

September 29, 2021 — New York City & Charleston, South Carolina

Foundation for Spirituality and the Arts to Bridge Longstanding Divide between Religion and Contemporary Art

Two notable figures in New York City's contemporary art scene, Tyler Rollins and Leeza Ahmady, pivot in a new direction to initiate Foundation for Spirituality and the Arts (FSA), a nonprofit devoted to nurturing connections between spirituality and contemporary art. The first faith-oriented organization to arise from the center of New York's contemporary art world, FSA will launch September 29, 2021, with Rollins as Executive Director and Ahmady as Director of Programs.

For centuries, art and religion in the Western world were inextricably linked, with faith providing a bedrock for artistic practice. Yet looking at art today, it seems unfathomable that these two spheres were once indivisible. In noted art historian James Elkins' words, "Contemporary art is as far from organized religion as Western art has ever been, and that may be its most singular achievement — or its cardinal failure, depending on your point of view. The separation has become entrenched."

FSA has been established to address the marked lack of support for the creation and dissemination of spiritually-oriented art and its discourse in the US contemporary art scene. Creative works have much to gain from religious inspiration, just as religion has much to gain from art and aesthetics. "We aim to reignite the union between the two realms while fostering community through residencies, exhibitions, gatherings, and fellowships to inspire a more conscious and fulfilled life," states FSA Director of Programs, Leeza Ahmady.

After the events of the past year, our cultural need for community has become abundantly clear. Focusing on the spiritual and how it can unite us is a vital means of reaching beyond the material and connecting with our neighbors. What better way to do that than through art, a physical form that expresses the intangible, unifying experience of what it means to be alive? As Tyler Rollins, FSA executive director, notes, "A focus on transcendence and orienting oneself to a higher power can be a source of insight, illumination, and inspiration — all things that are also associated with artistic expression." FSA's programs will activate neglected, meaningful dialogue and collaboration between the faith-based and contemporary art communities.

Our signature program will be a fully-funded artist residency located in Charleston, comprising an award program with juried selection, alongside less structured invitational residency retreats for individuals and small groups. During the residencies, artists will have the opportunity to engage with local religious and arts organizations to develop and explore their practice as it relates to spirituality. In addition, FSA will host exhibitions, symposiums, interviews, gatherings, and fellowships. FSA's first public program will debut in Fall 2021.

Rollins and Ahmady each have over twenty years of experience in the contemporary art world and are particularly noted as innovators and pioneers in the Asian art scene in the United States.

In 2008, Rollins opened Tyler Rollins Fine Art, a highly acclaimed public gallery space in New York City dedicated to supporting and promoting internationally active mid-career artists from Southeast Asia. Called “one of the most reliably interesting spaces in Chelsea” by The New York Times, the gallery presented an ongoing exhibition program that often highlighted the links between spirituality, nature, cultural traditions, and varied forms of artistic expression. The gallery regularly participated in leading art fairs such as Art Basel Hong Kong and Art Basel Miami Beach, and placed its artists’ works in major museums around the world.

Since 2005, Ahmady has directed New York’s acclaimed Asia Contemporary Art Week (ACAW) — the premier US platform for leading museums and galleries dedicated to showcasing both reputable and lesser-known artists and dialogues from across all regions of Asia, including the Middle East. Over her career, she has enabled 3000+ diverse practitioners to present their perspectives at notable local and international institutions, art fairs, and auction houses, including Asia Society, The Met, Guggenheim Museum, MoMA, Sotheby’s, Alserkal Avenue, Art Basel, ICI-Independent Curators International, and many more.

Longtime colleagues and friends, this will be Rollins’ and Ahmady’s first long-term professional collaboration.

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