The College of Fine Arts and Communication at Towson University invites you to join us as we explore the arts through the lens of politics and change. From art exhibits and lectures, to plays and special presentations, our theme has inspired collaborations, some interdisciplinary and others within departments and across colleges. Observes Susan E. Picinich, dean of the College since 2011: “The adoption of an annual theme is an exciting new COFAC venture, especially in light of the breadth and depth of faculty-initiated programming at Towson. I hope that everyone will take time to attend at least one of these events. After all, an emphasis on politics and change is most timely given that this has been a U.S. presidential election cycle.”

The programmatic line-up however, speaks not only to change as it pertains to the workings of government and negotiations of power, but to the enduring intersections of the visual and performing arts and politics. With this understanding, the Symphonic Band's spring performance of Ronald Lo Presti's *Elegy for a Young American*, composed in memory of John F. Kennedy shortly after his assassination, co-exists nicely alongside the Percussion Ensemble's performance of Ivan Trevino's *Hands Up*. Trevino's composition addresses the contemporary theme of race relations in the U.S. *Hands Up* includes the rhythmic recitation of words Trevino excerpted from interviews and twitter posts sent from #blacklivesmatter protests in various cities. The TU Symphonic Band contributes to the series with *Requiem* by composer David Maslanka. He writes: “Requiem is a single-movement fantasia written in response to an event of the Holocaust in World War II. It is not possible truly to grasp the deaths of millions of people, but the death of one, in this case a year-old baby—brought me face-to-face with the horror and revulsion of the whole. We think that history is past, and nothing can change it. But the effects of such things as the Holocaust are still immediately with us; the open wound has not been healed. It is my feeling that music can bring closure, and it is my hope that Requiem will serve in this capacity.”

Moving beyond an emphasis on elections, the Department of Theatre Arts presents two plays that highlight themes of race and justice as a culmination of the department's three-year collaboration with The Acting Company: *X*, a new play by Marcus Gardley, and William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. In *X*, the assassination of the black power figure is brought to vivid, lyrical life. Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* provides a framework for Gardley to deepen our understanding of one of America's most complex, compelling historical figures and to explore the tumultuous landscape of ideology and activism in the 1960s. Shakespeare's timeless political masterpiece itself has great relevance to the theme of politics and change. Through the story of Julius Caesar, a rising political star torn down by his most trusted allies, audiences witness the art of persuasion, the ugliness of backroom politics, and the historical patterns we can't stop repeating.

The Department of Art + Design, Art History, Art Education presents *Dark Humor*, an exhibition, lecture, and film series inspired by a recent show of African American art curated by artist Tiffany Barber, who hails from Edinburgh, Scotland. Ms. Barber is completing her dissertation at the Carter G. Woodson Institute for African American and African Studies at the University of Virginia.
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Her particular focus is artists of the black diaspora living in the United States. In conceiving the exhibit, Barber explored the works of black artists who employ “satire, visual puns, farce, absurdity, kitsch, and the bizarre” to “upend social and aesthetic conventions.” A lecture by the renowned artist Joyce J. Scott opens the Dark Humor series. On February 10, COFAC welcomes both she and painter Peter Williams with a reception that is open to the public. Scott and Williams use the visual arts as a site for the exploration of race, violence, and stereotypes. Best known for her breathtaking beadwork, Joyce Scott, a 2016 recipient of the coveted MacArthur Fellowship, delivers a public lecture on her cross-disciplinary artistry on February 22. Peter Williams, whose work also addresses political events and realities, will lecture on March 2. On March 9, Nikki A. Greene, assistant professor of art at Wellesley College, discusses the artistic output of four contemporary artists: Renée Stout, whose assemblage artworks address her personal identity and African American heritage; conceptual artist David Hammons; Cuban-born artist Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, now based in Boston; and Radcliffe Bailey, sculptor and painter, who uses “culturally resonant materials” to explore themes of ancestry, race, and memory.

Also joining us in March will be Dr. Mia Mask, Professor of Film and the Mary Ripma Rose ’32 Chair at Vassar College. Professor Mask is the author of numerous books including Divas on Screen: Black Women in American Film. Her cultural commentary can also be heard on National Public Radio. In addition, the Department welcomes Zoe Charleton, Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Art at American University. Based in Baltimore, Charleton received the MFA in Painting from the University of Texas at Austin. With a nod to critical theory, Professor Charleton addresses the themes of privilege and empowerment through her positionality as a black woman of the 21st century.

