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Guide

cultural evolution

Houston Creatives Pushing the Arts Forward

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THE ART OF LIVING

Houston's art scene has always been as exceptional as the ever-evolving city itself. And this year, girls rule. Here's a look at some of the remarkable women who are painting our town beautiful.

BY MELLANIE PEREZ
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CANDACE MOORE

THE
doyenne

Melody Mennite plays the role of Psyche in *Sylvia*, running Feb. 21-March 3.



MELODY MENNITE
The ballerina inspires a new generation of dancers.

To convey fierceness and grace while striking a grand jeté is no easy feat, but Melody Mennite, principal dancer at Houston Ballet (houstonballet.org), does both with elegance. Watching her work, it's no surprise she's one of only nine women to have ever choreographed for the esteemed company—seven commissions in total. In her 18 years with Houston Ballet, the Santa Cruz, Calif., native has collected such big-name main role credits and accolades as Marie in Stanton Welch's *Marie*, Nikya in *La Bayadère*, Odette/Odile in *Swan Lake* and many more. In 2016, she co-founded REACH (reachprojecthtx.com), which seeks to provide dancers and choreographers a platform from which to express themselves. Proceeds from REACH go to a charity of its choice, like Houston Ballet's X3 arts education program, its benefactor for the past two years. It's no wonder the company's younger generation of dancers look up to her, as not only the eldest but also the most experienced of its female dancers. "I feel honored to be in that position. Aside from learning about my strengths and weaknesses, I've learned acceptance," she says. "As I've brought that to myself throughout this career—which can be demanding and perfectionistic—I've become more gentle with myself, and I think I'm able to demonstrate that to the younger generation: that you can work really hard and still esteem and take care of yourself well."

THE
star



This coming January, she stars in Houston Grand Opera's production of Daniel Catán's *Florencia en las Amazonas* as Florencia Grimaldi.

GOWN BY JOVANI AND EARRINGS BY JOSE BARRERA, BOTH AT ELIZABETH ANTHONY, HAIR AND MAKEUP BY DARCI TEASLEY

THE
the purveyor



Off The Wall Gallery celebrates 40 years at its Ruby Slippers Art Soiree on Jan. 10, 5-7pm.

ANA MARÍA MARTÍNEZ

The international opera star journeys home to take on the title role at HGO's latest production.

This coming January, beloved Grammy Award-winning Puerto Rican soprano Ana María Martínez stars in Houston Grand Opera's (houstongrandopera.org) production of *Florencia en las Amazonas* as Florencia Grimaldi, a legendary opera singer who journeys home to give a concert and find her love Cristóbal, whom she left to pursue an illustrious career. Surely, Martínez can identify with Florencia: The now-Houstonian by way of New York City is one of the foremost sopranos of her time, with a 24-year career that spans the world's most important opera houses and concert halls. "Early in my career, David Gockley, then-director of HGO, Plácido Domingo and Robert Tanenbaum formed the trilogy that believed in me and afforded me new opportunities," says the Juilliard graduate. "My first pinch-me moment was the first time I sang with Domingo, in 1996." Through it all, Martínez embraces the honor of representing Latino heritage in the world of performing arts. "Opera is the only art form that unites all art forms," she says. "When we are in the opera house, we're not amplified—it is sheer lung power and technique, and it reminds us of what we as humans are capable of. That is inspiring."

MIMI SPERBER

The art dealer behind some of the city's most cutting-edge collections steps into the spotlight.

Being ahead of the curve is not unfamiliar for Off the Wall Gallery's (offthewallgallery.com) managing partner, Mimi Sperber. This year, the gallery celebrates its 40th anniversary as home to a vast collection of midlevel career painters and sculptors from all over the world, as well as a growing collection of masters like Picasso, Miró, Dalí and Chagall. A transplant of New York City, Sperber has been known to put together cutting-edge collections that examine cultural issues of the time. "I believe that our work should be uncensored and everybody should respect that it exists," she says. In her 4,400-square-foot custom-built gallery and art boutique space in the luxury wing of the Galleria, Sperber has nurtured and developed a loyal troupe of aesthetes, whom she occasionally takes on private studio tours across the globe. For the anniversary celebration in December, she's taking a group of clients to Peter Max's studio in Manhattan. "In the next 40 years, I want to find more artists, host more trips and create more memories," she says. "I will do this as long as it's fun."

ELIZABETH BUNCH

The Alley Theatre actress ushers in a new era.

