

Bennett Prize

The 10 finalists selected for the third iteration of the \$50,000 Bennett Prize represent the best women figurative realist painters working today.

BY SARAH GIANELLI



Bennett Prize co-founders
Steven Alan Bennett and
Dr. Elaine Melotti Schmidt

Designed to propel the careers of women artists, the Bennett Prize awards \$50,000 to allow the recipient to devote two years to create a body of work that culminates in a solo exhibition at Michigan's Muskegon Museum of Art, after which it will tour the country.

The prize was announced in 2018 after being developed at the Pittsburgh Foundation's Center for Philanthropy. Art patrons and avid collectors, Steven Alan Bennett and Dr. Elaine Melotti Schmidt of San Antonio, Texas, endowed a \$3 million fund to ensure it would be awarded every two years in perpetuity.

In the following pages, you will learn about the 10 finalists for this year's prestigious and most generous art award ever offered solely to women figurative realist painters, and see samples of the artwork that made these women rise to the top of a record number of applicants.

The finalists were selected by an esteemed jury of four comprised of eminent realist painter Zoey Frank; Julie Bell, the world-renowned illustrator and painter;

Joseph Rosa, retired director and CEO of the Frye Art Museum; and Bennett, the prize co-founder.

Representing the far corners of the country and many states in between, this year's top 10 artists are Ruth Dealy, Ronna S. Harris, Haley Hasler, Sara Lee Hughes, Monica Ikegwu, Laura Karetzky, Linda Infante Lyons, Mayumi Nakao, Kyla Zoe Rafert and Deng Shiqing.

The winner will be announced May 18, at the opening reception of the exhibition at the Muskegon Museum of Art in Muskegon, Michigan. For the first time, a runner-up will receive a \$10,000 award. All 10 finalists' works will remain on view through September 10 before traveling through the summer of 2025. The work of Bennett Prize 2.0 winner, Ayana Ross, will be presented in a solo exhibition that will run concurrently with the exhibition of the finalists.

"The work of these finalists lives up to, and exceeds, the high standards set by the previous finalists," says Bennett. "The finalists' exhibition is going to be an extraordinary exhibition of the highest quality."



Flower Wars, oil on canvas, 60 x 48"



HALEY HASLER

"I want to tell stories in painting," says Fort Collins, Colorado-based artist Haley Hasler. "Often the stories that have the most resonance are the same stories human beings have been telling since the very beginning of language and art: stories about journeys, about transformation, about humans' place in the natural world. Partly because I am a woman painting in the 21st century, I tell these stories in a new way." Her "autobiographical figure paintings" often contain clever commentary on iconic heroines from art history. "The central female characters in my paintings are more a reference to and departure from all of the beautiful marble-like Madonnas, Eves and Venuses in art history, who, though they may occupy the center of a painting, often seem empty of human spirit," she says. One way she counteracts that is by inserting a self-portrait. "The experience of looking at the exterior from within is a perspective unique to the self-portrait," says Hasler. "This has become the subject of my work—the collision between interior and exterior self; the complex nature of the portrayal of such; and the possibilities of exploring narrative and meaning inherent in this process. The painting tells me the story through the act of painting it."

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Cockfight, walnut ink, gouache and serigraphy on mounted paper, 16 x 12"

KYLA ZOE RAFERT

"I cannot express how validating it feels to be a finalist. As artists we spend a lot of time questioning ourselves, questioning what we do and why we do it, and this is by far the greatest honor I've had thus far as an artist," says Kyla Zoe Rafert, who lives on a farm in Amanda, Ohio. Rafert's work has always been partially autobiographical, inspired by her experience of womanhood's limitations and gifts. "I've always centered my paintings on my inner conflicts and self-contradicting ideals in regards to my identity as a female," she says. "The pitfalls, the impossible expectations and unending array of hats we must wear. Not to mention the complexities of what it means to raise children in a society that seems to move ever faster...My goal in my art, in life and in my mothering, is to slow down, get lost in the process and savor what's right in front of me."

