



THE art OF COLLABORATION

THIS FALL, THANKS TO A GRANT FROM THE PEW CENTER FOR ARTS & HERITAGE, A THRIVING HAVERFORD PARTNERSHIP WILL PUT NEURODIVERGENT ARTISTS IN THE NATIONAL SPOTLIGHT.

By Anne Stein • Photographs by Holden Blanco '17

Every weekday for five to six hours a day, dozens of working artists gather to create, collaborate, and learn in a huge studio space in Wynnewood just down the road from Haverford. The steel pillars inside Center for Creative Works (CCW), situated in a former auto dealership, have been painted yellow and blue. The aqua walls with occasional lime green trim are covered with drawings, task boards, and photos to brighten the once-dull interior. A large abstract canvas—a collaborative project by a group of CCW painters—hangs above orange double doors leading to a storage area for picture frames.

Artists sit in groups of two to four at wooden tables throughout the main area, working on paintings, chalk drawings, watercolors, and embroidery. Others create in smaller studios off the main area that house equipment for woodworking, printmaking, fiber arts, ceramics, and sound recording.

While the space on Lancaster Avenue looks like a typical arts studio, it's

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pretty uncommon. The 85 artists who work here, along with 20 at CCW's smaller space in the South Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia, are neurodivergent, and CCW is what's known as a progressive studio.

Progressive studios originated 50 years ago in Oakland, Calif., when an artist and a psychologist launched a radical arts movement aimed at helping people with developmental disabilities thrive. Florence Ludins-Katz and Elias Katz established the Creative Growth Art Center—still in existence, along with two Bay Area sister studios also founded by the Katzes—to provide art materials and a professional studio environment for neurodivergent artists, along with guidance on how to become part of the contemporary arts scene through exhibitions, publications, gallery representation, and sales of their work.

There are an estimated 80 to 100 progressive studios across the U.S., and CCW is one of the best-known on the East Coast. For the past decade, Haverford students have collaborated with CCW artists through a disability studies class, art exhibitions, internships, and other projects.

This fall, thanks to a \$360,000 grant from the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage awarded to Haverford's John B. Hurford '60 Center for the Arts and Humanities, the collaboration will expand into the national spotlight.

The grant will fund a major project called *Look Here*, which includes three art exhibitions—two at Haverford and one in Philadelphia—along with a symposium to be held for the first time on the East Coast, and a publication focused on progressive studios and neurodivergent artists.

Look Here comes at an important time. Progressive studio artists are increasingly finding success in the mainstream art world, and the term “outsider art”—a label applied for decades to art by people with disabilities—is being used less frequently to describe contemporary artists with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

“One of the things we’re trying to do is push back against that language,” says professor Kristin Lindgren, director of the College Writing Center and faculty liaison to the office of Access and Disability Services. “In progressive studios, these artists aren’t outsiders. They’re working in a community of artists, they’re exposed to art history, and their work is being bought and exhibited.”

But it's a fraught time as well. The studios and their artists are supported by federal funding, including Medicaid. “People with intellectual disabilities use Medicaid for many services,” explains Lori Bartol, CCW's director. “No one knows what will happen if Medicaid is slashed, but there's a lot of anxiety that programming for people with disabilities might be cut. For artists, this is especially devastating. They lose their day program, their place of work, and their working identity that, for some, they worked to build for many years.”



There's hope within the field that *Look Here* will raise awareness at a crucial inflection point. “It's super important for us at CCW, but it's really important for the field that Pew is willing to fund this project and put a spotlight on this work,” says Bartol. “I don't think there's ever been an exhibition that brings together the amount of work from this number of studios at one time.”

A Decade-long Collaboration

The Haverford-CCW partnership has long been nurtured by Lindgren, who teaches a first-year writing seminar called “Portraits of Disability and Difference.”

The course, which examines how disability is portrayed, treated, and discussed in visual art, literary art, and in the media, was transformative, says **Lindsey Lopes '16**, who recently completed her Ph.D. in biosciences at Rockefeller University. “It provided language and perspectives I had not previously been exposed to but that resonated deeply with my lived experiences.” Her brother is Christopher Lopes,



ARTISTS IN ACTION:
(clockwise from left) Allen Yu at the drafting table; Paige Donovan in the studio; Jenna Powers with a work in progress; Clyde Henry with one of his signature animal sculptures; Brandon Spicer-Crawley, Donovan, and curator Jennifer Gilbert discuss one of Spicer-Crawley's paintings; and fabric artist Cindy Gosselin with one of her large creations.



a professional actor with Down syndrome. “The introduction that I got to disability studies during that seminar allowed me to approach other courses I took at Haverford with a different perspective.”

A few years after taking the seminar, several students including Lopes and her roommate, **Sarah (Waldis) Revak '16**, approached Lindgren about doing an independent study in disability studies. “Kristin is an amazing professor and person, and I wanted the opportunity to learn from her again before I graduated,” says Revak, a Philadelphia pediatrician. “Especially as a pre-med student, I felt there was a lot I could learn from disability studies about the social model of disability, which examines disability as an interaction between individual impairments and societal barriers and discrimination.”

