

EDITED BY **LAUREN CLEM**

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Artists ASOBIEN

Rhode Island School of Design
President Crystal Williams
in conversation with Providence
artist **Nafis M. White** about inclusion,
equity in the arts and her dreams
for the iconic art institution.



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n December 2021, Rhode Island School of Design's board of trustees announced Crystal Williams as the school's eighteenth president. To some, the choice may not have seemed a natural fit: A poet then serving as vice president and associate provost for community and inclusion at Boston University, Williams represents a departure from the school's long history of presidents with backgrounds in visual arts and design. But the president-elect had a vision, one ready to carry the institution into the next era of its history.

A one-time bartender who grew up in Detroit, Williams speaks openly about her circuitous route through higher education. She worked as an actress and bookstore manager before securing degrees from New York University and Cornell University. In her first teaching position at Reed College, she developed a reputation as a faculty activist committed to expanding the reach of the college's resources beyond its traditional demographic. At Bates College, she continued that work as associate vice president for strategic initiatives. Along the way, she published four books of poetry, attaining accolades and fellowships within the arts community. Her work engages with topics of voice and identity and has been featured in anthologies and at the Museum of Modern Art.

Five months into her tenure as the school's first Black president, Williams sat down with Providence-based artist Nafis M. White, who is represented by Cade Tompkins Projects in Providence, to reflect on her role in the school's history and the changing arts landscape. White is a RISD faculty member and alumna and the artist behind several prominent works, including "Oculus," recently on display at the RISD Museum. Her work draws inspiration from Black beauty traditions, often using nontraditional media to engage

with history and create messages of self-affirmation.

Their discussion covered many topics within the arts community, including a shift in focus for artists of color, RISD's role as a global institution and Williams' dream for young artists as they work to establish their voices in a changing world.

WHITE: When I and others heard you were coming to RISD, we were beside ourselves with joy. When I came in, there were a lot of challenges as an undergrad and graduate

student. There were sit-ins, there were actions, there were ways in which we as a student body moved together to change representation, to make a way to have our teachers and our staff members come from communities that represent us. We wanted curriculum really looked at; the board of trustees. We had all of these different things happening in simultaneity in these cycles that kept building. And when I learned, I was euphoric that you were coming here. As a Black woman, I thought, 'Wow, this is a moment. Perhaps RISD is ready. RISD is ready



President Williams at the 2022 RISD commencement, her first as president. Courtesy of RISD/Matt Watson.

This interview has been edited lightly for length and clarity.



ABOVE: Williams snaps photos of student artwork by Kalee Calhoun at the 2022 Grad Show (left, photo by Jo Sittenfeld) and with Sam Northcut at the Furniture Design senior show at Woods-Gerry Gallery (right, photo by Alex Pizzuti). **BELOW:** Portrait of Crystal Williams (Jo Sittenfeld).

now for some prolific change.' Because I think the thing that I had noticed, and the biggest challenge I had when I was here, was the talk of change instead of actualized change.

WILLIAMS: Oh, thank you, Nafis. I have been so honored to be here among RISD artists and makers and thinkers. It's been a great first several months!

You know, your way of thinking about my being here is something I've heard often as I meet and talk with alumni and current students, staff and faculty.

One of the things that interests me about representation and this moment is that my appointment was the result of a collective effort — catalyzed by students, faculty, staff and ultimately, the board of trustees. To your point, the community said, 'We've been talking about change and we've been engaged in some good work, and now we want to double down on that work.' We want our next president to be someone who can help us signifi-

cantly build upon and further advance our commitment to social equity and inclusion and excellence in art and design; someone who has done that elsewhere and who can help move us from point C to point M. Or point Z and beyond.

