

WORDS ON CANVAS

ANNUAL WRITING COMPETITION



2026 WINNERS

HARN MUSEUM OF ART

WORDS ON **CANVAS**

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Introduction

Words on Canvas has been a significant feature of the Harn Museum of Art's programming for the past eleven years. This annual writing competition does more than introduce college students to the Harn Museum of Art. The competition asks fundamental questions about what makes us human, inviting students to answer through their own creative responses.

We gratefully extend our thanks to this year's panel of volunteer adjudicators: Mr. Stanley E. Richardson, founder of ARTSpeaks GNV; Dr. Douglas Gabriel, Assistant Professor of Contemporary Asian Art; and Mr. Errol Nelson, Student Engagement Manager at the Harn Museum of Art, with assistance from the Spring 2026 Student Engagement Intern, Katherine Hamilton.

The submission list included over 40 entries from students from Santa Fe College and the University of Florida. The judges note that the high quality of the submissions made it challenging to select just a few for awards. We applaud each of you for your submissions and thank you for sharing your thoughts with us.

Several themes emerged from the winners of our competition.

Memory as Place

Many writers of this year's competition focus on location: cliffs, oat fields, coastlines, forests and beaches. These are not neutral backdrops but represent emotionally charged sites where personal history and contemplation meet. It is from this theme that our first-place submission, *As the Sun Rises* by Mariah Ferguson, originates, responding to Rockwell Kent's picturesque landscape. Here, Ferguson engages with quiet contemplations at dawn.

Everyday Objects and Labor

Ordinary materials and labor were also a focus of the selections. An empty can, a soda bottle and tools of labor were repeatedly elevated into symbols of consumption, survival and connection. Poems such as our second-place submission, *The Woodcutter* by Michael Orlando, place us in the world of Robert Gwathmey's oil painting of two men laboring.

Identity, Language and Inheritance

Several works grappled with adoption, migration, bilingual identity and intergenerational memory. Karina Claros' bilingual poem (also reproduced in English) *Mujer Morada (Purple Woman)* illuminates how identity is assembled through images. It was awarded third place for its close visual rendering of identity through an abstracted image.

Hope as Motion, Not Resolution

Rather than offering neat conclusions, our honorable mentions, *Marginalia* and *Instructions for Remaining Human*, point toward hope as an ongoing practice. Both Christian Rios and Mariana del Moral's remind us, through their texts, that seeing, witnessing and ending suffering occur in a moment of rupture that compels us to act.

Words on Canvas invites students to look closely, think deeply and write thoughtfully about art. In doing so they discover things about art and about themselves while they simultaneously open paths into these artworks for all of us—as readers—to explore. We remain gratefully committed to building communities of creativity between the University of Florida, Santa Fe College and the broader world through the power of art.

Please enjoy these wonderful writings.

Errol Nelson
Editor

Katherine Hamilton
Editorial Assistant Intern

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Junior in the College of Engineering
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Gift from the Stephen and Carol Shey Collection

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The Working South

09. By Michael Orlando,
Sophomore in Mechanical Engineering
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Museum purchase, funds provided by the Caroline Julier
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Instructions for Remaining Human

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Mujer Morada

15. By Mariana del Moral,
Junior in the College of Journalism and Communications
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Gift of Jerry and Anne Godsey

As the Sun Rises

Mariah Ferguson

Some truths rise with the morning sun,
moving softly as breath upon a chilled window pane,
discerned as a secret revealed but to a chosen few.
Still, should the most determined ever decide to seek,
they may be granted some small understanding
of what happens as the sun lifts from its slumber.
With a keen eye, one may take notice
of how a gentle dew hangs on blades of grass at daybreak;
how little droplets hold the light
with a grace gentle and tender,
blessing the forenoon and the soil below,
whilst morning hush stretches harebells awake.
And should one tilt their head above the terra,
they would see clouds rise with quiet, slow deliberation
haloed in pastel hues
eager to dissolve themselves in the bosom of the atmosphere.
So if you, one day, find yourself awake at dawn,
walk to the reef-shore meadow,
the place where land meets sea.
And if you truly are awake,
you'll find a sacred boundary drawn by ancient hands
who knew how longing carves a line.
And ere the salt of the sea remembers its weight,
you'll soon learn how a confession
settles in the stillness of breath.
And in the moment of that confession,