Lopes, Revak, and Lindgren eventually designed “Critical Disability Studies: Theory and Practice,” a course where Haverford and Bryn Mawr students examine recent work in critical disability studies across a range of disciplines, including literary studies, visual studies, and history. They explore

the historical and theoretical development of the ideas of normalcy and disability; questions around ethical engagement and inclusive design; and disability arts, culture, accessibility, and exhibition practices.

The course includes a semester-long partnership with CCW, where students and artists have collaborated in numerous ways—from making artwork together to interviewing each other for audio pieces to co-teaching grade schoolers woodworking techniques—always with a culminating co-curated exhibition.

“As part of the course design we proposed a community partnership, although we didn’t yet know which organization we were going to partner with,” Lindgren says. “We were looking for a place that was financially and physically accessible to artists with disabilities, a place whose philosophy and values aligned with disability justice principles, a place that supports people as agents in their own lives.”

In 2015, Lindgren, along with Lopes and Revak, visited CCW—which was in 1972 known as the Lower Merion Vocational Training Center and transitioned to CCW

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in 2010. “I just fell in love with the place,” she recalls. It was the beginning of a collaboration between Lindgren, Bartol, and CCW exhibitions manager Samantha Mitchell. “When we first met with CCW,” Lindgren says, “they told us that they wanted the opportunity to exhibit their work, and they wanted documentation of the project.”

Each year, students and artists collaborate to curate a small exhibition in the Visual Culture, Arts, and Media building (VCAM) or the Haverford library. In preparation, students talk with artists about their work, write the wall text and catalog copy, record audio descriptions of each work displayed, and think broadly about exhibition accessibility. They plan an opening event that welcomes artists and their families and gives the broader Haverford community an opportunity to meet the artists and learn about their approaches to artmaking.

The partnership project is different every year. Students and artists have created work both individually and collaboratively—bioart in Haverford’s biology labs; action figures in VCAM’s Maker Arts Space; embroidery, collage, and print-making in CCW’s studio—and through working together

they build relationships, a primary goal of the partnership. Artists enjoy interacting with students, having access to spaces like VCAM and Haverford’s arboretum, and exhibiting their work. For instance, Paige Donovan—an artist who began at CCW after she graduated from Saint Katherine School’s high school program at Archbishop John Carroll High in 2012, participated in the project that taught woodworking to an afterschool program. “I got to teach kids to do woodworking, mostly building cars and spinners,” she says, noting that she really appreciated the experience of teaching kids. Students enjoy forming relationships with artists, learning about their art practices and daily lives, and developing skills in accessible exhibition planning.

Engagement with the surrounding community is central to Haverford’s ethos and to CCW’s mission, says Lindgren. Guided by the principle of reciprocity, “the partnership brings our communities together and benefits both CCW artists and Haverford students.”

For the first year’s bioart project, which used bacteria grown in Petri dishes to create art, CCW artists came to Haverford’s biology labs, where students including Lopes and Revak showed them how to use microscopes, along with other basic lab protocols. Students went to CCW and practiced embroidery and other fiber arts projects. For the past few years, CCW artists learned to use equipment such as 3D and laser printers at Maker Arts Space under the guidance of Kent Watson, and this year, created 3D action figures of themselves.

“As a science person, I didn’t always consider myself a creative or artistic person, so the opportunity to create art and learn from CCW artists wasn’t something I expected for my senior year of college,” says Revak. “I learned from the CCW artists the many parallels between science and art, and I now think of science and experimentation as a much more creative process than I previously did.”

“Our artists really feel connected with the school at this point,” says Mitchell. “They expect to see the students in the spring to work with them on different projects. And when they go to campus, they feel a great sense of ownership around the different spaces there.”

A Big, Pew-funded Gathering

Look Here—the brainchild of Lindgren, Mitchell, and Matthew Seamus Callinan, associate director of Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery, VCAM, and Campus Exhibitions—will focus a national spotlight on disability arts and strengthen and expand the Haverford-CCW partnership.

Look Here’s primary exhibit is a group show featuring six CCW artists at the Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery, co-curated by U.K.-based Jennifer Gilbert, who works with and champions disabled and neurodivergent artists, and two CCW

A Quick Look at *Look Here*

SEPT. 19-DEC. 13, 2025

The *Look Here* project includes a group exhibition at Haverford’s Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery featuring the work of six artists from the Center for Creative Works (CCW), co-curated by Jennifer Gilbert, Mary T. Bevloek, and Paige Donovan. The artists featured will be Kelly Brown, Cindy Gosselin, Clyde Henry, Tim Quinn, Brandon Spicer-Crawley, and Allen Yu. An opening talk and reception will be held Sept. 19 from 4:30 to 7:30 p.m.

SEPT. 19-DEC. 13, 2025

Look Everywhere, a group exhibition of CCW artist works, will be featured at the Visual Culture, Arts, and Media building (VCAM).

