

The Lives of Local Artists

The artist community in Northwest Arkansas is filled with incredible talent, passion and creativity. We are host to artists of all levels of fame – from internationally known artists who have created for a lifetime to individuals who only recently have allowed themselves the time to explore their artistic talent, and all scenarios in between. In this issue, we share a quick peek inside the lives and minds of five local artists with very different life experiences. We feature their individual creative mediums and how Northwest Arkansas contributes to their art. Read on to be inspired!

Artist: Aaron Bleidt



As a Fayetteville resident of 20 years, Aaron Bleidt has conquered leadership roles in media, marketing, publishing, design – and now digital art. Founder of *CitiScapes Magazine*, Bleidt served as its executive editor from 2000 to 2010. Following his time at the publication, in 2011 he went on to establish a marketing and design firm, Vantage Point Communications. This past February, VPC merged forces with Northwest Arkansas-based creative firm DOXA, with Aaron serving as principal and chief marketing and communications officer of the newly blended agency DOXA / VANTAGE.

In his free time, outside of creating and managing his company, Bleidt says he enjoys his married life, two dogs, art collection and exploring the great Northwest Arkansas outdoors.

What inspired you to try making art?

I've tended to always have some sort of a creative outlet to play with on my off hours, but until recently it was mainly in the form of creative writing and photography. But I think the desire to create visual art has been burning within for a while.



You Are Here

We've been fortunate to count a number of artists as close personal friends, so I've been exposed to the behind-the-scenes lives and studio spaces of artists for a while now.

I've also had the pleasure of serving on the boards of a few different arts organizations. And professionally, my marketing and design firm has grown to include many arts-related clients

– we’re the agency of record for some of the region’s largest arts producers and presenters, including Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, the Momentary, SoNA and Walton Arts Center. So, I guess you could say that for the past few years in particular I’ve been eating, drinking and basically breathing art. So, one day, I really just decided to give painting and drawing a try. And, as with most things, I went full tilt, declaring that we’d turn our guest bedroom into a dedicated art studio!

What was the first piece you made?

I distinctly remember drawing a black-and-white stippled bird and a bold, colorful Calder-esque fish in elementary school, and later making a piece of intricate stained glass in the shape of a conch shell in junior high. But after those singular pieces from childhood, it would literally be decades until my next truly deliberate artwork took form. Fast-forward to Christmas Day 2018. It was a rocket that I drew, poised for takeoff, in a palette of red and yellow and black and blue, with “5...4...3...2...” written above. “The Countdown,” I called it. A harbinger of things to come perhaps, but little did I know at the time that in the year to follow I’d become rather obsessed and complete more than 175 works – of varying complexities, of course, some very simple, others considerably more involved.

What have you learned about yourself by making art?

Above all else, I have learned the importance of simply trying and giving things a shot, however outlandish it may seem. If you’re passionate about something, it’s worth it to try. I never, ever thought that I would be doing this, that the word “artist” would be used to describe me, at least not in this way, as an actual visual artist creating my own work, much less showing and selling it. I have always had a pretty wild and vivid imagination, and I have been very happy to discover that it is becoming even more so with time.

Visit www.instagram.com/artfuloutsider/ to see more of Aaron’s creations and to contact him about purchasing a print.

Artist: Kellie Lehr



Kellie Lehr could be considered an artist of the world, having lived and created all around the globe. Born in Fort Smith and raised around the state, Lehr graduated from the University of Arkansas with a degree in international business. From Fayetteville she moved to Moscow, Russia, then on to the outskirts of Los Angeles, and eventually back to Fayetteville.

As a painter, Lehr says she enjoys being outside in nature and the visual sensations of moving around in the world, which is so vividly depicted in her works.

Has your knowledge in international economics made an impact on your artistry?

Everything goes into the work – the experiences I’ve had, places I’ve traveled to, people I’ve met, learning new languages, the occasional “aha”

moment. I’m looking for new ones always. My previous work with software manufacturers has impacted my work in the way I visualize networks, systems and understanding the way we connect. I like making the unseen seen and combining what I imagine with what I see.

What is going through your mind when you paint such whimsical scenes?

I’m interested in creating sensations of movement and visual rhythm that feel caught in states of either becoming or dissolving – moments of transformation and change. Psychology, behavioral patterns, impacts of technology of how we interact and connect, the tension of holding two simultaneous and contradictory beliefs or perceptions – these are some of the things I wrestle with.

Is there ever a starting point or do you let the painting become what it may?

Yes, there is a starting point. I usually start with specific ideas, references and rules in the beginning, but then often drop them to prioritize what I sense the painting wants or needs by the end. I often use elements from the natural landscape near my house as both a grounding and as a jumping-off point. I work on paintings usually for several months, so ideas often get layered in on top of my original plan; I value intuition as part of the process. I find that the removal of paint is just as necessary as the building up of color and mark.



Raveling, oil and acrylic on canvas

What are some of your favorite pieces?

