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Eight rising artists awarded \$50,000 each from Leonore Annenberg Fellowship Fund

PHILADELPHIA – A cellist who has performed for the President. A silk painter whose flags of American currency were exhibited on Wall Street. An actor who won raves at the Public Theater for an electrifying performance as the rebellious son of a TV preacher.

These rising talents are among the eight early-career artists chosen this year to receive \$50,000 fellowships from the Leonore Annenberg Fellowship Fund for the Performing and Visual Arts.

In its 10th and final year, the program is awarding one-year arts fellowships to mezzo-soprano **Samantha Hankey**; ballet dancer **Cassandra Trenary**; actors **Ato Blankson-Wood** and **Ruibo Qian**; visual artists **Herman Aguirre** and **Emily Erb**; and cellists **Khari Joyner** and **Jia Kim**.

Including the \$400,000 awarded this year, the fund has presented a total of \$6 million to 70 artists who have demonstrated extraordinary talent, character and commitment. The funds have helped to cover studio time and touring, record a debut album, shoot a film, buy an instrument, pay for vocal and dance training, afford healthcare and repay student loans – allowing promising artists the time, space, and resources to focus on their art.

Past and present recipients, supported by mentors, have been selected in consultation with such partner organizations as Yale School of Drama, American Ballet Theatre (ABT), Lincoln Center Theater, the New England Conservatory of Music, and the Metropolitan Opera.

“Leonore Annenberg was long interested in strengthening the arts and the cultural fabric of our society,” said Gail Levin, Ph.D., director of the program, administered by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania. “The financial resources provided by the fellowship program which bears her name, and the guidance of a distinguished mentor, will enable these

young people to experiment artistically and create new professional opportunities. Ultimately, as they begin to realize their dreams, they make it possible for the arts to thrive.”

The fund was set up as a “wasting endowment” which would spend down its principal and interest over a 10-year period.

Past recipients include Misty Copeland, ABT’s first African-American female principal dancer, and Isabella Boylston, ABT’s youngest principal dancer; actor André Holland of the TV series “The Knick” and the film “Moonlight”; Tony Award-nominated actor Bryce Pinkham of “A Gentleman’s Guide to Love & Murder”; violinist-composer Michelle Ross; photographer Richard Mosse; and bass-baritone Ryan Speedo Green.

The 2017 recipients of the Leonore Annenberg Fellowship Fund for the Performing and Visual Arts are:

- Artist [Herman Aguirre](#) was born and raised in Chicago and has family ties to Mexico. His paintings have depicted the violence and victims of the Mexican drug cartel wars. Aguirre is sponsored by the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, from which he received a bachelor’s degree and will receive his Master of Fine Arts in May. “Inspired by my background as a Mexican-American,” he says, “I have begun to use my art as a voice for social change and to express important ideas within the contemporary art world that are not necessarily visible elsewhere.”
- Actor, singer and dancer **Ato Blankson-Wood** delivered a “breakout performance of wry wit and musical intensity” in “The Total Bent” last year at The Public Theater, wrote the New York Times’ Christopher Isherwood. Blankson-Wood, who’s been cast in Spike Lee’s new Netflix series “She’s Gotta Have It,” is a graduate of NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts. He is sponsored by the Yale School of Drama, from which he has an MFA. Originally from Silver Spring, Md., he’s the son of Ghanaian parents and plans to use part of his fellowship to study storytelling at Ghana’s National Theater.
- Artist [Emily Erb](#) of Philadelphia works in silk painting, tackling sprawling and provocative topics such as the role of women and slaves in U.S. history and gun violence. Her silk flags of American paper money were displayed in the solo show “Legal Tender” and on Wall Street at the Museum of American Finance. In 2016, her diptych “Climate Change,” meant to fade with the weather, was exhibited outdoors in Philadelphia. Erb, from Richmond, Va., has a bachelor’s degree from Tyler School of Art and an MFA from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, her sponsor.
- Mezzo-soprano [Samantha Hankey](#), raised in Marshfield, Mass., will graduate in May with a Master of Music degree from the Juilliard School, her sponsoring institution, from which she received the Kovner Fellowship. Hankey, a winner of the 2017 Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, has “a voice of great beauty and versatility,” says Brian Zeger, artistic director of Juilliard Vocal Arts. Hankey will be seen this summer in the title role of Rossini’s “La Cenerentola” in San Francisco.
- Cellist [Khari Joyner](#) has been a soloist with orchestras and a concerto soloist on four occasions with different ensembles at Juilliard, his sponsor, where he is finishing his Doctor of Musical Arts degree. Joyner, from Atlanta, Ga., has performed at the White House for President Barack Obama, for Coretta Scott King, and for Hank Aaron’s birthday celebrations.

Joyner “made a powerful impact,” New York Times critic Zachary Woolfe wrote of a performance. Joyner’s fellowship will support a solo debut recording and a recital tour combined with community engagement and education, reaching churches and hospitals along with concert halls.

- [Jia Kim](#), a longtime California resident, began her cello studies at age 10 in South Korea. She has been associated since 2003 with the Perlman Music Program, her fellowship sponsor. Her mentor, Itzhak Perlman, calls her playing “elegant,” adding that she “plays with a beautiful sound and has technique to spare.” She has both a bachelor’s and a master’s degree from the Juilliard School. She was a tone judge for the Violin Society of America’s 2016 International Competition and is artistic director for International Music Sessions, a nonprofit organization that aims to bring music students from conflict areas around the world to the United States to bridge the gap between cultures through music.
- [Ruibo Qian](#), sponsored by Lincoln Center Theater, has performed at the Huntington Theatre Company in Boston and the Old Globe in San Diego, Calif., and appeared in the Amazon series “Mozart in the Jungle” and the film “Manchester by the Sea.” The Shanghai-born, Texas-bred actress has an MFA from NYU’s graduate acting program and appeared this season in Lincoln Center Theater’s LCT3 production of “Bull in a China Shop.” She plans to use her fellowship for career development and training, including a workshop in Bali to study mask work, puppetry and dance.
- American Ballet Theatre soloist [Cassandra Trenary](#), a native of Lawrenceville, Ga., grew up studying jazz, modern dance and hip-hop as well as ballet. She joined ABT’s corps in 2011 and rose swiftly to soloist, in 2015. Reviewing Trenary’s Princess Aurora in “The Sleeping Beauty,” the New York Times’ Alastair Macaulay praised “her sparkling ebullient feet, her gift for dancing coloratura steps as if in bliss, and the marvelous liveliness of her torso.” With her ABT-sponsored fellowship, Trenary aims to “reach outside the comfort of the only company I have known” and seek coaching from the Mariinsky Ballet, the Royal Ballet, and the Netherlands Dance Theater.

The arts fund is part of the [Leonore Annenberg Scholarship, Fellowship, and School Funds](#), which also provide four-year college scholarships to high school students who have shown academic excellence and overcome challenging circumstances, and grants to underfunded public elementary schools that serve children in financial need. As of this year the Leonore Annenberg Funds will have awarded more than \$22 million to arts fellows, college students and public schools.

About Leonore Annenberg: Leonore Annenberg (1918-2009) was U.S. Chief of Protocol for President Ronald Reagan and wife of the late Ambassador Walter H. Annenberg. Mrs. Annenberg established the grants to support her lifelong commitment to public service, education, and the arts. All grants are made on an invitation-only basis, in consultation with a partner organization. Visit www.leonoreannenbergsscholarships.org to learn more.