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NiaJune, oil on canvas, 36 x 48".
Image courtesy the artist and
Galerie Myrtilis - The Gregg J. Justice
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MONICA IKEGWU

Fresh out of graduate school, Baltimore artist Monica Ikegwu is navigating life as a full-time practicing artist. "Having been selected as a finalist for the Bennett Prize gives me extreme confidence and lets me know that the ideas that I present in my work resonates with others," she says. Ikegwu's work deals with personal identity, specifically for those who identify as Black. Using oil paint and traditional painting methods, she aims to create portraits of Black people that fit the way that they perceive themselves. "I allow the subjects of the painting to have free control over their image," she says. "By removing a part of my creative authority, it allows the subject to reveal the external qualities that define who they are without outside forces influencing them."

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Marital Bliss, oil on canvas, 40 x 76"



RONNA HARRIS

Since learning that she was selected as a finalist, Ronna Harris says, "it has uplifted me emotionally and inspired me to positive action. It's a great honor to be one of the 10 women painters who have not yet received full professional recognition." If she wins the prize, she says she will apply the funds to career necessities such as hiring a professional website designer. "The prize would also allow me to travel to meet curators and gallery owners in addition to entering national competitions and being able to hire models on a regular basis," she adds. Harris, who lives in New Orleans, paints in the style and medium of the Old Masters. Her works communicate a state of controlled chaos as the artist strikes a tension between realism and abstract expression. "The end result is a spatial between magic and illusion rooted in the American realist tradition," she says. "My philosophy is that art is magic, and the magic is illusion."

www.ronnaharris.com



LAURA KARETZKY

“The essential reemergence of figuration in art is something I’ve been anticipating ever since I first picked up a pencil,” says Brooklyn, New York, artist Laura Karetzky. “As a female artist, interested in our shared human experiences particular to this moment in time, being named a finalist for the Bennett Prize is thrilling.” Karetzky’s paintings depict a superimposition of images and stories that convey the idea of simultaneous realities that are constantly shifting. The significant monetary award from the Bennett Prize would allow Karetzky to pursue the next project in her “window” series. “My plan is to erect a maze-like space displaying stories within stories which will continue to challenge our basic understanding of narrative perspective, point of view, time, and will present the possibility for a variety of simultaneous truths.”

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Points and Palms, oil on canvas,
60 x 48"



Don't Rock the Boat,
oil on canvas, 50 x 92"

SARA LEE HUGHES

“As a Bennett Prize finalist I feel a great sense of validation that I am headed in the right direction with my painting and it marks a significant moment in my artistic career,” says Lockhart, Texas, artist Sara Lee Hughes. If Hughes receives the award she will spend the next two years transforming her many thumbnail sketches into full-sized works. Hughes’ work relies heavily on her background in theater, film and television. “Like a play, the paintings are produced with attention to direction, character, costume, lighting and set design,” she explains. “The narratives highlight moments, memories and ideas that mark a journey navigating the differences between my gay father, my straight mother and the socio-cultural norms of the era and those proceeding.” Informed by her life growing up in the South in the 1970s and 1980s, her works function as “metaphors for discovery, other-ness, identity, connection, balance, and truth.”

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ASMR, oil on linen,
60 x 80"



DENG SHIQING

Brooklyn's Deng Shiqing uses her paintings to explore the "relationships between virtual manipulated reality and the tangible world." This exploration takes the form of strange and mysterious narratives populated by small figurative groups or single actors. Shiqing's stories are drawn primarily from the personal, borrowed from the lives of her friends, from her own questions about society or contemporary events. Clothing becomes a starting point for both concealing and expressing the body, a second skin that provides visual clues to the invented stories. The drawn elements often serve as costume, a visual narration of the internal, sketched notes that allow the actors to communicate without speaking. Quiet, contemplative, mysterious and humorous, Shiqing's paintings hide as much as they reveal. "I feel very lucky and happy to be a finalist," says Shiqing. "For me, the Bennett Prize is a great platform to be seen and also discover other great artists to get inspired."



