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tucson MEET OUR *makers*

In this month's edition of the newsletter, we'll hear from Laura Pendleton-Miller on how Tucson's newest art gallery, the Blue Lotus Artists' Collective, is showcasing the work of talented Black artists. Keep reading for more of about the gallery or click on the "What's New" link below for the latest and greatest updates from Tucson.

[What's New in Tucson](#)



Meet Laura Pendleton-Miller

When Laura Pendleton-Miller, Founder and President of the Board of the Blue Lotus Artists' Collective (BLAC) wants something, she pursues it with a relentless drive.

Pendleton-Miller's fierce determination and the broad community support, spurred by the personal and professional connections of BLAC Board Member Joanne Stuhr, led to BLAC's swift transformation from a brainstorming session to a full-blown gallery – all in less than a year.

"This started as a happy hour brainstorming session. What we really thought we were talking about at that time was being advocates, not starting a gallery," Pendleton-Miller said. "By the time we got to the third meeting, one of the local Black artists, Willie Bonner, said: "Why do we keep waiting for someone to want us?" And I could see the lightbulbs go off over the heads of the people in the room. Hey, we're doing this. We're going to do a gallery ... That was in May 2022."

A year later, in the spring of 2023, BLAC opened its doors in a donated space in downtown Tucson. The name it was given – Blue Lotus Artists' Collective – is an homage to the intrepid water lily that's native to Africa and can persist even in muddy and nutritionally deficient conditions.

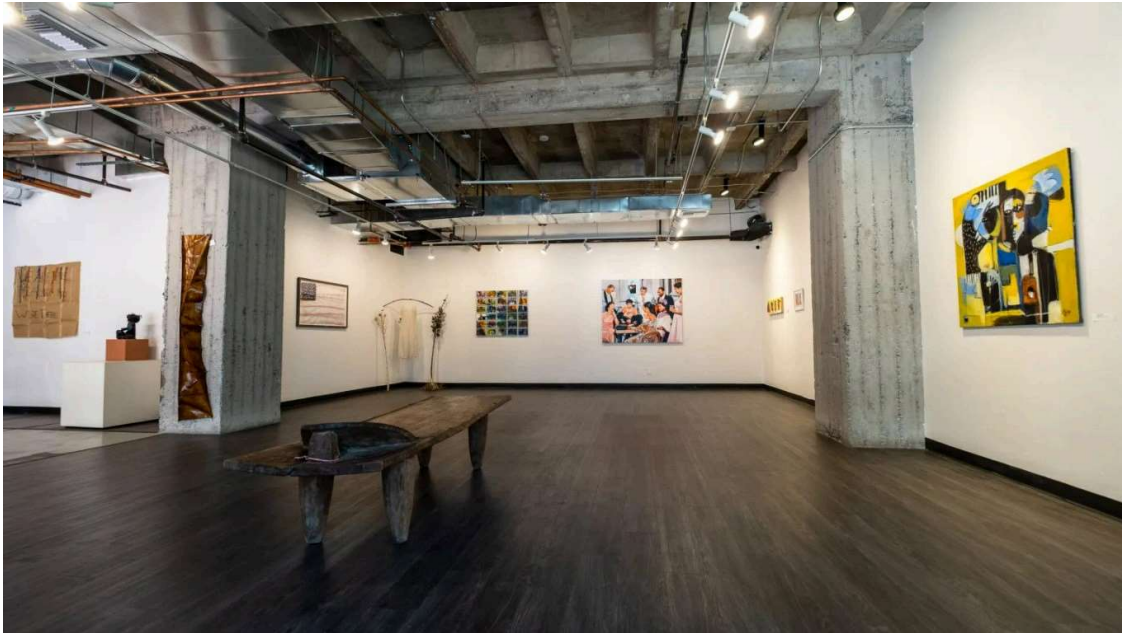
According to Pendleton-Miller, BLAC's mission is: to serve as a vehicle for underrepresented local and regional Black artists to showcase their work; to position Tucson as a contender for nationally and internationally recognized Black artists; to tell important stories that are missing from the educational system; and to demystify galleries for people from all walks of life.

