Kimberly D. Iles was known for her vivacity, generosity of spirit, and passion for the arts. She graduated with honors from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in 1990, earning a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. As a graphic designer, she poured her talent and energy into her work for clients ranging from the Oak Ridge National Laboratory to the White House Tech Corps and started her own very successful design firm, Ilesnet Design. She designed a web-based textbook – the first of its kind – for the Computational Science Education Project, a K-12 educational program to teach the principles of high-performance computing. She later transitioned into a fulltime career in fine art, exhibiting her paintings and photographs in juried shows around the world.

When Kimberly was told she had a terminal illness, she and her husband, James J. Hack, began discussing the idea of an enduring scholarship that would impact the future of young artists and decided on a generous endowment to her alma mater.

“I can’t continue to contribute to the arts, but this will give another generation the opportunity to do the things I can’t,” Iles said.

The Kimberly D. Iles Art Scholarship Endowment, established in 2015, supports multiple scholarships awarded annually to undergraduate students in the School of Art. The awardees must have successfully completed a portfolio review, have high academic performance, may have financial need, and must be residents of Tennessee. To date, 12 students have received scholarships totaling $23,000. Many more will be awarded in the years to come.

The inaugural Kimberly D. Iles Awards Ceremony took place September 19, and James Hack presented the awards. The 10 recipients, representing each area of study in the School of Art, presented their work and discussed the scholarship’s impact.

“This endowment is a real game changer for undergraduate students in the School of Art,” says David Wilson, director of the School of Art.

“It has the potential to create a strong sense of achievement for our students. They’ll know about this award and look forward to being nominated by their professors.”

Iles’ legacy is already living on in the work of current UT students.

“Just being nominated for this scholarship has made me feel much more confident in my ideas and in my work,” says Jade Knox, a senior studying ceramics.

“Receiving this scholarship backs me with greater responsibility to carry on the practice of creating meaningful and insightful work that honors Kimberly D. Iles and her own commitment to the arts,” says Parker Jenkins, a junior graphic design student.
Celebrating Creative Successes

This past year has been especially exciting for the School of Art, and the new year holds great promise. We have a new School of Art academic advisor, Brittany Hunt-Woods, dedicated to keeping our students informed and on track to graduate. We have an exceptional group of new graduate students coming to our highly ranked program from nine different states. We are very pleased to welcome Mary Laube, new faculty member in painting and drawing.

The student gallery has opened at 1150 McCalla Avenue with updated features and more robust exhibition and event scheduling. Exciting exhibitions are scheduled in the Ewing and UT Downtown galleries including new media artist Morehshin Allahyari, the artist-in-residence biennial, and Dual Current, which examines the relationship between painting and architecture in a contemporary context.

We are also very excited about the formation of the new School of Art Council of Advisors, which will offer vital support and advice so we can make informed decisions that positively impact students and faculty.

We encourage you to get involved in the creative successes of the students and faculty of the School of Art. We are very fortunate to have generous individual and family supporters who recognize the importance of art and design in a contemporary society and believe in the value of art education. The School of Art relies on donors to provide critical support for scholarships, awards, and creative activity. Donations from private individuals are the lifeblood of a great academic program.

To that end, we have updated our Give to the School of Art webpage. Our endowments are listed with active links that not only make donating very easy, but provide background information about the origin of the endowment and what the income goes to support. Please consider making either a one-time or sustained contribution to one of our established funds. Or, if you are considering a unique endowment or legacy gift, please contact me. All contributions are greatly appreciated.

Please contact me if you wish to know more about the School of Art and all that we offer.
Three students in graphic design at UT spent their senior year developing a brand for a line of environmentally sound food products for the University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture (UTIA).

The project began with two professors of biosystems engineering and soil science, an entrepreneur, and a line of environmentally safe coffees sourced by UT alum Andrew Blake. When they reached out to Deb Shmerler, associate professor of graphic design, for design help, the search for a coffee brand design evolved into a vision for designing an overarching brand for all UTIA products.

Shmerler tasked her students, Kari Cottrell, Erik Vass, and Wilder Smith, with writing a strategic brand plan, including the name, mission, vision, unique value proposition, position, and personality of the brand. These elements would provide the foundation on which to build visuals.

The students began by researching UTIA history and other university food product brands, interviewing faculty, reviewing market analysis trends, and reviewing a business plan provided by Joy Fisher, Ag Innovations entrepreneur, and UT marketing student Caroline Conley.

“Once the brand brief was written, naming became the most difficult part of this process,” Cottrell says. “We worked for weeks to come up with down-to-earth names that had a connection to UT and farming, while also focusing on the importance of the student component.”

At the end of the semester, the students presented their strategic plan and visual work to UTIA faculty and Bill Brown, dean and director of UT AgResearch.

“Everyone was very pleased and impressed with the work...even the creative team,” Shmerler says.

Forbes Walker, professor of biosystems engineering and soil science, believes that this brand would provide UT alumni with high quality products and an appreciation for how they were produced. According to Chris Clark, professor and interim head of the Department of Biosystems Engineering and Soil Science, all products will be produced using management practices that mitigate environmental damage and promote resource conservation. Proceeds from sales will be reinvested to support student travel and research.