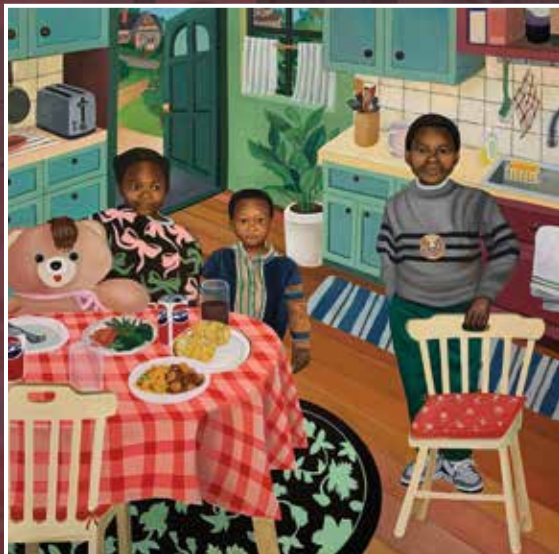
Isuwiaq's Blessing, oil on panel, 30 x 30"



LINDA INFANTE LYONS

"To be included in this list of talented artists is a great honor," says artist Linda Infante Lyons. Infante Lyons studied art at the Vina del Mar Escuela de Bellas Artes in Chile, where she lived for 18 years but was raised in Alaska, where she now resides. Her family is of Alutiiq/Sugpiaq Alaska Native and Estonian/Russian ancestry. This history and ancestry informs her current body of work. "In the spirit of inclusivity, I blend the spiritual symbols of Western culture with those of the Alaska Native people, elevating the culture and worldview of my ancestors," she says. "I acknowledge the duality of my heritage and invite the viewer to consider Alaska Native beliefs as equal to Western beliefs. I present images of Alaska Native women, inspired by friends, family and fellow artists as the powerful beings I know them to be. Additionally, the land, animals and plant life take their rightful place as equals in my icon inspired paintings."

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Early Afternoon, oil on canvas, 48 x 48"



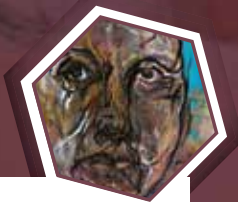
MAYUMI NAKAO

Brooklyn artist Mayumi Nakao's paintings address family, home, history and Western culture. Her charming narratives are inspired by the family photographs of the friends she has made since coming to the United States. Her spaces are characterized by vibrant colors and distorted perspective and scale, and are populated by family groups, especially children, and iconic Western products and food. Her desire to capture the warm memories of friends and comforts of home stems from her sense of isolation upon emigrating from Japan. In her "borrowed nostalgia" she seeks moments of shared humanity and love that transcend cultures and race. "This is a first time in my life that I've been selected as a finalist for such a big award," says Nakao. "I'm nervous, but I'm very excited and happy. It is a very important step in my artist's career. A lot of people will see my art in person while in the exhibition and it fosters motivation and confidence." It will also validate her status as an immigrant artist when she applies for an artist visa so she can continue to work in the United States.

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Early Morning, acrylic on raw canvas, 60 x 60"



RUTH DEALY

When it comes to painting, Providence, Rhode Island, artist Ruth Dealy's primary focus is observation—of reporting what is seen without preconception and the "innuendoes and shadings of education, prejudice, previous art styles, personal taste and cultural trends." Whether she is painting a self-portrait or a landscape, her practice is a meditative one with a goal of revelation, of finding transcendent wonder through the act of repeated observation. The resulting paintings strike a balance between representation and spatial abstraction, with recognizable forms occupying fragmented spaces that speak more to the experience of what is seen than its physical character. Through her art, she seeks universal communication with the viewer, inviting all into a new experience and hopefully, a willingness to embrace the "sensation of falling from wonder to wonder."

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