"We want you to bring your lunch," Pendleton-Miller said. "This is a warm and welcoming space. Come by yourself or bring your friends. Come and come often."

The inaugural March 2023 show displayed the work of eight artists, six of whom live in Arizona, including the aforementioned Bonner, who will headline a show in February 2025.

Pendleton-Miller credits him as one of the gallery's driving forces, urging the group to form the gallery and even coming up with its name. And on the day I spoke with Pendleton-Miller at her home over Zoom, I notice two vibrant paintings on the wall behind her – both by Bonner – who moved to Tucson several decades ago to study under internationally acclaimed Black artist Robert Colescott, then a professor at the University of Arizona.

"Willie does abstract work, but he uses a lot of symbolism. There are a lot of important stories about our history being told in his work," Pendleton-Miller said.



Since the inaugural show, there have been three other shows at BLAC, with mediums ranging from paintings and prints to sculpture. The gallery's non-profit status puts it in a unique position, allowing BLAC to operate almost as if it's a hybrid between a museum and gallery, showcasing both new and historic works coming from personal and museum collections.

On the mid-June day I spoke with her, the gallery's volunteers were in the process of taking down BLAC's most recent show, "Three Voices," comprised mostly of sculptures and prints by Seattle artists Marita Dingus and Carletta Carrington Wilson, respectively, and sculptures by Tucsonan Monad Graves Elohim.

The next two shows will run in quick succession. "Arizona Collects" is on display at BLAC this summer and features artwork from the community's personal collections. Then in October, BLAC will showcase the work of deceased Harlem Renaissance artist Arthur Monroe, whose abstract expressionist paintings highlight the major cultural movements of mid-century New York City.

"His son has selected three places to show his work – the Sonoma Valley Museum of Art, Van Doren Waxter Gallery in New York City and the Blue Lotus Artists' Collective," Pendleton-Miller said. "This is a big deal and we are exceptionally honored to feature Arthur Monroe's work."

Largely speaking, the community has been extremely receptive to BLAC, with many of Tucson's local institutions, such as Tucson Museum of Art, University of Arizona Museum of Art and Museum of Contemporary Art Tucson, actively involved in discussions relating to BLAC. It's been a blessing, Pendleton-Miller said, as their insight was crucial in navigating the intricacies of opening and maintaining a gallery on a tight deadline.

"Throughout this process, we've had no pushback, no one has told us why this wouldn't work," Pendleton-Miller said. "I think part of the reason why Tucson was so

responsive is that this community really does try to embrace the beauty of individual differences. Tucson is such a mixture of Native American and Mexican American that our attitude is more inclusive and more embracing.”



Despite the community outpouring of support, there are still naysayers. On the day I spoke with Pendleton-Miller, she was obtaining video footage that the police have requested. It's of a man who came into the gallery shouting racial slurs and acting threatening while her two nieces were manning the front desk.

“It's a shame, really,” she told me. “I've been so inspired by the number of young people who have expressed interest in volunteering at the gallery. I'll need to rethink staffing from here on out to ensure that our volunteers are safe.”

Pendleton-Miller's dedication to making the arts accessible to everyone stems from her own experience. She grew up in a town in Pennsylvania that felt “culturally devoid,” and didn't develop a passion for art until she began babysitting for a family whose home “was like a museum.” Later, when she moved to Washington D.C. to attend Georgetown University, she frequented the city's numerous museums and art galleries, and her love for art blossomed as if it was on “steroids.”

Though her passion for artwork has remained consistent over the years, her focus has shifted to shining a light on the work of talented Black artists.

“We feel that there are local and regional artists who are being overlooked. We really just scratched the surface in our initial shows,” Pendleton-Miller said. “There are an amazing number of Black artists in Arizona who we are just beginning to uncover.. So yes, in Arizona, there are a lot of overlooked jewels, but we also want to think broader

than that in terms of what we would like to showcase ... We want to promote our culture in as many ways as we can.”



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