

# THE BEGINNERS' HALL OF FAME

Six people who found a new creative calling later in life — or for whom recognition was long overdue.

By Jason Chen



## LORRAINE O'GRADY,

89, NEW YORK CITY

The multidisciplinary artist and critic, whose solo show at Mariane Ibrahim gallery in Chicago opens this month.

I THOUGHT I was going to be a writer. My family tells me that I made my first poem when I was a year and a half old: “I like mice because they’re nice.” [In my early 30s, after working for five years] as an intelligence analyst, I went to the Iowa Writers’ Workshop for fiction. I hadn’t really been reading fiction, though, so I wasn’t very good at writing it. I spent most of my second year there translating short stories written by my instructor [the Chilean novelist] José Donoso.

Growing up, I had all these exposures to beauty. I’d gone to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston as a child and seen [Paul] Gauguin’s “Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?,” a painting that continues to influence me. And my mother was a dress designer. She redid our house every six months. By the

time I was 10, I basically had everything that I’m now working with in place, but I didn’t have the language. I didn’t get that language until the early 1970s, when I read [the critic and curator] Lucy Lippard’s “Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object From 1966 to 1972.” [Then] I was ready. The ideas for my visual art already existed within my experience. I just hadn’t known they were art before.

A few years later, when I was in my early 40s, I had to have a biopsy of my breast. After — thank God, it was negative for cancer — I was thinking about what I could give my doctor as a thank-you present. Reading my copy of the Sunday New York Times, I saw a line in the sports pages about Julius Erving that said, “The doctor is operating again.” I said, “OK, this could be the start of something,” and I made a really good poem for my doctor [out of words clipped from the newspaper]. But when I finished the poem, I said, “This is too good to give to him.” Then I immediately started making newspaper poems for a project called “Cutting Out The New

York Times.” I made one every week for 26 weeks. When I finished, I realized that I’d become a visual artist — or revealed that I was a visual artist.

— interview by J.C.

Lorraine O’Grady’s “Announcement Card 2 (Spike With Sword, Fighting)” (2020).

## TONI MORRISON,

1931-2019

The author of 11 novels, including “Beloved,” “Sula” and “Song of Solomon.”

BY THE TIME Toni Morrison wrote “Beloved” (1987), her best-known novel, she’d worked for nearly two decades as a book editor. Her debut, “The Bluest Eye” (1970), was published when she was 39 and, while not a commercial success, was critically praised. She published three more books between 1973 and

1981 — including “Song of Solomon” — while still at her editing job.

Prior to going into publishing, Morrison — who had a master’s degree in American literature from Cornell University — spent nearly a decade teaching college English. After her divorce, she worked for a textbook division of Random House before joining Random House proper as its first Black female editor; there, she championed and published Black authors such as Angela Davis, June Jordan, Gayl Jones and Toni Cade Bambara. “I didn’t go to anything. I didn’t join anything,” she once said about the civil rights movement. “But

I could make sure there was a published record of those who did march and did put themselves on the line.” All the while, Morrison was waking by dawn to write before heading into the office. She’d later describe those sessions as a form of liberation: “The writing was the real freedom because nobody told me what to do there. That was my world and my imagination. And all my life it’s been that way.”

For many years, Morrison considered her day job essential to her art. “I thrive on the urgency that doing more than one thing provides,” she once said. But the

industry had its difficulties — the overwhelming whiteness, the increasing commercial demands — and she left her position in 1983. Four years later, at age 56, she published “Beloved.” In a preface to the 2004 edition of the book, she looks back on the rush of feelings she experienced following her last day at the job. “I was happy, free in a way I had never been, ever. It was the oddest sensation. Not ecstasy, not satisfaction, not a surfeit of pleasure or accomplishment. It was a purer delight, a rogue anticipation with certainty. Enter ‘Beloved.’”