OCT. 1-OCT. 31, 2025

Look There, an exhibition featuring the work of artists from progressive studios across the country, will be on display at Atelier Gallery in Philadelphia, with an opening reception on Oct. 1 from 5 to 7 p.m.

OCT. 20-OCT. 23, 2025

The sixth annual Creating Community Symposium will be held in Philadelphia in collaboration with the Creative Growth Art Center.

NOV. 5, 2026

Look Here will release a first-of-its kind publication on the work of progressive studios.



Tim Quinn, “Untitled (Kitchen)”

artists: Donovan and Mary T. Bevlock. “The idea is that these six artists have been selected and we’re going to have at least three works from each in that show, so people get a fuller picture of those artists and their capabilities,” says Callinan, who is project producer of *Look Here*.

A satellite show at VCAM will feature one piece of work each by other CCW artists. A third exhibition, also curated by Gilbert, will be held at Philadelphia’s Atelier Gallery and will showcase artists from some 30 progressive studios nationwide. Donovan will represent CCW at that show with some of her detailed embroidery work. It’s an exhibition that is unprecedented in scope, says Callinan.

“To bring them together and showcase their talents is a dream,” Gilbert says. “A few artists have received contemporary art world success, but I think it’s important to keep drilling home the message to curators to look more broadly, and head into progressive art studios to see the abundance of talent. These artists should be included in group and solo shows in museums and contemporary art spaces.”

Callinan and Lindgren have worked closely to ensure that *Look Here*’s exhibitions and talks will be accessible to people with varying disabilities and needs—similar to a 2012 disability arts exhibition at Cantor Fitzgerald that the two worked on, called *What Can A Body Do?*

That exhibit featured art by artists with disabilities (though not necessarily neurodivergent artists). It was the first that the two specifically tailored to be accessible, and it was named one of the 50 most important shows for artists with disabilities in the last 50 years by Art in America.

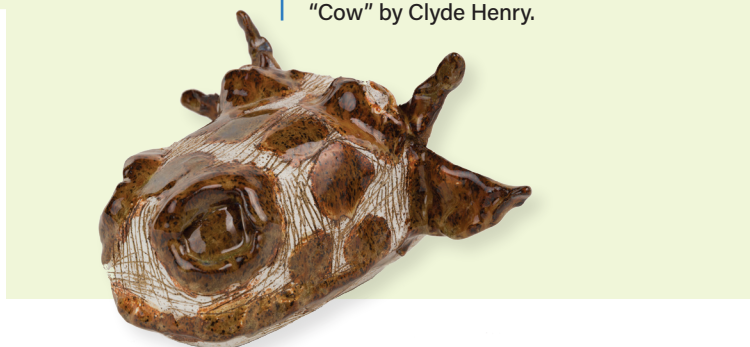
“We want to model what an accessible art exhibition can look like,” Lindgren says. “Accessibility is never perfect, but we want everyone to feel welcomed into these gallery spaces, and we want arts professionals to see how they might provide access at exhibitions they are developing.”

There will be braille materials, audio descriptions, and American Sign Language embedded in video, along with captions for viewers who are deaf and hard of hearing. “Matthew [Callinan] also thinks about physical accessibility of space, with wide pathways for wheelchair users and different heights rather than set heights at which we hang things,” Lindgren says.

The Creating Community Symposium, an annual national gathering of progressive studios, will be held during *Look Here*, the first time it’s to take place on the East Coast. “It gives us a chance to show off our studio and our artists,” says CCW’s Bartol, who’s coordinating the symposium. “And it gives access to studios on the East Coast that haven’t been able to attend the West Coast



CREATIVE CHAMPIONS:
(clockwise from left) Kristin Lindgren and Matthew Seamus Callinan have been instrumental in the College’s collaboration with the Center for Creative Works and the *Look Here* exhibition; “No No” by Brandon Spicer-Crawley; “Cow” by Clyde Henry.



symposiums, because we all have small budgets. There are a lot of smaller studios that we’re hoping will be able to come, to find collegial kinship and learn and grow.”

Bartol expects 150 progressive artists and staff to gather for presentations, discuss current projects, share best practices, and hear panel talks and a keynote speech on the future of art made in progressive studios and its increasingly significant place in the contemporary art world.

Recent major successes by artists include the first solo exhibition by an artist with a developmental disability at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, California-based Marlon Mullen, in December 2024. And in October 2023, San Francisco’s Museum of Modern Art announced a partnership with Oakland’s Creative Growth Art Center, purchasing more than 100 works by artists from Creative Growth’s three affiliated Bay Area studios.

“These artists are starting to be taken more seriously, getting shows at larger institutions, and representation at major galleries,” Callinan says, “not necessarily because of their disability, but because of their artwork. I feel like, honestly, that [*Look Here* is] maybe a next big step in that.”

“These aren’t isolated, outsider figures that have sometimes been fetishized in the art world,” says Lindgren. “We’re hoping that *Look Here* will highlight a different way of understanding the work that these artists are doing.” ■

Additional reporting by Brian Howard.