



*Arts Orange County is the leader in building appreciation of, participation in, and support for the arts and arts education in Orange County, California.*

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## **Arts Orange County Announces 26<sup>th</sup> OC Arts Awards Honorees**

APRIL 17, 2026 – IRVINE, CALIFORNIA – **The Orange County arts community will gather on Tuesday, September 29, 2026, in the Samueli Theater at Segerstrom Center for the Arts in Costa Mesa, to honor its stars at the 26<sup>th</sup> Orange County Arts Awards, hosted by the county’s non-profit arts council, Arts Orange County.**

A ***Helena Modjeska Cultural Legacy Award*** will be bestowed upon artist **Ann Phong** for her lifetime achievement. Born in Saigon, Vietnam and now residing in Southern California, Phong has participated in over 200 solo and group exhibitions, spanning from local galleries and museums throughout the United States to Seoul and Tokyo. In 2025, she received the prestigious Los Angeles Lakers’ *In The Paint* grant. Her art transcends traditional boundaries. In each canvas, she weaves a poetic narrative of our shared journey through life, marred by the detritus of our existence. Her work is a symphony of colors and brushstrokes that evoke motion, harmoniously intertwined with an array of found objects meticulously positioned. Phong also served as board president of the Vietnamese American Arts and Letters Association (VAALA) from 2009-2018.

A ***Helena Modjeska Cultural Legacy Award*** will be given to **Eli Simon**. Eli Simon is the founding Artistic Director of New Swan Shakespeare Festival, a professional summer theater that performs on the campus of UC Irvine with support from the Claire Trevor School of the Arts, the Department of Drama, the Office of Research and the campus community. A Chancellor’s Professor of Acting in Drama, this marks his 38th year at UC Irvine. Simon is the author of three books: *The Art of Clowning*, *Masking Unmasked* and *Power Speech*. He has directed more than 100 productions at Shakespeare festivals, regional theaters and international venues across the United States and abroad, including in Romania, Italy and Korea.

A ***Helena Modjeska Cultural Legacy Award*** will be given to **Janet and Walkie Ray**. Janet and Walkie Ray have been a tremendous force behind the success of a number of Orange County philanthropic initiatives. They were instrumental in the strategic planning, fundraising and construction of the Discovery Science Center, and recently chaired the capital campaign for the \$17 million expansion of Sherman Library and Gardens. Individually, the Rays each played integral roles in development of Irvine’s Great Park. They have also been involved with Segerstrom Center for the Arts, Orange County High School of the Arts, and Arts Orange County, with Janet having chaired the Arts Awards on several occasions.

A ***Helena Modjeska Cultural Special Award*** will be given to **Segerstrom Center for the Arts**. Originally named the Orange County Performing Arts Center, the Segerstrom Center for the Arts is celebrating two big anniversaries...its 40th year for the 3,000-seat Segerstrom Hall, and its 20th year for the Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall. Renamed in 2011 to honor the family, it has grown into a major campus, now including the Samueli Theater and Argyros Plaza. The vision of the Center’s founders became reality on September 29, 1986 when a concert was held in its new opera house-style Segerstrom Hall. Performances by Pacific Symphony, the Philharmonic Society, and Pacific Chorale, as well as celebrated international ballet companies, national tours of Broadway musicals, and much more fill the Center throughout the year. The Center also has an education department dedicated to bringing young people to the campus for live, professional performances, and to providing arts programming to schools throughout the county.

Three **Achievement Awards** will be bestowed:

**Outstanding Artist Award** to **Alicia Rojas**. Rojas is a Colombian interdisciplinary artist based in Santa Ana. Her work centers immigrant rights, anti-gentrification, equity, and ecological justice, using collaboration and storytelling to explore connections between land, place, people, and nature. Rojas is the Co-founder and Director of the Santa Ana Community Artist(a) Coalition, advancing community-led public art. Her work has been supported by the Andy Warhol Foundation, National Association of Latino Arts and Cultures, and the City of Santa Ana, among others. She has exhibited internationally, including at ARTBO in Bogotá, and completed a residency at Grand Central Art Center. Her project *Las Poderosas* will be archived by the Library of Congress as part of the American Heroes of the Pandemic collection.

**Outstanding Arts Organization Award** will be given to Orange County Arts and Disability. Their mission is to provide arts education and cultural opportunities by, with and for people with disabilities, making the arts accessible to people of all abilities. By creating an accessible platform that empowers individuals with disabilities to explore their creativity, they have significantly enriched the cultural landscape of the Orange County community, and proved that artistic expression has no limits. Formerly known as Very Special Arts Orange County, the organization is celebrating its 50th year producing the annual countywide arts and disability festival held at MainPlace Mall in partnership with the Orange County Department of Education.

**Emerging Arts Leader Award** to **Boróka Nagy**. Nagy is an award-winning choreographer, dancer and multimedia artist. She earned her BFA at Alvin Ailey/Fordham in NYC, and her MFA at University of California, Irvine. Nagy has performed at venues including New York City Center and the Apollo Theatre and continues to perform internationally in site-specific and concert stage works. Her choreography has been presented worldwide, exploring the human experience through movement, interactive performance, and collaborative art with her company Re:born Dance Interactive. Nagy directs The Academy of Dance in Orange County and founded Reborn Arts, a nonprofit advancing community engagement and peace through dance and shared movement experiences.

This year marks the 26<sup>th</sup> edition of the Orange County Arts Awards (held annually except for 2020) and the seventeenth time that it will take place at Segerstrom Center for the Arts. Preceding the ceremonies, honorees and sponsors will enjoy a pre-event reception and elegant dinner in the Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall Rotunda before joining all ceremony guests for the evening's program in the Samueli Theater.

The program features performances by exceptional Orange County artists, to be announced.

"Arts Orange County proudly honors the people and organizations that have profoundly impacted the creative life of our community," commented Patrick Brien, President and CEO of Arts Orange County. "Each year, we look forward to recognizing those in the arts who have contributed to Orange County over the course of a lifetime and those who have made a more recent impact. This is an evening that celebrates our diverse artistic community, where we honor and thank those whose dedication to the arts enriches and benefits so many throughout Orange County."

More information on the event may be found at <https://artsoc.org/events-and-programs/orange-county-arts-awards/>