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ArtsWave awards over \$200,000 to 24 artists through the 2026 Inspire Artist Grants

December 10, 2025 — ArtsWave, the region's engine for the arts, has awarded \$204,700 to 24 local artists through its 2026 Inspire Artist Grants. Now in its sixth year, the program provides financial and career support to individual artists in the Cincinnati region, encouraging them to explore themes of "Truth" and "Inspiration" and to envision a more equitable future through their work.

The Inspire Artist Grants are part of ArtsWave's broader effort to strengthen the sustainability of artists and organizations focused on preserving and advancing BIPOC arts and culture.

The 24 funded projects span a variety of mediums, including film, performance and visual art, exploring themes of migration, heritage and the diverse BIPOC experience here in Cincy. Some highlights include multi-year grant recipient K.A. Simpson's spoken word album exploring the intersection of memory and identity, and Jay Kalagayan's historical fiction comic series that uncovers the forgotten story of the first Filipinos in North America.

In addition to funding, the program offers selected artists professional development opportunities, including writing, project management, and business development sessions. This year, participants will work closely with ArtsWave staff and local professional artist, mentor and ArtsWave-grant recipient Michael Thompson to bring their projects to fruition. New to 2026, the cohort introduces a new category specifically for emerging artists to receive additional mentoring and career guidance throughout the project cycle.

The Inspire Artist Grants are made possible through partnerships with the City of Cincinnati, Duke Energy, Greater Cincinnati Foundation and the Contemporary Arts Center. The program culminates in a professional showcase of the selected projects at the Contemporary Arts Center in July 2026.

For more information about this year's Inspire Artist Grants, visit artswave.org/inspire.

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About ArtsWave

ArtsWave fuels the Cincinnati region's arts, supporting 150+ organizations, projects and artists each year. Since 1927, it has been the primary way the region funds the arts, raising millions annually from tens of thousands of individuals, businesses and foundations to drive a more vibrant economy and connected community. Through the Blueprint for Collective Action, ArtsWave strategically makes investments that maximize the arts' impact across the region. **To learn more and give, visit artswave.org.**

2026 Inspire Artist Grant Program Project Descriptions

Markus Cook | *How to Resurrect a Loved One*

Facing the trauma of a death in the family is never easy; what would you do if your loved one came back to life, for one night, one last meal? *How To Resurrect a Loved One* is a film that delves into the ramifications of just that. The film depicts the fractured and divided Evans Family, as they grapple with the mysterious return of their matriarch one dark Sunday evening.

Bertha Davis | *The 90's: A Documentary for the Ages*

The 90's: A Documentary for The Ages is a series of interviews with individuals born in the 1990's and individuals 90+ years of age. The film introduces six individuals who share their story, their perspective on life and mental health. Those aged 90+ experienced the beginning of widespread use of telephones, and those born in the 1990's were on the cusp of a digital revolution. What does each group see as their biggest challenge? Do they approach mental wellness the same? Viewers will leave the film with tools for coping in challenging times and hope for their future.

Clifford Fenell | *Many Voices: Stories of Us*

Many Voices: Stories of Us is an anthology film highlighting the diverse experiences of people of color in Cincinnati. Through personal monologues paired with poetry, dance, and music, we celebrate authentic voices and foster community dialogue. This project aims to deepen understanding, bridge divides, and amplify underrepresented perspectives.

Ashley Glass | *SDOH (The Social Determinants of Health) Short Documentary/Trailer*

SDOH is a short film that shines a light on the social determinants of health—the everyday factors like housing, access to care, and education that shape how we live and thrive. Through real stories from Black and Brown Cincinnatians, this project

amplifies voices often left out of the health conversation. Using art as advocacy, the film will educate, inspire empathy, and spark change.

Brandon Isaac | *Pride in my Heritage: Coming Home to Yourself*

Pride in My Heritage: Coming Home to Yourself is a creative storytelling and film project that blends hip-hop, poetry, and documentary to explore identity, legacy, and pride. The project guides young Black and Brown boys through workshops where they document family stories and learn to express themselves through media arts. Alongside their journey, Brandon creates and performs original pieces inspired by their growth—showing how art can heal, connect, and transform. The final film and performance will honor both the youth voices and Brandon's evolution as a storyteller and filmmaker.

Julia Orquera Bianco | *Iluminar*

Iluminar is a solo exhibition and film by artist and ecologist Julia Orquera Bianco. Exploring migration, family and ancestral heritage, and plant knowledge from both hemispheres, the project will present a new interdisciplinary and multi-sensory body of work. Through her unique lens, Orquera Bianco seeks to illuminate the complexity, resilience, and beauty of the migrant experience, inviting the audience to reflect on human movement and the building of belonging through creative storytelling.

