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.1 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.” These 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. 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.

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Marilyn Holsing. Perhaps by coincidence, Holsing’s “Further Tales of Young Marie Antoinette,” does its own work as a narrative on paper and dioramas creation. We seldom think of the future Queen of France as a child or young girl; Holsing’s fascinating creation provides no forewarning of Marie Antoinette’s ride to the guillotine in October 1793. Holsing, whose work is featured in a one-person exhibition this semester in the Holtzman Gallery (September 9-October 15) entitled Marilyn Holsing: Les Histories, is a professor at Temple University’s Tyler School of Art.

The second half of the Towson Brass Quinter program includes music of early America, the antebellum period, and the Civil War. Noteworthy composers include Philip Philp, John Hill Hewitt, and lastly, Frances Johnson, described as the first black American composer to have his arrangements published as sheet music. Johnson is also credited as the first African American bandleader and the Afro-French composer, Chevalier St. George, are enjoying lesser-known gems including Arthur Hadley’s patriotic march Defend America. A sub-theme of pioneering minorities includes music by Florence Price, the first African American woman to have a symphony performed by a major U.S. orchestra. Both Price and the Afro-French composers, Chevalier St. George, are enjoying something of a renaissance that extends beyond classical music circles. The concert concludes with This American, a piece by former Towson faculty member Philip Sneed, that commemorates September 11, 2001 and its aftermath. Critical commentary is presented by art historian and period instrument specialist Marc Bellaisis, musicologist Aaron Zieg, and electronic music expert John Turner.

The 2016 EMF Fall Film Series, now in its 28th year, interprets the COFAC theme through a ten-week presentation of films and discussions led by Towson University faculty. The series commemorates the representation of political histories through popular film. Electronic Media and Film faculty and guest presenters from various disciplines encourage viewers to engage critically with a wide range of filmic perspectives. The series features historical dramas based on actual events (Good Night and Good Luck and Edward R. Murrow’s McCarthy conflict), acclaimed documentaries (Democracy, Camilla Nielsson’s recent film which chronicles Zimbabwe’s crumbling buildings — but growing out of all of that is a strong and unswerving spirit is 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 art 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 Sticks + 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 and envision subjects anew.

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 academic events to 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.”

The Department of Art + Design hosts a series of lectures that provide fascinating glimpses into the ever changing world of the visual arts. Photographer Ginevra Shay maintains that her artistic practice has been influenced by her living in Baltimore which she describes as “an expansiveness of space, of vacant, and
crumbling buildings — but growing out of all of that is a strong and unswerving spirit is 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 art 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 Sticks + 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 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, Artan 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 theme of world peace and healing continues with the four day residency of monks from the Dreupung 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 Buddhisn monks are based in Atlanta, Georgia at the Center for Tibetan Buddhist Studies, Practice & Culture, but the Dreupung Loseling Monastery in India, founded after the destruction of most of Tibet’s monasteries in 1959, is home to over 5,000 monks observing the Buddhist philosophy that is most practiced in this artistic practice. The Dreupung Monastery was established in Lhasa in 1416. Visitors will experience the transcendent 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, systemic threats to their culture, and restrictions on religious freedom.

Faculty have worked hard to make not only intelligent choices but to provide a series that addresses the theme of politics and change from different vantage points.

Endnotes
1 Thanks to all COFAC faculty who contributed entries included in this overview.
3 For more about Audra Buck-Coleman see http://www.art.umd.edu/faculty/abuck/.

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