it comes to you,
patient as the turning tide,
as soft as the first light,
a calm older than the naming of life.
It's carrying, scarcely bearing
the quiet ache of all forgotten
and the ache of all yet to come.
Though to the simple unaware,
mornings at the reef-shore meadow
appear to be nothing more than a bright light
covering wind-brushed plant matter
and a den of blue



Rockwell Kent, *Ireland Reef*, 1926, Gift from the Stephen and Carol Shey Collection

The Working South

Michael Orlando

Sunken into the earth, lines of felled pines writhe, their thin, black branches sharp with the stark geometry of rigor mortis. Only four survivors stand, their dark bodies tall and stiff-backed. At each tree's crown, clusters of leaves flare out into a stretch of orange, the late-day sky pulped with heat like a slate of scabbed resin, spread low over the land. Below, patches of bruised grass push up through the soft mud, just barely, their little blades dull beneath rolled logs and the boot tread of two Black men at work among the trees. The younger man lifts an axe high overhead, its haft slung back, primed to drive the square steel head down again. At his hand, the forest has splintered, broken into split logs. Beside him, an older man cradles each one, sliding the wood onto a stack grown shoulder-high. Both take on the labor in loose patchworked clothes, all vibrant swatches of burnt red, rust tones, pale blue cotton stained with old dirt and fresh sweat. And still a pine scent clings to the skin, still the sharp bite of steel, the buzz of shock shot through an axe, taking root in bundles of muscle worn raw. A woodcutter's work hardly ends in the woods. There are still trees.



Robert Gwathmey, *The Woodcutter*, 1945, Museum purchase, funds provided by the Caroline Julier and James G. Richardson Art Acquisition Fund

Instructions for Remaining Human

Karina Claros

You want to believe
the world is still capable
of instruction—
that suffering teaches,
that history bends,
that progress is more than a bedtime story
we whisper to quiet our fear.
But look:
everywhere, the same pattern,
like a river returning to its bed.
A people crying out.
A government turning away.
A child lifted from rubble, another buried beneath it.
The map glows—
with the heat of places
where life has become
a negotiation with death.
As though the earth itself
were fevered
by what it has witnessed.
And still,
the world insists on its routines.
Markets open.
Borders harden.
Leaders speak of order
as if order were not built
on someone's broken body.

You ask what it means
to be human in such a time.
But the answer is older
than any nation:
To witness suffering
is to be implicated by it.
To turn away
is a kind of wound.
It is the same answer
the trees give
when the wind tears at them:
to stand,
to witness,
to remain part of the world
even as it trembles.
Injustice is not abstract.
It has a face, a pulse,
a mother waiting for news
that will ruin her.
It has a silence
that spreads like smoke
through rooms where people pretend
not to hear.
And yet—
something in us refuses to die.
Not the blaze of certainty,
but a stubborn ember
insisting the world
can be otherwise,
though only if we learn
to sustain the work.

Call it hope
if you must,
though the word feels small
against the scale of grief.
It is the flow, steady motion that continues
after outrage cools,
after the crowd disperses,
after the cameras leave.
I call it perpetual motion:
the forward-leaning ache
toward a future
we may never see,
the refusal to let cruelty
be the final word.
We rise
because something in us
still believes the world can turn—
A quiet motion forward,
small but insistent,
the human refusal
to let suffering
be the end of the story.

