

5 Artists

HOW DID YOU KNOW YOU WERE AN ARTIST?

HOW DID YOU KNOW YOU WERE AN ARTIST? WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AN ARTIST? HOW DO YOU STAY AN ARTIST? THESE ARE DECEPTIVELY SIMPLE QUESTIONS THAT STYLE EDITOR EMILY LEINFUSS ASKED FIVE TALENTED INDIVIDUALS WHO ALL HAVE DEEP CONNECTIONS TO OUR AREA. WHILE PARTS OF THEIR ANSWERS WERE SURPRISINGLY DIVERSE, OTHER RESPONSES WERE VARIATIONS ON A THEME ABOUT PERSEVERANCE AND PATIENCE.



CHARLIE BARNETT

SARASOTA-RAISED ACTOR GOES TO HOLLYWOOD

Charlie Barnett is one of the best-known alumni of Booker High School's Visual and Performing Arts Theatre Department and is also a veteran of the Sarasota Youth Opera and The Players Theatre. After he graduated from the Juilliard School of Drama he landed small, and then larger roles in movies and TV including NBC's "Chicago Fire," and Netflix's "Tales of the City" and "Russian Doll." His star continues to rise; yet his personality remains grounded in family and in the art of performance.

How did you know you were an artist?

When I was growing up I became very invested in the arts, to which I give a lot of credit to Sarasota. When I was six or seven years old I was at The Players Theatre and a girl, my age, booked a role in the Sound of Music on Broadway. (Ashley Rose Orr attended The Players Performing Arts School and went on to Broadway as Gretl in "The Sound of Music" in 1998.) I went to see it and I thought 'this is a person I know doing this. Why can't I?'

Was there an experience that led you to really commit to being an actor?

Well, I come from a sailing family. My sister was an unbelievable sailor and I was terrible. One time we were in a race at the Sailing Squadron and I was winning for the first time. Then my rudder got caught on the line of a buoy and I not only lost the race, I got stuck out in the water. I was so pissed I told my Mom I would never go sailing again. My parents have always been very open about not pushing us into something, but they also wanted us to choose a direction. My mom laid out ideas, sports included and I chose the arts. Living in Sarasota the arts environment was all around me.

What do you like best about acting?

Acting is like a relationship. There is the science and the ballet of reply and response and the reaction to cause and effect. There is also a balance and energy that passes back and forth between people. That is what drew me in.

How have you persevered through a roadblock?

That's a funny question because in this industry there are always challenges. I appreciate them. Sometimes they demand that you make yourself more vulnerable. Other times you have to climb mountains and that makes you more invested and clear about your voice. At the end of the day it's about

continuing to ask questions and go deeper. It sounds like a cliché but I ask myself: how I can help? What can I do to be of service? Where do I fit in with my art? Those are hard questions but they help you become more clear on what you want to do and why. You have to face challenges, prepare, and do your work: myself included.

MIKE SOLOMON

ESTABLISHED IN HIS OWN LEGACY

Mike Solomon is the real deal. He grew up in Sarasota in the 1960s and, as the son of noted abstract expressionist Syd Solomon, he was also raised in the larger art world of the time. When he was 15 years old he decided to seriously pursue art for himself. After college he worked as a studio assistant to John Chamberlain, the famed abstract artist who resided in Sarasota for two decades. Solomon then moved to New York and returned to Sarasota in 2003. His artwork has won prestigious awards and has been exhibited in prominent galleries and museums across the U.S.



How, and when, did you know you were an artist?

In my case, because I grew up with art and painted from the age of five, the issue was finding my own voice or if I even wanted to sing at all, so to speak. So I had to go out from the context of my background and find out. In time I started to have my own authentic experiences with art so that was when I allowed myself to really identify as an artist. It was in New York, in the fall of 1978.

What form, or genre, of art making is primary for you?

I work in the area between painting and sculpture. My process combines painting with assemblage. The suspended Mylar pieces I am doing now appear as one translucently painted layer but are in fact composites of four or five painted layers bound together. Assembling is a sculptural process because the individual parts have physical autonomy before they are put together and, because the works suspend in space and are viewable from both sides, their context is spacial.

Do you practice other art(s)? If so what?

I have always played music just for enjoyment. I also write a lot. Writing is often how I think philosophical things through. There's also an historical writing that is the basis of my curatorial practice and lectures (Solomon is the curator for his father's body of work). I like sound and music just for the place it takes me. It's a simple yet profound pleasure. There are certain scales that I play in the morning before the painting begins. It's a preparation of sorts, a sound meditation.

How have you persevered through a roadblock?

Sometimes one has to wait for the train of whatever to pass: moods, distractions, or not knowing what to do next – it means having patience. "Roadblocks" can signal that one is not headed in the right direction or the timing is not right, so they are usually blessings in disguise.

We often think prayers are only answered in the affirmative but the negative is an answer too, and often very beneficial. There's a prayer that goes,

"Thou art my guide and my refuge." A guide moves one along the path and a refuge is where one rests and consolidates. Both are the process.

As a member of the Baha'i faith how do your beliefs influence, or impact, your art?

The Baha'i faith is centered in the oneness of humanity. There is an essence, a heart that art has always spoken to. It transcends borders and other separations the world sets up. This is inspiring to me spiritually and creatively. I aspire to express this universal reality, yet all symbols, images and one's identity are culturally specific. My recent works came from thinking about Kristalnacht, 1938, yet the broken glass imagery goes beyond that event and speaks more universally, to the breaking of standards or barriers as well as what were presumed to be safe spaces. In the imagery of the shards there is the drama, and the danger and beauty of light and dark.



