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ALWAYS ARTIST-CENTERED: JAMAL CYRUS AND CÉSAR A. MARTÍNEZ HONORED BY ART LEAGUE HOUSTON'S ANNUAL AWARDS PROGRAM

Seventy-eight years ago, 16 women artists wanted to create a place where they could make, exhibit, and talk about artwork; together they founded **Art League Houston**. The artist-centered organization in Houston has since established itself as a leader in celebrating contemporary art in Texas, in part because of their Contemporary Texas Art Archive program, which includes four prestigious annual awards.

This year Art League Houston honors Jamal Cyrus (Texas Artist of the Year Award, est. 1983), César A. Martínez (Lifetime Achievement Award in the Visual Arts, est. 2013), Surpik Angelini (Lifetime Achievement Award in Arts Leadership, est. 2019), and Joe Diaz (Texas Patron of the Year, est. 1989). The recipients are further recognized through exhibitions, documentary video interviews, and publications, and at the annual gala.

For his solo exhibition *Saharan Air Layer*, on view through Dec. 20, Cyrus created an installation that connects Houston and the Sahara Desert, continuing his interest in Black American history, music, and cultural production. The show's title refers to a massive cloud of dry, hot, dusty air that originates in the Sahara Desert and makes its way across the waters to arrive in Houston every summer. Exhibition visitors can engage with Cyrus's conceptual and material explorations of generational connections, the cyclical nature of time, and related sounds through the videos, drawing, and sculptures on view.

Generational connections are also an element of Martínez's exhibition, also through Dec. 20, which features a selection of the San Antonio-based artist's colorful, textured works in painting, printmaking, collage, and more from the past 50 years. He is a pivotal figure in the 1970s and '80s Chicano Art Movement as an individual artist and as a member of the Con Safo artist collective and founding member of Los Quemadose. Today Martínez continues to research and celebrate contemporary Chicano culture and history through his artwork.

"César is a legend," says Bridget Bray, who has been Art League Houston's Interim Curator since May 2026. "This [exhibition] is a wonderful opportunity to show his work in a space where there's no admission fee, so there's no barrier for people coming in, spending as much time with his work as they'd like. It's a chance for our audiences, really all of Houston, to savor his work."

Art League Houston established the Lifetime Achievement Award in the Visual Arts in 2013 as a way to recognize individuals who have had a substantial impact on arts and culture throughout the state. "Through the selection process, we saw this huge pool of amazing artists who not only dedicated their career to art, but their entire life," says Executive Director Jennie Ash. "Often they had mentored whomever was selected for the Texas Artist of the Year." For example, **Vincent Valdez**, who was honored as Texas Artist of the Year in 2023, looks to Martínez as a mentor.



Installation View: *Saharan Air Layer* Jamal Cyrus
2026 Texas Artist of the Year Exhibition at Art
League Houston. Photo by Alex Barber, courtesy of
Art League Houston.

In addition to an exhibition, Art League Houston collaborates with the artists to create a corresponding publication. "The exhibition is a great way to bring people together, but a publication is a tool that can help springboard an artist's career. For example, we've sent some of the catalogues we've created to museums, galleries, and collectors, so it's been a way to match-make the artists with certain institutions," says Ash.

Sometimes that publication goes beyond typical exhibition catalogue expectations. Valdez's book comprised a suite of prints, a deconstructed-type book with artwork on one side of the paper and the artist's source of inspiration to make that piece on the other side (think band posters stapled to a teen's bedroom walls, or pages ripped from an art book and pinned up in an artist's studio). Publications about Cyrus and Martínez are forthcoming.

Art League Houston's founders may or may not have anticipated the impact their efforts would have on future generations, but the women currently at the helm are crystal clear in what and who their work is for.

"Our awards program is a documentation archive project for Texas," says Ash. "It speaks to the artist-centeredness that drives everything we do."

—NANCY ZASTUDIL