



artist as changemaker

2025 - 2026

why artists belong in the deep work of systems change

Peter Senge, one of the leading systems thinkers, developed the iceberg model as a way of seeing what shapes the world around us.

What we see in the world around us is what is happening above the surface: the events, the headlines, the moments that catch our attention. But there is so much more happening beneath. The deeper we go, the heavier the pressure, the slower the movement, and the more profoundly the iceberg is shaped by what cannot be seen from above.

Beneath the events sit patterns and trends, the repetitions that show up across communities, generations, and sectors. Below those are the structures, policies, and power dynamics that hold those patterns in place. And at the very bottom are the mental models: the narratives, beliefs, and values, the current that runs beneath and shapes everything above.

We can work at any of these levels. But the deeper we go, the more we are working with what is hardest to see, and hardest to change, and perhaps most worth tending.

Artists move through the world with a particular kind of attention. They are drawn toward what cannot yet be measured or named, toward the spaces where mutual becoming is possible. From that ground, they reach toward the deepest layer of the iceberg, toward the beliefs and stories and inherited ways of seeing that shape everything above. That is where they do their most essential work.

The work of socially engaged artists moves in two directions at once. Tending to living experimentation in relationship while shifting the stories that hold everything in place is their particular gift to systems change.



artist as changemaker

A RESIDENCY FOR SOCIALLY ENGAGED ARTISTS. A PRACTICE ROOTED IN RELATIONSHIP, PROCESS, AND COLLECTIVE IMAGINATION.

In a world shaped by complexity, artists move as meaning-makers and translators, helping communities sense what is shifting beneath the surface and reach toward what is still becoming.

Artists have a distinct role to play in tending to the cultural, social, and ecological conditions where communities and the natural world can flourish. When artistic practice meets the tools of social innovation and systems thinking, artists can find the leverage points where creative work can meet and move the change already stirring within communities.

This premise grounds the Artist as Changemaker (AAC) Residency.

about the program

AAC is a partnership between The Institute for Community Prosperity and Calgary Arts Development. Now in its 7th year and 4th iteration, the program is an initiative to illuminate, elevate, and expand the capacity of socially engaged artists to create pathways to social change.

The residency is artist-led and cohort-based. Artists apply together with a community partner, bringing either an existing relationship or a new one they are ready to grow, entering the residency to address social challenges they care about through artistic process and social innovation. The work emphasizes collaborative, experimental, and iterative practice between artists, organizations, and communities, shifting patterns from the inside.

Over the course of eight months, artists and community partners move through the year together as a cohort. They attend workshops in systems thinking and social innovation, bringing that learning directly into their community work and testing what they discover in real time. They receive mentorship from other socially engaged arts leaders and they lean on one another as a cohort, thinking through challenges together, sharing what is working and what is not. The emphasis throughout is on the process of learning and making, rather than on a final deliverable. At the end of the residency, the work is brought into community and celebrated together at the Community Process Celebration.

our guiding question

The program is oriented by a guiding question:

HOW MIGHT WE EXPAND THE CAPACITY OF ARTISTS TO FACILITATE MEANINGFUL SOCIAL CHANGE?

In addition, each artist and community partner also develops their own How Might We question together, one that is specific to the social challenge at the heart of their partnership. This shared question becomes an orienting thread throughout the residency, something to return to as the work deepens and shifts.

areas of practice

The Residency Program develops three interrelated areas of practice:

01 EXPANDING KNOWLEDGE

Expanding social innovation and systems change learning is a core objective as we try to understand how artists could use this knowledge to inform their artistic process, how the artistic process is interrelated with social change, and how it can advance systems change.

02 INVESTING & DEEPENING RELATIONSHIPS

Investing in and deepening the relationships between the cohort of artists and partner organizations is central to the residency, as we explore what it means to work collaboratively in an environment of trust, knowledge sharing, and deep connection.

03 'PROCESS AS OUTCOME'

Change often occurs in the 'how', not the 'what'. Social innovation practices place as much (if not more) emphasis on the process of innovation rather than the final product. It is in the process of working together that transformation occurs. Focusing on the process with the artists cohort and partner organizations allows us to gain deeper insight and understanding into the role that artists play in social change and transformation.

residency journey

september 2025 - april 2026

8
months

8
artists

8
community
partners

11
cohort learning
sessions

16
hours of 1:1
mentorship

1
community
celebration



edward campbell



“As an artist, this is a dream come true, coming to a place where you can be financially supported, spiritually supported, educationally supported. It's a space you don't find anywhere else.”

