September 6, 2019
California Arts Council
Chair Update/Reflections:

“Come with me, Mom says. To the library. Books and Summertime go together.”
- Lisa Schroeder

As with all summers, this past summer seemed to go by so quickly. It reminded me of a quote from Shakespeare, which, when introduced to me in a high school English class, I didn’t quite understand. He wrote, “Summer’s lease hath too short a date.” Now I get it. I started this past summer with the idea of all the summertime things I would do, especially the books I would have the time to read, at my leisure. I’d start with the serious stuff and work my way down to the beach reading fluff. Then, Toni Morrison died, and it changed my relationship to every word I thought I wanted to read. I decided to re-read each of her books, in the order they were published. Starting with *The Bluest Eye*, I then re-read *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*. I am currently reading *Tar Baby*, again. None of them are easy reading, but they are profound, mystical and timeless. Now it’s September with only a few weeks of summer left. School has started, my son has moved on to his next adventure, leaving our nest partially empty. My time is more my own as I settle into a new routine.

Aside from reading, this summer, I visited art galleries and museums; attended concerts and traveled back east with my family for a few weeks. We saw a particularly moving exhibition at the Guggenheim: *Defacement: The Untold*
Story. The show opens with a painting by Jean-Michel Basquiat which commemorates the death of a young artist named Michael Stewart, at the hands of NY Transit Police. Basquiat originally painted it directly onto the studio wall of artist Keith Haring. Haring cut it out of the wall when he moved and framed it. It is the centerpiece of the show. Other artists’ works are also included with their commentary on the incident, on police brutality and issues of social justice. It was a deeply provocative experience. We also attended the screening of the film, *Miles Davis: Birth of the Cool*, produced and directed by former Bay Area filmmaker, Stanley Nelson, and narrated brilliantly by Bay Area actor, Carl Lumbley. Miles’ classic, *So What* played in my head for days afterward. These are both must see cultural experiences, attested by the long lines to get into both events. We also attended the 10th annual Montclair Jazz festival in NJ. Enthusiastically attended by over 12,000 Jazz fans.

In the San Francisco/Bay Area, I attended a range of cultural events: an exhibit of works by Bay Area photographer, Lewis Watts at the Rena Branston Gallery.; Oakland Museum’s Friday Nights party where I experienced an interactive piece called *The Black Thought Project*, by artist Alicia Walters; a lovely small show of 18th century European fans and works by native Californian tattoo artist, Ed Hardy, *Deeper Than Skin*, both at the DeYoung museum. At SF Jazz my husband and I rocked at a music/dance concert by New York based band, *Burnt Sugar, the Arkestra Chamber*, who presented musical tributes to Max Roach, Steely Dan and David Bowie. My husband enjoyed it so much, he went back for more the following night!

All of these experiences were enhanced by visiting friends and family. However, there were contrasting experiences, as well. Every time I think things can’t get any more bizarre or chaotic in the world, something else happens and I’m astounded at our capacity to cope and survive the madness. This Summer was no exception, with wars and rumors of war. The Amazon Rain Forest is burning, Greenland is melting, children are still in cages at our southern border, fascism/racism is rearing its malevolent head and mass shootings came in rapid-fire
succession- beginning here in California, at a Garlic Festival. There are wild fires on the Left coast and a hurricane on the Right. With all of these disturbing current events and natural disasters, Morrison’s words ring even more true, her wisdom, it turns out is timely and enduring. She wrote:

“I know the World is bruised and bleeding, and though it is important not to ignore its pain, it is also critical to refuse to succumb to its malevolence. Like failure, chaos contains information that can lead to knowledge—even wisdom. Like Art.”

Like Art. She is speaking of the efficacy of the Arts and Culture in society, beyond its intrinsic value—the appreciation of Beauty, the illumination of our minds, the titillation of our senses and the cultivation of our creative impulses. She is speaking also, about the Power of the Arts and its broader impact on what we all share; our common humanity, love for our families, concern for our communities, our health and well-being, the health and well-being of our larger global society and of our planet. Art impacts so much in our lives- the economy, our educational systems, and the environment. Morrison is talking about why it is imperative that we have the courage and wisdom to create and to support Creativity. Our survival depends on it.

