

Cool Works In Progress: A Sneak Peek

Hosted by Christine Steyer

MONDAY
SEPTEMBER 14
7-8:30PM CT

ZOOM
EVENT

VISUAL PROJECTS

LYDIA AHN
CHERI WOLF

MUSICAL PROJECTS

CARMEN BELL
ANNE BURNELL
ELISABETH HOWARD
JEFFERY LYLE SEGAL
DON SKOOG
CHRISTINE STEYER



COOL WORKS PRESENTATIONS

Lydia Ahn—Patchwork (Stop-Motion Film)

Carmen Bell—Tangled Roots (Opera)

Anne Burnell—His Day (Singles Release, Album)

Elisabeth Howard & Jeffery Segal—Crazy Love (Musical)

Don Skoog & The Dickinson Ensemble—The War Between the Houses (Opera)

Christine Steyer—And I Said Nothing (Opera)

Cheri Wolf—Artist Trading Cards (Visual Art)

BIOS & ARTIST STATEMENTS



Lydia Ahn—Patchwork (Stop-Motion Film)

Lydia Ahn is an animator who works in both stop-motion and 2D. Her films often explore the fragile balance between wanting to belong and self-erasure, featuring characters caught between opposing forces, such as childhood innocence versus adult responsibility, or the pull of connection versus the desire for isolation.

Using tactile materials and a distinct, personal visual style, Ahn creates allegorical art that does not offer easy answers. She sees empathy as a difficult journey, examining how conflicting truths can coexist and how our perspective shapes what we see. Her films invite the viewer into a space of complex ambiguity.

Her stop-motion film *Patchwork* follows a multi-colored lamb living in a monochrome world. As the lamb struggles to exist in an environment where it does not seem to belong, it begins to feel pressured to hide what makes it different. The film explores alienation, self-erasure, and the desire to belong without having to erase the parts of oneself that feel unfamiliar or difficult to understand. Through its handmade materials and visual storytelling, *Patchwork* reflects Ahn's interest in the contradictions of identity and the complicated ways we learn to see ourselves through the eyes of others.

For Ahn, animation is a way to give shape to internal feelings like doubt, deep longing, and tenderness. She uses the delicate nature of her materials to confront heavy topics, prompting quiet yet uncomfortable reflection. Her work portrays the deeply split human experience and tensions that are simply part of life.



Carmen Bell—Tangled Roots (Opera)

Carmen Bell is a soprano, educator, higher education administrator, and arts leader whose career bridges performance, education, and creative entrepreneurship. She holds degrees in vocal performance from Western Michigan University and Eastern Michigan University and has performed opera, musical theatre, spirituals, and concert repertoire throughout her career. She is the new Director of Working In Concert's Black Voices In Cabaret initiative.

Bell is the founder of AuthenticOpera, an opera company committed to authentic storytelling, expanding representation on the operatic stage, and creating opportunities for artists and stories that have historically been underrepresented. She is also Program Manager for Academic Support Programs in the Merze Tate College at Western Michigan University, where she focuses on student success, engagement, and programming that helps students find their voice and thrive. In Chicago, she serves as Managing Director of Black Voices in Cabaret.

Bell's current creative focus is *Tangled Roots*, her original one-act opera, composed by Rufus Ferguson and Jordan Hamilton. Bell conceived the project, and performs the role of Queenie. The opera explores African American history, ancestry, identity, cultural memory, and resilience through music and storytelling.

Tangled Roots begins with slavery as one root of the African American experience, while refusing to let oppression define the entire story. It examines what African people carried with them: music, spirituality, tradition, memory, and connections to ancestry that could not be erased, and how those roots survived, transformed, and continue to resonate across generations. Through this work, Bell invites audiences to confront America's difficult past while recognizing the creativity, cultural inheritance, resilience, and humanity that endured beyond it.



Anne Burnell—His Day (Singles Release, Album)

Anne Burnell is a vocalist and songwriter whose work has been presented at jazz clubs and festivals including the Sarasota Jazz Festival, Taste of Chicago, Plymouth Arts Wine & Jazz Festival, and the Food & Music Festival in Panama. Recordings include: *This Could Be the Start of Something Big*, *Two for the Road*, *Blues in the Night*, *Serious*, *Little Things We Do Together*, *Summer Days & Dreamy Nights*, featuring original songs that earned her a Billboard Magazine Certificate of Achievement in Songwriting.

Anne has served on non-profits: Chicago Cabaret Professionals as president (2019-2023), Managing Director of Chicago Cabaret Week, and Cabaret Connexion, an initiative of Working In Concert (2019-2026). Anne received the Chicago Cabaret Professionals Service Award, and the 2024 Gold Coast Award along with her husband Mark Burnell. She is also a recipient of a Chicago DCASE Individual Artist Grant.

Anne has been working on writing, recording, and releasing music for several years. In the last few years the business has changed drastically, and the playing field is leveled in a couple ways. Anyone can directly record and release music to streaming platforms, but there are a lot of steps. Most recently, she dropped a single from a new recording to be released in 2027. Her song "His Day", is a story about her father, a WWII veteran, and there is an official music video on YouTube. She is currently recording the rest of that project with her husband Mark.



