



2025 IMPACT REPORT

REAFFIRMING

OUR MISSION





Kene Okigbo

*Chair of the Board - 2025
The Union for Contemporary Art*

FROM THE BOARD PRESIDENT

This past year was marked by upheaval. If you are reading this, you likely felt it too. National shifts affected The Union. Local conditions reshaped our context. Internal transitions challenged our systems and our people. The cumulative effect was real and, at times, painful.

Not all change is productive. Cuts to public arts funding, including those affecting the National Endowment for the Arts, have tangible consequences for organizations like ours across the country. Through many lenses, the resources available to realize our mission just a few years ago are no longer assured. The landscape we enter in 2026 is materially different from the one we knew before.

At the same time, change can also be clarifying.

In early 2025, I wrote to the Board about the idea of the phoenix and asked whether renewal is instinctive or intentional. I argued that it is neither accidental nor passive. The phoenix wills the flame, the ash, and the renewal. It wills, through sulfur and suffering, new life, even when circumstance places it at the precipice.

That framing proved instructive. The Union endured a difficult year, but it did not remain in the ashes. We saw the revival of our performing arts program, the reclamation of the Abundance Garden, the revitalization of our co-op studio, and a reinvigoration of youth programming. Just as importantly, we recommitted ourselves to relationships by reengaging longtime collaborators and welcoming new community partners who believe in the role of art as connective tissue.

As I transition out of the role of Board Chair, I will offer one clear-eyed observation from 2025 as we move into 2026. The work ahead will not be easy. Strengthening the cultural and social fabric of a community, especially this one, never is. But the arts remain among our most powerful tools for reigniting positive social change for artists, for North Omaha, and for the greater Omaha metro.

The Union for Contemporary Art enters its next chapter tested, more self-aware, and deeply committed to its mission. That commitment is not symbolic. It is practiced every day by artists, staff, youth, partners, and supporters who continue to will something better into being.

For that commitment, we thank them, and we thank you.

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Thank you to our co-op passholders, instructors, board, community members, families, and everyone who helped support The Union and our efforts in 2025. We have a lot planned for 2026 and know the momentum we built up this past year will carry us forward to newer heights, stronger programs, and greater community impacts. —*Lakesha Green, Executive Director*



OUR MISSION is to strengthen the cultural and social landscape of our community by using the arts as a vehicle to inspire positive social change.



REFLECTING

OUR CULTURE





EXHIBITIONS

By Lily Stennis-Vinson, Exhibition + Residencies Manager

In 2025, the Union's exhibitions and residency programs experienced a dynamic year marked by diverse artistic presentations, multisensory community engagement, and expanded opportunities for local and emerging artists. The Wanda D. Ewing and Blue Room Galleries showcased exhibitions ranging from visual narratives of Black love to contemporary fabrication and Sudanese cultural expression. These exhibitions drew more than 2,000 visitors, generated media coverage, supported art sales, and facilitated 14 public programs.

KEY SUCCESSES

Compelling Exhibitions & Cultural Impact: Hosted high-demand, diverse exhibitions that generated strong visitation, media coverage, art sales, and emotional resonance.

Deepened Artist & Community Engagement: Activations fostered intergenerational dialogues, supported multidisciplinary collaboration, and strengthened residency experiences through local partnerships and hands-on learning.

Expanded Professional Development & Support: The Union Provided meaningful development for resident artists and fellows—including workshops, technical skill-building, cohort gatherings, and structured expectations that supported creative growth and community connection.

2025 EXHIBITIONS AT A GLANCE:



Lily Stennis-Vinson
Field of Lily's
"Little Black Girl Memoir"



Celeste Butler
"Elevate"



Nathan Murray
"Undercurrents"

Asaad Komi
"Naturally Framed"



To honor **Thomas Curry**, the first artist in The Union's new initiative to support emerging local artists, we renamed The Blue Room to The Cancur Gallery following his passing in late November. More than 50 close friends and family attended the announcement, which was also covered by KETV News. We will be hosting a public dedication in the coming months honoring the legacy of Thomas Curry.



ACTIVATIONS at a glance



Our exhibitions deepened cultural dialogue through collaborations with poets, dancers, musicians, and community culinary artists.

