At 24, **David Wilson**, director of the School of Art, had only just begun thinking like an artist. His investigations began as social interactions both in the environment and buildings slated for demolition by “setting things up and leaving them,” potentially for others to happen upon them or to disintegrate over time. It was only after picking up an art book that he discovered a context to what he had been creating intuitively.

After an initial misfire at higher education, Wilson re-enrolled part-time in a second chance program at a local community college. He completed his associate degree and transferred to the University of California, San Diego, where he earned both his BA and later his MFA degrees. At UC San Diego, Wilson was mentored by well-recognized artists Allan Kaprow, Italo Scanga, and Manny Farber and focused his activities on video, performance, and installation.

During his master’s thesis project, Wilson began including drawings in his artistic practice. He experimented with projecting miniature drawings onto walls, referencing Persian miniature paintings.

“It was exciting for me to create something really small but then to see it blown up really big,” Wilson said. “I took that motivation and started creating large scale drawings and have continued to work large scale and environmentally.”

Wilson learned carpentry and manual skills and worked as a specialty fabricator for his professors and local artists to pay for his education. He was hired as studio assistant for Farber, a position that continued after graduation.

“I never expected to get a job in academia, and that was part of the reason I learned a lot of skills. If there was ever a job I could learn something in, I would volunteer and try to learn a new skill.”

Nevertheless, he applied to positions across the country.

“I’d been a graduate teaching assistant for a couple of classes at UC San Diego, but I’d never had my own class like our graduate students do at UT. I really liked working with the students, and being a shy person, it really drew me out. When I was offered the job at UT, I didn’t want to pass up the opportunity.”

For his earned teaching sabbaticals, Wilson actively sought and was accepted for artist residencies in Australia, New Zealand, and Switzerland. These were formative experiences for him as both an artist and a teacher.

“I think having that experience away, out of my element, gave me confidence and a belief in my own abilities and a validation in what I was doing, in terms of being accepted as an artist,” Wilson said. “Being on residencies gives you a much wider perspective. It was very exciting and stimulating to be interacting with and learning from artists whose perspective and frame of reference are so very different from your own. To have had those cross-cultural experiences that opened me up, I could talk about this with students and provide them with my insights and encourage and help them make the similar connections.”

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Christopher McNulty
NAMED DIRECTOR OF THE SCHOOL OF ART

Christopher McNulty, chair of Auburn University’s Department of Art and Art History, has been named as the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, School of Art’s first externally hired director in more than a decade.

“The university and the School of Art are very well known and respected,” McNulty said. “I know a lot of the faculty at UT, professionally and personally, and really respect them. It’s an exciting time to be in the arts because there are so many new technologies and new processes available to artists. I am excited to be working in a larger department with a graduate program to pursue the School of Art’s vision.”

McNulty served 19 of his 21 years as an educator at Auburn. The department, consisting of 15 faculty members, offers undergraduate degrees in studio art and art history. McNulty began at the university in 2001 where he served as sculpture area head for 17 years.

In his creative research, McNulty has exhibited work in galleries and museums throughout the US, including the Blue Star Contemporary Art Center, Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Rochester Art Center, and Saltworks Gallery in Atlanta. His works have been featured in publications including Art Papers, New American Paintings, The Atlanta Journal Constitution, and The Week. McNulty has received many grants and awards, including a Hembra Foundation Fellowship, Alabama State Council on the Arts Grant, Madison CITARTS grant, and Rowland Fellowship. He has completed artist residencies at the MacDowell Colony, Marble House Project, the Hambidge Center, and the Vermont Studio Center.

During his two-year tenure as department chair, he led initiatives to create a new Bachelor of Fine Arts concentration in animation, securing $150,000 facilities grant for new animation facilities and building renovations, and successfully nominated seven faculty for university-wide awards, professorships, and professional-leaves.

McNulty succeeds retiring director David Wilson, who served the School of Art in a four-year term as director. Hired in 1985 as instructor of drawing, he transitioned to tenure-track faculty teaching in painting and drawing, 4D/time-based arts, and cinema studies. Wilson took over as director in 2016.

