Patrick Riley knew from a young age that he wanted to be an artist. He participated in art classes growing up and art has provided a way for him to express himself. Art has always been part of Riley and something he knew he would pursue as an adult.

BY EMMA FRÜTZ
He attended the University of Oklahoma and received his Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1964. After graduation, he began teaching students in Oklahoma City Public Schools, something he continued for more than thirty years. In 1971, he earned his Master of Arts Education from the University of Oklahoma to further his ability to teach others art. Since then, Riley has been an educator and artist in Oklahoma making his way through the state by showing students of all ages the joy of expressing oneself through art. He is the embodiment of an Oklahoma artist that is most rewarded by the students he teaches, more so than technique.

In 1974, Riley was selected to design and construct the masks, costumes, and set for the Oklahoma City Ballet’s Firebird performances. Riley now views this moment as a “springboard for an amazing career” as an artist. Following this experience, Riley set off for New York at the recommendation of another artist. He arrived at the Fairtree Gallery of Contemporary Craft in New York City with all of his work in the car for the chance to show. Riley had his work exhibited in the gallery and returned to Oklahoma affirmed that art was his path in life.

In 1986, Riley decided to apply for a fellowship that recognized two teaching artists in the nation.
Laid Back Dragon, leather and copper, 1996.

Blue Eagle, leather, copper, beads, 1980.
Moon Spirit Mask.

Buffalo Spirit Mask.

Elephant Spirit Mask.

Turquoise Eagle Mask.
Thinking that he would never be selected, however, Riley was selected for the Artist Teacher Fellowship in the visual artist category by the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. As the recipient, Riley was in D.C. for a period where he showed at the R Street Gallery and designed the costumes for an African dance company in a performance exhibition. To this day, Riley considers this experience one of his greatest accomplishments and credits it for changing his career.

Riley returned to Oklahoma where his career as an artist and in arts education took off. He has been commissioned for several pieces throughout Oklahoma, including works at Integris Hospital South’s Cancer Center, the Ford Center, and the Oklahoma Judicial Center. Riley’s teaching career expanded as he became the chairman of the Visual Art Department at Northeast High School in Oklahoma City and then at Southwestern Oklahoma State University. In 1994, he became the Fine Arts Director for Oklahoma City Public Schools where he worked to maintain the arts in public schools, helped develop two arts integration elementary schools and the training program for teachers at these schools, and created the Classen School of Advanced Studies Fine Arts program. Throughout his career, and still to this day, Riley has traveled the state of Oklahoma teaching students techniques and skills. However, more important, he teaches students how to express themselves and how to release what is inside them.
At the center of Riley’s fifty-five-year career is the reason he does it all—his heart. When asked how he viewed himself as an artist, Riley simply stated “I never thought much about my art, it is just what is in my heart that needs to come out.” Riley never thinks out what he is creating. He even claims that when he does put a lot of thought into a piece, he is never happy with what he creates and it “drives him up a wall” to have to think a piece out rather than just express himself. Riley says that his best pieces come from simply taking what is in his heart and creating it. Unable to control when it comes out, Riley says that when images come to him he has to create them. He immerses himself in the work until he is pleased with the direction and then continues to listen to the piece itself rather than his mind. “His gift,” as he calls it, allows him to fully express his heart rather than only his mind.

Creativity was natural for him; even as a child, Riley considered himself the “artist kid.” When asked where he got his talent, Riley never knew how to respond because it was simply something he did. He has always seen his art as a gift over anything else. The gift of being able to express oneself. Riley never understood his gift until recently when he realized that the creative section of his brain was just more open. He claims that “everything is a brain thing, you just have to train your brain.” This falls in line with Riley’s method of taking his gift as a child and working to develop it as he got older. When he determined that being an artist was what he wanted to do with his life, he knew he would have to work to develop the raw gift that he had been given. Based in intuition, Riley continues to develop with both his art and his education practices.
Although masks are what he is best known for, and has the most fun creating, Riley has practiced with many mediums throughout his career. He began with drawing, experimented with jewelry making, and sculpts as well. Riley had considered drawing his forte long before he recognized he was intrigued with masks. Through his drawing and other creations, he had been playing with the psychology of the face and it took a few trips around the world to determine what exactly it was about the face that held his attention.