HOW MIGHT WE QUESTION

How might we support immigrant youth at risk in building belonging, self-expression, and positive identity through creative practice?

COMMUNITY PARTNER

Centre for Newcomers; Noel Bahliby

PRIMARY ARTISTIC MEDIUM

Dance

Born and raised in Panama, Edward Campbell developed his interest in all the arts through his mother. During his high school years, a love for dance and design flourished, pursuing both careers simultaneously as a B-boy and a graphic designer. He attended The University of Panama and completed his bachelor's degree in their Graphic Design program. In 2003, he founded Fullstyle Family, one of the oldest breaking groups in Panama. Prior to moving to Calgary in 2014, Edward hosted workshops in Panama, Costa Rica, and the United States. Since moving to Calgary, he has joined the crews People's Militia and Next of Kin. He has kept busy teaching in many different studios around Alberta and aims to be a bridge for new dancers to understand, respect and benefit from dance.

Edward Campbell, in partnership with the Center for Newcomers, designed and piloted a program called Breakin' Mindsets. The program aimed to engage youth at risk through breakdancing lessons while also fostering life skills, resilience, and a stronger sense of belonging through mentorship and guest speakers. Working with first-and-second generation newcomer youth navigating the intersections of settlement, education, healthcare, and the justice system, Edward used breakdancing as the entry point and built outward from there. Participants moved through dance sessions, financial literacy, self-love, and conversations about accountability and belonging. The program built self-discipline, resilience, and a stronger sense of belonging among participating youth. It created connections between young people who shared similar backgrounds and experiences, and opened conversations about identity, culture, and what it means to build a life in a new place.



LEARNING REFLECTION

presence is the first practice

Where you stand shapes what you see. Who you are, what you carry, what you assume, and what you are willing to set down matter as much as any tool or framework.

natasha jensen

“I don't think I've ever been in a space with such a diverse group of artist with various practices but still have the same kind of values.”



HOW MIGHT WE QUESTION

How might we use storytelling to inspire the public to take action on climate issues?

COMMUNITY PARTNER

Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS)

PRIMARY ARTISTIC MEDIUM

Mixed Media

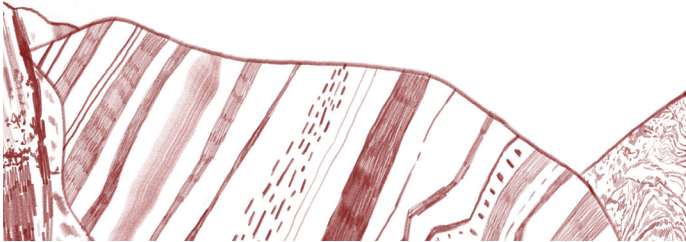
LEARNING REFLECTION

art moves us

Artists work where patterns live. Where others see data, artists find story. Where reports accumulate, creative practice opens a door into the felt, the embodied, the personally true. That reach, into what is hardest to see in a system and most important to shift, is where the work becomes possible.



I am a mountain, stacked with clay, silt and sand.



Natasha Faye Jensen is an interdisciplinary artist from Moh'kins'tsis (Calgary), located in the Treaty 7 territory of Southern Alberta, Canada. She earned her Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) from the Alberta University of the Arts (formerly known as the Alberta College of Art and Design) in 2013, and she completed her Master of Arts (MA) in Contemporary Art Practice at the Edinburgh College of Art in 2020. Natasha has participated in both solo and group exhibitions, as well as festivals in Canada, the United States, Finland, and the United Kingdom.

"What is the story of a mountain on the Eastern Slopes? What does it feel like to be part of that ecosystem? What does it feel like to be stripped, mined, and altered? How can reports and data describing environmental change in Southern Alberta be translated into something that is felt in the body? And how could I give voice to something as vast and complex as a mountain range?"

Natasha Jensen

Throughout the residency, Natasha Jensen created a zine titled *I Used To Be A Mountain* to explore how storytelling can inspire deeper engagement with climate and conservation issues. Through extensive research and collaboration with her community partner, the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS), Natasha examined ways of translating complex information on extraction and conservation efforts into experiences that are more accessible and emotionally resonant with Albertans. Her zine invites readers to reflect on their relationship with Alberta's landscapes, particularly the Eastern Slopes, and consider how resource development can co-exist alongside conservation efforts to create a more sustainable future.

adrienne williams



“Usually, as an artist, I’m focused on the end result and what I produce. This experience helped me to take the time to really be present and connect with what the process of change.”