Top: Celeste Butler's artist talk held during Native Omaha Days **Middle row:** (left) The Nuba Kush cultural dancers performing among the works of Asaad Komi's *Naturally Framed* exhibition, (right) Nathan Murray's artist talk **Bottom row:** (left) Emcee Sho and Nebraska Poet Laureate Jewel Rodgers performing among Celeste Butler's *Elevate* exhibition, (right) Thomas Curry's *Urban Omaha* exhibition relaunched the Blue Room as an exhibition space for emerging local artists

RESIDENT ARTISTS & FELLOWSHIP

2025 also saw our Studio 24's resident artists broaden their practices through interdisciplinary learning and community connections, while the Inside/Outside Fellowship supported artist development through structured expectations, community-based projects, and reflective cohort engagement.

With plans for 2026 that include expanded local exhibitions, professional development, community story-driven programming, and strengthened pathways for young artists, the department is poised to continue transforming the galleries and residencies into culturally resonant, artist-centered, and community-driven spaces.

KEY EVENTS



From the Fellows Showcase



Terron Baldwin's GNARLY exhibit and artist talk



The 2025 fellows: Keith Rodger, Amelia Broussard, Ashton J. Page, Maritza N. Estrada, and Ana Luisa González



Summer resident artist, Adrienne Gaither



Fall resident artist and Alabama State student, Terron Baldwin, our first resident artist from a HBCU

REVIVING

OUR THEATER



PERFORMING ARTS

By Denise Chapman, Producing Artistic Director

In 2025, the theatre department underwent a significant reset and restart period, addressing substantial operational challenges while rebuilding artistic momentum. The year began with major technical and facility hurdles—including a damaged floor, a nonfunctional sound system, and a transition to a new ticketing platform—yet the team successfully relaunched the performing arts program and expanded activation of the Shirley Tyree Theater.

Looking toward 2026, priorities include restarting the Director Training Program and Play Reading Series, deepening community connections, and increasing both audience numbers and artist participation, supported by essential staffing and technical needs to sustain growth.

KEY SUCCESSES

Program Relaunch & Season Activation: Successfully reintroduced the performing arts program, increased use of the Shirley Tyree Theater, and announced a fully realized 2026 season.



Culturally Grounded

Programming: Delivered meaningful events—including Northside Carnation and Black Theater Day—that centered

Black theatre artists and celebrated North Omaha's cultural history.

Rebuilding Artistic Infrastructure: Despite major technical setbacks, the department stabilized operations, reestablished audition processes, and launched new events like *Holiday Extravaganza* to reenergize artist and audience engagement.

Growing Team: Dr. Khalid Long will be joining us for the 2026 season as our resident scholar. Long is a theatre scholar, dramaturg, and director specializing in African American and Black diasporic theatre, performance, and literature



The opening of Northside Carnation



Kathy Tyree in Northside Carnation, which ran during Native Omaha Days



The cast of Holiday Extravaganza, which ran for nine performances



2026 THEATRE SEASON

***Wine in the Wilderness* by Alice Childress**
Feb. 20-March 8

***Boulevard of Bold Dreams* by Ladarrion Williams**
April 24-May 10

***Being Black Outside* by Vinecia Coleman**
A co-production with Great Plains Theatre Commons
June 4-14

***Fry Daddies* by Eric Lawson**
August 7-24

REIMAGINING

THE POSSIBILITIES



ABUNDANCE GARDEN

By Rayn Tot, Program Support Manager

Through extensive rebuilding, we reestablished structure, restored the grounds, and rebuilt community participation: transforming the garden from a simple produce stand into a growing hub for engagement. The Sow & Grow series—featuring nine produce stands and workshops facilitated by both staff and community members—engaged 226 families and distributed over 2,800 pounds of donated food, while the first ticketed workshop introduced new revenue-generating potential. Additional volunteers, weekly free produce offerings, and new programming momentum have laid a strong foundation for 2026, where the garden is envisioned as a cultural and healing hub offering markets, artist-led workshops, and expanded partnerships. With increased funding, staff support, and equipment, the Abundance Garden is poised for deeper cultural impact and broader community reach in the coming year.