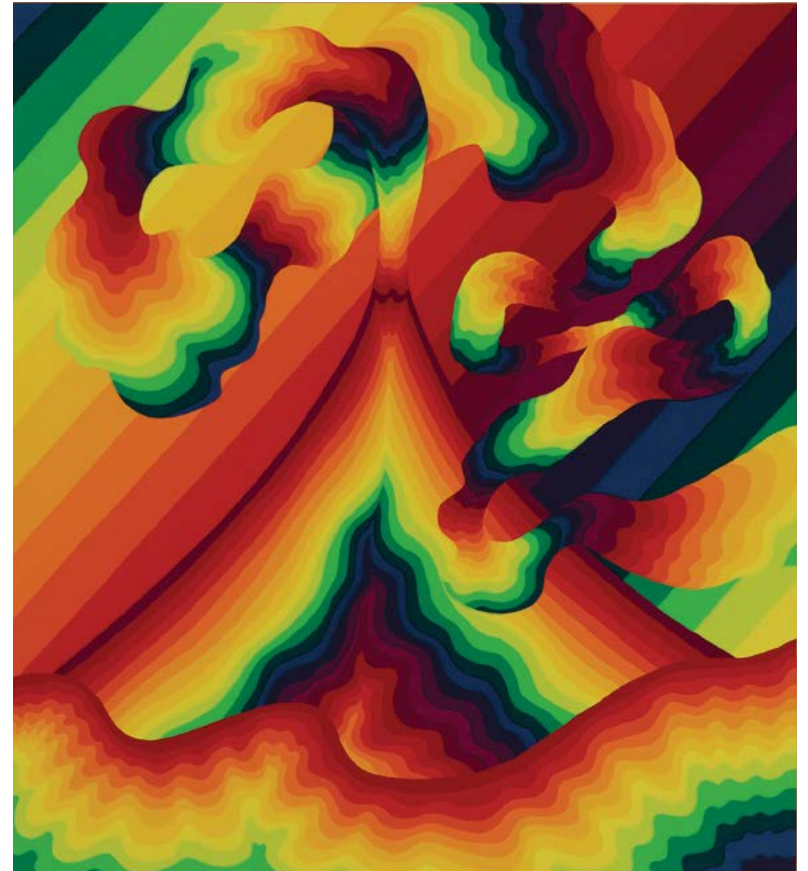


Yuse Yoshinori, Perpetual Motion, 1980, Gift of Jerry and Anne Godsey

Marginalia

Christian Rios

Having no concept of what lay above, her colors simmered and her murmur beneath us grew louder. The unignorable expression of tender crust, whose once dormant senses now spurred a destructive appetite. A tempest whose hunger echoed in its chamber, whose hiccoughs trembled the ground, whose eruption released a rainbow cloud to be suspended from the sky. The squall launched tephra and struck lightning. The wind spun the pink and purple petals of the hydrangeas while the fire ran down the stems of the pieris. Without certainty of what remained, we opened our eyes. Breath by breath and blink by blink, we saw her cerulean snow melt to unveil a new scenery—the volcanic marginalia of Mount Fuji.



Ay-O 霰嘔 (Takao Iijima 飯島孝雄), *Mt. Fuji*, 1975, Gift of Jerry and Anne Godsey

Mujer Morada

Mariana del Moral

Tus ojos me atraviesan.
El aire cambia de rumbo.

Giro dentro de tu órbita,
atada no por manos,
sino por vibraciones.

Sujétame sin tocarme.
Baila el pulso antiguo
que pensábamos perdido.

Aislada,
entendimiento infinito.

Lecciones en mis caderas.
Mi hálito te enreda.
Mi pelo: palma viva,
raíces en la arena.

Hubo un tiempo
de pena enseñada,
silencio impuesto.

Ahora el viento me desarma
y me rehace.
Tus risas, admiración.

