finds fostering her students' creativity rewarding.

"I get to share my experience with them – they've seen my photos up at the Print Room," she says. "It's interesting to see how they digest art they see and also still hold their own ideas and see how they bring them forward as well." 📷



Years 24 • **Lives** Cleveland & Canton • **Creates** Cleveland • **Degrees** BFA in painting from Cleveland Institute of Art

Justin C. Woody exudes creativity. He's taken his talents from blank canvases to intricate looms to center stage, and at each stop, he impresses viewers and audience members alike.

The Canton native's early creative influences were varied, too, but bound by a common thread: family. His mother is a hairstylist and his father a barber, and their beauty-industry artistry left an impression on Woody. His grandparents also provide artistic influence.

"My grandpa upholsters couches and my grandma makes dolls. It wouldn't do well in the art world, but to me, there's something special about it as far as what it has to do with my

craft now. A lot of the things that are in my work, I get from them."

In some ways, quite literally. Costume jewelry his grandmother uses for her dolls or to embellish eyeglass cases makes its way into Woody's work, as does discarded hair from his parents' professions.

These are evident in Woody's most recent works, a series of tapestries that debuted in November 2017 at "NAPS," a show with Marcus Brathwaite at Praxis Fiber Workshop in Cleveland's Waterloo Arts District, where he'd just completed a six-month artist-in-residence program. Some of those pieces also were on view in the group show "Beau•ty" at PopEye Gallery at 78th Street Studios in Cleveland.

The large-scale pieces employ colors and patterns that grab one's attention from across the room, but it's upon closer inspection that the tapestries reveal themselves. Woody refers to some of his works as indexical collages; the materials – not just what they are but where they come from – have weight to them, and he hopes viewers consider the context.

"I really want people to recognize the material I use," he says. "People need to recognize the material and recognize where it comes from, and the people who use those materials, and how you relate to those people, and how those people relate to you. I want them to have this exchange of culture and knowledge.

"Hair is probably one of the No. 1 identifiers to black culture, and next to that is music, dance, food – so many things you can kind of pick up, physically, that speak to that – and I wanted black culture to have space in this art world that's just kind of white-walled sometimes," he says. "I didn't want to make a painting because it would blend in too much."





Previous page, top: Justin C. Woody at Praxis Fiber Workshop in Cleveland. **Previous page, bottom:** "Nappy Shit" (detail). **Above:** "Nappy Shit," 6 x 10 foot weaving or area rug (hair extensions, dreads, jewelry, blunts wraps, beads, hair barrettes). **Below:** Mask "My Lip Gloss is Poppin'," Archival Pigment Print. Printed on metallic paper. Artwork courtesy of the artist.



Woody's BFA from the Cleveland Institute of Art is in painting, but even during his schooling, his interests began to shift. He found other media allowed him to produce work more quickly and on a larger scale than painting, and they allowed him to communicate things he felt he couldn't in painting.

In fact, his BFA work consisted not of paintings but of a series of scans in which he used items he collected to compose abstract versions of faces akin to ceremonial masks from traditional African culture.


"I really liked the finished product; I felt the same about it as I did my finished paintings, or better because I knew the material I was using better than anyone else," he says. "I knew about hair better than anyone else, I knew about the jewelry I was collecting. I kind of got fascinated with embellishment of things that were identifiers to black culture, specifically."

Then there's acting – an interest he's pursued just as long as art. He's performed several times at the Players Guild Theatre in Canton, where he's taken on roles such as Gator in "Memphis," Lumière in "Beauty and the Beast" and Snoopy in "You're a Good Man Charlie Brown." This spring, he'll play the lead role of Youth in the musical "Passing Strange" at Karamu House in Cleveland.

"That's my biggest role yet," he says. "And this is my first time working at Karamu. They have a huge reputation, so I'm very excited to work there."

This summer, he'll embark on a two-year conservatory program at American Musical and Dramatic Academy in New York City. He'll be studying musical theater and hopes the second year of the program will send him to Los Angeles.

For Woody, neither practice takes away from the other, and transitioning between them is "seamless."

"I think that's why I'm deciding to go back to school for theater, because I put it on the back burner, professionally, for such a long time in pursuing my art career," he says, "but now I can do them both." 



