

CREATIVE CALLING

THANKS TO AN INFLUX OF FRESH IDEAS AND PASSIONATE PEOPLE, PALM BEACH COUNTY HAS FINALLY FOUND ITS FOOTING IN THE SOUTH FLORIDA CULTURAL SCENE. MEET SOME OF THE MEN AND WOMEN SCULPTING AREA ARTS.

BY MARY MURRAY | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBERT NELSON
SHOT ON LOCATION AT THE CULTURAL COUNCIL OF PALM BEACH COUNTY



From left: William Halliday, Daniel Biaggi, Genie Croft, Andrew Kato, Marisa Pascucci, Bruce Helander.

Art from left: *October Leaves*, Pamela Acheson Myers; *New Day*, Shani Simpson; *Party*, Margie Agoston. In background: *Waterlily*, Elsie Marley Musella. All artwork featured in the "Biennial 2015" exhibition.



From left: Marisa Pascucci, Andrew Kato, Genie Croft.

Art from left: *The Easter Cougar*, Agata Ren; *Virtual Landscapes*, Sylvia Riquezes.

You've got to go outside of your normal day-to-day skill set just so you learn what your artists are going through. It keeps you honest. —ANDREW KATO

The Female Phenom

Genie Croft's theater career has been propelled by one force: strong women. Growing up in Hollywood, California, Croft was surrounded by the arts, but it was her grandmother who inspired her to act.

"My grandmother, who was this dynamic redhead, was absolutely in love with plays, movies, and music," she says.

Croft studied theater at the University of Arizona and began directing at the behest of a professor. She moved to another warm climate and worked at several Florida theaters before establishing the Women's Theatre Project in 2002. The company moved around South Florida before settling in Boca Raton in 2012, but its mission always remained the same: to present compelling theater, written by women, that depicts myriad female experiences.

"I want [theater] to be honest, and I want to give opportunities to all different types of women," Croft says.

For more than 10 years, the Women's Theatre Project staged works that celebrated a spectrum of female voices with a focus on racial diversity, lesbian playwrights and themes, and roles for women older than 30. Croft and her compatriots fostered art that portrayed complex women who, as she describes, "have their own voices and are not afraid to be manipulative and selfish and ambitious and powerful."

The company closed in February, and Croft has brought that passion to her new role at Theatre at Arts Garage in Delray Beach, where she is beginning her first year as resident director. She and Producing Director Keith Garsson have split responsibilities for the 2015-16 season, with Croft heading the two main-stage productions.

Despite having evolved as a director, Croft has maintained the wonder that brought her to theater in the first place. "It feeds my imagination," she says. "I'm always fascinated by the [effect] those two hours you get to create something has on people: how you can move them; how you can change them."

The Showman

The magic of the theater is constructed behind the scenes. For Andrew Kato, producing artistic director at the Maltz Jupiter Theatre, the world unseen has always been his territory.

"A lot of people assume if you're in theater you started as an actor, and I really was one of these strange kids who knew exactly what I wanted to do from a very young age," he says. "I was never comfortable being in front of people, so I was happy to create these worlds and not be the center of attention—which continues into today."

Kato has built drama ever since he attended a puppet production of *The Canterville Ghost*, which inspired him to stage shows in his home. As a teenager living in Tequesta, he worked at the Burt Reynolds Dinner Theatre, which would later become the Maltz Jupiter Theatre. In between waiting tables and assisting on shows, he produced his first musical, *Switch!*. Its three-performance run illustrated to Kato that if he could conceive it, he could produce it.

Today, he's in his tenth season at the Maltz Jupiter Theatre, managing the business and artistic output. His days are dominated by casting shows, working on marketing campaigns, constructing season schedules, and occasionally stepping out of the office and into the rehearsal room to direct, as he did for *The Wiz* in January.

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In his time away from Jupiter, Kato is a creative consultant and coordinating producer for the Tony Awards, a dream job he's held for 12 years. "Dreams are anything I've ever had for myself," he says. "I've just assumed they were going to happen, and they eventually do."

Kato's dreams extend to the Maltz Jupiter Theatre, which he'd like to see grow in both size and production diversity. "Running a theater is really a process of reinventing oneself," he says. Though he hopes to evolve with his audience, he is confident the essence of the Maltz and his own convictions will remain the same.

The Art Geek

Marisa Pascucci is not your typical artist. In fact, she doesn't consider herself one at all. "I am not an artist in the least bit," she says. "[But] I'm a self-proclaimed art geek."

As the curator of collections at the Boca Raton Museum of Art, where she has worked since 2012, Pascucci's canvas is the museum's second floor and her medium its 5,000-piece permanent collection. "I feel very proud that I can call 5,000 pieces of art my domain," she says.

Originally from Ohio, Pascucci embraced the creative field during a freshman art history course at American University. "You're sitting in a gigantic auditorium with 200 students, the lights go out, the slides go on, and most people fall asleep. I did not," she says. "I became obsessed with art history."

Pascucci went on to obtain a graduate degree in art history and museum studies, realizing she wanted to not only be surrounded by beautiful pieces but also to work with their creators and educate the public. She found that balance in the curatorial field.

When not tending to the permanent collection, Pascucci works on some temporary exhibitions. Together with the museum's curator of contemporary art, Kathleen Goncharov, she conceives and curates a handful of shows each season, especially those that highlight local artists, such as this summer's "Brenda Hope Zapitell: A Journey of Gestures" and the newly opened "Dames: Portraits by Norman Sunshine."

Because the Boca Raton Museum of Art was founded by a group of artists, "dealing, presenting, and working with local artists—and not just local as in Boca, but as in the state of Florida—is very important to us and really speaks to our history," she says.

