

VILCEK FOUNDATION

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Immigrant contributions to American society recognized with 2017 Vilcek Prizes

*Visual artist Nari Ward and biophysicists Lily and Yuh-Nung
Jan receive \$100,000 Vilcek Prizes*

*Winners of Vilcek Prizes for Creative Promise
each receive \$50,000 awards*

New York, NY, February 1, 2017 — The Vilcek Foundation is pleased to announce the winners of the annual Vilcek Prizes, recognizing outstanding immigrant contributions to the American arts and sciences. The Vilcek Prize in Biomedical Science will be awarded jointly to Chinese-born Lily and Yuh-Nung Jan, a collaborative research duo and professors of molecular physiology at the University of California, San Francisco. The Vilcek Prize in the Arts recognizes Jamaican-born Nari Ward, a New York-based visual artist known for found-object assemblage art. Each prize includes a \$100,000 cash award.

“Like all great artists and scientists, these immigrant prizewinners challenge our very perceptions of the world,” said Rick Kinsel, president of the Vilcek Foundation. “Their works are attempts to understand fundamental questions and concepts in American society, from the neurological underpinnings of the self to the institution of democracy.”

This year, the Vilcek Prize in the Arts is awarded in the fine arts, marking the completion of an 11-year cycle through various disciplines in the arts and humanities. The recipient, **Nari Ward**, was born in Jamaica and immigrated to the U.S. at the age of 12. He is known for found-object assemblage artworks that invite both a public conversation and an intimate dialogue with the viewer around topics of race, immigration, and the Caribbean diaspora identity. His usage of found objects aims to highlight the history of a place and the urgency of the moment; his installation *Naturalization Drawing Table* features a large desk—built out of Plexiglas bodega barriers—covered with dense linear drawings made over copies of Immigration and Naturalization Service applications. On select days during the exhibition, viewers are invited to “apply” for naturalization by lining up and filling out an application, giving them a taste of the bureaucratic process of applying for citizenship. Ward has won several prestigious art prizes, including the Joyce Award, the Rome Prize, a Bessie Award, and several other awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation.

Lily and Yuh-Nung Jan were both born in China and raised in Taiwan. They came to the U.S. as graduate students of physics at the California Institute of Technology but switched their focus to biology, in part inspired by their mentor, the renowned biophysicist Max Delbrück. Over the course of a collaborative career spanning over four decades, the husband-and-wife team have made many significant discoveries in the field of neuroscience, with far-reaching clinical implications. They isolated the gene encoding a protein that shuttles potassium ions across cell

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membranes, enabling the characterization of a molecular player implicated in functions as vital as maintaining heart rate and controlling muscle movement. Today, this type of ion channel is implicated in diseases such as epilepsy, ataxia, and hypertension. Simultaneously, the Jans identified genes and principles underlying the processes by which neurons acquire distinct identities, burgeon into thickets, and establish precise circuits; their work in this area may help unravel human diseases such as autism and schizophrenia. Currently professors of molecular physiology at the University of California, San Francisco, the Jans have been honored with membership in the United States National Academy of Sciences, as well as with Howard Hughes Medical Institute Investigator awards.

The Vilcek Foundation also awards the Vilcek Prizes for Creative Promise, given to younger immigrants who have shown substantial talent and ability early in their careers. Each prize includes a \$50,000 cash award. The winners in the fine arts are the following:

Iman Issa, a conceptual artist, creates objects and installations in an attempt to address complex philosophical questions. Her original area of study was phenomenology, a branch of philosophy that examines the structures of consciousness that organize subjective experience—or, put another way, how we take meaning from things we individually experience. Later, Issa realized that art allowed for nuanced exploration of those topics, and continued her philosophical questioning through art. She is particularly interested in monuments and memorials—esthetic forms tasked with a function that hold a shifting relevance based on their location in time and relationship to history. Her work has been shown at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the 8th Berlin Biennial, and the New Museum, and she has received the DAAD 2017 Artist in Residence Award, the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award, and the HNF-MACBA Award. Issa was born in Egypt.