Derrick Smith | *Building a Nest in a Dying Tree*

Building a Nest in a Dying Tree is a short film that shares the same title as the album that it accompanies. It follows the story of a radio show host who must listen to the troubles (mostly pertaining to housing) of listeners and give advice while still navigating his own issues. The film itself will be 6-12 minutes and feature 3 original songs from the album. There will also be a 5-12 minute, behind the scenes mini documentary about the making of the short film and album.

Jori An Cotton | *Voices of Resilience: Amplifying Stories, Art, and Healing Across Sheltered Communities*

Voices of Resilience: Amplifying Stories, Art, and Healing Across Sheltered Communities brings poetry, visual storytelling, and performance into the lives of individuals and families experiencing homelessness. Through guided workshops at local shelters, participants explore their voices, emotions, and experiences and transform these insights into a professionally produced multimedia performance. Combining spoken word, original music, and projected visuals, the final showcase honors the resilience, joy, and humanity of these communities. This project fosters healing, celebrates lived Black and Brown experiences, and bridges art with social impact — creating space for empathy, understanding, and creative connection.

Gabriel Martinez Rubio | *Free-Dom*

Free-Dom (taken from "Freedom and Domination") is a two-part project. There will be two bilingual, Spanish and English, workshops for members of the community introducing them to modern dance. The workshops will be a safe and accepting space where participants can learn more about dance techniques and movement and how it can be used to express themselves. The second part is an original 30-minute modern dance work aimed for a general audience, with a main theme that focuses on how the

media conditions and manipulates society as it relates to the Latine community and the conversation around immigration.

Geri P | *Broken Kids*

Broken Kids is a five-song EP and live showcase that connects artists through sound, storytelling, and community. Written and produced by Cincinnati-based artist Geri P, the project transforms themes of healing, growth, and self-discovery into music that bridges experience and emotion. Through collaboration, mentorship, and shared creative processes, *Broken Kids* will become more than an album—it will be a safe space for people to feel, reflect, and heal together. Each song represents a step in the journey toward self-worth and creative liberation.

Roberto | *SI DIOS QUIERE*

A partially autobiographical, partially biographical album told from a rotating first person omniscient perspective with each song named after and narrated from the point-of-view of individuals that the author can cognitively empathize with through lived experience. This narration pays homage to the folklore depicted in regional Mexican norteña music. Throughout the project are nods to Mexican/Chicano cultures, which take the form of de la soul Esque skits inspired by viral moments and classic cinema from the Mexican diaspora. All employed composition techniques and musical stylings were contributed to or popularized by artists of Mexican heritage on either side of the border.

K.A. Simpson | *You Should Have Been There: Things That Sounded Funnier in My Head*

This project is a spoken-word album that lives at the crossroads of poetry, music, and truth where words breathe, rhythms speak, and stories carry us forward. Inspired by the spirit of Nikki Giovanni's 'Truth Is on Its Way,' this project will explore memory, identity, and the Black experience in Northern Kentucky and beyond. Each track will be a reflection, a conversation, a heartbeat that connects the personal and the universal, bringing these poems to life in sound, crafting an album that resonates, uplifts, and reminds us that our truths are not just heard, but they are also felt.

The Silent Poet | *Threads of Solidarity: A Collective Manifesto in Word and Action*

Threads of Solidarity: A Collective Manifesto in Word and Action is a writing and community art project uplifting cross-racial solidarity between Black and Brown communities. Through three creative workshops held at WordPlay Cincy, participants will share stories, reflect on justice, and imagine new ways to stand together. Insights from these sessions will inspire an original poem—my artistic manifesto—brought to life as a large-scale scroll installation. This project blends poetry, visual art, and community engagement to spark conversation and action toward collective healing and liberation.

Noam Denenberg | *Carbon Dreams*

Carbon Dreams is a decade distilled into fragments of the artist's journey as a gay, Jewish, Israeli-born immigrant artist carving his own path. It's a visual meditation on transformation, expressed through series of paintings tracing the arcs of awareness, discovery, connection, reflection, and renewal. Each chapter captures moments of learning to love—myself and others—the echoes of relationships, and the tension

between pain and joy, resilience and rediscovery, vulnerability and strength. Through layered body prints, diverse materials, and resin, the work explores the ways we move through states of being—celebrating the beauty of living unapologetically as ourselves.

Drea | *Rankin House, tribute to the successful journey*

A fashion installation 3D art piece, *Rankin House, tribute to the successful journey* is an artistic fashion piece created with the story of all 2,000 successful trips of enslaved African Americans on their way to freedom through the underground railroad. One stop in particular was the John Rankin House. The fashion creations will be hand painted with details of the history, struggle and resilience for those Black and Brown individuals who made the journey. This project is a tribute of creativity, style, and elegance in a way that captures the story and how far we have come today as a culture in the United States.