"Justin Woody graduated from CIA with a degree in painting, though he is an artist whose practice incorporates many mediums, including performance, printmaking, weaving and photographic scans. His recent show at Praxis Fiber Workshop, 'NAPS' with artist Marcus Braithwaite, featured a selection of weavings produced during his six-month residency. Woody draws a connection between the process of weaving – combining through, stopping and restarting – to doing hair and its relationship to black identity. He is an artist to watch because he takes chances and isn't afraid to experiment with different mediums in order to address his subject. Performance is a large part of his practice, which he pulls off with ease, and it's readable even in his weavings. Not an easy thing to do, but he accomplishes it with charismatic presence and heart."

Nikki Woods, director, Reinberger Gallery at Cleveland Institute of Art

ON VIEW

See Justin C. Woody play the lead role of Youth in the musical "Passing Strange," which will be on stage from **May 10 to June 3** at Karamu House, 2355 E. 89th St., Cleveland.



Years 24 • **Lives** Akron • **Creates** Akron • **Degrees** BFA in painting and drawing, The University of Akron's Myers School of Art

For the past several years, Melissa Markwald's artwork has turned heads – literally and figuratively. She primarily creates portraits, and her large-scale oil paintings have been on view



at places like Massillon Museum's Studio M, the Malone Art Gallery at Malone University in Canton and The BOX Gallery in downtown Akron's Summit Artspace.

Her first major series, 2014's "Anonymous," dealt with transforming the unknown into the known.

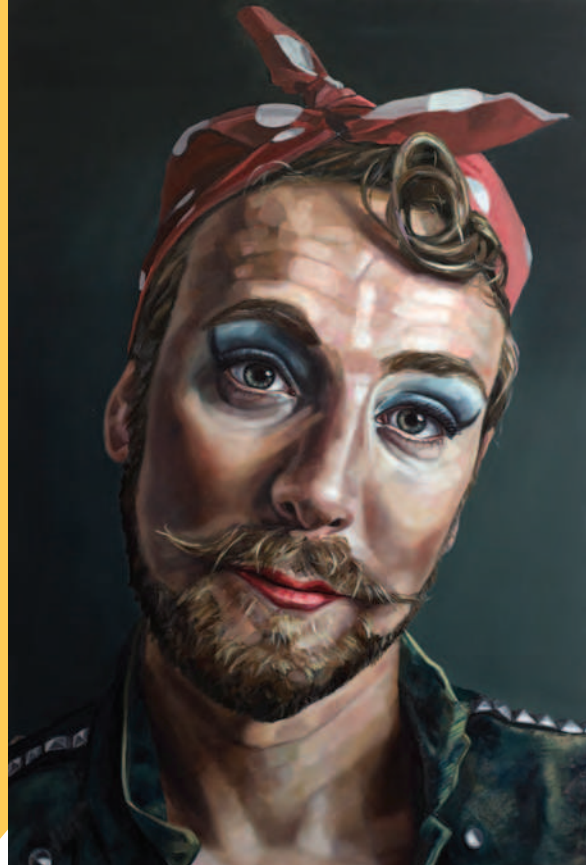
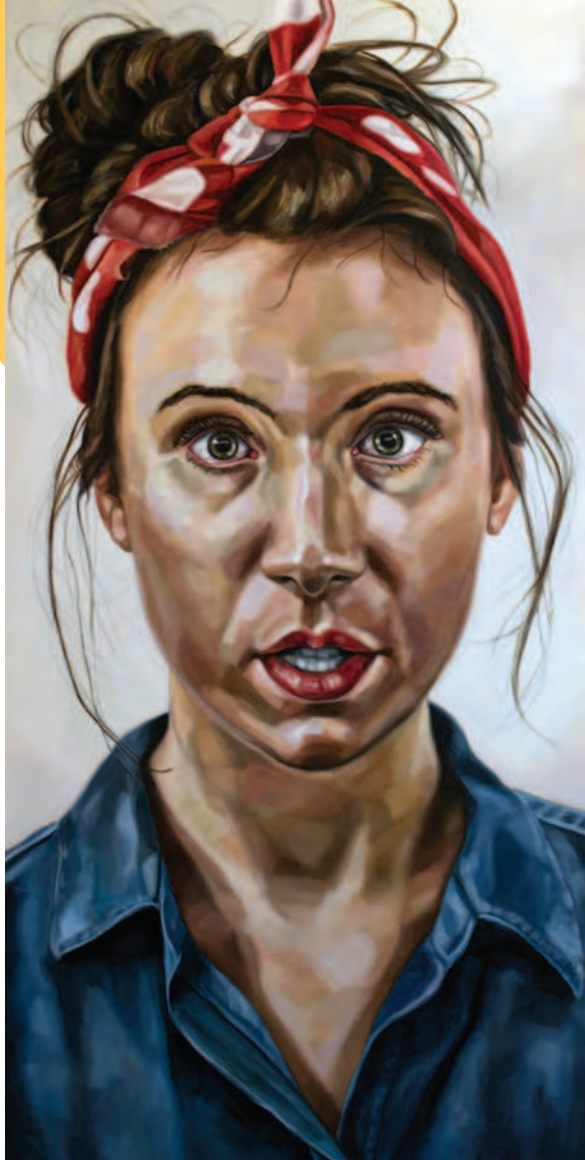
"I was interested in taking normal people and using the medium to make them more important, make them iconic in some way," she says. "I was taking people no one knew, and people would look at the paintings and say, 'Oh, that kind of looks like Molly Ringwald.' There was this expectation that people thought they were supposed to know who the person was, but it was nobody."

