

# art & culture

OF PALM BEACH COUNTY  
Fall 2020



DIVERSITY IN THE ARTS:  
A RICH TAPESTRY OF  
CREATIVES

INNOVATION AMID  
COVID-19

ARTISAN GIFT GUIDE

EDUARDO MENDIETA

# THE ARTIST WITHIN

Pulling from their own experiences, local creatives reflect on how heritage, race, and otherness have impacted their work

BY MICHELE MEYER



## CYNTHIA SIMMONS

During a trip to Arizona in 2014, Cynthia Simmons became mesmerized with Native American art. She was moved by the way in which they expressed their heritage through their craft, especially with jewelry. Soon, she felt compelled to do the same and began making pieces that “pay homage to my people,” she says.

The former social services worker had a new mission—and business. With her made-to-order beaded jewelry, Simmons seeks “to heal, uplift, and inspire.” And her West African heritage is a huge influence on her aesthetic. Although her parents were born in Georgia, DNA test results revealed that they’re both 95 percent or more West African.

Simmons describes her jewelry as wearable art that incorporates items such as healing stones, cowrie shells, silver, copper, and Caribbean and African trade beads, many that she and her friends have collected on trips around the globe. Some feature Adinkra symbols, which originated with the Asante people of Ghana and carry cultural and proverbial significance.

The name of her line, Belle’s Nefertiti Collection, came to her as she was gazing upon herself while wearing her first creation. She thought of Nefertiti and later learned that the name means “a beautiful woman has come.” As for Belle, it’s both her mother and daughter’s middle name.

Considering the peace she’s found through this practice, Simmons began hosting “Sacred Beading” workshops at The Lord’s Place as solace for those who’ve lost loved ones to gun violence. In 2016, she expanded to head wraps, belts, and skirts made of Ankara cloth. Face masks are a recent—and best-selling—addition to Belle’s Tribal Fusion Collection.

“Customers tell me they’re proud to wear African prints to show solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement,” Simmons says. While her art has evolved, “the theme hasn’t changed. My look is rooted in Africa.”



JERRY RABINOWITZ

## TODD LIM

Todd Lim's introduction to prejudice was brutal. The Asian-American visual artist grew up in Greenwich, Connecticut, and says he was ostracized, bullied, and pelted with slurs—even trash.

"I always was trying to fit in, find an identity, and express myself since I wasn't able to express myself verbally," he says. "My parents said to ignore the bullies. I felt misunderstood and silenced."

Lim found his calling while working at a supermarket, where he volunteered to paint signs for the store. Finally, he was accepted—at the prestigious School of Visual Arts in New York City, no less.

His prophetic artwork since addresses racism and subverts iconic images associated with American culture and consumerism. A decade before Uncle Ben and Aunt Jemima rethought their logos, he highlighted their shortcomings in his food package series. His 2016 oil painting of wingtip shoes looks like an illustration from a mid-century clothing catalogue but takes on new meaning thanks to the incorporated text: "Black Shoes Matter."

Lim's sculptural *Black Male* piece is a work in progress. In 1989, he constructed a black mailbox and began covering it with the names, birthdates, and death dates of slain African Americans. Three of the most recent chalk-scrawled additions are for Ahmaud Arbery,

Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd.

Another revealing work, *Ticket to Recovery*, was inspired by the "admit one" tickets issued at the methadone clinics he attended during a three-decade-long battle against addiction. "After I lost the ability to think or paint, I surrendered," Lim recalls. Following a 21-day detox in Miami, he went to rehab in Delray Beach and then lived in a halfway house for six months. He's been drug-free since 2009.

He started anew in West Palm Beach and, despite anti-Asian coronavirus epithets reopening wounds, he's hopeful. "We're at a turning point," he says. "The curtains have fallen. Through admitting racism, we can become more inclusive—and begin to heal our society and possibly our world."



## EMMANUELLA DORCELY

Choreographer Emmanuella Dorcely doesn't dance around her traumatic early years: Her family belonged to a cult, where she experienced sexual trauma from ages 6 to 14, unbeknownst to her parents.

Her salvation was dance. "I've lived and breathed it since I was 6," she says. "It was how I expressed myself."

Her Haitian immigrant parents—a cook and a housecleaner caring for the elderly—couldn't afford to send their three daughters to extracurricular activities. Instead, Dorcely would stare through dance studio windows to memorize movements she'd then practice until 5 a.m.

Her first official class, at age 15 in her hometown of Boynton Beach, set her fate. After graduation she moved to Orlando, where she supported herself by teaching hip-hop dance and set her sights on entering Valencia College's dance program. It took three years. "I wasn't their visual norm: I

was the only Black, and I was bald," she says.

