

## NEON Shines Bright with The Arts



**(Kyle Confehr's *The Kindness of Strangers* mural. Photo by Jon Abrahams of Jpixx)**

**By Jerome Langston**

When urbanist and scholar, Richard Florida, first introduced the “creative class” into our popular lexicon back in the early aughts, his ideas were heralded as being transformative and sexy, yet rooted in substantial data...all of which led to buy-in from urban planners and downtown revivalists throughout the country. And in particular, his 2002 magnum opus, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, emerged as a sort of reference text, for the many aspirations of this newly identified social class of writers, educators, artists, scientists, tech gurus, etc., who were finally being catered to by city planners and local governments.

So much has changed since then, and even the author himself has since questioned many of his own prior conclusions and assertions—reached and made back during those heady years of urban promise and potential. Yet there are still places where a city’s investment in its creative class of artists, has clearly enhanced its downtown and larger city culture. I

believe that's very much the case with Norfolk's continued commitment to its downtown NEON District, the city's first official arts district. And that commitment is put on remarkable display through its annual two-day NEON Festival, which kicks off its eighth year on October 19-20.

An acronym for New Energy of Norfolk, NEON has had a well-programmed free festival since 2015. And Rachel McCall, who is the vice president of the Downtown Norfolk Council, has co-chaired the festival since its inception. She's away at a conference when we finally connect by phone, to chat about the details of this year's festival. Rachel explains that Thursday's events will be held at the Chrysler Museum of Art, as is the established norm. There's music and dance happening in its Huber Court. The museum's Glass Studio will also have events going on, and of course the museum itself stays open late, that Thursday evening. "We're very grateful for our partnership with Chrysler, and we love to bring the crowd there," says Rachel.

Friday, though, is when most of the exciting, high-profile events will occur. "And then Friday, on that night, we really move to the other side of the district, and focus on Granby Street, the local businesses that are there," she says. Much of the performing arts related programming will occur at The Plot's main stage and will include performances by the likes of the Virginia Opera, and The Governor's School for the Arts Jazz Band. There will also be two beer gardens, free Improv shows at Push Comedy Theater, which I've really enjoyed in prior years...as well as DJ sets, activities for kids, pop up art exhibitions, and a bunch of other events and activities happening throughout the district, from 6:00 to 10:00 PM.

One of the mainstays of the festival over the years has become the debuting of newly commissioned murals. This year features Philadelphia artist, Kyle Confehr's *The Kindness of Strangers*, which is a large-scale mural located at the intersection of Brambleton and Granby. "The mural is so exciting. It's really a big gateway into NEON," Rachel tells me. It apparently features a bunch of Norfolk relevant Easter eggs and got its name from the welcoming interactions with the public, that the artist experienced while creating the large work. Besides Kyle's work, Rachel is also excited for *NEON Walls*, the street art and graffiti project by Richmond's Few and Far, which will be created live on both days, in Magazine Lane.

Foster Beauty, a community empowerment and creative culture focused platform, started a few years back by Ariana and Ace Foster, who are local transplants via the military, is programming a range of fashion and beauty related activities within the storied Harrison Opera House, on Friday evening. When we chat a couple days after talking to Rachel, Ariana tells me that "the event is the culmination of everything that our social platforms are." The main event during their 4 hours of programming is a Foster Beauty fashion show, which will feature the works of seven designers, including several who are emerging. Attendance is free for standing room, but the VIP donation for better accommodation and

access is \$45 minimum. "From our knowledge, there had not been a fashion component before. So we were excited to have the opportunity to do that in the Opera House, of all places," says Ariana.

Later the same day, I chat with Will Sprueill, an ODU graduate and photographer, who works in multiple disciplines, and is building a prominent brand within our local visual arts scene, working with respected entities like WHRO Public Media and the Chrysler Museum of Art. He's the co-curator of Commune's group exhibition of photographers from the Night Shift Collective, called *Full Disclosure*.

It's a juried exhibition, displaying the expansive photographic artwork of 12 photographers, who are part of the collective. "In Full Disclosure, the artists are using their lens as their voice to showcase the world through their eyes..." explains Will. The group show, which opens as part of Friday's programming, will run into December, and features some established and emerging names in fine art photography: including Malik Emmanuel, Sergio Lorenzana, Aria Maisey, and Korey Jackson.

After confirming the details of the big show, Will and I chat about the current state of photography, including the disruptive nature of new technology—such as AI. It all makes me appreciate the importance of building community, especially as creatives, which is something that Rachel, the Fosters, and Will, are actively engaged in. "I love seeing people prosper," Will says. "I want to prosper as well, but I like building people up with me."



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