That said, there is something else about representation that interests me in relation to this presidency, something I hadn't fully internalized until I stepped on campus as 'a first' and felt the response from a very

broad range of people — white, Black, Asian, Latine, First Nations, everyone. I knew, given the work that I've done in higher ed, what the data tell us about how important representation is to groups of people. If you are LG-BTQ, it's important that you have LGBTQ

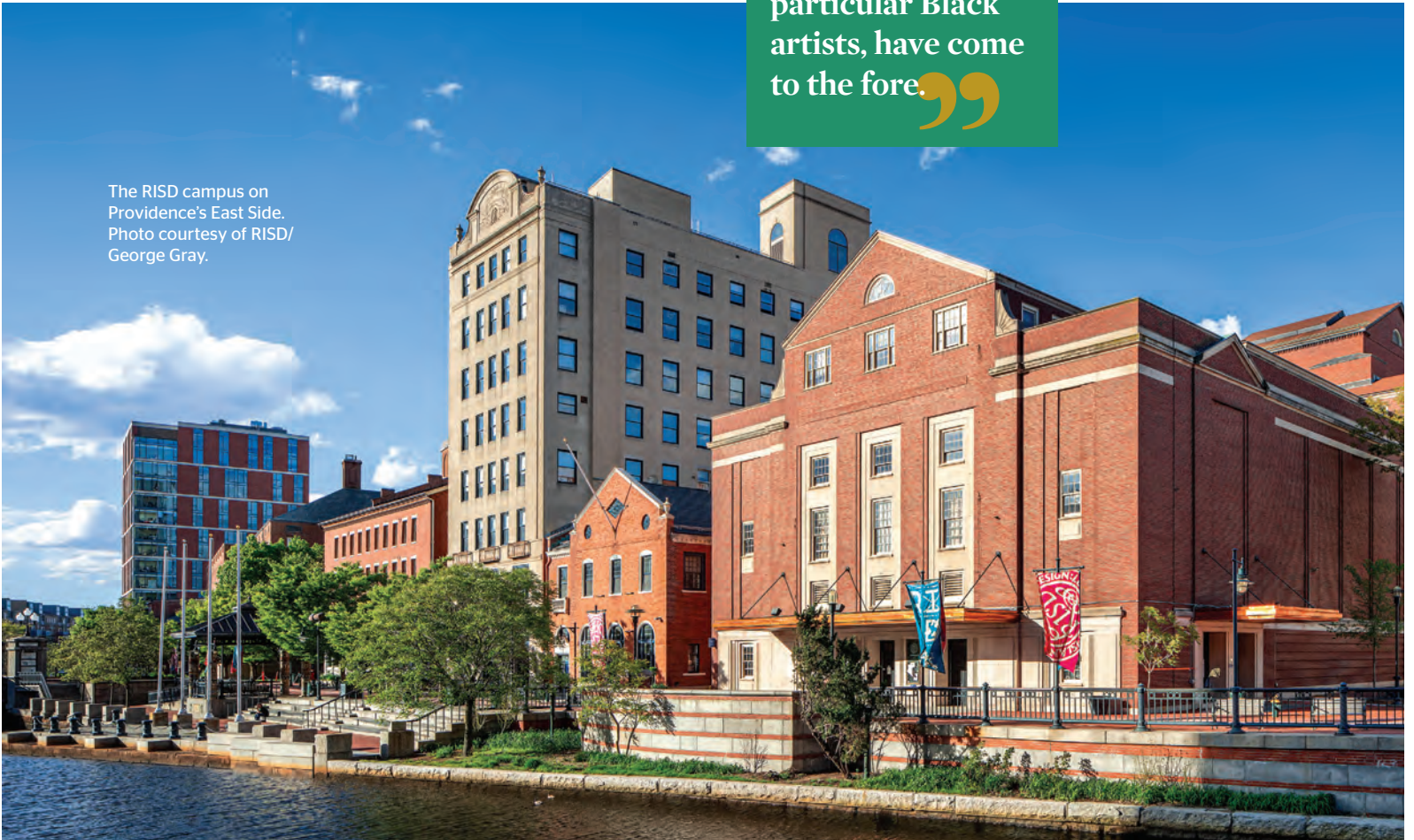
role models. If you're a woman in a male-dominated field, it's important that you have female role models. It's important if you're Black or Asian or Latine to have role models that look like you to reflect what is possible. Likewise, if you're a person living with disabilities. I know and understand that research well. And I've worked with enough students to have heard this anecdotally time and again.