Rush hour in London, England is not where one expects to find answers for themselves, but for Riley that was the moment he had been looking for. He found himself at the mouth of the London underground system watching people for hours, trying to determine what it was about faces that intrigued him. He watched so many people they all became a blur. The people he observed were elated, focused, sad, angry, and every emotion in between. Riley says that after this experience, he was finally able to put his finger on what about faces holds him captive: there is an energy behind each of our faces and creating masks pulls that energy into the forefront.

After his trip to London, Riley traveled to India. Like so many, he found himself asking questions of existence and purpose. India was a place of learning, self-growth, and meditation. While in India, Riley learned meditation and found ways to express the energy he had discovered in London. He made peace with himself. Looking back, Riley calls this his “quest to look for the human soul inside himself” and because of this journey, amazing things have come to him, including inner peace. This experience allowed Riley to stop being so restless and found what he had been looking for, and art allows him to share that with others.
Trombone Jazz Time Totem.
Above, Trombone Totem Sculpture, leather, wood, beads, brass, and close-up, below.

Clarinet Boogie Woogie Totem.
Through this journey, combined with many other experiences, Riley realized that mask making is where his true passion lies. For Riley, mask making is fun and enjoyable. It allows him to express what he truly sees in people and his subjects. Although many think of masks as hiding someone’s face, for Riley, a mask is a way to reveal who one truly is behind the face itself. His process of mask making is as simple and, yet, just as involved as it may seem. Riley spends time getting to know an image, familiarizing himself with the face and who the person is. He does not enter a project with big plans and drawn out schematics. Allowing the image to dictate what he creates, Riley uses intuition to guide the actual mask making. He finds this process more gratifying over spending time laying out a plan of what to create.

Regardless of the medium Riley uses, he is an Oklahoma artist through and through. Even after his experiences in New York City, Washington, D.C., London, and India, Riley still says he belongs in Oklahoma. At the root of it, Oklahoma is home and traveling the state to teach children is one of the most important parts of what he does. The Oklahoma Arts Council has been a “mainstay of [his] life and supported [him] for years.” Riley claims that Oklahoma is not only a beautiful place, but was the right place for his career. The people that he has had the opportunity to work with have made it all worth it. His experiences in the towns he visits, the students he teaches, and the people he works with all have contributed to why it is imperative to Riley that Oklahoma is where his career took place.

For Riley, “all of the human beings and their support are at the center of his career.” He realizes that the last fifty-five years working in Oklahoma have been made possible by each individual that he encountered along the way and supported him. He claims that it has been an amazing journey and he still enjoys it. Riley still travels to various towns in Oklahoma to teach students different techniques and, more important, what art can bring them. His art is part of the permanent collection of the Judicial Center and the Oklahoma State Capitol building, as well as being held in public and private collections throughout the United States. Riley’s contributions continue to influence those that encounter him and his art.

Riley claims that he owes his career and his successes to every person that has offered support, encouragement, and kind words. Riley says careers are not truly about the individual, but are actually owed to the people who encourage you and help you along the way. The most important and rewarding part for Riley is being able to help people through his career. Riley says at the center of everyone is his wife, who has loved and supported him unconditionally for years, along with his kids.
His career may have officially begun with a show in New York City or a fellowship with the John F. Kennedy Center for the Arts, but Patrick Riley’s career, and the man, found his home in Oklahoma and continues to change the lives of each person that he encounters. He embodies a truthfulness and enjoyment of life that so many have been lucky enough to witness. Riley’s ability to create from his heart and share that with so many has created a career of over fifty years in the place that he calls home. He continues to give more to others than he will ever realize.

After fifty-five rewarding years working as an artist, what does one do next? A retrospective show if you are Patrick Riley. A show that features all of the work that you have done over the last few decades in honor of those that have supported you through the process. A show that exemplifies who you were as an artist, who you are now, and what you still have left to create. A show that at its center, comes directly from the heart.