“Christopher is an excellent choice for the next director,” Wilson said. “Our faculty are excited for his fresh perspective and the new ideas he brings to the school as director.”

McNulty and his family—wife, Kalyani, and seven-year-old daughter, Asha—look forward to the cultural diversity and energy of Knoxville. He started in the position August 1.
The Knoxville Museum of Art’s spring exhibition, *Beauford Delaney and James Baldwin: Through the Unusual Door*, was set to be the focal point of Associate Professor Mary Campbell’s African American Art History course. Her class, which covers African American art and artists from the Middle Passage to present day, coincided with the exhibition that featured more than 50 paintings, works on paper, and unpublished archival material examining the relationship between painter Beauford Delaney and writer James Baldwin.

For one of the final assignments, students were to write a paper on Delaney’s *Dark Rapture (James Baldwin)* until COVID-19 closed the KMA, making the portrait no longer viewable in-person. Campbell ultimately chose to cancel the paper, not wanting the students to write about the work based on online photos.

The class, however, was not solely focused on the art and the artists.

“I really enjoy the way Dr. Campbell teaches her classes because she teaches history through learning art,” said Nicole Gentry, recent studio art graduate. “Especially with something like African American art history, it’s so important to understand the context and the history behind everything.”

As students covered artists, they also learned of the social and cultural norms that were associated with different time periods. Slavery, Jim Crow Laws, and the Civil Rights Movement were just some of the topics that were intertwined with the artists’ works.

In thinking of the African American experience, Campbell was reminded of the children’s story that was dedicated to Delaney by Baldwin— *Little Man, Little Man*—exploring and celebrating black childhood. His book reminded her of other African American artists, such as Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence, who had authors write about their upbringing.

“I think that what we see is this impulse to use art to tell a story, to speak to some sort of political engagement, to create a community in what we’re seeing now is a really hostile white world,” Campbell said. “I wonder whether these books are a part of that project by teaching and enlightening children.”

Campbell shifted the final paper to a storytelling project for the students to share information and work from the artists they learned about over the semester. Projects, which varied from poems to podcasts and short stories to novels, told more than just about the artists but the events and movements that coincided.

Gentry’s group used story-telling methods similar to that of Baldwin. Their project, “Jimmy’s Amazing ARTventure,” recounted the day of a young Black child’s tour of an African American art museum where he met artists, such as Augusta Savage, William Johnson, and Jean-Michel Basquiat, who looked like him.

“Prior to the class, I knew a couple of the artists [in our project] from being an art major, you know about a lot of the contemporary artists that are happening, and then a couple I knew from Dr. Campbell’s 19th century American art which has a lot of prominent African American artists. I was surprised that I’m studying art and yet there were so many I wasn’t aware of. It goes to show the underrepresentation of African Americans.”

Unfamiliar with art history prior to the course, Reilly Harrison, a senior studying political science and Africana studies, used her project to address political issues in America.

In a similar way that *Little Man, Little Man* is written to straddle the line of children’s and adult’s literature, Harrison wrote politically charged poems for parents and their children in an effort to start uncomfortable, but necessary conversations. Her project “But What About Emmett Till?” covered topics of lynching and murders of African Americans, the pay gap and gender inequality, as well as the national hunger crisis.

Throughout the semester, in addition to what they learned from the past, the class watched as the Black Lives Matter movement came to the forefront of social issues following the deaths of individuals including Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd. As the cousin of two biracial teenagers, Harrison thought of what their life experiences would be while she wrote many of the poems.

“As I sat down to write these, I felt very saddened for the experience that everyone who is a minority experiences, but I also felt very powerless,” Harrison said. “I felt like there was this privilege in me getting to sit down in my apartment, at my out-of-state college where I’m taking an art history class. For me to sit down, in that comfort, and write some of the more racially charged poems, there was a very significant component of discomfort and guilt in my privilege.”

Campbell described the results of the project as gratifying. Her students, who come from all different backgrounds on- and off-campus, found something meaningful in the art, history, and classes’ discussions.