Meleko Mokgosi is a slow, considered painter; behind every painting he produces are hours of research, reading, and conversations with people. Mokgosi is interested in depictions of Africa and its people; he believes that the widespread misrepresentation of Africa and Africans has done a violence to the people of the continent, and through his art he attempts a representation that is fair and just. He is deeply concerned with politics, and seeks to understand and illuminate the relations of power that shape people, families, villages, regions, and nations. Mokgosi has been named the recipient of the Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters Grant and the Jarl and Pamela Mohn Award, and he has shown his work at Art Basel, the Armory, the Hammer Museum, and the Whitney Museum. He was born in Botswana.

Carlos Motta works in a variety of media—including video, performance, photography, and sculpture—to explore questions of identity, sexuality, and politics, and to identify and dissect the relations between an individual and the culture that forms them. Since moving to the United States in 1996, Motta has become more interested in questions of representation and the experience of democracy, the emotional underpinnings of political awareness, and the ways that dominant accounts of history have become biased. Motta has won a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Future Generation Art Prize from PinchukArtCentre, and grants from Creative Capital and New York State Council on the Arts, and his work has been shown at the Perez Art Museum Miami, The Tanks at Tate Modern, and at MoMA/PS1. Motta was born in Colombia.

The winners of the Vilcek Prizes for Creative Promise in Biomedical Science are the following:

Michaela Gack has uncovered potential molecular targets for the design of antiviral drugs and vaccines for a range of infectious diseases. Early in her career, Gack identified the molecular mechanism by which a protein called RIG-I tips off the human immune system to lurking viruses and triggers a defensive response. The mechanism turns on an enzyme called TRIM25, which activates RIG-I by tagging it with proteins called ubiquitins. Following Gack's discovery, it was found that ubiquitin-tagging by TRIM enzymes is a common immune defense strategy.

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Because flu viruses block TRIM25 to sidestep the resulting immune response, her findings have yielded a potential target for designing antiviral drugs and vaccines. More recently, Gack has focused on mosquito-borne viruses such as dengue and West Nile virus, and her work could pave the way toward the rational design of vaccines against emerging infectious diseases. Gack, now an associate professor at the University of Chicago, was born in Germany.

Michael Halassa has illuminated how the brain filters sensory noise and sustains attention. By making mice a viable model for cognitive neuroscience, Halassa has probed aspects of attention and perception that have long eluded mechanistic study. His work revealed how the thalamus, a brain region primarily thought to be a sensory relay station, plays a broader role, contributing to cognition. Specifically, he found that thalamic circuits involved in sensory processing operate as tunable filters, enabling the brain to suppress sensory noise during selective attention. He also identified a form of autism in which this filtering process is deficient, paving a potential path to treatment. More recently, he has shown that the thalamus amplifies functional connectivity in the brain's cortex, sustaining attention and perception. His findings could help understand how the brain generates the mind. Halassa, an assistant professor at New York University, was born in Jordan.

Ahmet Yildiz has used his expertise in visualizing molecules found in living cells to uncover the precise mode of action of molecular motors, which are proteins that ferry cargo along the cellular backbone to support vital functions like neuronal development and cell division. Visualizing the stepwise movement of these motors—kinesins, myosins, and dyneins—along cellular scaffolding had long remained technically challenging. Yildiz developed a technique to localize fluorescent dyes within cells at 1 nanometer resolution, surmounting the challenge and imaging the march of molecular motors on cellular tracks. In related work, Yildiz used super-resolution microscopy techniques to suggest how a protein complex called shelterin protects the ends of chromosomes from the deleterious action of DNA repair enzymes. Because damage to chromosome ends has been tied to premature aging and cancer, Yildiz's findings may yield clinically relevant targets for the treatment of such diseases in the future. Yildiz, an associate professor at the University of California, Berkeley, was born near Turkey.

The prizewinners were selected by panels of experts in each field; they will be honored at an awards gala in New York City in April 2017. For more information about the prizewinners and jurors, please visit vilcek.org.

The Vilcek Foundation was established in 2000 by Jan and Marica Vilcek, immigrants from the former Czechoslovakia. The mission of the foundation, to honor the contributions of immigrants to the United States and to foster appreciation of the arts and sciences, was inspired by the couple's respective careers in biomedical science and art history, as well as their personal experiences and appreciation for the opportunities they received as newcomers to this country. The foundation awards annual prizes to prominent immigrant biomedical scientists and artists, and manages the Vilcek Foundation Art Collections, a promised gift from its founders.

To learn more about the Vilcek Foundation, please visit [Vilcek.org](http://vilcek.org).