HOW MIGHT WE QUESTION

How might we activate and empower Black Calgarians to build systems of support for and with one another that address local gaps in opportunity, education and representation?

COMMUNITY PARTNER

United African Diaspora

PRIMARY ARTISTIC MEDIUM

Drawing and Paint

Adrienne Williams is a multidisciplinary artist, working with themes of urban culture and the individual. Her paintings, installations and video works explore her Caribbean ancestry, while often highlighting ideas of pop culture and culture clash. Williams completed her BFA in Drawing at the Alberta University of the Arts in 2007. She has shown her work in Calgary, Edmonton, Italy and Spain.

"I loved that I was approached by an artist who wanted to collaborate. That felt different from the start."

United African Diaspora

Adrienne is a visual artist whose practice weaves together illustration, community storytelling, and cultural celebration. During her residency, in partnership with United African Diaspora, she engaged with Black Calgarians across Calgary to understand the systems of support, education, and representation that communities are building for one another. Through this, she created a community coloring book that maps the African diasporic presence in Calgary through illustrated neighborhood scenes and activity pages. Designed for children and families, the book transforms mutual aid, cultural pride, and collective dreaming into an accessible and joyful artifact that can travel into homes, classrooms, and community spaces.



LEARNING REFLECTION

community knowledge

Communities hold deep knowledge of their own contexts and needs. Artist changemakers work with that knowledge in nonlinear, emergent ways, shaped by iteration and a willingness to not know.

tiffany lai



“ I changed the way I start with a project and end with a project. I used to start and end with a statement, now I start with a question and end with a question. ”

HOW MIGHT WE QUESTION

How might we use drama and storytelling to build family resilience and mutual understanding when navigating life challenges?

COMMUNITY PARTNER

YW Calgary

PRIMARY ARTISTIC MEDIUM

Theatre

Tiffany Lai is a drama educator and a registered social worker in both Hong Kong and Alberta, Canada. She graduated with distinction from the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts with a Master of Fine Arts in Drama, majoring in Drama and Theatre Education. Her thesis focused on utilizing Drama in Education pedagogy to enhance the Chinese character recognition and writing skills of students with dyslexia. Tiffany has received multiple accolades, including the Estella Wong Drama Education Scholarship, the HKSAR Government Talent Development Scholarship, the Reaching Out Award, and the Bravo! Hong Kong Youth Theatre Award. She was also twice sponsored by the Lee Hysan Foundation to undertake short-term drama training in the UK.

In partnership with YW Calgary, Tiffany Lai designed and ran a program called Little Big Steps: Building Emotional Literacy through Stories and Drama. The program aimed to support children and caregivers in exploring their emotions, self-confidence, communication, and relationships through a series of interactive drama-based workshops. Using storytelling, humour, imaginative play, and various creative activities, Tiffany helped families develop emotional literacy and strengthen their connections in a safe and supportive environment. By creating opportunities for children and caregivers to learn and play together, this program highlights how theatre can be an accessible and engaging tool for fostering communication, empathy, and well-being within families across Calgary.



LEARNING REFLECTION

the process is the product

In socially engaged practice, how you work is as important as what you make. The relationships, conversations, and moments of co-creation are not the path to the work. They are the work itself.

sue-shane tsomondo

“For me reading is an act of empathy, an act of putting ourselves in other people’s shoes to see how they are living their lives and how we might treat people differently if we have some insight into how diverse our experiences are, and also that we are all going through something in life.”



HOW MIGHT WE QUESTION

How might we design an engaging in-person reading community that fosters connections by drawing Calgarians back into shared public spaces?

COMMUNITY PARTNER

d.talks

PRIMARY ARTISTIC MEDIUM

Literary Arts

LEARNING REFLECTION

unlikely kin make strong webs

The most generative change often emerges at the edges, where disciplines, communities, and ways of knowing that don't usually meet start making something together.



Sue-Shane Tsomondo is a writer, arts administrator and occasional writing instructor based in Mohkinstsis. Born and raised in Zimbabwe, Sue-Shane’s writing is a lifelong exploration of diasporan guilt and blackness. She has previously performed for Woolfs’ Voices and Single Onion. In 2019, Sue-Shane founded a literary arts platform, Sue’s Stokvel, to highlight the work of racialized writers across the globe. Between 2020 and 2021, Sue-Shane received the University of Calgary Women’s Resource Centre Alumni Award and appeared on the cover of the Calgary Journal for her work on Sue’s Stokvel. While writing and providing social commentary continues to be at the forefront of her artistic practice, Sue-Shane also wears the hat of an arts administrator, most recently as the executive director of an artist-run-centre.