Elisabeth Howard & Jeffery Segal—*Crazy Love* (Musical)

Elisabeth Howard is a composer, lyricist, and performer whose work combines theatrical storytelling with emotional honesty and wit. Jeffery Lyle Segal is a composer, lyricist, and musical-theatre collaborator known for his sharp dramatic instincts and melodic craftsmanship. Together, Howard and Segal bring a distinctive voice to their intimate, provocative ensemble musical *Crazy Love*, balancing 1970s period flavor with themes that remain immediate and relevant.

Crazy Love is a musical comedy set in New York City in 1975, at the height of the sexual revolution. Six people come together to create a new musical based on an audacious premise: the next six weeks of their actual lives will become the material for the show. What begins as an exciting theatrical experiment soon becomes dangerously personal as the boundaries between art and life disappear.

At the center are Melissa and David, a married songwriting team and best friends since high school, who decide to experiment with an open relationship. Melissa becomes involved with Billy, an ambitious young actor pursuing his Broadway dreams, while David grows close to Beverly, an actress searching for lasting love. Meanwhile, Beverly's relationship with Barry, a wealthy surgeon and financial backer, begins to unravel as Barry confronts feelings he has never fully acknowledged and develops an unexpected connection with Andre, the charismatic director orchestrating the experiment.

As affairs, jealousy, friendship, sexual identity, ambition, and unexpected love become theatrical material, the six discover that finding the "perfect person" may be less important than discovering who they really are. With comedy, romance, and a lively 1970s-inspired score, *Crazy Love* explores what happens when real life refuses to follow the script.



Don Skoog & The Dickinson Ensemble—*The War Between the Houses* (Opera)

Founded by Don Skoog, The Dickinson Ensemble is a Chicago-area chamber group that reimagines classical music and opera through the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Their intimate, theatrical performances and immersive concerts in concert halls, historic sites, community spaces, and unconventional venues, combine new music and storytelling to make Dickinson's work emotionally immediate, accessible, and relevant to contemporary audiences.

Through their performances, they seek to reveal the power and beauty of Dickinson's words and life while inviting audiences to discover how her poetry can resonate with their own experiences. Their mission is to present Dickinson as a vital American voice whose work continues to speak meaningfully to modern audiences.

The War Between the Houses is a one-act, nine-scene contemporary opera by Don Skoog based on a tragedy in the life of Emily Dickinson. When Emily and her sister discover that their brother has taken a lover, they are forced to choose sides between their brother and his wife, setting the two households on a collision course that ultimately leads to tragedy. In its aftermath, Emily confronts her own culpability and the true cost of loving outside society's rules.

The War Between the Houses is scheduled to premiere in June 2027 as part of Working In Concert's summer season at the Nineteenth Century Charitable Association in Oak Park, Illinois. The opera is being conceived as an ongoing, mobile production, with a cast, crew, and sets designed to travel to venues throughout the Midwest.



Christine Steyer—*And I Said Nothing* (Opera)

Christine Steyer is the 2020 Honored Artist of The American Prize for outstanding contributions to the arts and the 2025 recipient of the Illinois Creative Accelerator Grant. The soprano has received acclaim for her authentic portrayals of opera heroines, including *Madama Butterfly*, *Violetta*, and *the Countess*. Steyer is an avid recitalist and producer, showcasing contemporary works and those by women. She is also a librettist, with three of her operas premiering since 2021.

Steyer is the founder and Artistic Director of *Bellissima Opera & Song*, whose *In the Classroom* program has brought music to 26,000 young people. She is co-founder of the vocal alliance *Working In Concert*. Through her performance, writing, producing, and educational work, Steyer is committed to creating new opportunities for artists and bringing meaningful experiences to diverse audiences.

Her latest project is *And I Said Nothing*, a short anthropomorphic opera. Inspired by pastor Martin Niemöller's famous post-World War II confession about silence during the Nazi persecution of various groups, the opera explores the consequences of remaining silent in the face of repression. By placing human experiences and moral questions in the voices of animals, the work uses the imaginative distance of fable to make difficult truths accessible and universal. It asks audiences to consider how easily silence can become complicity and what responsibility each of us bears while also serving as a warning that Niemöller's words remain deeply relevant in the modern age.

The libretto and music for *And I Said Nothing* are currently being written by Steyer. Peter Stigdon serves as arranger. The project is exploring ways to introduce puppetry into the final production which hopes to premiere in 2027.



Cheri Wolf—Artist Trading Cards (Visual Art)

The featured visual artist of *Bellissima Opera's* 2023 celebration of International Women's Day, Cheri Wolf began her life of artistic endeavors with private art lessons at age three, learning to crochet at age six and earning one of several scholarships to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago beginning at age eleven. Today, she eyes items she comes in contact within the world, with a filter of repurposing and for utilizing as interesting mediums. Cheri is always making something, from crocheting/knitting, drawing/painting, baking/decorating to building and everywhere in between.

In January 2025, Cheri came across the concept of swapping artist trading cards and soon became an active participant as an artist and collector of these miniature works of art (the size of commercial baseball cards) from artists around the globe. In hoping to educate and perhaps entice others to join in the fun and fulfilling community, she will be presenting ATC 101 — Introduction to Artist Trading Cards.

SPECIAL THANKS

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