She took a similar approach with her 2016-17 series "Rosie," but for those works, she painted friends instead of strangers. All of her subjects were dressed like Rosie the Riveter, the World War II icon that represented women joining the workforce.

While the mid-20th century Rosie was a mass-produced wartime call to action, Markwald's Rosies are individualized and eminently more relatable to 21st century viewers. Her subjects communicate a wide range of emotions, and together, the paintings offer commentary on themes such as feminism, gender identity and representations of strength.

"It was a refreshing series for me because there was a lot of collaboration between me and the subjects," she says. "I was like, 'What do you want your painting to look like? What take do you want to have on it?' Letting the subjects have that decision was really interesting."

The arts community has taken notice. Markwald's work has repeatedly placed at juried exhibitions in the region, and last year, she earned a scholarship to participate in the summer undergraduate residency program at the New York Academy of Art.



Previous page, top: Melissa Markwald in her Akron studio.
Previous page, bottom: "Rya" oil on canvas, 90 x 72 inches.
Left: "Margaret as Rosie" oil on canvas 33 x 66 inches.
Above: "Jason as Rosie," oil on panel, 44 x 30 inches.
 Artwork courtesy of the artist.

"It opened my eyes. I got to meet so many people and learned so much there about technical skill," she says of her New York experience. "I learned that everyone finds their own way of doing what they want. There's no one way to be an artist, there's no one path. Everyone gets what they want out of it."

Markwald didn't take interest in art until late in high school, but that was enough for her to explore it further while at The University of Akron. She was drawn to the process of making art more than the finished products she created, and she landed on using oil paints instead of acrylics for similar reasons – they force her to stop, let the paint dry and think about her work.

In addition to her schooling, she credits her time working at the Akron Art Museum as a "major influence" on her decision to pursue art.

"I was a security guard there for six years, and talking to the public about the artwork really opened my eyes to all the different purposes art can serve to different people," she says. "I was always amazed. People would come in and they'd say something about a

painting I'd seen a thousand times and (then) I'd have to look at it a completely different way."

What's her favorite painting at the museum? "Opened Box" by Philip Guston.

"He used to go to his studio late at night and paint until he did something that made him uncomfortable, and then he'd leave," she explains. "Every time I look at that painting, I always try to look at his brushstrokes. I wonder at which moment he ended. I wonder what the last stroke was."

These days, Markwald still discusses art with patrons – but it's now her artwork that's the topic of conversation.

"I think most people, when they see my artwork, they expect they should know what it's about or know who the person is, but I also get a lot of people who question why I'm doing it," she says. "To see them perplexed by it, I always find that really interesting."

Markwald adds people assume that because she makes realistic images, there's no concept behind them. One person in particular, she recalls, questioned one of her straightforward, realistic paintings.

"He was like, 'that's a really big photograph.' 'Well, it's not, actually.' I ended up talking to him about it, and he was like, 'Why isn't it just a photo?' We had a long conversation, and then he left. He came back for another opening and was all fired up, and he said, 'I get it now!'"



"As a student, Melissa pushed herself to make more work and show it at every opportunity – she had obvious ambition and guts. It's also been exciting to see her post-baccalaureate work grow as she has continued to push her artistic practice by adding varying degrees of abstraction and scale shifts to her portraits. Some of her recent work has begun to address questions of empowerment and gender norms as well. It is especially exciting to watch young artists as they find their voice."

Arnold Tunstall, director, University Galleries at The University of Akron Myers School of Art