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Martine Syms and Melvin Edwards Among United States Artists Grant Award Winners

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Nathalie Joachim, Martine Syms and Sophia Nahli Allison. United States Artists

Every year since 2006, in response to cost-cutting at the National Endowment for the Arts, the nonprofit (and nonpartisan) advocacy organization [United States Artists](#) (USA) has awarded unrestricted monetary grants to scores of artists in different disciplines and at all different stages in their careers. On Wednesday morning, USA announced its list of 2020 Fellows, each of whom was chosen after a rigorous nomination and panel process. Every grant winner is being awarded \$50,000, which can be used for whatever means the artist wishes: work, healthcare, familial support, etc.

Among the visual artists named in this year's class of fellows are [Melvin Edwards](#), who became the first African American sculptor to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1970, and [Martine Syms](#), a Los Angeles-

based “conceptual entrepreneur” who uses her artwork to interrogate disparate representations of blackness.

“In their own way, each artist is responding to the increasingly complicated issues of our time,” Deana Haggag, the President and CEO of United States Artists, told Observer via email. “For some, that’s wrestling directly with the climate crisis, immigration policies, socioeconomic inequity and more. For others, it’s reckoning with the many cultural heritages that have come to make this country. Either way, the 2020 USA Fellows are a testament to the remarkable art that is being made in every corner of the country—urban, suburban, and rural—by dozens of exceptional composers, fashion designers, playwrights, painters, architects and so many more.”

Artists from many different disciplines are also included on this year’s United States Artists fellowship list. Writers Hanif Abdurraqib, Sharon Olds and Edwidge Danticat will all receive grants of \$50,000, and the same is true for the filmmaker Bing Liu and the Harlem-based architect Sara Zewde. “We believe strongly that the arts are critically important to the well-being of our communities and at the heart of the arts is the individual artist,” United States Artists Board Chair Ed Henry said in a statement. “We are proud to offer this unrestricted award to encourage artists to explore the possibilities of their practices and support their livelihoods.”

Indeed, grants like this have arguably become even more essential over time, given the fact that the president has diligently spent the last four years attempting to eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts entirely. Such a loss would be devastating to America’s artistic diversity for many reasons, one of them being that if only trust fund kids are able to afford to invest in their art careers, the cultural landscape will become an utterly homogenous drag.