Added to that, however, is another fact:

It's also important, imperative even, for folks who don't look like me to see me leading the institution. In this way, representation is a catalyst for ongoing societal change. It not only shows people what is possible, over time representation informs what people expect and

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The RISD campus on Providence's East Side. Photo courtesy of RISD/George Gray.



accept. So for current RISD students who will go out into their respective fields and become leaders, their expectation about who should be in the room is forever changed by my presence. Some of them will go into the world of art and design and enact that understanding through what they make and design and others through their collaborations, who they hire, who they promote, who they turn to for advice and fellowship. So representation is utterly transformative. And can be transformative for entire fields.

WHITE: What are your observations about the art world today?

WILLIAMS: I see a lot of theater. Less this year than in previous years, but a lot, and mostly in New York. It's felt to me, amazingly, as if we're in a historic moment, a significant cultural and artistic shift where artists of color, in particular Black artists,

have come to the fore. And that's been true in American poetry, too, and I think it's been true in visual arts. One of the things that has happened in theater, and I'm interested in how you think about visual arts, Nafis, is that there's a cadre of new theater artists who seem to me to be shunning the Wilsonian storytelling tradition, creating a new tradition, which a friend of mine once called 'expository projects.'

These projects or plays are much less character driven. The characters are archetypal, and the story often has less, if any, narrative arc. The point that the playwright is making is often political and to be almost mallet-like. So no *Raisin In the Sun* here. The conceits upon which the plays are predicated can also be strange, bordering on surreal because the play isn't actually trying to be a play so much as it is a statement about [insert X], usually social ills. For a long time, I was beyond

frustrated by this move away from Wilsonian theater traditions. I'd go into a play hoping for Wilsonian theater and come out having experienced an expository project and I'd just get mad until finally, I realized, these [plays] are trying to accomplish and achieving different things. I was asking the wrong questions of the plays and their makers. I'm interested if you've seen similar shifts in the visual arts and if so, what are those shifts?

WHITE: Absolutely. I've seen shifts like that. Things in the past have been able to fit in a nice little box. It's kind of like, 'This is the foundational work, this is the art history, master these things, do it like this, these are the didactics, knock it out like this, this is the recipe.' And really, I've seen a lot of people turn it on its head. I've seen performance artists, like Miguel Gutierrez, Ralph Lemon, you know, so many different artists kind of jumping in in this way.

WILLIAMS: What are they doing? In what way are they turning things on their head?

WHITE: They're not following any rubrics. It's like, maybe we'll add, if you're a painter, maybe we're going to do collage. Actually, maybe I'm going to wear white and project on myself and stand in front of the painting that I did in this way. There are all kinds of abstract ways of working, and they create this narrative and this pathway where it actually makes sense. || CONTINUED ON PAGE 117



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The work of Nafis M. White includes a self-portrait by the artist; "Hair Stories" from "Oculus 2020-2021," displayed at Newport Art Museum; "Hersey/ Heresies" displayed at the Spring/Break Art Show in New York; and the exhibition "New England Now: People," which included "Oculus 2021," displayed at Shelburne Museum.



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF THE ARTIST NAFIS M. WHITE AND CADE TOMPKINS PROJECTS; SPRING/BREAK ART SHOW; SAMUEL S. MORGAN

An Artist's Ascent

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You have to kind of ruminate on it, but it does ask you to do deeper work. That's what I'm seeing a lot of now. People giving themselves permission to really stretch mediums, materials and different ideas. Weave them together in unique ways. And that hasn't always been what I've seen.

WILLIAMS: Yes. Once I began to understand that their goals are different, then the question became, 'What *are* their goals?' That opened up a kind of curiosity and exploration that I'm finding interesting — and fruitful. One of the things that started happening in American poetry, maybe ten or fifteen years ago, was a lot of Black poets began taking traditional poetic forms, often very rigid Western forms, forms that have traditionally been used as proxies for 'artistry' or 'mastery,' and saying, 'I'm going to show you [audience] that I can master this form, have mastered the form, and now I'm going to subvert the form. And I'm going to do it at once.' And in so doing, two conversations started happening simultaneously.