ANNETTE BREAZEALE

IF THERE IS A QUESTION THEN ART IS THE ANSWER

Annette Breazeale is entering her seventh season as prop master at the Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe. She is also a professional artist, painter, sculptor, art conservator, and a production designer for film and video. Originally from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, she's lived in Sarasota for more than 30 years.

How did you know you were an artist?

When I read that question it stopped me cold. I never thought about it because it is pre-memory. My earliest recollections are of picking up a crayon at two or three years old, drawing something, and having all the adults in the room say 'she's an artist.' I was identified as an artist by my extended family from my earliest memories.

Were there artists in your family?

No. My grandmother collected art and we would visit museums and go to concerts. But my actually being an artist was unusual.

How have you persevered through a roadblock?

I just don't know how to do anything else. For better or worse, there are many, many things in life I cannot do, but (I can do) artistic endeavors. So, when I have been broached with a roadblock in one field, I just switch to another. Another way to say it is: when I have been faced with opportunities in the arts that I have no experience in I say 'ok, I'll do that.' That's how I ended up running a gallery and doing art direction for film. I just take the skills I learned from one field and make a little adjustment.

How did you gain the confidence to say 'yes' to creative opportunities?

It's not that. I literally don't know how to do anything else. So, for example, I was running the JABU Art Gallery here in Sarasota. (JABU exhibited the art of Joseph Anthony Buzzelli who settled in Casey Key in the 1960s. His son, Bob Buzzelli owned the gallery). Bob was a lovely man and he passed away very suddenly in 2007 at age 45. I just broke my heart, but before I could even wonder what I was going to do next, someone asked me to work with them in the theatre. I ended up doing costumes and set dressing for "Streetcar Named Desire" for a local production.

JOHN SIMS

AN ENIGMA BY ANY OTHER NAME

Is John Sims a mathematician who makes art or is he an artist who visualizes his ideas in the language of math? You might as well ask: what came first: chicken or egg? Sims arrived in Sarasota to develop a visual mathematics curriculum at Ringling School (now College) of Art and Design. His artworks span the areas of installation, text, music, film, performance and large-scale activism. He recently concluded a month-long Artist-in-Residence program at the Irwin House in Detroit, with the aim of developing a three-part, multi-media project about his childhood block, the west side neighborhood at Sorrento Avenue and West Chicago Street.



How did you know you were an artist?

I think I was born an artist because of my capacity and interest to connect to the language and the process of creating thinking. But there is also the idea of, when you decide to be an artist, what does that mean? To me it means accepting the challenge of behaving like an artist, which is making a commitment to creating art and creating a lifestyle around that to maximize creative production.

Did your family encourage your artistic side?

My mother guided me with basic things like math and art at an early age. She also gave me the space to explore, create and build things both conceptually and physically. But more importantly what I learned from my mother is to be patient.

How have you persevered through a roadblock?

I've discovered that working on different problems and processes takes time in both math and art. This idea of the quick solution and superfast

rendering is overrated. It's not reflective of the nature of how evolution works. In 2004 I created "The Proper Way to Hang a Confederate Flag," at Gettysburg College, PA. It was met with resistance and ended up being compromised. That was disheartening, but instead of dropping it, I continued to work on the project. It was revisited in 2015 and 2017 it was performed as "Confederate Flag: A Public Hanging" at Ohio University. In 2020 (after 20 years) I'm planning to conclude project with shows in Buffalo and Birmingham.



NANCY OLIVER

THE REAL GIRL RETURNS

Nancy Oliver's body of work – whether she's writing stage plays, screenplays or directing or producing for TV– always seems ahead of the curve. She was a writer and co-producer for HBO's landmark series "Six Feet Under," worked on the HBO series "True Blood" and received an Academy Award nomination for her original screenplay "Lars and the Real Girl." Oliver earned a Masters degree in Acting and Directing from Florida State University and just moved back to Sarasota from Los Angeles.

How, and when, did you know you wanted to be an artist?

I think always. I started with creative writing pretty much as soon as I learned the alphabet. But I was 20 or 21 by the time I had a real sense of what an artist is and what price I'd have to pay to become one, if I ever did become one and I'm not sure I have. I'll never be sure. But I had to try, it was a compulsion, it drove me, it still drives me.

Do you practice other art(s)? If so what?

Writing and directing are very much connected for me, but for many reasons, personal and professional, I haven't been able to practice the directing art the way I would have liked. But I did get

a chance to direct an episode of True Blood and it was a wonderful and terrifying experience.

I also produce, which can mean a lot of things, for me it means collaborating on set with a director to help bring a script to life – sharing ideas about shots, performance and the feel of the scene. It's different with every director. It also means I get to contribute in the editing bay, where so much of the action happens.

How have you persevered through a roadblock?

I'm not entirely sure what you mean by "roadblock." Do you mean writer's block? I've had that several times and I've learned it has its own timeline, like grief, and the best thing to do when the well runs dry is to step away from computer. Stop

trying. Stop pushing. Immerse myself in life, in things completely different from writing. Have adventures, help people, learn something new and over time the desire and ability to write return. So far it has. You never know. You have to face the question, "What if I can't ever write again?" And you have to figure out an answer and come to peace with it.

If you mean professional roadblocks or "failures" as some people like to say (I don't believe in failure, personally – you always learn something), they happen all the time. It's a discipline: you learn what you can, don't waste time feeling bad about yourself or anybody else, put it firmly behind you and move on to more work. That's what perseverance is.