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**Art History Projects Inspired by African American Artists & Children’s Books**

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Expanding the Study of Cinema

Social and cultural hot topics have always been the focus of independent documentarian Elaine McMillion Sheldon. Her films have shown the rise of women on the frontlines of America’s opioid crisis, young men rebuilding their lives and finding community through farming, and a community’s life after the boom-and-bust of the coal industry.

McMillon Sheldon joins the faculty of the School of Art as an assistant professor of cinema studies. The School of Art will begin offering a bachelor of arts degree in cinema studies beginning fall 2020.

McMillion Sheldon was born in Abingdon, Virginia, and raised in West Virginia. She lived up and down the east coast before moving back to West Virginia in 2016 with her filmmaking collaborator and husband, Curren Sheldon. Since returning home, the Sheldons have produced documentaries about addiction and recovery, black lung disease, politics, and even a music video for country music legend, John Prine. With a background in visual journalism, McMillion Sheldon always felt drawn to telling stories that affect people’s daily lives.

“I’ve always been driven and satisfied telling stories that teach me more about the world and others around me,” McMillion Sheldon said. “So the awards are just icing; they are never the motivator, but they allow and encourage me to keep making work, which I am very grateful for.”

McMillion Sheldon has worked as an independent filmmaker since 2012. As an educator, she looks forward to bringing her knowledge of the field to young filmmakers who are learning their craft.

“Teaching feels like a great opportunity to invest in a community and give back,” McMillion Sheldon said. “Throughout my life, I have had incredible mentors and teachers, and I always knew I wanted to repay that mentorship to others. I look forward to learning and growing with my students as they discover their own passion for storytelling.”

New to the state, McMillion Sheldon and her husband and filmmaker Curren Sheldon, look forward to the opportunities of projects that matter to Tennesseans.

“I’m excited to become a part of the University of Tennessee community, the Knoxville community, and continue to make work in the region of Appalachia where I was born and raised,” McMillion Sheldon said. “I’m looking forward to learning more about East Tennessee as a place to make work. And because I rely on local experts, I look forward to learning what stories matter to East Tennesseans.”

More of McMillion Sheldon’s recent work includes Recovery Boys, a 2018 Netflix Original Documentary, and Tunstil, a 2020 collaboration with The Marshall Project and PBS Frontline.

Promoting Women’s Health with Art

Elizabeth Watkins is a graduate of the College Scholars Program. During her time at UT, she pursued a program of study titled “Biomedical Visualization and Health Literacy.” Through courses in the School of Art and the biological sciences department, she studied how art can be used as a tool for communicating medical information. She continued this work as a part of her five-part thesis project focusing on the top most chronic diseases in the United States: diabetes, pulmonary diseases, kidney diseases, coronary artery diseases, and cancer—more specifically, cervical cancer.

“I am creating patient education materials that apply to the diseases using medical illustration and other infographic techniques,” Wombles said. “Elisabeth Watkins is the only student that corresponds with my cervical cancer Instagram. I was really thinking about women’s empowerment and women’s education especially regarding health. Elizabeth’s account follows her journey with her mom getting treatment, but also her journey to become a woman, which prepares her to manage her own health. It’s a story of two women at different points in life.”

Instead of using standard methods of disseminating information, Wombles chose to publish through Instagram for the young audience on social networking websites and apps.

“When you think of medical illustrations or any educational materials, you think books, infographics, posters, but I think social media can be used as an outlet. Most people my age have an Instagram account and they are going to look at it. By creating that narrative with Elisabeth Watkins and her mother, they are able to relate to it, empathize with it, and learn it in a way through a story.”

Although vastly different from Wombles, everything about Elisabeth Watkins’ imagination, her mother’s story is one that many women in America experience.

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“I love that College Scholars lets you design your own path. I knew exactly what I wanted to do, but I couldn’t do it under the main constrictions of the university. There’s no way I could be an art major and biochemistry and cellular and molecular biology major. But College Scholars really let me narrow in on the focus that I have in medical illustration.”

Through the School of Art, Wombles was able to explore different areas of art that she enjoys because of the opportunity to add those courses in her curriculum. She graduated in May, and will begin in the UT School of Information Sciences’ master’s program this fall.

To learn more about Elizabeth Watkins and her women’s health journey, visit Instagram.com/elizawatkins03.
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