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 the tenor of this year’s election cycle.”

Timely it is and yet, in regard to this year’s roster of events, the dean’s implicit reference to the U.S. presidential elections must be read both forward and backward in time. Only in this way, can the Symphonic Band’s spring performance of Lo Presti’s “Elegy for a Young American,” composed in memory of John F. Kennedy shortly after his assassination, co-exist alongside the Asian Arts & Culture Center’s fall exhibition. While the political resonances of Lo Presti’s work might be more readily “heard,” Joanna Pecore, Director of the AA&CC is pleased to introduce a broader consideration of cultural politics through the ceramics of minority groups in China. Exhibit visitors can explore the folk pottery created by China’s diverse ethnic groups whose traditions are affected by the policies of the Chinese state.

Moving beyond an emphasis on electoral politics, the roster of events features an engagement of the politics of identity; to wit, the Department of Theatre Arts will produce The Bluest Eye, adapted by Lydia R. Diamond from the novel by Toni Morrison. In this tale from the end of the Great Depression, the memories of two African American sisters reveal their childhood perceptions of racialized society and socially constructed “beauty.” The twin prongs of race and justice are reflected also in two plays that will be presented in the spring of 2017, 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 Malcolm X 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 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.

Understanding and tolerance across identity categories is at the core of Jennifer McMillan’s arrangement of Don’t Be Afraid, a work that takes its title from the hate-inspired attack on Scott Jones in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia in 2013. The event prompted the formation of Don’t Be Afraid, a LGBTQ awareness campaign with the goal of using music to affect positive change in society by eliminating homophobia and transphobia. Don’t Be Afraid is one of many works that will be featured on the program of the TU High School Choral Festival, led by Dr. Arian Khaefi.

Whereas some COFAC offerings incorporate the theme of politics and change in ways that are obvious, in the case of others, the connection is more suggestive. The opening concert of the Department of Music entitled “Music for the Royal Court and the Fountain” is illustrative of the former. The Towson Brass Faculty Quintet presents a multimedia-rich evening of music spanning five historical eras. Henry VIII’s royal court of England is represented with music by composer Thomas Tallis. Notwithstanding his six marriages, the King of England is remembered for his role in separating the Church of England from the Roman Catholic Church. Music of Jean-Phillipe Rameau and Jean-Joseph Mouret invokes the last epoch of the French monarchy and start of the French Revolution serving as a segue to the Department of Art + Design’s invited lecture by artist
POLITICS AND CHANGE THROUGH THE ARTS

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When asked to comment on the perception of Hollywood films as being politically naïve or backward, Michael Angelella, chair of the Department of EME, responded, “Actually, we’re quite proud of our line-up this year. Faculty have worked hard to make not only intelligent choices but to provide a series that addresses the theme of politics and change from a number of different vantage points.”

The theme of “change” figures prominently in the TU Pop Ensemble’s change of performance venue. Under the direction of Brian Simmons, the ensemble moves its show from the Harold C. Kaplan Concert Hall, a site more regularly associated with patriotic repertoire, the Symphony Orchestra’s spring concert addresses the theme of politics and change from a number of different vantage points.

The Department of Art + Design hosts a series of lectures that provide fascinating glimpses into the ever-changing world of studio art. Photographers Ginevra Shay maintained that her artistic practice has been influenced by her living in Baltimore which she describes as “an expansiveness of space, of vacant buildings — but growing out of all of that is a strong and unceasing spirit: a living change agent as her influences include architecture, urban planning, graphic design, typography, and dance. She is part of the group exhibition Reference/Material (September 9-October 15 in the Center for the Arts Gallery), which highlights the continued influence of Modernism in today’s world. Reinforcing the theme of politics and change, the Department welcomes graphic designer and University of Maryland professor, Audra Buck-Coleman, whose design research focuses on social innovation and, as she describes, on the ethical considerations of today’s design practice. Buck-Coleman has directed numerous design projects including Steve + Stones, a collaborative graphic design project that investigates stereotyping and social issues. Through even a cursory examination of the artistic output and intellectual thought of these innovators, one can appreciate their effort to revitalize that which is enervated and envision subjects anew.

The connection between the Mozart Requiem, a choral masterwork dating from the late 18th century, and its association with the theme of the politics of peace, lies in its performances at high profile events such as the memorial Mass for John F. Kennedy in 1964 and as part of a concert conducted by Zubin Mehta during the siege of Sarajevo thirty years later. Director of Choral Activities, Arban Khaefi and Director of Bands and Orchestras, Chris Cicconi, join forces for the performance of this perennial favorite. In addition to selections from the U.S. patriotic repertoire, the Symphony Orchestra’s spring concert features Copland’s Lincoln Portrait written to commemorate the ideals and achievements of America’s sixteenth president, and Karel Husa’s Music for Prague 1968, a work that memorializes events after the Soviet Union crushed the Prague Spring reform movement. The composer’s work is an example of program music, meaning that it draws on symbolism and allusions that would be well known to those versed in Czech culture.

The world of peace and healing continues with the four day residency of monks from the Dreung Loseling Monastery including opening and closing ceremonies, daily chants, lectures, and mandala creation, one of the most ancient practices of Central Asia. Hosted by the Asian Arts & Culture Center, the Tibetan Buddhist monks are based in Atlanta, Georgia at the Center for Tibetan Buddhist Studies, Practice & Culture, but the Dreung Loseling Monastery in India, founded after the destruction of most of Tibet’s monasteries in 1959, is home to over 3,000 monks observing the Buddhist philosophy that is most influential in this artistic practice. The Dreung Monastery was established in Lhasa in 1416. Visitors will experience the transient nature of these beautiful works of art as they are created and then destroyed in a manner that is highly symbolic, inviting reflection on the ephemeral nature of life. A lecture on the history of the Tibetan diaspora will illuminate how Tibetans have maintained their sense of national cultural identity in the face of human rights abuses, systematic threats to their culture, and restrictions on religious freedom.

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Voter registration is a critical component of an election year. To support the effort, and echoing the “Politics & Change” theme, the Graphic Design faculty curated posters from the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) Get Out the Vote campaign. On display in the Center for the Arts, the show will grow over time to include Towson University graphic design students’ solutions. The “Vote” poster show, located on the third floor, and the entire gallery between the second and first floor atrium — will be displayed until the 2016 election. 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 united in their social examination of issues critical to improving the human condition and to inspire us to improve upon it.

—Eileen M. Hayes

ENDNOTES
1 Thanks to all COFA faculty who contributed articles included in this overview.
2 See Article of the Week: Georgia Gray at http://tl.snedlock.artistoftheweek-ga/gray/2016/05/19.
3 For more about Audra Buck-Coleman see http://www.art.umd.edu/faculty/abuck/.
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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.
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 J. Scott, 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 Riepma Ross ’32 Chair at Vassar College. Professor Mask is the author of numerous books on film theory, Professor Charleton addresses the themes of ancestry, race, and memory. She 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. As a part of the event, students will read personal statements of their experiences with racism, hatred, exclusion, and intolerance. Director Ariana Kharefi has also programmed Ted Hearne’s “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 entries included in this overview.
2. davidhammons.com