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California College of the Arts announces Rob Epstein, Chris Johnson, and Lava Thomas as its 2025 Honorary Doctorate recipients



From left to right: Chris Johnson, Lava Thomas (Photo by Brandon Ruffin), and Rob Epstein (Photo by Hannah Epstein).

San Francisco, CA—May 6, 2025—California College of the Arts (CCA) is proud to award honorary doctorate degrees each year at its Commencement Ceremony to visionary artists, designers, and thinkers who have made lasting contributions to culture and society.

For its 118th Commencement Ceremony held on Saturday, May 17, at the Sydney Goldstein Theater, CCA will confer honorary doctorates to three distinguished recipients: Rob Epstein (Professor Emeritus), Chris Johnson (Professor Emeritus), and Lava Thomas (BFA Ceramics 1999).

“This year, we are proud to honor three extraordinary artists who exemplify both creative excellence and deep commitment to our CCA community,” said President David C. Howse. “Rob and Chris are beloved educators and influential artists who have shaped our college through their teaching and practice. Lava, a celebrated alum, continues to inspire the next generation with her groundbreaking work. Each of them creates art that resonates far beyond our campus—recognized and celebrated nationally and internationally. We look forward to the insight, inspiration, and encouragement they’ll share with our graduating students as they step into the next chapter of their creative lives.”

The honorees will be celebrated at a private reception before the Commencement Ceremony. Epstein and Johnson will speak at the undergraduate ceremony, while Thomas will address the graduate ceremony.

About Rob Epstein

Rob Epstein is an Academy Award-winning filmmaker known for his groundbreaking documentaries that illuminate untold stories and give voice to marginalized communities. His notable work includes *Word is Out*, *The Times of Harvey Milk*, *Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt*, *Paragraph 175*, *Howl*, *The Celluloid Closet*, *Taylor Mac's 24-Decade History of Popular Music*, and *Linda Ronstadt: The Sound of My Voice*. Over his distinguished career, he has received two Academy Awards, five Emmys, three Peabody Awards, a Grammy, the International Documentary Association's Pioneer Award, and numerous other honors, cementing his place as a leading voice in nonfiction storytelling. Three of his films are part of the Library of Congress National Film Registry.

In addition to filmmaking, Epstein is dedicated to education and mentorship, having served as a professor at California College of the Arts, where he co-founded the graduate film program, and as a visiting professor at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. He is also a member of the Directors Guild of America and has served on the Board of Governors of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Epstein's work continues to inspire and challenge audiences, demonstrating the transformative power of storytelling to shape culture and history. He is honored to receive this recognition from CCA and to celebrate the next generation of artists and storytellers.

About Chris Johnson

Chris Johnson is a photographic and video artist, educator, curator, and writer who has studied photography with world-renowned photographers such as Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, and Wynn Bullock. He has been a Full Professor and now Professor Emeritus, and for 11 years, he served as Chair of Photography at CCA.

Johnson's photographic artwork has been published and exhibited widely and is represented in collections including the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson, Arizona; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. In the fall of 2022, his fine art photographic portraiture was exhibited in a solo show at the Monterey Museum of Art.

Johnson has served as President of SF Camerawork Gallery, Chair of the Cultural Affairs Commission for the City of Oakland under Jerry Brown, and Director of the Mother Jones International Fund for Documentary Photography. He serves on the Board of the Oakland Museum of California and is Board President of the Alliance for Media Arts and Culture. Additionally, he authored *The Practical Zone System: for Film and Digital Photography*, currently in its 6th edition. His public artworks and projects are featured in the recently published book *Art as Social Practice: Technologies for Change*, Routledge Press. Johnson also originated the *Question Bridge: Black Males* concept, an award-winning video installation produced with Hank Willis Thomas and a team including Kamal Sinclair and Bayeté Ross Smith.

About Lava Thomas

Lava Thomas is a multidisciplinary artist whose work is grounded in an ethos of social justice. Her work has been exhibited at leading institutions across the country, including the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Harvard University, the Museum of the African Diaspora, and the California African American Museum in Los Angeles. Her work is held in the permanent collections of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem, Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, and the Cantor Art Center at Stanford University, among others.

In fall 2024, the San Francisco Arts Commission unveiled Thomas's *Portrait of a Phenomenal Woman: A Monument to Honor Dr. Angelou for the San Francisco Main Library* — the first public monument dedicated to a Black woman in the city's civic art collection.

Thomas has received numerous accolades, including an Academy of Arts and Letters Purchase Prize, a Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant for Painters & Sculptors, and a San Francisco Artadia Award. She was named a YBCA100 Honoree and was recognized as one of the "Women to Watch" by the San Francisco Advocacy for the National Museum of Women in the Arts. She has been awarded artist residencies at Headlands Center for the Arts, the Joan Mitchell Center, the Djerassi Resident Artists Program, and the Lucas Artists Residency Program at Montalvo Center for the Arts.

Thomas studied at UCLA's School of Art Practice and earned a BFA from California College of the Arts (CCA), where she now serves on the Presidential Advisory Board. She also serves on the Board of Directors of Headlands Center for the Arts. Her work has been featured in *Artforum*, *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Hyperallergic*, *SF Chronicle*, *The Guardian*, and more. Thomas is represented by [Rena Bransten Gallery](#) in San Francisco.

About California College of the Arts

Founded in 1907, California College of the Arts (CCA) educates students to shape culture and society through art, architecture, design, and writing. The college offers a rich curriculum of 22 undergraduate and 10 graduate programs taught by a faculty of expert practitioners. Located in the vibrant San Francisco Bay Area, CCA uniquely prepares students for lifelong creative work by fostering social and environmental responsibility, innovation, and community engagement. Graduates are highly sought-after by companies such as Pixar, Apple, IDEO, and Google, and many go on to launch their own successful businesses.

CCA's newly expanded campus adds 82,300 square feet of space to teach, make, and present art in a continuous indoor-outdoor environment. Designed by world-renowned architecture firm Studio Gang, the new addition brings together 30 academic programs and disciplines, student housing and dining, and interdisciplinary learning.

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