Though she also adores traveling and the opera, Pascucci's world is consumed by her passion for aesthetics. From the books on her nightstand to the audio books she listens to during her work commute, she's never far from art.

It's a different road for every artist, but the common denominator is hard work." —BRUCE HELANDER

The Newcomer

When guests enter ArtHouse 429, the nearly three-year-old gallery in West Palm Beach's Northwood Village, they are met with a unique welcoming committee: Dexter, owner William Halliday's salt-and-pepper Welsh Terrier, greets every visitor.

"He's very popular," Halliday says. "When I walk around the neighborhood, everyone says, 'Hi, Dexter.' They don't know my name, but they know his."

The inherently shy Halliday doesn't mind. He lets Dexter amuse the masses while he works on his metal sculptures in his studio, resurfacing to liaise with artists or relax in the property's sculpture garden.

A consummate creator, Halliday is adjusting to his role as gallery owner. He has spent most of his adult life as the head of a design company, first out of Washington, D.C., and then Dubai, building sleek interiors and furniture for restaurants and nightclubs. Afterward, he turned his design experience and passion for sculpture into a full-time art career. First, though, he needed to show his work in a gallery.

"I thought it would make more sense to open my own gallery, because I've always had my own business," he says.

A friend introduced Halliday to South Florida, and he initially considered setting his art roots in Miami's Wynwood district but was swayed by Northwood Village. "It has a lot of potential that doesn't really have an outlet to expand and flourish, but it seems inevitable in this area that it will," he says.

Every aspect of ArtHouse 429 is a reflection of Halliday's vision. The sparse, streamlined space is the perfect backdrop for works by local and international artists as well as Halliday's sculptures, which transform utilitarian materials and themes into fluid creations. By combining his love of all things motorized with a knack for fabricating, he achieves an aesthetic rooted in practicality, reverent of form, and born out of a need to create.

"I'm someone who is creative, and creative people are always thinking creatively," he says. "You don't have to make an effort to say, 'Okay, today I'm going to be creative.' It's always there."

The Voice

Daniel Biaggi discovered opera as a boy living in Switzerland. "I was probably about 9 or 10 years old when we went to the theater in Bern as part of a school trip to see *The Magic Flute*," he says. "But I didn't really do much about it. I just knew I enjoyed it."

Eventually, Biaggi did something about it. He studied singing and performed in operas in Europe before continuing his career in the United States. Though he began as a singer, he found his calling behind the scenes.

"I realized I was always the big-picture person, which is why I stopped singing," he explains. "As much as I loved being on stage, I didn't want to just chase high notes for the rest of my days, and I was always more interested in putting all of the pieces of the puzzle together."

Time as a coach, an educator, and a manager prepared him to be general director of Palm Beach Opera, a position he's held since 2009. "I was able to take all those professional experiences and bring them to the artistic [and] administrative side of the opera," he says.

Under Biaggi's leadership, Palm Beach Opera has found its voice, one that is committed to educating the public and producing compelling works.

In addition to staging last season's world premiere of *Enemies, A Love Story*, Biaggi counts Opera at the Waterfront, the company's free annual outdoor concert, as a career highlight.

"That was a big dream, to be able to bring something to the community for free and make an introduction so people can experience this incredible power of operatic singing and playing in a casual setting," he says.

With a new season ahead, Biaggi reflects upon these accomplishments as well as the day-to-day joy of his job.

"It's the idea of being able to create human connections and contact points while being surrounded by this incredibly astonishing talent of opera singers," he says. "To produce those sounds, to work together with the orchestra, to be dramatic in the moment—that's what fuels me every day."

The Mosaic

Like his acclaimed collages, Bruce Helander is a visual amalgam. On any given day, he's in his West Palm Beach studio, blasting Thelonious Monk and donning indicators of his experiences and creativity: a palm tree shirt he designed for Nicole Miller, a Yale baseball cap, a single fingernail painted green.

He thrives in this structured setting, yet his life as an artist has been anything but workaday. "If it wasn't for the surprises and the stimulation, then I'd have probably stopped long ago," he says.

Helander honed his creative energy at the Rhode Island School of Design. With the help of fellow RISD student Dale Chihuly, he unearthed his aesthetic in flea markets and thrift stores.

"I was drawn to old magazines and brochures that I'd never seen before because you could only find them at flea markets," he says. "I found it was more interesting to manipulate the paper and adaptively reuse it into another context."

Shown in premier permanent collections around the country, Helander's collages combine vintage clippings with painterly techniques to form abstract expressionist compositions. However, he does not identify solely as an artist. After stints as the chief academic officer and vice president of student affairs at RISD, he overcame his dyslexia and began writing, most notably as the publisher of *Art Express* magazine and editor-in-chief of *The Art Economist*. Ever the student, he even took classes at Yale's School of Journalism to further his skills.

"Writing is like painting to me. It's trying to find inventive turns and twists and things that make it interesting," he explains.

A twist in Helander's life led him to Palm Beach, where he ran Helander Gallery on Worth Avenue for 15 years. Today, he lives and works in West Palm Beach, where he was awarded a key to the city in 2014 for being only the third Palm Beach County resident inducted into the Florida Artists Hall of Fame.

"It's a different road for every artist, but the common denominator is hard work," he says. "It's something you've got to stick with, like an inventor. You have to keep inventing until the plane goes up in the air, if only for a few seconds." ◀◀



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Art from left: October Leaves, Pamela Acheson Myers; New Day, Shani Simpson; Party, Margie Agoston.

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