

Press Release

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HIGH MUSEUM OF ART NAMES CHERYL FINLEY RECIPIENT OF 2026 DAVID C. DRISKELL PRIZE

National award recognizes Finley's influence on Black art history and scholarship and the next generation of cultural leaders

Finley to be honored at 21st annual Driskell Prize Gala on Sept. 19, 2026

ATLANTA, May 27, 2026 — The High Museum of Art today announced Spelman College professor Cheryl Finley as the 2026 recipient of the [David C. Driskell Prize](#), the first national award dedicated to honoring contributions to African American art and art history. Among museums, biennials and major cultural institutions increasingly foregrounding Black artistic voices and art scholarship, the High's \$50,000 Driskell Prize has become one of the most significant recognitions for artists and scholars shaping the field. Finley, who serves as the Walton Endowed professor in the department of art and visual culture at Spelman, will be honored at the 21st annual, black-tie [Driskell Prize Gala](#) at the High on Saturday, Sept. 19, at 6:00 p.m. Previous Driskell honorees include [Alison Saar](#) (2025), [Naomi Beckwith](#) (2024), [Amy Sberald](#) (2018), [Mark Bradford](#) (2016), [Rashid Johnson](#) (2012) and [Valerie Cassel Oliver](#) (2011).

Finley's career as a respected and award-winning art scholar, educator and author spans two decades and has consistently focused on collaboration and mentorship among her peers and students. Since 2019, she has served as the director of the [Atlanta University Center Art History + Curatorial Studies Collective](#) at Spelman. Through the Collective, Finley has helped build one of the country's most important pipelines for emerging Black arts professionals, scholars and curators, connecting students from the world's largest consortium of historically Black colleges and universities with leading cultural organizations and museums, including the High. Recent initiatives have included a year-long educational partnership with LVMH, offering professional opportunities with their fashion brands and dynamic field immersions for students to meet with artists and company leadership in New York and Paris. Since 2013, Finley has co-organized Black Portraiture[s], a global academic convening committed to the study of African diasporic art and culture, bringing artists, educators and innovators together from around the world.

In addition, Finley has written and contributed to scholarly publications including “Committed to Memory: The Art of the Slave Ship Icon” (Princeton University Press, 2018), based on her dissertation research, and “My Soul Has Grown Deep: Black Art from the American South” (Yale University Press, 2018), which examines the art historical significance of contemporary Black artists working in the region. Her articles and art reviews have appeared in Aperture, Artforum, Artnet, ARTnews and Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art, among other publications. Her curatorial credits include the touring exhibitions “People Who Make the World Go ‘Round: The Legacy of Sepia Magazine” (2026-2029) and “‘Free as they want to be’: Artists Committed to Memory” (2022-present), featuring artists using photography, video and mixed media to reflect on freedom, memory and futurity.

“With this year’s award, the High is honored to support Finley’s distinguished career that sits at the intersection of scholarship and institutional change. Through her influential work, she has continuously invested in the next generation of visual arts leaders across Atlanta’s HBCU landscape and far beyond,” said the High’s Director Rand Suffolk. “We deeply respect her dedication to foregrounding Black artists and expanding how African American art and art history are exhibited and understood, efforts we have long been committed to through the Driskell Prize and our partnership with the AUC Art Collective.”

The Driskell Prize is the first national award to celebrate a scholar or artist whose work makes an original and significant contribution to the field of African American art or art history. Established in 2005, it was named for the renowned African American artist and scholar David C. Driskell, whose work on the African diaspora spanned more than four decades. Proceeds from the Driskell Gala contribute to the David C. Driskell African American Art Acquisition Restricted and Endowment funds, which have supported the acquisition of 54 works by African American artists for the High’s collection since the prize’s inception. Over the past two decades, recipients have shaped some of the country’s most influential exhibitions, collections and cultural institutions.

The selection process for the 2026 recipient of the Driskell Prize began with a call for nominations from a national pool of artists, curators, teachers, collectors and art historians. Finley was chosen from among these nominations by review committee members assembled by the High: Adrienne L. Childs (2022 Driskell Prize recipient and senior consulting curator at The Phillips Collection); Krista Thompson (2009 Driskell Prize recipient and Mary Jane Crowe professor in art history at Northwestern University); and two High Museum of Art curators, Michael Rooks (Wieland Family senior curator of modern and contemporary art) and Gregory J. Harris (Donald and Marilyn Keough Family curator of photography).

“I am honored to have been selected as the 2026 recipient of the David C. Driskell Prize,” said Finley. “Dr. Driskell was a friend and mentor, whose generosity as an artist, curator, scholar and educator continues to inspire my work. Coming at a time when funding for the arts and education has been met with historic challenges, the Driskell Prize recognizes the critical role of innovative pedagogy, collaborative work and academic excellence at HBCUs and beyond in

catalyzing the next generation of global arts ecosystem leaders. This work continues because people and institutions choose to invest in it, protect it and believe in its value in creating access and opportunity for future scholars, curators and art leaders across the African diaspora. This work cannot and has not been done alone. Rather, it recognizes the essential role of coalition building that defines the Driskell Prize.”