KEY SUCCESSSES



Program Rebuilding & Restoration:

Transformed an overgrown, under-resourced garden into a functional, organized, and active community space with renewed documentation, processes, and equipment.

New Revenue-Generating

Programming: Held the garden's first ticketed workshop about natural dyeing techniques, demonstrating future potential for income through art, wellness, and cultural programming.



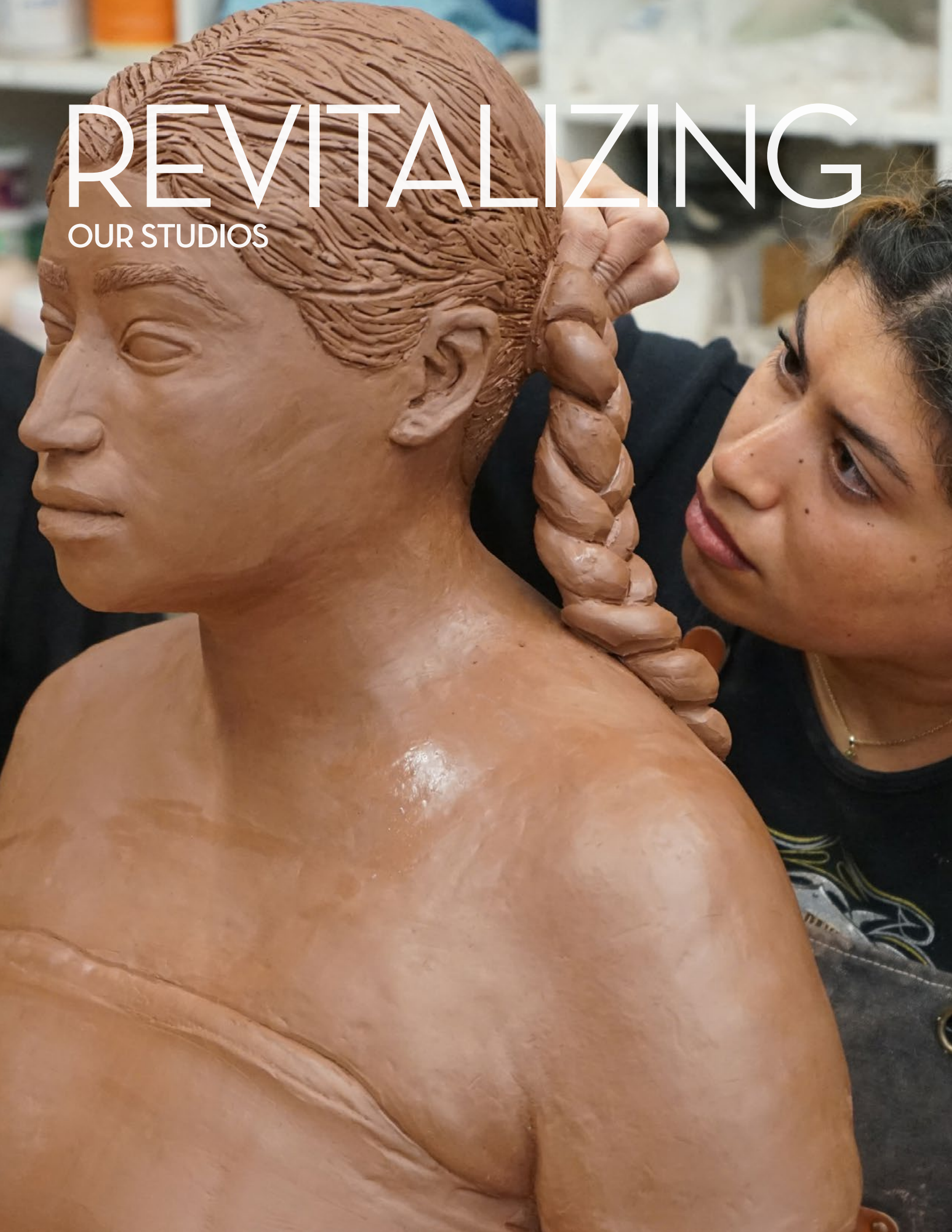
SOW & GROW EVENTS AT A GLANCE:

The Union hosted nine Sow & Grow events, distributed 2,816 lbs. of donated produce, engaged 226 families, and supported 11 volunteers.