Sue-Shane is an artist whose practice is rooted in gathering, dialogue, and the deliberate creation of the conditions for human connection. During her residency, she convened a year-long reading community that brought Calgarians together around texts exploring race, power, belonging, and collective liberation. The work unfolded incrementally, each gathering layering new ideas and deepening relationships between participants.

“My love for my country and its people is an inheritance I’ve failed to shake, my love for humanity began and remains an ode to my first love: Zimbabwe ... That’s why I want to bring people and to tell stories as an ode to my country, an ode to my parents.”

Sue-Shane

shandie ta

“ Courage has shifted and morphed for me in what it looks like and feels like. For the longest time I was looking outward, asking, can I do this yet? Now I know I'm not asking anybody else for that permission. ”



LEARNING REFLECTION

staying with the trouble

The work of change asks us to remain present with what is difficult, uncertain, and unresolved. Not to fix it prematurely or look away, but to stay, to keep showing up, to let the complexity teach us something.

Shandie is a Vietnamese-Canadian social innovator whose practice is grounded in dance and performance. She is a community programmer, producer, and creator of connections and space activation. In the national Kiki Ballroom community, Shandie is known as Princess Sen Gvasalia. She co-founded VogueYYC in 2018 - a group of like-minded individuals dedicated to growing and nurturing Calgary's Kiki Ballroom scene. Popular categories such as Performance (Voguing), Runway, Face, and Realness are now being practiced and presented by more people who identify within this culture in Calgary. This brings more conversation to the evolving dialogue about the challenges and celebrations facing gay and trans IBPOC in the community. As a movement based creative, Shandie's curiosities lie in how the body can be a conduit of inner and external social impact.

Shandie convenes queer racialized youth regularly through ballroom and vogue, using dance and its surrounding culture to build a space that functions both as artistic practice and community infrastructure. The work draws on ballroom's deep lineage as a form of community making, born from African American and Latino queer and trans communities in New York. In this tradition, the floor, the dance, and the house structure are themselves practices of safety, kinship, and self-authorship rooted in the long history of queer and trans communities building for themselves what the world around them would not.

"There are a lot of artists with grand ambition, and that is important. But in the meantime, those efforts can be used for what's around us right now. It takes looking around and seeing what role we can play."

Shandie

HOW MIGHT WE QUESTION

How might we use creative practice to create the conditions for Queer racialized youth to author, share, and be held by their own narratives?

COMMUNITY PARTNER

Calgary Queer Arts Society

PRIMARY ARTISTIC MEDIUM

Dance



samuel obadero



“Systems thinking and systems change from the iceberg model just give me deeper insights. Now I see situations from a different lens. Even when I don't have the solutions, I have the mind to ask those questions, I live with it every day now.”

HOW MIGHT WE QUESTION

How might we frame stories of hope and struggle among mothers and families facing postpartum challenges, so that their unseen journeys become catalysts for empathy, policy, and healing?

COMMUNITY PARTNER

Hands Lifting Hearts

PRIMARY ARTISTIC MEDIUM

Photography

Samuel Obadero (he/him) is a Nigerian-Canadian multidisciplinary artist based in Calgary/Mohkínstsis. Founder of Motif Photography and Motif Media Agency, Sam has spent 20+ years crafting portraits and narratives that elevate under-represented communities. An award-winning photographer and arts-administrator, he mentors emerging Black creatives, produces socially engaged exhibitions, and explores the coming together of art, grief and resilience through film and performance.

Sam Obadero is a photographer whose practice centers on bearing witness and building connection through image. During his residency, he stepped outside his primary medium to engage in deep listening with postpartum mothers, sitting with their stories, their silences, and the emotional terrain that rarely surfaces during public conversation. From these exchanges, he developed an original spoken word piece that translates lived testimony into art, illuminating the grief, resilience, and humanity of families navigating postpartum challenges.

"The gift to me is that I don't have to lead this. I get to watch and support someone else flourish. It's been such a joy to watch the artistic process unfold."

