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**THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR CHOREOGRAPHY-AKRON ANNOUNCES
CYNTHIA OLIVER AS THE 2026 KNIGHT CHOREOGRAPHY PRIZE RECIPIENT**
*– Made possible by Knight Foundation,
This Award Invests In Choreographers & the Future of Dance –*



Cynthia Oliver; photo by Laura Bianchi for Bogliasco

AKRON, OH (October 6, 2026) — **The National Center for Choreography-Akron** (NCCAkron) today announces choreographer **Cynthia Oliver of Cynthia Oliver Co Dance Theatre** (Urbana, IL) as the latest recipient of the \$50,000 Knight Choreography Prize. Made possible by Knight Foundation, this award is designed to support the artistic experimentation and career longevity of choreographers in the United States. Each year, the award honors a living choreographer or artist collaborative whose body of work is distinguished not only for their artistry but also for their originality of thought and impact. The award celebrates choreographers who provide significant contributions to the dance field, expand audiences for dance, and ensure the artform has a prominent place in U.S. culture. Cynthia Oliver will receive an unrestricted cash award of \$30,000, plus \$20,000 in programmatic support over two years, to be co-designed with NCCAkron.

Oliver describes choreography as a world-making enterprise. It is a means to process, understand, commune with, critique, and interrogate the world she inhabits and design the world in which she wants to live. For more than thirty years, Oliver has been creating experimental

dance-theatre works that explore the complicated nature of contemporary blackness, femaleness, Afro-Caribbean and Afro-global expressive cultures. These elements figure in her extensive writing, scholarship, and enactments of Caribbeanist and Africanist experimental movement and forward-thinking black performance. Her work has reached audiences across the U.S. Oliver is also a widely published author and scholar; she is currently a professor at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, in the dance department with affiliations in African American Studies and Gender and Women's Studies.

Oliver continues to create. Her newest work, *Turn.Turning.TURNT*, builds upon her record of black cultural excavation, using double dutch as survival strategy and collective coping mechanism steeped in community. *Turn.Turning.TURNT* had its world premiere at Bates Dance Festival July 2026 and was presented at Krannert Center for the Performing Arts October 2026. This work will mark Oliver's return to BAM/Brooklyn Academy of Music November 4-7, 2026.

"The 2026 Knight Choreography Prize Selection Committee was particularly impressed with how long Cynthia Oliver has been an example as a forward-thinking artist on stage and in the studio classroom," says **Christy Bolingbroke, Executive/Artistic Director of NCCAkron**. "She is a prolific choreographer and has been inspiring students and audiences alike to listen, respond, and engage in the world in which we live for decades. For Cynthia, innovation is not just a trending term of the moment but an embodied practice."

"I am so honored to receive this acknowledgement from my community of artists, arts enthusiasts, and supporters. I LOVE dance. Dance has saved my life. Dance (and dancers!) gives me so much hope. Early in my career, when I would get caught up in the politics of our field, one of my dear mentors, Laurie Carlos, would say, 'Just do the work.' This acknowledgement proves that just doing the work has an impact. Thank you to NCCAkron for this award and for the kind words that accompany it. They mean so much," shares **Cynthia Oliver**.

About the Knight Choreography Prize

With an initial investment of \$5 million from Knight Foundation, NCCAkron was established ten years ago to address research and development opportunities in dance. This nonprofit organization has become a matchmaker between national choreographers and the robust cultural ecology in and around Akron, OH, as well as operating as a hyperagent for dance across the national landscape. Over the past decade, NCCAkron has worked with more than 800 dance artists across 100 U.S. cities. In 2022, Knight Foundation invested an additional \$1.5 million to establish this annual unrestricted cash and programmatic award for choreographers and sponsor it in perpetuity.

The Knight Choreography Prize is designed to support the artistic experimentation and career longevity of choreographers in the United States. NCCAkron intends for the award to provide essential time and space for the creative process, for research, and for rigorous play and positive failure. NCCAkron commits to co-create activities and residencies with artists as equal

partners and promote equity in the arts by elevating underrepresented voices that are a valuable part of the 21st century dance ecosystem and the future of the artform.

NCCAkron invited dance artists, dance stakeholders, and NCCAkron alumni across the U.S. to nominate a choreographer for this award. An NCCAkron committee then selected five artists from that nomination list, based on established criteria, and those artists were invited to submit application materials. The final selection committee comprised NCCAkron alumni, board members, and Knight City artists. Miami-based choreographer Rosie Herrera was named the inaugural recipient of the Knight Choreography Prize in May 2024, Shamel Pitts (Brooklyn, NY) received the second award in October 2024, and Alice Sheppard and Laurel Lawson of Kinetic Light (Brooklyn, NY) received the third award in October 2025. Hereafter, the Knight Choreography Prize is announced once a year, in the Fall.

Cynthia Oliver Bio

Cynthia Oliver (Choreographer/Director) is a Bronx-born, Virgin Island-reared dance maker and scholar. Her work incorporates textures of Caribbean performance with African and American aesthetic sensibilities. She has toured the globe as a featured dancer with contemporary companies David Gordon Pick Up Co., Ronald K. Brown/Evidence, Bebe Miller Company, and Tere O'Connor Dance and as an actor in works by Laurie Carlos, Greg Tate, Ione, Ntozake Shange, and Deke Weaver. She earned a PhD in performance studies from New York University, is a New York Dance and Performance (Bessie) Award winning choreographer, a 2016 Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography Mellon Fellow, a 2017 University of Illinois Center for Advanced Studies Associate (and now CAS Professor), and a 2007 University Scholar awardee. She served a five-year term as Associate Vice Chancellor for Research and Innovation in the Humanities, Arts and Related Fields from 2017-2021 and is currently Special Advisor to the Chancellor for Arts Integration at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, where she is a professor in the dance department with affiliations in African American Studies and Gender and Women's Studies.

She is a widely published author with articles in a variety of journals and edited volumes. Her single authored book is titled, *Queen of the Virgins: Pageantry and Black Womanhood in the Caribbean* (2009). Her last evening-length performance work, "Virago-Man Dem" premiered at the New York Brooklyn Academy of Music's (BAM) Next Wave Festival 2017 and toured the country. She has also been named a 2021 United States Artist, a 2021 Doris Duke Artist, and a 2022 Guggenheim Fellow.

About NCCAkron

For ten years, the National Center for Choreography–Akron (NCCAkron) has been a leader in dance research and development and a connector for artists. As one of only two choreography centers in the U.S., NCCAkron is an incubator and hub for dance. We also offer audiences opportunities to experiment with and understand dance through conversations, events, podcasts, and books. Over the past decade, NCCAkron has supported 800+ dance artists across 100 U.S. cities, serving as a cultural matchmaker for choreographers and a hyperagent for the national dance field. Offering space and resources for rigorous play and positive failure,

NCCAkron has redefined what it means to support dance artists. For more information, visit nccakron.org.

A discrete nonprofit organization, separate from The University of Akron but with offices based there, the establishment and general operation of NCCAkron are made possible by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

About Knight Foundation

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