The Dark Humor theme is at once a pun on race and social commentary. The film series features a number of golden oldies in black cinematic history: Marlon Riggs’ perennially current Ethnic Notions; the blaxploitation film Foxy Brown, featuring Pam Grier; Keneen Wayans’ satire on the Blaxploitation franchise, I’m Gonna Git Ya Sucka; and Spike Lee’s much remembered and refreshingly topical Bamboozled, dating from 2000. Join us for this four-week presentation of films by black filmmakers and discussions led by Terence University faculty. Film discussant Kalima Young, Lecturer in Electronic Media & Film, observes; “I am excited to participate in this timely discussion about the role of visual media in reflecting, upending, and re-writing dominant notions of race and identity. The films that comprise the Dark Humor series are examples of the keen ways Black artists find productivity in the midst of pain and oppression. Each film reflects an understanding of humor, satire and the power of self-directed stereotypes to forge an understanding of Black identity wholly unique and specific to Black American culture.”

The Department of Mass Communications and Communication Studies joins forces with Theatre Arts to host Guillermo Gómez-Peña, the leading border-crossing theory scholar, performance artist, writer, educator and activist. Familiar to some as “El Mad Mex,” the Chicano artist is known for his incisive commentaries on race, gender, and immigration, among other topics, through the performative vehicle of radical storytelling, spoken word poetry, and language experimentation. Gómez-Peña presents his one-man show Guillermo Gómez-Peña Unplugged at the TU Center for the Arts Mainstage Theatre on Thursday, February 23. “Come, be offended and laugh,” says Tavia La Follette, assistant professor, theatre arts, who is co-organizing the event with communication studies assistant professor Desirée Rowe. “This isn’t just a political artist ranting,” adds La Follette. “He will be creating art commentary on the current climate.”

In a program titled Black Lives That Influenced Us, the TU Jazz Faculty pay tribute to African American musicians whose compositional output resonates with black freedom dreams and the campaign for human rights. Highlights will include Charles Mingus’s “Mongo’s Fables of Faubus,” a song indicting the then governor of Arkansas, Orval F. Faubus, who is remembered for his role in the school desegregation case that, in 1957, became famous through the courageous acts of the Little Rock Nine.

Mingus’ “Free Cell Block F ‘Tis Nazi USA” refers to a particular cell block in the deep South in the seventies, but it could just as easily apply to cell blocks in Guantanamo or Abu Ghurab today. “Remember Rockefeller At Attica” is an example of the composer’s practice of attributing titles to pieces after they were finished, lending them an air of programmatic intention that did not apply. Still, listeners recall the prison uprising in 1971, its many fatalities, and Governor Nelson Rockefeller’s response. On the other hand, John Coltrane’s “Alabama” commemorates the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, a tragedy that captured the nation’s attention in 1963. The murder of the four black girls contributed to making 1963 the bloodiest year of the civil rights movement. Rounding out the program, faculty will choose from a wide array of compositions ranging from those by Thelonious Monk, Ornette Coleman, Max Roach, Julius Hemphill, and Anthony Braxton.

On a more prosaic note, the theme of “change” figures prominently in the TU Pop Ensemble’s change of performance venue. Under the direction of Brian Simms, the ensemble moves its show from the Harold C. Kaplan Concert Hall, a site more regularly associated with programs of classical music, to PAWS, the student-friendly open space that is adjacent to the sandwich station and grill in the Union Building. Students rocking out at the concert have a hard time believing that this is a class, but as Jim McFalls, director of the Jazz Orchestra maintains, “Performance practice means practicing the art of performance. We’ve got to be where people are. We try to teach our students to play in such a compelling way that they can’t possibly go unnoticed.”

In May, the TU Chorus concert titled “Metamorphosis” includes Mason Bates’ Mass Transmission, a choral work that addresses globalization and communication across vast distances. As a part of the event, students will read personal statements of their experiences with racism, hatred, exclusion, and intolerance. Director Ariana Kharei has also programmed Ted Hearnes’ “We Cannot Leave” from his 2009 acapella song cycle, Privilege. The College’s 2016-17 array of programming offers something for everyone. An examination of the arts through the lens of politics and change reminds us that they are most frequently mobilized for uplift and the greater good. Departmental offerings are testimony to the power of the arts to reflect the human condition and to inspire us to improve upon it.

—Eileen M. Hayes

ENDNOTES
1. Thanks to all COFAC faculty who contributed ideas included in this overview.
2. davidmaslanka.com