Shmerler was eager to take on the project. "I am interested in problems that increase the sustainability, strength, and creative potential of a place or culture," Shmerler says.

She saw in this project the potential to improve Tennesseans’ quality of life. Like the many research-based courses taught by the graphic design faculty, it provided the opportunity to ensure that students walk away from their UT experience with an understanding of how design can promote civic responsibility and strengthen the creative potential of diverse communities.
Printmaker and Puppeteer

In addition to being a third-year student in the UT MFA printmaking program, Johanna Winters is a puppeteer. Her hand-built figures are both endearing and uncanny, and her performances, using larger-than-life heads and distorted, delicate figures, are both humorous and dark. In her current work, Dowagers, she explores ideas about control and play through a pair of reclusive sisterly spinsters.

“My work behaves as playful coping rituals for anxieties about aging, vanity, shame, and disappointment,” Winters says. “I use elements of animation, printmaking, and puppetry to concoct an elixir of discomfort and delight.”

This past summer, Winters took her show on the road. Through an artist residency in Wrocław, Poland, and the Orin B. and Emma G. Graf Travel Award, Winters traveled to central and eastern Europe, expanding her research in printmaking and puppetry in a region with a rich history of storytelling and theater.

As part of her residency, she exhibited recent work in printmaking and animation at the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Fine Arts together with Elysia Mann, a 2017 graduate of the UT MFA program in printmaking. The residency allowed Winters and Mann to experience the vibrant culture of graphic arts in Poland and inspired them to take new approaches to their own studio practices.

Winters also traveled to the Czech Republic, Vienna, and Budapest to encounter both historical and contemporary artworks and theater productions that broadened the scope of her research in hand-driven performance. According to Winters, marionette puppetry has a long-standing tradition as a form of public entertainment throughout Bohemia that dates back to the Middle Ages. At museums of puppetry and marionette theater in the Czech Republic, including those in Prague, Pilsen, and Prachatice, she saw hundreds of hand-carved marionettes, many of which were constructed in the late 1800s. She also saw a marionette performance of the Mozart opera Don Giovanni, which originally premiered in Prague in 1787.

“It was exciting to imagine these forms coming to life through live performance,” Winters says. “This research affirmed my interest in puppetry for its ability to evoke a sense of both familiarity and discomfort in its near-humanness.”

Winters is looking forward to exploring the bridge between performance and visual art through puppetry in her thesis work. This spring, she will present a performative event in the Knoxville community and at the School of Art.
The Bensons are a family of artists, of Tennessee natives, and of University of Tennessee alumni. This past spring, The Ewing Gallery of Art and Architecture and the University of Tennessee Potter’s Club featured their work in Common Lineage: The Bensons.

The newest alumna, Mary Benson Carbonell, received her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in ceramics in 2013, and is pursuing her master’s degree in art education at UT. Her older brothers, Aaron and Zac, earned their degrees in ceramics and sculpture, respectively. Zac, who graduated from UT in 2009, went on to earn his MFA in studio art from the University of Maryland, College Park. Aaron graduated in 2007, received his MFA from New York State College of Ceramics, Alfred, and is now an assistant professor of art at the University of North Alabama, teaching ceramics/sculpture/3D.

Their father, Lee Benson, earned three degrees from UT – BFA in studio art, BS in art education, and MFA in ceramics in 1989 – and is a professor of fine arts in sculpture and ceramics and chair of the art department at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee. Lee met his wife, Elizabeth, while in graduate school, and together they started Benson Sculpture LLC.

Working collaboratively with their children (including daughter Sarah Benson, a current UT student), they create large-scale public sculptures out of timber, earth, and stone, which have been exhibited nationally and internationally. Recently, the Bensons have developed a relationship with Habitat for Humanity and Habitat for Humanity International to repurpose materials used in their sculptures to build homes in the community where the sculptures were exhibited.

The Bensons work well together, but as the Ewing Gallery exhibition demonstrated, they each have a distinct artistic vision and approach. Aaron, who works mostly in ceramics, describes his work as “using reductive forms and essential materials to span the gap between the present and the eternal.” Zac often repurposes found materials to make large sculptures that offer searing commentaries on current events. Mary exhibited large-scale photographic prints, and Lee works with a variety of materials, including sugar, gold leaf, VHS tape, and money.

Whether working individually or as a group, the Benson family is driven by their religious faith and moral convictions to create art that addresses social challenges. Their years spent at UT were not only important skill-building times, but also inspired each member of the family to celebrate and uplift the communities in which they work.
Milan Honored for Impact in Art

Wardell Milan II, an internationally recognized artist based in New York City and graduate of the studio art program at UT, was honored this past spring with a Trailblazer Award by the Commission for Blacks and the Office for Diversity and Inclusion. Wardell (‘01) studied photography and painting at UT before he went on to earn a Master of Fine Arts degree at Yale University. He is a faculty member at the School of Visual Arts in New York.

In keeping with its mission of honoring the accomplishments of African Americans affiliated with the University of Tennessee, the Trailblazer Series selected Wardell for being a trailblazer in his discipline.

