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WINTER ARTS GUIDE

# A sanctuary for Black artists, born in the violent racial tumult of Boston's past, finally gets its day

After much of his work was destroyed by vandals in 1973, artist Dana Chandler helped found a safe space that remains today. An ICA exhibit aims to tell the story.

**By Murray Whyte** Globe Staff, Updated January 16, 2026, 7:00 a.m.

Reginald L. Jackson, Things Go Better?, circa 1970. REGINALD L. JACKSON

In August of 1973, the artist Dana Chandler took his first-ever family vacation, escaping the sweatbox of a Boston summer for beachside bliss in Jamaica. When he got back, his South End studio, stuffed with years of his work, was in ruins. A break-in had left paintings and drawings destroyed. Some of them were tauntingly arranged in a nearby playground — a makeshift exhibition of ripped and torn works, wrinkled and stained by the elements. Some things had been stolen, but in a final gesture of disdain that seemed to assure the motive wasn't merely burglary, the perpetrators had turned on

faucets in the building's basement, where many more of Chandler's pieces were stored, leaving them a sodden, destroyed mess.

The studio was an unusable wreck. Chandler, a Black artist who had made his name in both art and activism by hammering on the intractable racism that he and his community encountered daily, would have to start over, with nowhere to go in a city famously hostile to him.

What happened next might be one of the most catalytic moments in Boston's urban cultural history, though it's not as well known, or as much celebrated, as it ought to be. The end of Chandler's South End studio also marked the beginning of the African American Master Artists in Residency Program (AAMARP) at Northeastern University, though even Chandler himself didn't know it right away. A chance meeting, an empty factory, and a kindly gesture from a university dean coupled with Chandler's fiery determination is the short version of the story; the much longer one, finally and for the first time, will get its clearest and most comprehensive treatment at the Institute of Contemporary Art when it opens "Say It Loud: AAMARP 1977 to Now" on Feb. 12.

An airing of decades of determination by an energized community of Black artists, inflected by activism, righteousness, and joy, the show features dozens of artists in the AAMARP orbit, now vital to the city's cultural history: Ellen Banks, Marlon Forrester, John Wilson, Allan Rohan Crite, Benny Andrews,and of course, Chandler himself, who died last year at 84. Jeff De Blois, the ICA curator of the show, worked closely with Chandler as he pieced the story together, gathering personal histories, archival materials, and a lot of art. "One of the things that I was really drawn to was Dana's idea that AAMARP is for everyone," he said. "He wanted people to bring their families. Everything was a party. It was a joyous celebration."

Dana C. Chandler Jr. painting in his studio at AAMARP. Northeastern University. JERRY SCHRADER

From the wreckage of Chandler's studio to a squat former factory building in Jamaica Plain where AAMARP artists in residence still work today, there's a long, unbroken line of continuous making,

convening, celebrating, and doing, always centered on an active cohort of Black artists. The line has zigged and zagged, surely, from three locations and a standoff or two with the university. But today, on Atherton Street, 13 artists continue to carry the torch for a loose organization that honors its founder's legacy as an activist, an advocate, and a champion for culture left on the city's margins.

Its start sprang from a happenstance meeting in 1974 between Chandler and Gregory Ricks, then dean and director of the African American Institute at Northeastern University. Hearing of Chandler's plight, Ricks offered him storage space in an unused building on campus, and then studio space, too. Chandler, mightily prolific, filled every inch offered, and quickly needed more. So Ricks took him to an unused college building at 11 Leon St. with 32,000 empty square feet and asked him how much he might require. Chandler, sensing the opportunity, replied quickly: All of it.

Richard Yarde, "The Parlor," 1980. LAURA SHEA

Official designations would come later. But with that answer, the program was born.

"He'd been thinking about how, in the name of Black self-determination, people could become organized; this was the opportunity to live up to those values," said De Blois. "He convinced them to not only let him use the whole space but to give him a budget, and the budget then became the seed money for the founding of the residency program."

Had Chandler's South End studio not come to destruction, would it have happened at all? It's hard to think not. Chandler was uniquely, irrepressibly resolute. In 1970, after years of agitating, he had finally goaded the Museum of Fine Arts into reluctantly dipping into the surging Black Arts movement that was seizing the country. Enlisting Edmund Barry Gaither, the newly-installed director of the fledgling National Center for Afro-American artists in Roxbury, Chandler pushed the famously non-confrontational MFA into an apex moment in the culture wars.

In the years after the murder of Martin Luther King Jr., the Black rights movement fractured into more militant strains, notably the Black Panthers. Running alongside that political disquiet was the Black Arts movement, a burgeoning cultural imperative to challenge polite society in music, in writing, and of course, in visual art. Unabashedly political, the Black Arts movement was breaking through and being seen at major museums around the country. But in Boston, staid, conservative, and famously racist, that moment had not come.

Chandler set out to change that. In January 1970, he sent a document to Perry Rathbone, then the MFA director. Its title: "A Proposal to Eradicate Instititional Racism at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts." Among its many demands was an exhibition representing the Black Arts movement, which he shared with the local press. Under growing public pressure, the museum acquiesced. That spring, "Afro-American Artists: Boston and New York," curated by Gaither, opened at the MFA, to immediate widespread acclaim.

Benny Andrews, "Nene," 1978. MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY

Black artists, of course, had been working in Boston for decades. Allan Rohan Crite's South End home was an informal artists' club house, and John Wilson would become a major figure on the national scene. But AAMARP gave bricks-and-mortar permanence to a community of working artists whose place in the city was always precarious; it was their place to stand on, a home to be handed down through the generations.

In later years, AAMARP faced challenges. In 1993, after years of being funded as a program of Northeastern, its funding fell victim to severe budget cuts. The space would be maintained, but further funding, including Chandler's pay as the program's de facto head, were cut off. AAMARP would move twice, first to another underused Northeastern-leased building on Huntington Avenue in Roxbury, and finally to Jamaica Plain, to its current home on Atherton Street.

That's not been without its challenges, either. In 2018, Northeastern moved to close that space down and issued eviction notices to the artists working there, citing liability concerns. A public spat ensued, quelled only when the school acquiesced and AAMARP was allowed to remain, though it remains in negotiations with the school to find a permanent solution.

Without funding and official affiliation with the school, AAMARP survives as it always has, through the sheer force of will of the artists and the community that surrounds it — in a way, an ongoing tribute to its founder, whose no-quit approach lit a fire that burns still.

"There was an entire Black art infrastructure across the country that existed separate from museums," De Blois said. "We know its story in New York, in Chicago, in Detroit. AAMARP was a huge part of Boston's story." Finally, it's being told.

**SAY IT LOUD: AAMARP, 1977 TO NOW**

Feb. 12 to Aug. 2. Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, 25 Harbor Shore Drive. 617-478-3100, icaboston.org