Along the way, an instructor helped her realize that she had learning disabilities—the reason she took three times longer to complete her studies. "What I had was passion and drive."

She now owns a dance company, Nemma Productions, and says that she's grateful for her struggles. "I would not be the artist I am without them. Sometimes we must be in the dark to find the light. I use heartbreak to create."

Her approach to choreography is also unconventional. She works in silence to allow her emotions to determine movements. Only then does she add music. "I'm inspired by pain, love, sadness, and passion," she says. "I want to create off my emotions, not the composer's."

As a performer, choreographer, and instructor, "there are jobs I don't get because of my skin color or age," she notes. "But it doesn't define or stop me." She urges art supporters to open themselves to new perspectives. "To change the world, we must start with ourselves. That is how we evolve."



ETHAN DANGERWING

THOMAS YI

## ALEJANDRA ABAD

Talk about culture shock. “I had to start from zero,” says Alejandra Abad, whose family moved to Fort Lauderdale from Caracas, Venezuela, in 1993 when she was 9. At the time, she knew no English. “I’d been an excellent student, but I had no idea what people were saying. It was traumatic.”

Abad’s new teacher recognized her potential and placed her in a bilingual gifted program. Yet, she felt “othered,” and this feeling inspired her to become an artist promoting social change. “It’s not okay to pretend some humans are better than others. Inside, we’re the same. We’re all migrants at heart with unique, beautiful stories.”

In her art, she uses animation and audience participation to blend reality and magic, the past and the present. Her approach is nontraditional, for sure, but that’s what’s needed. “If we continue to have art that looks and feels the same, we’re not doing our jobs as cultural innovators.”

Abad works with museums and cities to give children and families free workshops and activities that transcend language and place, she says. As a multimedia artist, she often creates immersive pieces that speak to some of today’s most pressing issues. Her *Parkland* installation, for example, was a commentary on gun violence and honored those killed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on February 14, 2018.

Having studied architecture at Florida Atlantic University and earned her BFA in film, video, animation, and new media at the School at the Art Institute of Chicago, she’s currently pursuing a master’s in interdisciplinary media at the University of Colorado Boulder. She received a summer fellowship from the university to conduct research on the Venezuelan diaspora, and her MFA thesis will be a nonlinear animation exploring the mythology behind the Venezuelan exodus. “Leaving was the best decision for our family. The corruption only got worse.”

But she’s found her home in Florida—and she can’t wait to return.



JERRY RABINOWITZ

## LAWRENCE JEAN-LOUIS

A longtime jewelry lover, Lawrence Jean-Louis picked up beads and fishing line eight years ago—and was hooked. “At first it was something to do,” she says. “But I found it very relaxing and meditative.”

Jean-Louis promptly checked out every book on bead weaving she could find at West Palm Beach’s Mandel Public Library. While her passion took flight here, she credits her attention to detail to the “amazing” artisans in her homeland of Haiti. “They don’t slap things together,” says Jean-Louis, who is also an amateur photographer and digital marketing professional.

She describes her jewelry aesthetic as “atypical,” employing flat Japanese glass delica beads and monofilament fishing line to create asymmetrical, geometry-inspired earrings and necklaces. While pieces often draw from African history, her brand’s name, BeYOUteous, says it all. “The underlying message is that it’s okay to just be you—every perfectly imperfect inch of you.”

Such acceptance would’ve helped her in October 1991, when her family moved to Florida to escape the political violence and economic issues that were pervasive in Haiti at the time. Instead, the 8-year-old was verbally attacked. To her, the worst references were to the boats on which some refugees to the United States arrived.

Times change, and she now feels accepted in an area she’s grown to love. When not beading, she writes poetry and takes photos, often of churches because of their architectural shapes and their stories. Jean-Louis is also the author of *Drunken Philosophy* and *Poop! Random Words, Musings, and Insights*, and will release a new book, *Color Your World*, this November. As she notes, from random insights to the narratives behind photographs, we all have a history worth hearing. “If you like an artist, see if they have an online presence and develop a conversation. Your appreciation of their work will deepen.”

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## KEITH “SODA POP” SQUIRE

Musician Keith “Soda Pop” Squire’s first taste of performing came early, when his parents formed the rap group Kidz 4 Christ featuring then 5-year-old Keith. He and his sister later toured across the South for six years as Pah Z Kids, including a stop at Six Flags Over Georgia where they rapped for an audience of 2,000.