## Practice Some Denial

When I was working on “Diamonds & Rust” (1975), I was at a low point of my career and I made a decision that I was going to concentrate on music and quit globe-trotting for different issues. I realized that the music needed my time and attention if it was going to be any good. Learning to live with the state of the world’s a daily practice. Everything we do, we do against the backdrop of global

warming and fascism. I never dreamed I’d live in a world this chaotic and discouraging, and I’m overwhelmed but I’m also a great believer in denial — I think that’s where you have to be in order to create, or have fun or dance — providing that we set aside a certain amount of time to come out of denial and actually do something to help. — **Joan Baez**

ADVICE ON BEGINNING

**Stephanie Goto, 47, architect**  
If my clients allow me to peel one eye away from their commissions,

I’d like to dive deeper into the renovation of my own property in Connecticut, which includes the

circa 1770 former home of Marilyn Monroe and a tobacco-and-milk barn that will house my studio.

**Amalia Ulman, 35, visual artist and filmmaker**  
I’m beginning to write the script for my third feature film — probably my favorite part of the

process, when I just need to close my eyes and see the film in my head. It’s the closest to a holiday because it feels like daydreaming.

DA ZEXE

# TABBOO!

65, NEW YORK CITY

The multidisciplinary artist and former drag performer, whose paintings are currently on view at the Dallas Contemporary art space and the MassArt Art Museum in Boston.

MY MOTHER PUT me into an art class when I was 15 at the Worcester Art Museum, and then I went on to art school [at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design], where I majored in painting and fine art. I remember my first sale, to my aunt Julie. She wanted me to copy [Jean-François] Millet's "The Gleaners." I didn't want to copy someone else's stuff — I think one of the reasons I'm popular is that I'm very original — but I still did the painting, of course. It was a commission and I was being paid!

I started performing drag in nightclubs when I moved to New York in 1982, but I've always been painting, too. This isn't something I just came up with, like, "Oh,

I can't get on 'RuPaul's Drag Race,' I better start painting." I had one-man shows and gallery exhibitions right after graduating from art school. Elton John and Gianni Versace bought my paintings. I don't want anyone to have the impression — which certain people seem to — that I took up painting just because I stopped doing drag. I might be getting a bit more attention for it now, but I've always been doing it.

I usually get up at four in the morning. I feed my cat and then start painting. A lot of my paintings are sunrises. And I do sunsets and cityscapes. Or if it rains in a weird way, I'll do a

rain painting. It's a very spiritual, meditative, private thing. There isn't a day that goes by that I haven't done something, and so my work gets better and better and better.

And I must say, I'm a master of my craft now.

Sometimes a collector will ask, "Can we come over to the studio and watch you paint?" I tell them no. I usually do it naked. — interview by J.C.



A 2023 acrylic on canvas by Tabboo! titled "Lavender Garden."

## JUSTIN VIVIAN BOND,

60, NEW YORK CITY AND THE HUDSON VALLEY, N.Y.

The performer and multidisciplinary artist, whose work has been exhibited at Participant Inc. and the New Museum in New York City, and will be on view at Bill Arning Exhibitions in Kinderhook, N.Y., in May.

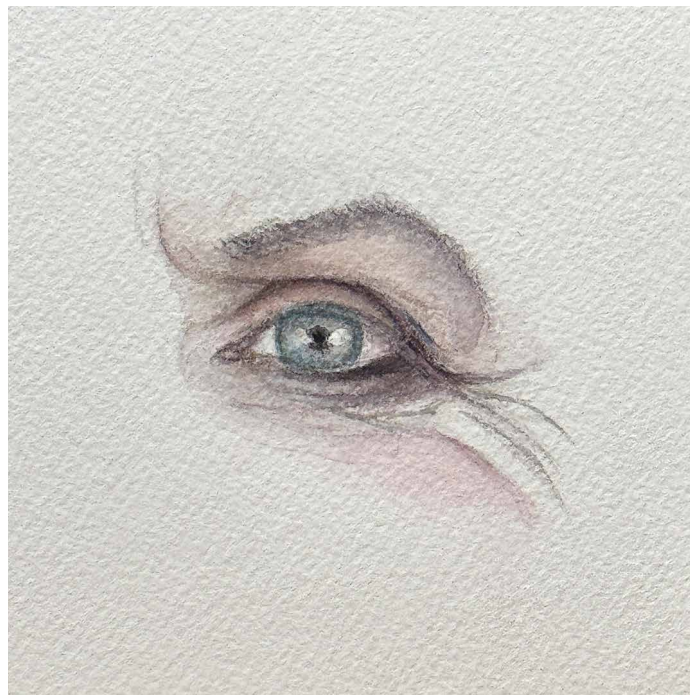
WHEN I WAS in high school, I was interested in visual art as well as music and acting, but I decided to major in theater in college because I thought it was a career that could get me out of Maryland and allow me to move to New York. I became a performer, and I've been doing cabaret for many years. In 2008, when I broke up my cabaret act Kiki and Herb, my rent was so cheap that I didn't have to work as much. I started painting again, and it flows very naturally for me.