Ximena Flores | *Inti Echoes*

Inti Echoes is an immersive art project inspired by Inti, the Inca Sun deity, celebrating harmony, balance, and the cyclical flow of life. Using natural and repurposed materials like fibers, bark, and dried flowers, these sculptural installations and participatory mandalas invite audiences to reflect on ancestral wisdom and our connection to nature. Rooted in the principles of Ayni—sacred reciprocity—this project merges art, sustainability, and community engagement. Through shared creation and contemplation, *Inti Echoes* illuminates how the echoes of Incas teaching continue to guide us toward gratitude, respect, and a deeper relationship with the Earth.

Jeni Jenkins | *Here in The Middle: Colors of Colorism, Bodies in Margins*

This project explores what it means to live in the in-between — to carry many shades, stories, and lineages within one body. Through community workshops, conversations, and portrait sessions with mixed-race women, this socially engaged project confronts colorism, belonging, and the politics of visibility. *Here In The Middle* is both personal and collective — a space to name what has been silenced and to honor the complexity of identity. The final exhibition will weave together story, sound, and images to celebrate resilience and reclaim the beauty of difference. The hope is to foster understanding.

Jay Kalagayan | *St. Malo: First Filipinos in North America*

St. Malo is a historical fiction comic series that uncovers the forgotten story of the first Filipinos in North America. This project shines a light on the Manilamen, sailors who escaped Spanish oppression in the 1700s and established a free settlement in Louisiana, including a fight with Jean Lafitte's men in the Battle of New Orleans.

This comic is being created to challenge history, celebrate the Filipino diaspora, and ensure Asian Pacific Americans are seen as the heroes of their own complex, haunted, and hunted stories. This is about representation, history, and visibility.

Noel Bassam Mohammad Maghathe | *Between Us*

Between Us moves through what stays and what fades. It explores how light shifts, memory hides, and what the body needs to heal. For this series, working with light and land to create tri-color cyanotypes, the artist uses an alternative photographic process

that traces the body, memory, and earth through ritual and repetition. Using what the earth provides, the artist will gather sunlight and ground herbs to create layered images of cyan, magenta, and yellow, mimicking the screen-printing process through light. Each print rests in a protective hand-carved wooden frame, embedded with personal messages and sigils, a private mantra, a language for the artist, their land, and their light.

Lisa Merida-Paytes | *The Paroxysm-Tree Project*

The Paroxysm-Tree Project is a vehicle examining health discrepancies, ancestral weaving techniques, concepts and materials with traditional, hand-dyed threads to create an immersive installation telling a story of Hispanic cultural and personal narratives. The installation utilizes physical elements of lights, dramatic shadows, traditional and contemporary materials/techniques enhancing the viewer's visceral experience while inviting touch and movement. The site-specific installation will provide emotional engagement, transform the space and create a captivating environment for viewers to contemplate our connection. This project's intention is to expose juxtaposed ideas to reveal blurred distinctions between connections and dysfunction exhibited in multi-media multivalent invocations of the body.

Rebecca Nava Soto | *The Land Remembers: We Were Always Here*

The Land Remembers: We Were Always Here is a community-based art project and installation led by artist Rebecca Nava Soto. In collaboration with Indigenous Mexican, Central American, and migrant families in Cincinnati, the project explores migration as sacred continuity, not exile. Participants emboss stories into found metallics—transforming soda cans and scraps into contemporary milagritos and retablos—and join a projected sound and video installation illuminating local landmarks. Together, these works honor resilience and belonging, reminding us that the people called “migrants” and “illegal aliens” are returning through ancestral lands that have always remembered them.

Christina Sifri | *Land and Body*

Throughout the last several years, the artist has begun dissecting the ways in which her body has felt like a battleground similar to her homeland. The land of Palestine has experienced decades of apartheid along with the people, and this work is an exploration of the interconnectedness between the artist's land and body, calling attention to how her experiences living in America reflect the passed down experiences of her ancestors. Through these iterations, the healing process will begin, realizing the generational and empathetic connection that humans hold with the natural world.

Janyla Smith | *The Essence of My World*

The Essence of My World celebrates the artist's skin, culture, and the beauty that comes from both joy and struggle. Through a series of 10-12 paintings of familiar faces in the community, the work will showcase not only their expressions but also their actions and their essence. Through her art, the artist mixes realism and fantasy to show the truth of who we are—strong, soft, and full of story. People will see the power in color, history, and creativity, and each piece will reflect their happiness, struggles, sadness, and anger, telling the full story of all of our lives.

Ingrid Woode | *Twilight Sanctuaries*

Twilight Sanctuaries will transform an hour once marked by fear into a space of rest and remembrance. This series of original work pairs large format 4x5 film portraits and 360 video vignettes of Black rest at dusk, as acts of dignity and peace, accompanied by original music arrangements serving as a soundtrack for this series. Inspired by my grandmother's journey with Alzheimer's disease, *Twilight Sanctuaries* will explore memory's fragility and endurance through light, breath, and sound. Each immersive sanctuary honors stillness as sacred, reminding us that Black rest is not an exception, it is a right.