Hands Lifting Hearts



LEARNING REFLECTION

systems have stories

Every system has a plot. Patterns of acceleration, erosion, and stasis are all around us, shaping what gets seen and what gets buried. Artists can read those plots, and offer new ones. Sometimes that means stepping outside your own medium, following the story that needs to be told rather than the one you already know how to tell, and finding that the act of listening is itself a form of bearing witness.

sara-maya kaba



“Art doesn’t begin with a blank Canvas; art begins when we create the conditions for people to feel safe and feel connected, and feel like they are able to take risks.”

HOW MIGHT WE QUESTION

How might we increase the self-esteem, confidence, and sense of community of immigrant youth and adults using dedicated spaces for playful arts-practices?

COMMUNITY PARTNER

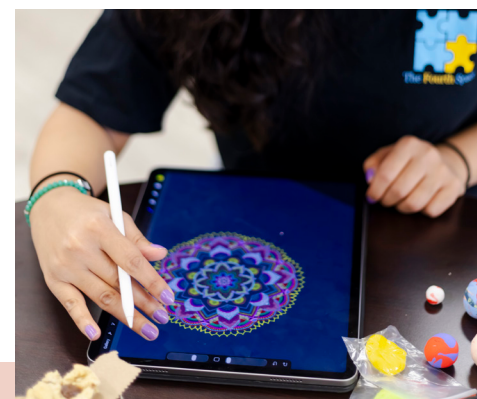
Canada Immigrants Women Association (CIWA)

PRIMARY ARTISTIC MEDIUM

Multidisciplinary

Sara-Maya Kaba is a poet, spoken word artist, dancer, and aspiring visual artist. She uses movement, creative writing, and visual storytelling to explore themes such as mental health, identity, memory, and South Asian womanhood. Her arts background includes writing and directing *Severing Roots*, a spoken word performance with six Muslim women artists on Islamophobia, and performing in *Passages*, a large-scale dance production exploring Muslim diasporic stories in Canada. Sara-Maya is a Pathy Foundation Fellowship alum, having designed and led an arts-based mental health literacy program that reached over 500 participants across Pakistan. She is the co-founder of The Fourth Space, a nonprofit that uses art, play, and story to build connection and mental health literacy across communities, and currently works part-time as a guest educator with the Calgary Board of Education.

Through her nonprofit The Fourth Space and in partnership with Canada Immigrants Women Association (CIWA), Sara-Maya designed and ran a program called Creating Space. The program aimed to support immigrant girls and women through a series of creative workshops. Each session introduced participants to a different artistic practice while creating opportunities to explore identity, well-being, and womanhood in Canada. By fostering safe and welcoming environments for participants to share their experiences, Sara-Maya demonstrated the value of coming together through creativity, where the process of creating, connecting, and sharing becomes just as important as the final artwork itself.



LEARNING REFLECTION

change happens at every scale

Change shows up in mental models, relationships, policies, and resource flows. It tends to move and accumulate rather than arrive all at once. The work at one scale makes the work at another scale possible.

conclusion

Over six years and four iterations, we have watched artists move into complex social challenges with presence, with curiosity, and with a willingness to stay with the trouble. We have watched community partners discover that the artistic process reveals what traditional approaches tend to miss. The nonlinear, emergent, relational nature of creative practice opens pathways into the deeper layers of systems change that are hardest to reach.

This year, we were intentional about holding three bodies of knowledge in deliberate conversation: systems thinking, social innovation practice, and the long tradition of socially engaged art. We wanted artists to move fluidly between them, to use those frameworks as companions to what their practice already knew.

We close with the words that have held this particular cohort from the beginning:

"In urgent times, many of us are tempted to address trouble in terms of making an imagined future safe, of stopping something from happening that looms in the future, of clearing away the present and the past in order to make futures for coming generations. Staying with the trouble does not require such a relationship to times called the future. In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings."

Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*

what's next

We are continuing to refine how we hold the integration of systems thinking, social innovation, and artistic practice. Each cohort teaches us something we could not have known before them, and this one was no exception.

The challenges our communities face are real and urgent. They are also too complex, too layered, and too deeply human to be met without people who can reveal what others cannot see, who can make others feel what data alone never could, and who can hold space for grief and possibility at the same time. **The work continues. And it is in good and gathered hands.**

gratitude

This program would not exist without the generosity and sustained partnership of Calgary Arts Development, whose belief in the potential of artists as changemakers has made this work possible year after year.

Deep gratitude also to the community partners who opened their doors, brought their trust, and stayed in the process even when it was uncertain. Your willingness to work alongside artists in new and emergent ways is itself an act of systems change.