My watercolors are primarily portraits of people I know. I'll ask them to pose for a photograph and then paint from that. I also make pseudo fan art, like my "Witch

Justin Vivian Bond's watercolor "Witch Eyes, by Viv, to Protect You From Evil Chodes: Lois" (2024).

Eyes" series, which is based on iconic photographs of celebrities' eyes. The wonderful thing about painting is that you have total control over it, if you're lucky. Onstage, there're so many variables. And with painting, you don't have to be there [when people see your work]. I love being in front of an audience, but I don't really love being among people. The pleasure for me is singing but, when the show's over, I have to talk to a lot of people. I like all of them, but there're too many, so it can be a little overwhelming. You don't ever get to connect on a deeper level. The most satisfying times in my life have been when my shows have been installed and it's the night before the opening. All of it's exactly how I

want it — the room, the lighting — and I just sit there and look and have this sense of utter satisfaction. — interview by J.C.



THESE INTERVIEWS HAVE BEEN EDITED AND CONDENSED. FROM TOP: TABBOO!, "LAVENDER GARDEN," 2023, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND KARMA; JUSTIN VIVIAN BOND, "WITCH EYES, BY VIV, TO PROTECT YOU FROM EVIL CHODES: LOIS," 2024, WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

## WALLACE STEVENS,

1879-1955

The poet, whose best known works include "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," "The Snow Man" and "Anecdote of the Jar."

WALLACE STEVENS NEVER quit his day job. Though he had literary ambitions as a young man, serving as the editor of the Harvard Advocate as an undergraduate, he earned his degree from New York Law School and in 1916 joined the Hartford

Accident and Indemnity Company, where he remained, specializing in surety and fidelity claims, until his death, in 1955. Yet he was writing all the time: on his daily walk to work, at home in the evenings and sometimes in the office.

It wasn't until 1914, when Stevens was 34, that his first post-college poems appeared in literary journals. He went on to publish seven volumes of poetry over the course of his lifetime. The first, "Harmonium," released in 1923, sold fewer than 100 copies; the last, 1954's "The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens," won the Pulitzer Prize.

The themes of Stevens's work — the affirming

power of art and beauty, the sublime contained within the mundane — suggest one reason why he stuck with insurance law even as his artistic acclaim grew. His steady paycheck would have allowed writing to remain a purely creative act. In his essay "Surety and Fidelity Claims," Stevens says of his insurance work, "You sign a lot of drafts. You see surprisingly few people. . . . You don't even see the country; you see law offices and hotel rooms." Poetry, on the other hand — as he characterizes it in 1923's "Of Modern Poetry" — "must be the finding of a satisfaction." It was his livelihood, in the most artistic sense of the word.

Wim Wenders, 78, filmmaker  
Several years ago, I started a project about the Swiss architect Peter Zumthor, who, along

with others, designed the new Los Angeles County Museum of Art that's being built now. The working title of the film is "The Secret of

Places," and it's done in 3-D. My dream is to make a comedy one day. [Laughs.] Seriously. [Laughs again.] I'm working on it.