REVITALIZING

OUR STUDIOS



CO-OP STUDIOS

By Nathan Murray, Co-op Studios Manager

In 2025, the ceramics studio—and the broader Co-op studios—experienced a revitalized year marked by renewed structure, strong participation, and a thriving creative culture. Under reorganized processes and clearly defined expectations, the ceramics studio became a high-use hub for both new and returning members, while workshops in ceramics, printmaking, and the darkroom saw consistently strong enrollment. Enhanced mentorship, hands-on support, and a rebuilt communal learning environment significantly boosted artist confidence and project completion across disciplines. As momentum grows, the Co-op is poised for continued expansion in 2026, with goals to increase membership, deepen cross-studio collaboration, and strengthen technical and material support to meet rising demand.

KEY SUCCESSES



Studio Revitalization: Reorganized systems, clarified expectations, and rebuilt culture created safer, more efficient, and more vibrant shared spaces.

High Participation: Strong workshop attendance and increased day-to-day studio use—especially in ceramics—reflect renewed momentum and engagement.

Enhanced Artist Support:

Consistent mentorship and hands-on guidance improved confidence, learning, and the completion of major projects.



MEET SOME OF OUR INSTRUCTORS:



REINVIGORATING

OUR YOUTH





YOUTH PROGRAMMING

By Christie Jones, Learning + Engagement Director

The learning and engagement department navigated a challenging but productive year focused on strengthening core youth and family programs—including Art Club, Action Brigade, Mentoring Young Artists, and Family Night—while also laying the groundwork for a future summer camp curriculum. Family Night showed steady growth, increasing participation from six to eight families, and the October event offered an especially meaningful experience as families engaged hands-on with the pottery wheel and clay. Looking ahead to 2026, the team aims to deepen impact by expanding Family Night through community partnerships and increasing family attendance to 20, supported by a broader awareness campaign to reach more neighbors and build more intentional, high-quality learning opportunities.

YOUTH PROGRAMMING AT A GLANCE:



KEY SUCCESSSES



Program Strengthening:

Continued development and refinement of youth and family programs, including early work on a summer camp curriculum.

Growing Engagement: Family Night participation increased, with families highly engaged in hands-on creative activities such as the pottery wheel.

Clear Momentum for 2026:

Established strong foundations and defined measurable goals for expanding reach and impact through partnerships and outreach.