One was the conversation the poem was trying to have just as a poem or as just art. Another I think was a conversation that is often implied between the Black poet and the reader — a contextual social justice conversation regardless of the poem's topic. Which is to say, 'You want me to speak your language? I can. I am. But I don't like the language as it is, it's insufficient in some ways, for the ways and the content of what I have to express, and I have something to add. So I'm going to change the language. I'm going to take the thing that has been used as a value system that has historically cast me to the outskirts and I'm going to master it and then subvert it.' That's a secondary conversation that some of those poems are instigating, which I find fascinating because that assertion, embodied by the art, is ultimately about self-advocacy, self-awareness, self-fulfillment, and therefore, freedom, which for any artist is, I think, a goal.

In the end, what I want for young artists, young artists of color, queer artists, people who have not been centered in the world of art, who've been on the margins — what I want for all artists, but especially those on the margins — is that they are

free to do and say and be what it is they want to do, what they want to and need to say, who they want to be, and not necessarily in response to being omitted or sidelined. I think when this happens, the entire world of art is better, more expansive, more dynamic, more interesting, and therefore, more impactful. And I think it's especially important today as our society grows more and more alienated and distant from each other. If art is one of the central ways humans connect to and understand each other — and it is — we need all of the artists speaking with the fullness of their voice, their peculiar and powerful voice in their own peculiar ways. This is one of the ways we might be able to find our way back to one another.

WHITE: I want to know about your artistic endeavors moving forward or writings as you are ascending and becoming. I understand what you were talking about in terms of really being present in this community and seeing people and being here, understanding also from an artist's perspective what they're moving through, what this community has been so vital in doing as a powerful and prestigious institution but one that has been around a long time. Not big picture for RISD, but as we ascend, some things that you want to see that are actualizing and becoming as well.

WILLIAMS: RISD is an amazing place. We are a global institution. I'm fortunate in that I inherited good work to do with the diversification of the faculty, and the student body, and our staff. The alumni body has always been global and it is even more so today. So when you ask about what some of my goals are —

WHITE: Dreams. Let's not — goals sound so stringent and so archaic. Dreams. I'm a dreaming person.

WILLIAMS: I dream about an art and design community that fundamentally values all art and design traditions as equal and teaches that. And that means that the artists and designers and knowledge makers who leave here perpetuate that. I dream that at RISD the art of India is as valued and valuable as the art of South Africa, which is as valued and valuable as the art of Italy, which is as valued and valuable as the art of Chile, which is as valued and valuable as the art of the United States, etc. That is a dream.

I dream about RISD out in the big wide

world, and the impact we can and do have. The things that we do — there are so many people across the globe who, I'm learning, admire what we do, what we teach, what we represent, and so want to touch RISD, which I think is really gorgeous. There are so many creatives who haven't been catalyzed yet. And I dream about helping to catalyze them, which really means, I dream about more art and design. Because remember, I think art is love. And the more art in the world, the more loving the world. I think about RISD and the world in this way.

I also dream that every one of our students leaves here feeling profoundly served. I was recently talking to Dr. Ayoka Chenzira who chairs Spelman [College]'s Division of the Arts. She and I were in conversation for Boston's [Institute of Contemporary Art]. One of the things I said to Ayoka is that the thing I have long admired about Spelman women is that when they graduate from that place, they are dangerous in the way that people who are self-fulfilled are dangerous to the status quo. They understand their power, their value, their intelligence, their skills. They are clear. They are clear about themselves and they're clear about others. Because they've been served. I dream about that for our students. I dream that when they leave here, they know, deeply, 'I know this. I've got it. I'm a member of a global community of artists and makers. I'm on it. I'm ready. I was served here.' I want *all* of our students to feel that way.

WHITE: I love that. I really love that. And I see [evidence of] that when I've been a guest critic for finals. I had the wonderful opportunity to do that for textiles for thesis, also to join Spencer Evans' foundation class — which I said if I teach at RISD, it would be foundations, because that is a magical, magical place. They all are.

And there's something about when these young minds first arrive and how expansive, curious and courageous they are. And what a profound treat just to bear witness to people's ability and just where this community and campus is right now. I think it is a testament and a tribute to your presence and your dreams.

Well, I want to thank you for those beautiful words and, of course, for your time.

WILLIAMS: Thank you, this has been so lovely talking to you. 📍