Nick Ozemba, 32, and Felicia Hung, 33, designers, In Common With  
Next month, we're opening Quarters, a concept store and gathering space in TriBeCa that will feature our first furniture collection.



# THEASTER GATES,

50, CHICAGO

The University of Chicago professor and multidisciplinary artist, whose solo shows at the Gagosian gallery in Le Bourget, France, and the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo open this month.

IN 2000, I took a job as the arts planner at the Chicago Transit Authority. There was so much new construction happening there, and my role was to appeal to the Federal Transit Administration for a portion of the transit money to be set aside for public art. In a way, it was like an M.B.A.: I managed \$26 million over four or five years. My negotiating skills went through the roof.

I'd graduated from Iowa State [in 1995] with a degree in community and regional planning and then did a [post-baccalaureate] in religious studies and fine art at the University of Cape Town. After that, I spent time in Japan studying ceramics. So when I came to the C.T.A., my background incorporated both art and community and, every day, I was leaving there and going to my ceramics studio.

In 2005, I left the C.T.A. because I outgrew the position, and I stopped making pots because I couldn't afford my studio. I started using more recycled materials in my work [such as wood pallets]. It was during this period that I was starting to combine my knowledge of minimalism and conceptual practices with my background in building and working with my dad, who was a roofer. Now buildings have kind of become my primary monuments, and the project management and team building that I learned at the C.T.A. are really evident in the way that I create.

I did a project at the New Museum [that opened in late 2022 and] was essentially an exhibition about mourning and loss. My father had died six months prior to the opening, and I didn't have time to mourn his death or the deaths of dear friends like [the fashion designer] Virgil Abloh, my mentor [the Nigerian curator and art critic] Okwui Enwezor,

[the author] bell hooks and [the film scholar] Robert Bird. The show grew out of a desire to grapple with my feelings and honor these people. The museum didn't

Theaster Gates's sculptural work "Sweet Sanctuary, Your Embrace" (2023).



necessarily have the budget to do all of the things that I wanted to, so I had to figure out, "Are there poetic ways to articulate loss that don't require substantial build-out, or big, fancy gestures or expensive audio equipment?"

Ultimately, I included Bird's 9,500-volume library, and Virgil Abloh's widow loaned me his yellow diamond-studded necklace. Those were moments when limitations built new

friendships and more nuanced opportunities, and I feel like having been a planner's what made me willing to pick up the phone and say, "Hey, would you be willing to collaborate with me?" — interview by J.C. ▣

## Reject Fear. And Put Your Ego to Bed.

Last year, I went through what medical professionals would call a flop era. I'd had three years of the kind of lovely, psychotic busyness that has you hopping from job to job, just following green lights, but then everything went poof — the show I was working on got canceled; the financing for the film adaptation of my novel fell through. I'd been working on such personal things regarding sex and disability and, when those things ended or weren't [well] received, I began to doubt myself. But then, you're combating panic, and I started thinking really awful thoughts like, "Do I need to write a pilot where there's a

dead body?" Fear is the most poisonous thing to creativity. You can't force it, and you have to listen to the work — it'll tell you what it needs to be. Look at me getting all woo-woo, but it's true. When you make a living off of writing, not every single project's going to be from the depths of your soul, but I think there should always be some level of enjoyment. Starting over is really humbling, by the way. Knowing when to stop and when to start over requires giving your ego an Ambien. Real failure is letting your ego drive the bus of your life right off the cliff. — **Ryan O'Connell, 37, writer and actor**

ADVICE ON BEGINNING

### DA NEXT

**Bobbi Jene Smith, 40, dancer, choreographer and actress**

My husband, Or Schraiber, and I are creating a work composed of solos for each dancer of L.A. Dance Project, where we've been residents for the past year and a half. We've had the unique opportunity to connect deeply with some of the dancers, and this — a gratitude poem for each of them — will be our culminating project. They'll each be a few minutes long and characterized by physicality set against silence.