

# Milwaukee Arts Board: Announces 2022 Artists of the Year, Friends of the Arts award honorees

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MILWAUKEE, WI – The City of Milwaukee Arts Board (MAB) is announcing the 2022 Mildred L. Harpole Artists of the Year and 2022 Friends of the Arts award recipients. These honorees recognize and celebrate excellence and exceptional service in Milwaukee's arts community.

Artists **Ck Ledesma and Nirmal Raja** were named the 2022 Artists of the Year, while **Cynthia Henry and Ray Nitti (Rayhainio Boynes)** were named the 2022 Friends of the Arts.

"Our arts community is unique and makes our city special. Artists and creators throughout Milwaukee are full of creative energy that adds value to our neighborhoods," **said Milwaukee Mayor Cavalier Johnson**. "I am proud to honor this year's Artists of the Year and Friends of the Arts. These individuals are leaders in Milwaukee's creative community who are helping position this city as an inclusive arts and cultural hub."

"The 2022 Artists of the Year and Friends of the Arts represent the depth and range of Milwaukee's arts community," **said Alderman Nik Kovac, Chair of the Milwaukee Arts Board**. "Congratulations to this year's award recipients. It is through your art and advocacy that we better understand – and love – our city and world."

All recipients will be honored on June 14 at 4:30pm at the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts. Local arts organizations receiving MAB sustaining grants will be recognized as well.

More information on this year's honorees is below.

- **Ck Ledesma, 2022 Mildred L. Harpole Artists of the Year.** Ck Ledesma is a transdisciplinary artist from San Juan, Puerto Rico. Currently residing in Milwaukee, Ledesma is passionate about serving their community while building authentic relationships and the liberation of all BIPOC people. They co-founded Cosecha Creative Space, a community-focused space that centers connections, understanding, and building togetherness through creative engagement, mutual aid, and the arts. Ledesma is a 2020 Mary L. Nohl Fellow and has served as the artist-in-residence for the Cesar Chavez Drive Business Improvement District, the Milwaukee Public Library Mitchell Street branch, and Casa Candela in Cayey, Puerto Rico. Their work has been exhibited locally, nationally and internationally.
- **Nirmal Raja, 2022 Mildred L. Harpole Artists of the Year.** Nirmal Raja is an interdisciplinary artist living in Milwaukee. She lived in India, South Korea and Hong Kong before immigrating to the United States 30 years ago. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature from St. Francis College in Hyderabad, India, a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design (MIAD), and a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Raja is the recipient of several awards, including the "Graduate of The Decade" honor from UW-Milwaukee and the Mary L. Nohl Fellowship. She was a mentor at RedLine Milwaukee, a community arts incubator, and is now a mentor for the Milwaukee Artists Resource Network. She has participated in solo and group shows throughout the region, the nation, and the world. Raja collaborates with other artists and strongly believes in investing energy into her immediate community. Raja curates exhibitions that bring people together from different cultures and backgrounds.
- **Cynthia Henry, 2022 Friends of the Arts.** Cynthia Henry is an art collector and advocate. She was Vice President of the Milwaukee Artist Resource Network and serves on the board of the African American Arts Alliance at the

Milwaukee Art Museum. In 2012, with partner Gregory Stanford, Cynthia opened Ayzha Fine Arts Gallery & Boutique at Grand Avenue in Downtown Milwaukee. Ayzha Fine Arts is a contemporary, multicultural gallery with an emphasis on art from the African diaspora. The artists are drawn from Milwaukee and around the globe. The boutique offers unique jewelry, cards, books, calendars, organic hair products and other items.

- **Ray Nitti, 2022 Friends of the Arts.** Ray Nitti is a musician, filmmaker, and activist. He is behind the \$66 million Creative Corridor project, a major affordable housing development in Milwaukee that includes 35,000 square feet of community service space for creative programming. The project is about five months away from having the first wave of residents move in. “I created the corridor to retain and elevate some amazing creatives that have been doing great work in and outside of the city,” said Nitti. “These individuals that have come together to help me achieve this vision will be listed below. Although it was my dream that is coming to fruition, any opportunity to elevate the collective as a whole would be truly a blessing. I’m just hoping to one day change the narrative of our creative and artistic community.”

The Artists of the Year program was inaugurated in 1995 by former Alderman and MAB Chair Wayne Frank. The Artists of the Year Award was renamed in 2020 in honor of late, beloved arts board member Mildred L. Harpole. Each recipient receives a \$1,500 cash award. Funds used to launch the first award included a memorial bequest in honor of Milwaukee artist and former MAB member Jim Chism. Additional funds for the award come from MAB members.

Established in 2012, the Friends of the Arts Award is given to individuals who, often behind the scenes, have distinguished themselves through exceptional service to Milwaukee’s arts community.

The MAB sustaining grant program is funded by the City of Milwaukee, with support from the Wisconsin Arts Board, the State of Wisconsin, and the National Endowment for the Arts. MAB also awards matching funds annually for public art conservation.

More information about the Milwaukee Arts Board is available at [milwaukee.gov/MAB](https://milwaukee.gov/MAB).