“The thing no one can teach you is how to take risks onstage,” says Elizabeth Bunch, legend at the Alley Theatre (alleytheatre.org) resident company, who celebrated her 70th performance there this season. “Acting is about finding truth, and when you do the same show every night, you have to have all nerve endings ready to react to whatever is happening to keep that truthful. At the Alley, I’ve found an ability to let those organic experiences happen in front of 750 people when they really count.” The West Virginia-born actress and New York transplant found her way to Houston for the first time in 2002, when she was plucked from the Broadway scene by playwright Keith Reddin to star in her first Alley production, *Frame 312*. That turned into a permanent move in 2005, when the Alley offered her a spot in its resident company. Since then, she’s played more than 96 parts—sometimes even 14 in a single play. “What I really enjoy is diving into one massive character,” she says. “My most terrifying and gratifying experience thus far was playing the pilot in *Grounded*, which is a one-woman show.” Later this season, she’ll welcome the thrilling challenge of performing in *Constellations* with her husband—fellow resident Chris Hutchinson—as her sole acting partner. It’ll be the first time they’ll play a couple on stage in a raw, heavy-hitting production. “There are new opportunities opening themselves to me now. I’ve gotten to play lots of different characters, but I’m maturing whether I want to or not,” she says. “I’m adjusting my thinking around what I’ve learned about being a mother in real life and how that’s expanded my compassion, maturity and strength. I’m asking myself what childhood dreams are falling by the wayside, and what’s important as I get older.”

WARDROBE BY DAO CHLOE DAO AND THE CHLOE DAO BOUTIQUE; SET DESIGN BY TODD ROSENTHAL

This month, Bunch plays Mrs. Cratchit in the upcoming performances of Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, Nov. 16–Dec. 30. It’s her 10th production of the Christmas classic.

THE advocates



Catch ROCO In Concert: *Ticket to Ride* Feb. 23, featuring Jim Stephenson's musical tribute to miniature trains, "ROCOmotive."

ALECIA LAWYER & AMY GIBBS

The women behind ROCO spark conversation about female leadership in classical music.

Since its establishment in 2005, the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra (roco.org) has been known to be two beats ahead of its time. Its founder and artistic director, Alecia Lawyer, made it that way when she launched and just so happened to appoint an all-female staff—a rarity in the biz. Recently, ROCO joined the national conversation about women's leadership and power with rekindled vigor at its first-ever Women in the Arts panel, discussing the current state and future of female representation. For its 14th season, Games People Play, a female composer, conductor and soloist is featured in every single concert. The influence of the organization also goes beyond championing female representation. "We have the third-largest number of commissions nationally," says the managing director and resident right hand, Amy Gibbs. "By the end of this season, we'll have premiered 79 commissioned pieces," she says. The 40-piece group easily flexes down to two players in a hybrid model—a new form of classical ensemble. ROCO embraces tech integration, live-streaming full orchestra concerts and launching an app. This coming year, it premieres its first recording on a label, *Visions Take Flight*. "It's all about access and taking it to the next level," says Lawyer.

ANGELA FABBRI

A contemporary painter connects art and food.

"Time is our most valuable currency, and we need to make sure whatever we're doing, we're loving every minute of it," says Houston-based fine artist Angela Fabbri (fabbriology.com). She's speaking of one of her pieces that features a clock that says, "Invest Wisely" in her contemporary realism series, *Inversion*. The self-taught artist has been developing this series over the last 18 years, and each piece represents a specific experience that greatly impacted her life. However, it wasn't until April 2017 that she became a full-time artist, working out of Silver Street Studios. "People don't tell you that you can be an artist full time, but Houston has a tremendous amount of opportunity and diversity," Fabbri says. Over the last few years, she's earned distinction for her abstract paintings and contemporary realism. Last year, she started bringing the kitchen to the studio with her pop-up dinner series, Table 22 Fine Art + Fine Food, for which she collaborates with local chefs to create an art-infused culinary experience. It's a decidedly intimate experience, with only 18 seats at \$200 a pop. So far, Fabbri has worked with the likes of Monica Pope (Sparrow Bar + Cookshop, Beaver's) and David Cordúa (Américas). "I'm a big foodie, and I love building relationships with my clients," Fabbri says. "I believe in bringing people together and putting good energy out there—it'll come back to you."

THE innovator



Angela Fabbri hosts her annual Holiday "pARTY" in her Silver Street Studio on Dec. 15.