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For Immediate Release

Applications Officially Open for Arts Commons Incubator Multidisciplinary Artist Development Program

Arts Commons is currently accepting submissions for the inaugural cohort of Incubator, a multidisciplinary artist development program built for Calgary artists guided by 2021-22 Incubator Fellows, Jae Sterling and Contra.

July 20, 2021 CALGARY – With the end of closed galleries and dark stages in sight, Arts Commons is moving full speed ahead into the future of Calgary’s artistic life with Arts Commons Incubator, a first-of-its-kind professional artist development program at the city’s largest performing arts centre. Designed deliberately to support Calgary-based artists who reflect the diversity and vibrancy of Treaty 7 territory, **Arts Commons Incubator is now accepting applications until August 31, 2021** from multidisciplinary artists whose work defies categorization and is in active conversation with the world around them.

The inaugural cohort of Arts Commons Incubator artists will begin the program in the fall of 2021, coinciding with the return of regular programming at Arts Commons, including Arts Commons Presents productions, Arts Commons Galleries exhibitions, and Arts Commons Education offerings. Built to support artists who work across artistic disciplines and have historically been underrepresented in the downtown Calgary cultural scene, Incubator will provide its cohort with a season of engagements under four themes: networking; professional development; mentorship; and paid live performance, exhibition, and teaching opportunities within Arts Commons initiatives. More details on public presentations of Incubator artists will come later this fall and through the 2021-22 season.

On top of the challenges posed to local artists by the COVID-19 pandemic and widespread gallery and theatre closures, the past year has also been a reckoning of the intrinsic inequality that exists within Canadian society – including artistic institutions. As the largest arts centre in Western Canada, Arts Commons is placing renewed efforts to grow, celebrate, elevate and learn from these artists.

“If we are going to be serious about real and lasting change, we need to leverage our platforms and privileges to empower others. In our case, that’s best done through the exchange and amplification of knowledge, skills, and networks,” says Alex Sarian, President and CEO of Arts Commons. “This program is a call to action for new behaviours, mindsets, and ways of working with artist communities. It is a reminder that sometimes the best way to disrupt the power dynamics that lead to inequality is to stand back and create space for a more equitable paradigm of artist-led and community-based development.”

In that spirit, each season of Incubator will be guided by a different group of **Incubator Fellows**, who will bring new perspectives and fresh approaches to the program each year. These Fellows will select the inaugural cohort, curate public engagements with Incubator artists through exhibitions and performances, as well as receive direct support, including exposure to Arts Commons audiences.

The inaugural season of Arts Commons Incubator will be directed by Calgary-based interdisciplinary artists, curators, entrepreneurs and founding members of the THOTNATION/SANSFUCCS collective, **Jae Sterling** and **Contra**.

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"You don't usually see people, artists, like ourselves in these spaces. That's what makes this organic, that's what made [Arts Commons] think of us," says Sterling. "What's important to me is to create these spaces yes, but to also make sure it's a safe space, especially for the QTBIPOC community... There's a delicate way to make an artist better that comes natural to us. If we can show other artists how to deal with certain kinds of criticism and how to avoid certain kinds of criticism, how to learn the language of these spaces, and how to grow in their chosen mediums, that's the ultimate goal."

"It's an ambitious thing to suggest that maybe we can be one of the big art cities in Canada," adds Contra. "But we have the talent. I think this country needs to ready themselves for it."

"Jae and Contra represent the kind of artistry the world is calling for: urgent, intentional, and boundary-expanding. I can't think of anyone better to lead our inaugural cohort, to influence a generation of Calgary artists, and to help redefine our role in supporting, and learning from, Calgary's vibrant artist communities," says Alex Sarian.



Jae Sterling and Contra, Photo by Asim Overstands

Jae Sterling and Contra will be curating the first cohort of 25 – 35 Incubator artists through an online application process that is open to artists now. For more details on the upcoming 2021-22 season of Arts Commons Presents, including future dates for Incubator events, openings and performances, visit artscommons.ca in the coming months.

To learn more about the Arts Commons Incubator program or to learn how to apply, please visit artscommons.ca/incubator or email incubator@artscommons.ca.

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Arts Commons is the third-largest performing arts centre in Canada, located in downtown Calgary, with a mandate that includes a commitment to foster, promote, and present the arts. It is home to six gallery spaces, five theatres and the Jack Singer Concert Hall. As the programming arm of Arts Commons, Arts Commons Presents is one manifestation of this mandate, achieved through the programming and presenting of our in-house series: BD&P World Stage, National Geographic Live, PCL Blues, TD Amplify Cabarets, and TD Jazz, as well as the work that we do in the community. Through this work, we are able to do our part to further enrich our city, as well as create opportunities for Calgary-based artists on a multitude of levels. Arts Commons Presents invites you to discover the transformative power of the Arts.

Contra (she/they)

Contra is a multidisciplinary artist who navigates the Canadian arts and culture landscape as a musician, director, producer, and creative strategist. Her most prominent project to date is through her work in Cartel Madras, an expansive and experimental music project now signed under Sub Pop Records. As a founding member of the THOTNATION/SANSFUCCS collective her artistic journey has also brought her into the world of art direction, visual production, and creative strategy. Challenging cities, industries, and narratives to allow new voices in is at the very centre of how Contra pursues all her creative endeavours; furthering culture and allowing art to thrive.

Using her eclectic professional background within the creative sector, Contra has been able to combine her artistry with business strategy and marketing acumen with initiatives through her collective. Through her work in Cartel Madras, she has developed counter-culture showcases for new artists while touring extensively within Canada & The United States giving her an immediate, essential and thorough pulse of the underground across Canada. In 2021 she expanded her expertise into overseeing the creation and production of art exhibitions, digital series and documentaries.

Jae Sterling (he/they)

Jae Sterling is a multidisciplinary artist and founding member of the THOTNATION/SANSFUCCS collective. Beginning as a musician, he has extended his art form over the years to include painting (acrylic & oil), digital design & mixed media, streetwear design, and written essays.

Through his early years in Kingston, Jamaica to the landscapes of North America, Jae has spent the past few years developing his artistry by weaving his experiences growing up in Jamaica, South Florida, and coming into adulthood in Canada into all his projects. In 2019, his exploration in hip hop led him to be one of 10 artists selected for the National Music Centre's Alberta residency program. Sterling has so far released four music projects and has toured in Alberta & Ontario.

In 2020, Sterling embarked on an ambitious year-long multimedia exhibition, Riding Horses with White Men (RHWWM). This exhibition debuted in Calgary in summer 2020 and is currently touring across Canada into 2021. The success of RHWWM led to him being one of Calgary's first Black muralists, painting The Guide & Protector in Chinatown.

Jae's more recent work, falling under the self-styled title of BULLY, veers towards examining race, sexuality, violence and art's ability to retell and heal histories while simultaneously violating them. In 2021 Jae intends to release a collection of essays from the RHWWM exhibition and launch BIG BULLY apparel.

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