Eventually, the West Palm Beach native stepped away from performing, but a five-year stint in the U.S. Navy made him change his tune. As he fell “into a military schedule,” he realized he missed having the free time to pursue music. He dedicated himself to the craft anew at age 28.

“Music moves and inspires me,” says the singer/guitar player. “I love how the right words and melody can take someone from a low to a high.”

His “Soda Pop” nickname bubbled up from childhood, when Michigan-

and Florida-based relatives argued about whether soft drinks should be called soda or pop. “It reminds me to keep my mind open to look for similarities, not differences,” notes Squire.

He is also open to all forms of music—from soul to reggae—united by stories about relationships and messages of peace. Though others may judge him by his skin, he says, “I don’t think about myself as a person of color. Everybody is a color and represents a story. That’s the power and beauty of music. It’s above labels.”

Still, he wishes Palm Beach County patrons sought out and financially supported diverse artists. Now 36 and a father of six, he is rooted in the community and performs regularly, busting out original songs and tribute sets to greats like Bob Marley. “Anything that will bring us to a higher level of unity is better,” he adds. “When we work together there’s no limit to what we can do.”



## YVETTE NORWOOD-TIGER

“One of the beauties about music is color lines disappear,” says vocalist Yvette Norwood-Tiger. “It’s about the art.”

While she dabbles in many styles, jazz is what lifts her spirit the most. Of her tributes to legends Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Cole Porter, George Gershwin, and Duke Ellington, she says, “It’s not as popular as some genres, but I want to keep it alive.”

If anything, that race against time—not racism—spurs her as a performer. She appears locally as well as internationally, from London’s Royal Albert Hall to the Muizenberg Jazz Festival in Cape Town, South Africa. She also notes that the South Florida audience and talent pool runs deep. “Musicians from all over the world move here.”

As a producer of shows, she says she faces discrimination, especially with the Palm Beach International Jazz Festival, which she started here three years ago. (The 2021 festival is scheduled to take place January 16 at the Kravis Center’s Rinker Playhouse.) “People in our area are not familiar with seeing a woman, as well as an African American, running a festival. I get comments, and I believe it’s harder for me to get funding.”

Originally from Detroit, she grew up surrounded by music. Her parents played instruments at their church, and all five of her older sisters sang in the choir—but Norwood-Tiger notes that she was too timid to join in. “I was so shy, I didn’t tell even my parents I loved singing.”

She worked as a civilian mechanical engineering technician for the Department of Defense before moving to Long Branch, New Jersey, in 2000 to be with Stephen Tiger, now her husband. They relocated to Florida 10 years ago. She considered singing a hobby until she was diagnosed with a brain tumor in 2012. Surgery and radiation followed, and “I realized how precious life is,” she says.

Emboldened by her career, she welcomes students to perform alongside her. “I celebrate the past and I embrace the future with my music.”



JACEKA GANCARZ

## EDUARDO MENDIETA

What began as teen mischief led to a career for muralist Eduardo Mendieta. “We were having fun doing graffiti,” Mendieta says of his earliest creative outlet.

His Ecuadorian parents taught him to work hard in their Spanish-speaking neighborhoods of Union City, New Jersey. In 1991, when Mendieta was 19, they relocated to West Palm Beach, which was significantly less urban than what he was used to. He describes the move as jarring, but he found acceptance in the arts community.

He spent years working in the art world, on projects big and small, private and public, and from faux-finished furnishings to computer graphics. Then in 2009, “I got the bug to paint big, big-time.”

He “pestered” the owner of Respectable Street Café to let him paint a mural on an exposed 100-foot-by-20-foot wall. The West Palm Beach Downtown Development Authority and local schools noticed. Soon, he

was painting the town.

In 2012, he was selected as one of 32 artists nationally to create work for Indianapolis’ “46 for XLVI,” a murals program for Super Bowl XLVI. A 2016 issue of *Architectural Digest* tagged his interior mural for real estate developer Jorge Perez. Signing his initials with the copyright symbol led to people calling him “Emo,” a moniker he notes was accidental. Friends and family know him as Ed or Eddie.

Now the father of two daughters (who starred in his street art when they were small) likes to think his work is “art for the people.” His palette is hot-hued, like his parents’ Guatemalan rugs, and the people he features often have darker complexions. “Being Latino is a big part of my life,” he says. “You paint what’s around you.”

His themes are universal: dreams and desires, life and hope. One hope is that his work with students leads them to pursue the arts—and that they’ll have the same opportunities he did. “To get greater diversity in the arts, love of art should drive the market, not money.” ❖