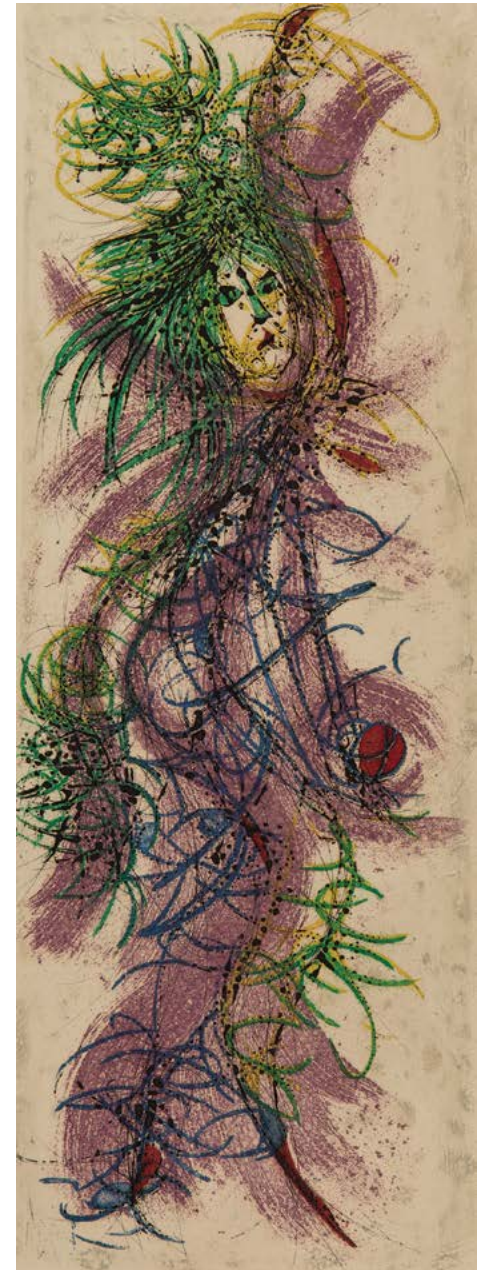
Cintas moradas,
rasgos dibujados por el tiempo.
Gestos florecen
como azucenas enlazadas.

Soy cuerpo que ora.
Soy carne que danza.
Soy mujer que llora.

Te perderás
entre los colores de mi flora.

Igual que tú,
carne y hueso.
Espíritu que no se demora.

Mira mi baile:
presencias
que no se ignoran.



Eiichi Shibuya 谷栄一, *Purple Woman*, Gift of Jerry and Anne Godsey

Purple Woman

English translation of *Mujer Morada*

Your eyes pierce through me.
The air changes its course.

I spin inside your orbit,
bound not by hands,
but by vibrations.

Hold me without touching me.
Dance an ancient rhythm,
the one we thought was lost.

Isolated,
infinite understanding.

Lessons in my hips.
My breath entangles you.
My hair, a living palm,
roots in the sand.

There was a time
of learned shame,
imposed silence.

Now the wind disarms
and remakes me.
Your laughter, admiration.

Purple ribbons,
features traced by time.
Gestures bloom
like intertwined lilies.

I am a body that prays.
I am flesh that dances.
I am a woman who cries.

You'll find yourself lost
in the colors of my flora.

Just like you,
flesh and bone.
A spirit that does not tire.

Watch my dance:
a presence
you cannot ignored.



We gratefully extend our thanks to this year's panel of volunteer adjudicators:

Mr. E. Stanley Richardson, the inaugural Poet Laureate of Alachua County and founder of ARTSpeaks GNV, a non-profit organization that seeks to place literacy in the hands of the community. His collaboration with the Harn Museum over many years is appreciated by all.

Dr. Douglas Gabriel, Assistant Professor of Contemporary Asian Art, whose teaching covers a wide range of directions, including the avant-gardes of East Asia, performance and participatory art, and science fiction in contemporary art. His insights on poetic reactions to art are gratefully appreciated.

Watch for next year's competition at harn.ufl.edu/wordsoncanvas



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