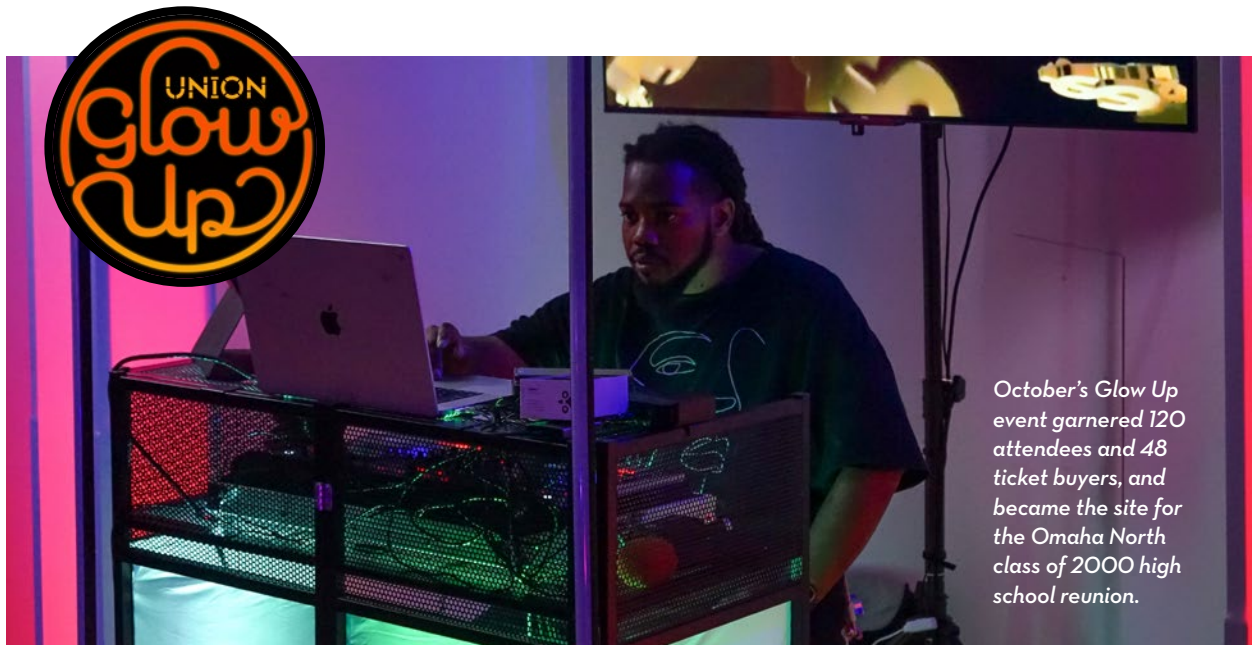


REENGAGING

OUR COMMUNITY

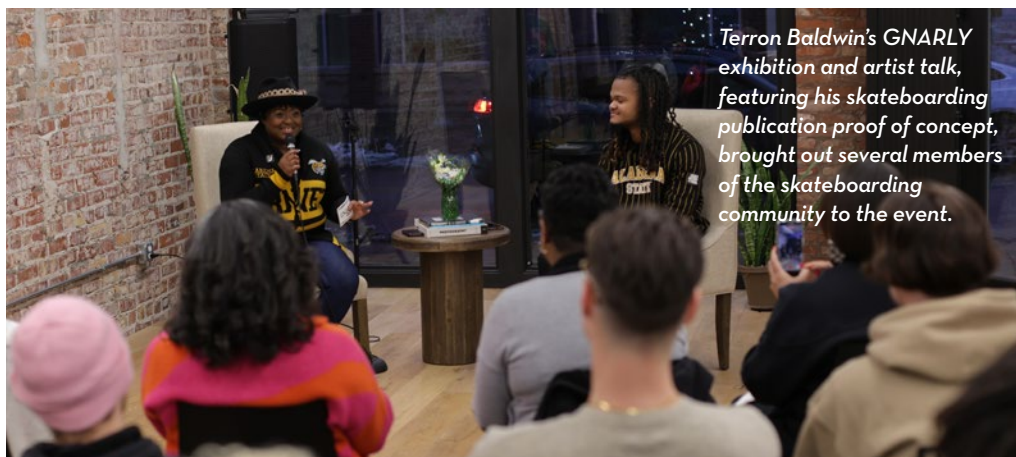
COMMUNITY & SPECIAL EVENTS

In 2025, The Union for Contemporary Art significantly strengthened its role as a cultural anchor in North Omaha by expanding community outreach efforts and deepening engagement across the neighborhood. Through 14 community-driven events—including the inaugural Union Day, Juneteenth celebrations, and participation in major local traditions such as the Native Omaha Days Parade—The Union more than doubled total engagements and tripled total engagement hours compared to the previous year.



COMMUNITY & SPECIAL EVENTS (continued)

Members of the community gathered for a discussion about the release of the powerful new documentary *MY OMAHA* by Nick Beaulieu (pictured in foreground). Set against the backdrop of Omaha's deep divides and burgeoning racial justice movement, *MY OMAHA* tells the story of Nick's personal journey to document the activism in his hometown and reconcile his viewpoints with his terminally ill father.



Terron Baldwin's *GNARLY* exhibition and artist talk, featuring his skateboarding publication proof of concept, brought out several members of the skateboarding community to the event.



Assad Komi's artist talk



Hundreds of visitors who attended the Elevate opening reception were treated to an array of modern African cuisine, provided by Chef Jamil and the team from the House of Bah.



A roundtable discussion held during this year's Black Theater Day.



u-ca.org (402) 933-3161

📍 @TheUnionOmaha

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Tues-Thurs: 1-8 p.m. Fri & Sat: 10 a.m.-5 p.m.