This is why the work we do is so very essential. As a state agency, the California Arts Council’s current mission, to Advance California through the Arts and Creativity; and your work and support as Cultural workers- you who are the artists, activists, arts educators and community advocates, you help to make it possible for us to achieve this mission, for all Californians. I thank you for this commitment! It is truly a Labor of Love.

Every community has its own unique needs – and it’s our responsibility to create and support the state arts grant programs that match and address those needs. That is not an easy task. I know, in some sense, I am preaching to the choir, but I don’t think its’ importance can be overstated. I don’t need to remind you of the crisis of homelessness all around us. The verdicts from the Ghost Ship Fire that came down yesterday, once again highlights the potential tragic nature of this urgent problem. Many of those who perished were artists, seeking a place to live and work. How do we heal from this trauma? What do we teach/tell our children? What kind of a society is it that does not support or encourage its creatives?

It’s a challenge to find a way to equitably address the needs of the breadth of
diverse communities across our state – although, I firmly believe that the Arts, in its many forms, can help meet this challenge. Artists and arts organizations can and must be a fundamental part of the solutions that are deeply needed by all of our communities. I’ve witnessed this firsthand throughout my career as an arts practitioner, an educator and during my time on the California Arts Council.

This past year the Council has established several priorities:

- Increasing diversity in the Arts Administration field with the CA Emerging Arts Leaders of Color Fellowship Program
- Arts and the intersection with Clinical Health and Public Health
- Arts and the intersection with Technology/Education
- S.T.E.A.M. as an educational pedagogy
- Evaluation of several of our programs
- Developing a new Strategic Framework
- Investigating grants for Individual Artists

We are meeting today to discuss some of these ideas and to review our grants guidelines for the coming fiscal year. This is only a portion of the work. The rest is up to our grantees, the arts organizations, our State and Local partners and Statewide Regional Networks. But most importantly it’s for the artists, for young and old, the people who make and benefit from the creative products and programs that these grants support. It’s all a Labor of Love.

I am always a little nostalgic in September. It’s the beginning of the last few weeks of Summer, season of my birth. Fall is in the air. Besides birthday parties and ice cream and cake, I have so many fond summer memories, and some that are simply sad. I was that kid who lived in the library in the summer, before picnics in the park, lying on the beach or traveling by a train called the Silver Meteor to Georgia to visit my maternal Grandmother. I was always a little horrified that the kids there had to go back to school in August. Little did I know I’d face that same dismay here in California, when my son had to return to school and I to teach. I always felt like our vacation was cut short in the midst of the “dog days” of Summer. Those lazy, hazy, hot fun in the summertime, and the living is easy days. “Summer breeze, makes me feel fine, blowing through the jasmine of my mind” days….see what I mean? I’ve always included books in my summer rituals. I read my first Toni Morrison book in the summer—Sula. I was mesmerized with the language, the poetry embedded in her prose. Her writing is bold, complex and deep. Most importantly, she understood how important creativity is to the human soul. She makes, for example, a case for why Art should be embedded in our schools’ curriculums. Describing her character, Sula, she wrote:
“In a way, her strangeness, her naïveté, her craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of an idle imagination. Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous.” (Excerpt From: Morrison, Toni. Sula.” Knopf, 2007-07-24.)

It is imperative that we include Art in our lives, embed it in our psyches. What better argument for S.T.E.A.M in education than Queen Mother Morrison’s description of Sula’s dilemma? Her’s is a metaphor for much that ails our society. Yet, in spite of all the danger around us, I, personally hold onto Hope because I firmly believe that Art, like Love, has the Power to Heal.

Respectfully submitted,

Nashormeh

Nashormeh Lindo

Chair

Echinacea in my summer garden.