

Fall Arts Preview: As VCUarts turns 90, we're exploring graduates who've stayed and thrived

- By JO LORD Special correspondent
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Sayaka Suzuki

Photo courtesy of 1708 Gallery

When Richmond art gallery owners talk about the Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts, they mention an institution that pushes

boundaries. They talk about a professionalism and partnership they can rely on. They underscore the remarkable careers of its graduates and the strength of the city's arts scene that can retain their kind of talent.

It all started in 1928, when Theresa Pollak, affectionately referred to as the matriarch of Richmond arts by one gallery owner, taught the university's very first art class. Since then, the program has become a national powerhouse, named the country's No. 1 public university visual arts and design graduate program by U.S. News & World Report every year since 2003.

As the school celebrates its 90th year, we start with the first of a recurring series exploring the lives and careers of VCUarts graduates who've made Richmond their home.

Ed Trask: B.F.A. in painting, 1992

Recent career milestone: having a painting added to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts permanent collection

Move around the city a little and it doesn't take long to run into a piece of work by Ed Trask. His murals cut across the exteriors of The Sidewalk Café and Ellwood Thompson's, just for starters.

After earning his VCUarts degree in 1992, Trask headed to Washington to join a touring punk rock band.

"I did a lot of illegal murals all over the world back then," he said with matter-of-fact delight. "Wherever I saw a cool wall that could use some attention, I took things into my own hands."

Trask eventually came back to Richmond, where he felt a seismic shift happening.

“Young people just started taking over and doing what needed to be done to make this a thriving creative city,” he said. “It seemed like a place I didn’t want to leave.” His career has taken off since then, to say the least, so much so that there’s a yearlong wait for his commissioned work.

BJ Kocen of glave kocen gallery in Richmond’s Fan District described Trask as “a way-paver,” one who doesn’t just open doors for other artists but escorts them through.

“Ed’s career has taken him all over the world, but I think his true passion is Richmond,” he said. “His city has embraced him, and he’s hugged back.”

Leigh Suggs: M.F.A. in craft and material studies, 2015

Recent career milestone: doing a six-month residency at Quirk Gallery

While Trask is an established artist, Leigh Suggs finds herself at the other end of the career spectrum as an emerging artist who graduated in 2015. The North Carolina native specializes in mixed-media works with paper, treating it differently than what’s typically expected.

“It’s been exciting to watch her growth,” said Alice Livingston, co-director of Reynolds Gallery in the Fan. “We’re continuously blown away by the way she manipulates her materials.”

Career highlights so far include a city of Richmond CultureWorks grant and a six-month residency at Quirk Gallery downtown. It came with an apartment and a studio, allowing her to really ground herself and create art with freedom.

A strong sense of community made Suggs want to put down artistic roots in Richmond. “I really loved the support I found in the School of the Arts,” she said, “and also outside of it.”

Sayaka Suzuki: M.F.A. in craft and material studies, 2005

Recent career milestone: receiving a Virginia Museum of Fine Arts fellowship

The city's embrace of its artistic community is also important to Sayaka Suzuki, who grew up in Yokohama, Japan. The 2005 VCUarts graduate was immediately offered a job as adjunct faculty in the school, a steady gig that helps support her artistic career.

Suzuki is a concept-driven artist who works with the materials that fit her idea of the moment. "Incredibly inventive" is how Page Bond, owner of Page Bond Gallery in the Fan, described her.

"She's remained one of my favorites because of her rigor and passion for her practice," Bond said.

What made Suzuki decide to stay in Richmond and pursue a career? "It definitely helped that I was offered a job here," she said with a laugh. "Richmond is the kind of city where you can make a living doing your work without compromise."

A recent career milestone, a Virginia Museum of Fine Arts fellowship, was preceded by a life milestone: buying her first home, complete with a husband, dog, bees, chickens and a studio.

"This city is a treasure," she said. "It's just a really easy place to be an artist."