Embedded Possibilities, Yes, Shinrin Yoku, Magic Soup Blanket and Here Be Dragons. I'm always looking to be surprised and bump into something I don't immediately recognize. When my work starts to shift, I find new energy. I can't create the same piece twice. I'm restless and always searching, looking for something I can't quite put my finger on, just slightly out of reach.

Visit kellielehr.com or find her on Instagram at [@kellielehr](https://www.instagram.com/kellielehr) to see her favorite pieces and to contact Kellie about purchasing one.

Artist:
Shabana Kauser



Shabana Kauser, the daughter of Pakistani immigrants, has spent her artistic career focusing on the power of women and her cultural, social and economic transition since childhood. Growing up and attending college in England, in 2008 she moved to Fayetteville and discovered her love of creating.

Featured within her realistic oil paintings is ornate jewelry and the Dupatta, the traditional scarf worn in South Asian countries. Kauser says this signifies not only her personal experience, but is a call to past, present and future generations of immigrants.

When and where did you discover your passion for artistry?

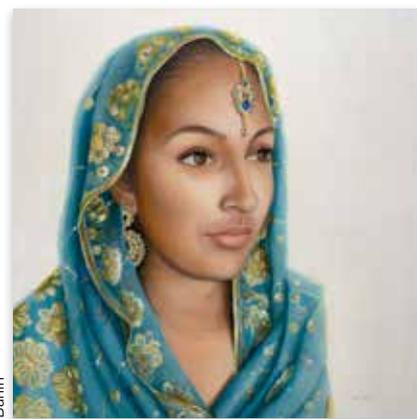
I discovered my passion for creating when we moved from London, United Kingdom, to Fayetteville. My husband was offered a work opportunity in Northwest Arkansas over 11 years ago. We left the bright lights of London and our careers in the corporate world, then made the move. Due to visa restrictions I was unable to work for several years in the United States. While feeling restricted and having to rebuild a new life, I found my passion for creating.

How would you say your art is influenced by your background?

My art is directly influenced by my background and our move to the U.S. The immigration experience involves uncertainty, changes and adaptation. Not only have I talked about my experience through my work, but it also made me think about other immigrants before me, my parents who moved from Pakistan to the U.K. in the 1970s. They moved to a land, culture and language that was completely new to them. I also thought about women in my generation and beyond. Each of my portraits has been inspired by one of these women.

What does it mean for Pakistani women in America to express themselves through art?

Being a Pakistani woman in America, where I can express myself through



Bahin

my art, has been very powerful. Each one of the stories behind my work has a universal message of strength, courage, determination, uncertainty, belonging and acceptance. That resonates with people regardless of their gender or background. The community has really amazed me with their interest in my culture work. America is a nation of immigrants, and it is important for people to connect with the raw immigrant experience and remember the journey of their family and ancestors.

I also think it's crucial for Pakistani women artists to exist. It's especially important that young South Asian girls see someone with the same skin color as them in the art world. They need to realize at an early age that they can be future artists, there is a place for them. A visual representation of that is encouraging.

My portraits include South Asian women wearing a Dupatta, which is the name for a traditional South Asian scarf. It's powerful to show women wearing traditional clothes and jewelry as a work of art. The art world needs portraits of all backgrounds and cultures. After exhibiting my work in various galleries and venues, this has opened up so much dialogue with the community. That makes me realize the impact my work could have further down the road.

Find her work at shabanakauserart.com or by following [@shabanakauserart](https://www.instagram.com/shabanakauserart) on Instagram.

Artist: Steven Wise



Painter, poetry lover, art historian and father of five, Steven Wise has dedicated his adult life to teaching, sharing and creating abstract works of art. After earning a bachelor's degree in art history from Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania and a master of fine arts, with a focus in painting, at the University of Iowa, Wise decided to ditch the idea of an East Coast lifestyle for something more personally fulfilling – the opportunity to be an active painter, teacher and father at the same time, not having to sacrifice one for the other.

His current project is a new series of paintings titled "O... is for Ozarks," a collection made up of 20 large pictures inspired by his study of the Ozark Mountains, the natural surroundings in which he lives and considers home.

What do you love about art history?

Since I was very young, I could be moved by a work of art in a way that a beautiful musical piece or a delicious meal may move you. As my fascination with artwork grew, I naturally wanted to learn more about it, which is what led me to study art history at Swarthmore College.

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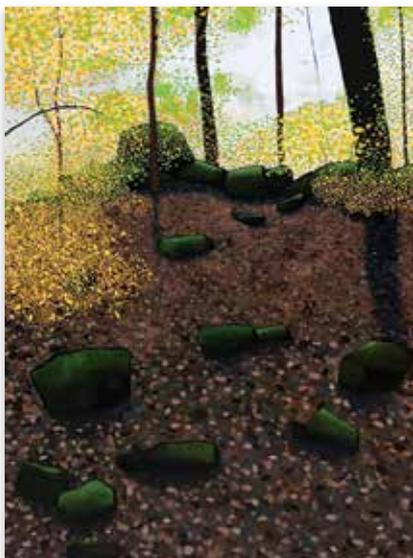
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Since my undergraduate years, I have continued my study of art history even though my professional life has turned toward painting. My study of art history enriches my thinking when I am painting.

