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ARTS & CULTURE

Four Hours, Four Portraits: Florida Art Masters Live Portrait Competition Kicks Off Oct. 10 in Lakeland

Sixteen artists will compete in a bracket-style portrait showdown for a $5,000 commission, painting to honor local breast cancer survivors.

By **Anna Toms** October 9, 2026

Notta Gallery will host the first round of Florida Art Masters 2026 on Oct. 10. | Anna Toms, LkldNow

4-minute read

This Saturday, Oct. 10, four artists will face off at Notta Gallery in the first heat of **Florida Art Masters 2026**.

In four hours, during an event that is free and open to the public from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., each will create a portrait. At the end of the day, only one winner will move on to the next round.

The competition is a collaboration between **Notta Gallery** and the **Depot Arts District**. The gallery and arts incubator are hoping to further invigorate the Central Florida arts scene and draw in new audiences with the first-of-its-kind in the city live-portrait competition.



Tony Agnello, co-owner of Notta Gallery, describes his vision for the Lakeland Art Masters competition on Saturday, Oct. 10, in the gallery. | Anna Toms, LkldNow

Florida Art Masters 2026 will begin with 16 artists, including two sculptors, who will compete in four preliminary heats of four, narrowing the ranks to four finalists.

Over 50 artists from across Florida applied to participate, and a jury of five selected the competitors for the March Madness bracket-style competition.

“To me, it’s just so interesting that we could have four artists producing a portrait of the same person,” said Mary Correa, Depot Arts District interim executive director and president of the **Lakeland Arts Association**. “They are probably going to look wildly different.”

The inaugural competition

Correa said the competition includes artists with a wide variety of styles, and heats were chosen intentionally to keep things interesting.

Preliminary rounds will be judged by a panel of three, including Tony Agnello, co-owner of Notta Gallery; **Laura Putnam**, curator of exhibitions at the Ashley Gibson Barnett Museum of Art; **Kerry L. Vosler**, Florida Ambassador for the Portrait Society of America since 2005; and **Sarah Brewington Baarns**, professor of visual arts and photography at Polk State.



Four artists will compete in the second round of Florida Arts Masters 2026 at the Depot Arts District on Nov. 14. | Anna Toms, LkldNow

events, public classes, and **April's Fuego Festival**.

"I don't think that art galleries outside of major cities can succeed with just selling art, so you do have to do event rentals, you do have to do classes. You do have to do other things," said co-owner Agnello.

The **Depot Arts District** opened on Nov. 1, 2025, and has become a hub for Lakeland creators, providing low-cost studio space and hosting public events.

"The idea is, if we do something big enough, people will come," Agnello said.

More than a portrait competition

"We had gone into this knowing that we wanted this to be bigger than just a portrait competition," Correa said. "We wanted somehow to help the community." She and Agnello explored different local nonprofit organizations and eventually chose to partner with the **Breast Cancer Foundation of Central Florida**.

Additional preliminary rounds are set at 10 a.m. on Nov. 7 at the Depot Arts District in Lakeland, Nov. 14 at **Vosler Young Artists' Studio** in Brandon, and Nov. 21 at **Red Calliope Gallery** in Plant City.

The four winners of the preliminary heats will face off on Dec. 10 in the finale at the AGB. That finale winner will receive a $5,000 portrait commission, funded personally by Agnello and through the AGB.

Bringing attention to the Florida arts scene

For the past 13 months, **Notta Gallery** has been bringing fine art to Downtown Lakeland and cultivating the city's arts community with special



The inaugural Fuego Festival, hosted by Notta Gallery, celebrated Hispanic culture on Friday, April 17, 2026. | Anna Toms, LkldNow

"We're trying to tell the story of the Breast Cancer Foundation of Central Florida through a portrait contest," said Agnello. "Their mission is to provide non-medical funds to people that are going through the diagnosis and the treatment of breast cancer."

Five breast cancer survivors will model for portraits during the competition. A sixth survivor will sit for the winning artist after the finale for an untimed portrait. Correa said it is a coincidence that competition will kick off in October, Breast Cancer Awareness Month.

Agnello and Correa see the competition as a platform for survivors to share their stories of strength, resilience, family, fear, hope, and life beyond breast cancer. They hope to shine a light on the ways that the Breast Cancer Foundation of Central Florida supports people facing a diagnosis and cancer treatment.

Reaching beyond gallery walls

Lakeland's **Spilled Lunchbox Network**, headed up by George Jenkins High School and Polk State College graduate **Dirk Sholar**, will capture Florida Art Masters 2026 on video.

He and Agnello said they're planning to edit the footage into episodes documenting the competition as a series, inspired by **Sky Arts Series 'Portrait Artist of the Year**.'

"I had always been slightly obsessed with that show and just enjoyed watching the process of an artist making stuff," Correa said. "Also, the idea that they have four hours to do a portrait that looks like somebody sitting in front of them is just amazing to me."

Agnello said they plan to share short videos on social media to generate excitement and draw people into the competition — and hopefully into the galleries.

He is also excited about what he calls "a pipe dream," the possibility that a company like Amazon or Netflix might have some interest in funding a television series in the future.

"If this works out," Sholar said, "we could make this a recurring series that we could film here in Lakeland and promote the arts that we do have here — it's thriving, it's hungry, but there's no outlet or venue or avenue for them to really showcase their work. So, for us, it's just wanting to film for the community and show that Florida, especially Lakeland, has a thriving, hungry art district and arts community that really wants to shine."

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