In addition to the Driskell Prize, Finley has received other grants and awards, including the 2025 Badass Art Woman Award from Project for Empty Space, the 2023 James A. Porter Book Award from Howard University, and in 2019, the Horowitz Book Award from Bard Graduate Center and the Historians of British Art Book Prize. Finley served as a scholar in residence at NXTHVN in New Haven, Connecticut, in 2023-2024, was a recipient of an American Council of Learned Societies Collaborative Faculty Research Fellowship in 2015-2017 and served as the Richard Cohen Fellow in African and African American Art at Harvard University’s Hutchins Center for African & African American Research in 2015-2016. Prior to joining Spelman, she was a professor of art history at Cornell University beginning in 2003. Finley serves on the boards of Creative Capital in New York, the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, Connecticut, and the Menil Foundation in Houston, Texas. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree from Wellesley College in Spanish and her M.A. and Ph.D. in African American studies and history of art from Yale University.

The 2026 Driskell Prize Gala Chair is Hassan K. Smith. Those interested in tickets for the formal gala may email driskellprize@high.org.

Driskell Prize Gala Sponsors

The 21st Annual Driskell Prize Gala is generously sponsored by Bloomberg, The Coca-Cola Company, Georgia-Pacific, Georgia Power and Delta Community Credit Union. The Driskell After Party is sponsored by Hästens Atlanta.

About the David C. Driskell Prize

Established by the High in 2005, the David C. Driskell Prize is the first national award to honor and celebrate contributions to the field of African American art and art history. Past recipients include [Alison Saar](#) (2025), [Naomi Beckwith](#) (2024), [Ebony G. Patterson](#) (2023), [Adrienne L. Childs](#) (2022), [Jamal D. Cyrus](#) (2020), [Dr. Huey Copeland](#) (2019), [Amy Sherald](#) (2018), [Naima J. Keith](#) (2017), [Mark Bradford](#) (2016), [Kirsten Pai Buick](#) (2015), [Lyle Ashton Harris](#) (2014), [Andrea Barnwell Brownlee](#) (2013), [Rashid Johnson](#) (2012), [Valerie Cassel Oliver](#) (2011), [Renee Stout](#) (2010), [Krista A. Thompson](#) (2009), [Xaviera Simmons](#) (2008), [Franklin Sirmans](#) (2007), [Willie Cole](#) (2006) and [Dr. Kellie Jones](#) (2005). A cash award of \$50,000 accompanies the prize. Proceeds from the High’s annual Driskell Prize Gala support the David C. Driskell African American Art Acquisition Restricted and Endowment funds and other ongoing African American initiatives and expenses associated with the David C. Driskell Gala. The current balance of the David C. Driskell African American Art Acquisition Endowment Fund is \$2.3 million. Through the David C. Driskell African American Art Acquisition Restricted Fund, the High has acquired works by artists including Jacob Lawrence, Simone Leigh, Radcliffe Bailey, Romare Bearden, Mark Bradford, Nick

Cave, Willie Cole, William Downs, Rashid Johnson, Kerry James Marshall, John T. Scott and Renee Stout.

About David C. Driskell

[David C. Driskell](#) (American, 1931-2020) was an artist and scholar whose work on the African diaspora spanned more than four decades. The High's relationship with Driskell began in 2000 when the museum presented the concurrent exhibitions "To Conserve a Legacy: American Art from Historically Black Colleges and Universities" and "Narratives of African American Art and Identity: The David C. Driskell Collection," which examined African American art in the broad historical context of modern and contemporary art. In 2021, the High organized the survey exhibition "[David Driskell: Icons of Nature and History](#)," which traveled to the Portland Museum of Art and The Phillips Collection after its presentation at the High. Born in Eatonton, Georgia, Driskell became a distinguished professor emeritus at the University of Maryland, College Park, where he established [The David C. Driskell Center for the Study of the Visual Arts and Culture of African Americans and the African Diaspora](#). He received his Bachelor of Arts degree from Howard University in 1955 and his Master of Fine Arts degree from the Catholic University of America in 1962. He also attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine in 1953 and studied art history at the Netherlands Institute for Art History in The Hague, Netherlands, in 1964. More information about Driskell is available at www.driskellcenter.umd.edu.

About the High Museum of Art

Located in the heart of Atlanta, the High Museum of Art connects with audiences from across the Southeast and around the world through its distinguished collection, dynamic schedule of special exhibitions and engaging community-focused programs. Housed within facilities designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architects Richard Meier and Renzo Piano, the High features a collection of more than 20,000 works of art, including an extensive anthology of 19th- and 20th-century American fine and decorative arts; major holdings of photography and folk and self-taught work, especially that of artists from the American South; burgeoning collections of modern and contemporary art, including paintings, sculpture, new media and design; a growing collection of African art, with work dating from prehistory through the present; and significant holdings of European paintings and works on paper. The High is dedicated to reflecting the diversity of its communities and offering a variety of exhibitions and educational programs that engage visitors with the world of art, the lives of artists and the creative process. For more information, [visit the High's website](#).

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