What art trends that you've enjoyed have transformed in recent decades?

I have been interested in recent developments in museum exhibition design that puts a focus on themes instead of chronology – such as pairing works of art from different centuries in the same gallery. It is also very encouraging to see museums exhibit more work by underrepresented artists of color and women artists. The Hilma af Klint show last year at the Guggenheim was exceptional and was widely discussed. So cool to have women artists highlighted in major collections. Or, in our own backyard, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art has done a phenomenal job of exhibiting work by contemporary African American artists such as Nick Cave, Amy Sherald, Kerry James Marshall and Leonardo Drew.

Where do your abstract art ideas originate from?

My abstract ideas originate in mundane observations that I take note of during my daily walks and drives around town. Sometimes, I write down on a piece of paper or a notebook an especially unusual combination of colors that may appear on a package in the grocery store or on a billboard on the highway.

I find that dusk and dawn are the best times to observe color and to see the world. The world is quieter at these times and colors are heightened. Natural forms are a common source of inspiration.

What's the difference between solo and group exhibitions?

Solo exhibition is an exhibition that presents work by only one artist, such as the current show of Hank Willis Thomas at Crystal Bridges. A group exhibition presents the work of several artists, such as the current "State of the Art" exhibition at Crystal Bridges.

Email stevenwise@yahoo.com for more information or visit stevenwise.com to see more of Steven's works.

Artist: Susan Idlet

A retired marketing manager and graphic designer residing in Fayetteville, Susan Idlet is not the only one in her family with the creative touch. With a Grammy-nominated brother in the band Trout Fishing in America,

an accomplished writer for a sister, a singing-songwriting niece and a cocktail craftsman for a nephew, creativity is a family affair.

Idlet said one of her favorite activities is serving as a member of the artist collective, Fenix Gallery, in Fayetteville. Her bright and colorful digital prints revolve around her wide range of interests – rock stars and musicians, quirky animals, societal icons and much more.

Where does the inspiration for your art come from?

I draw inspiration from photographs and phrases/words. My pencils are often drawn to the humorous side. If a piece makes folks smile, or at least stops them in their tracks wondering, "What the heck?" then I know I've done good work.

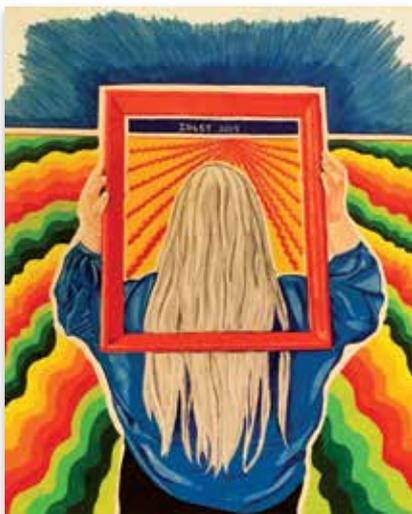
Where and how did your art begin?

I decided I would be an artist when I was a little girl. Specifically an abstract artist, living in a garret in Greenwich Village, dressed entirely in black, smoking cigarettes and drinking lots of coffee. That was my 6-year-old vision. I actively pursued this goal until I was 15, when I stopped making art altogether. That was 1970, and I was likely having too much fun being a young hippie to focus on my art.

My artistic skills came back into play as a self-taught graphic designer – a skill I added to my work as a marketing manager. At this point I was creating advertising campaigns for my clients and designing the print media at the same time. Sort of a one-woman marketing/advertising agency. I worked at this in-house for various companies until retirement in 2017.



Susan Idlet Self Portrait



I finally got the courage to create my own unique art, and today I can truly say that I am an artist – living in Northwest Arkansas, wearing lots of black, drinking plenty of coffee and happy to be an ex-smoker. My current medium is Prismacolor pencils. I love clear, intense, opaque colors. I find joy each day drawing at my kitchen table to the soundtrack of the whirring pencil sharpener, curated playlists and audible books or podcasts. I can't wait to see what comes next!

What are some of your favorite projects?

I always enjoy doing commissions – often of beloved pets. A project I'm particularly proud of is my four-by-four panel that is one of 20 panels contributed by local artists called The Better World Mural, at Terra Studios in southeast Washington County.

What do you notice about your generation's artwork at this moment in time?

I am most happy to see the explosion of street art – transforming gray concrete into a feast for the eyes. Since joining the artist community, I'm always impressed with the huge range of expression and mediums used. It's brave and personal and inspires me to break away from pencils and try something new. ■

Check out her work on Instagram at @susanidletart.



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