Among many other accolades, Wardell has received a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Biennial Award and grants from Art Matters and the Foundation for Contemporary Arts. Most recently, he has been exhibiting selections from ongoing bodies of work on paper and photography, including A Series of Inspiring Women at Louis B. James Gallery in New York; Kingdom or Exile: Parisian Landscapes at Savannah College of Art and Design; and The Charming Hour at David Nolan Gallery, where he is represented. Several of his pieces are part of permanent collections at The Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art.

While his career has taken him far from Knoxville, Wardell describes his work as perennially informed by his experiences growing up in Knoxville.

“As a young adult living in Knoxville, and eager to live north of the Mason-Dixon line, I was unconscious of how living in the South informed me as an artist,” Wardell says. “The South’s idiosyncratic culture, its psychologically charged history, and my perfectly recurring loop of life’s banal situations and social doctrines, would ultimately direct me towards moments of self-realization and discovery.”

In particular, Wardell was influenced by two of his UT art professors – Baldwin Lee and Kevin Everson.

“Even now, many years since my final day of photography class with Baldwin, and the film course taught by Kevin, I can still hear the voices of these young men when working in my studio,” Wardell says. “They taught me to continually challenge my creative practice and to remember that the world is full of artists and art, ‘so you better have something smart to say.’”

As part of his trip to Knoxville, Wardell selected three current UT undergraduate students for the Wardell Milan II Art Excellence Awards, sponsored by the Chancellor’s Commission for Blacks and the School of Art. Jesse “Drew” Justice, Paris Woodhull, and Joseph “Grant” Barbour, were honored for their work in painting, printmaking, drawing, and animation.

Robert Nobles, who chaired the Trailblazer Award ceremony on behalf of the commission, was pleased to reconnect Milan with the School of Art and current art students.

“The committee identified Wardell as someone with remarkable promise, and tremendous success early in his career,” says Nobles, associate vice chancellor for research. “We saw him as a role model for current and graduating students.”
Painting and Drawing Professor Joins Faculty

This fall, Mary Laube, assistant professor of painting and drawing, joined the School of Art faculty. Laube was born in Seoul, South Korea, and received her MFA from the University of Iowa in 2012. According to Laube, her work describes painting as an act of staging, an attempt to represent a constructed and idealized world. Drawing from her surroundings, she alters perspective to compress substantial forms into paper-thin constructions.

“Through various forms of representation, we create surrogates for the irretrievable histories we long to preserve,” Laube says. “However, efforts to present complete and accurate versions of history are often romanticized abstractions of what we think to be true.”

Her recent exhibitions include Piecing It Together at the Hawn Gallery in Dallas, Signaling to the Cipher towards a Segway at Field Projects in New York City, and Paper Planes at Whitdel Arts in Detroit. Laube is co-founder of the Warp Whistle Project, a collaborative duo with composer Paul Schuette.

“We are very excited to have Mary Laube joining the faculty,” says Jered Sprecher, senior professor of painting and drawing. “She brings a wealth of experience in painting and drawing as a practicing artist, while also working on collaborative projects that engage sound and movement. Her excellence as an artist and commitment as an educator are a dynamic addition to the School of Art.”

Powers Named Guggenheim Fellow

For John Powers, associate professor of sculpture, the past year has been a momentous one. Since being named a Guggenheim Fellow – the fourth in history for the University of Tennessee – he has been making the most of his freedom to explore ideas without the pressure of a deadline. In his studio, he’s been carving, making kinetic sculptures, editing videos, and experimenting with 3-D printing. Outside his studio, he’s traveled in Japan, visiting the national treasure sites that inform his work.

Powers first visited Japan in 2006, and his experience there has been feeding his work ever since. Recently, his interest has expanded into an inquiry concerning Buddhist iconography, mythology, and video game imagery and characters.

“Like a lot of people my age, I grew up playing games on an original eight-bit Nintendo console,” Powers says. “Years later, I began to ponder the elemental emphasis within the game, as well as the complicated nature of the hero figure, and the implicit question: is a robot or an android more than human or less than human?”

Powers describes his work as an inquiry into forces that we see only indirectly: wind, gravity, time, and love. While the Guggenheim affords fellows a break from teaching, Powers’ time devoted to research and experimentation has helped expand the scope of his teaching practice. When he returns to teaching next spring, he will offer a graduate seminar for students in time-based art as well as in sculpture and ceramics.

“My own work has branched into time-based media for a long time, including sound, video, and animation, in addition to mechanisms,” says Powers, who sees it as a logical extension to work more formally as part of the time-based art faculty at UT.
Support the School of Art

We believe in the power of art, design, and creative innovation to transform our world. Artists, designers, and scholars are uniquely capable of providing a distinct perspective and contributing to imaginative opportunities in shaping today’s world.

We encourage you to be involved in the creative successes of the students and faculty of the School of Art. We rely on donors to provide critical support for scholarships, awards, and creative activity. Please consider making either a one-time or sustained contribution to one of our established funds.

art.utk.edu/support  865-974-3407

Thank you for your support.