

# Drawn to innovation: How art and technology attracted this Minnesota artist to ASU

By Shane Davis, ASU News  
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**Editor's note:** This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [spring 2025 graduates](#).

When it came to choosing a major, Leah Donnelly explored various creative paths — advertising, fine art and design — but nothing quite captured the full scope of her interests until she discovered the School of Arts, Media and Engineering at Arizona State University.

Now she's earning a bachelor's degree in media arts and sciences and is an Outstanding Undergraduate Student in the Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts.

Donnelly said the program's unique interdisciplinary approach offered the perfect space to merge her passions for art, technology and critical thinking, setting the stage for an academic experience that would challenge and inspire her in ways she never expected.

"What really caught my attention was how this program wasn't just about creating technology — it was about understanding why we create it," Donnelly said. "It's not just messing around with new tools; it's thinking critically about how we can build better futures."

That curiosity led her to dive in headfirst, even before her first semester. The summer before joining ASU, she was already studying coursework [accessible on YouTube](#) from Clinical Assistant Professor Kim Swisher's classes, eager to begin working with Max MSP, an interactive, visual patching environment.

Once she arrived on campus, she found herself in an environment where faculty encouraged students to push the boundaries of what was possible.

Donnelly's first day at ASU as a media arts and sciences student made a lasting impression. At an introductory event designed to help students meet professors, she sat at a table entirely surrounded by faculty members. While initially intimidating, the experience solidified her belief that the school's strength was in its deeply supportive mentorship.

“I sat down next to Seth Thorn because I recognized him from my class schedule, and within minutes, he was already talking to me about his [Active Shoulder Rest project](#),” she said. “From the beginning, it was clear that this was a place where professors see potential in you before you even see it in yourself.”

Invited to join Assistant Professor Seth Thorn’s hyperinstruments course — an upper-division class she initially thought was beyond her skill level — she soon found herself working with his ASR research team, experimenting with circuit bending, interactive design and interdisciplinary research.

Whether hacking into a payphone for an exhibition, integrating electronics into sculpture or presenting at an international conference, she discovered that at the School of Arts, Media and Engineering, curiosity wasn’t just encouraged, it was the key to unlocking new possibilities.

“The courses we have here offer experiences most people will never have,” she said. “I’ve realized that innovation isn’t just about what you make — it’s about how you think.”

Throughout her academic journey, she has explored the intersections of art, technology and critical thinking while earning prestigious recognitions, including a full four-year Student Art Scholarship from the Central Minnesota Arts Board and ASU’s President’s Scholarship. Additionally, she received multiple travel stipends through the Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts, allowing her to expand her research and artistic practice beyond the classroom.

**Question: What was your "aha" moment when you realized you wanted to study the field you majored in?**

**Answer:** I started planning for college in eighth grade — I was a pretty intense kid. I’ve always loved art, technology and analysis, so in many ways, every class I’ve taken at ASU has felt like an "aha" moment. Each new project or concept reaffirms that this is exactly what I want to do for the rest of my life.

**Q: What’s something you learned at ASU — in the classroom or otherwise — that surprised you or changed your perspective?**

**A:** I never expected to be doing the kind of work I do now. As a freshman, I took a course with Dr. Seth Thorn, and he encouraged me to join his upper-division class. One thing led to another, and before I knew it, I was working as a research assistant for the Active Shoulder Rest team. It was a transformative experience — here I was, a sophomore, brand new to music technology and academic research, suddenly surrounded by incredibly talented people.

At first, I felt completely out of my depth. I’d be on Zoom, nodding and smiling while frantically taking notes under the table because half the terms — pedagogy, French philosophy — felt like gibberish. But my team treated me as a valuable member, and so I became one. That experience led to even greater opportunities, including an REU (research experiences for undergraduates) with Dr. (Suren) Jayasuriya and Dr. (Robert) LiKamWa, where I developed a device called the Motion Augmented Acoustic Skate System. I later had the chance to present my first publication on it at the [International Conference of Movement and Computing](#) in Utrecht, Netherlands.

**Q: Why did you choose ASU?**

**A:** Everyone who knows me thought I was crazy for choosing ASU — mostly because I hate the heat! I love the cold and consider myself a Minnesota girl at heart. But I came to ASU specifically for the media arts and sciences program, and more broadly, for digital culture. Other programs I looked at lacked the balance I wanted between art, technology and philosophy. AME does an incredible job integrating all three while fostering a tight-knit, supportive community within a large research university. It was exactly the right fit for me.

**Q: Which professor taught you the most important lesson while at ASU?**

**A:** That's a tough one because I've had so many incredible professors, but I'd have to say Dr. Jaime Kirtz. The most important lesson she taught me was to value myself. During my junior year, I was feeling lost and burnt out, but taking her Gender, Technology and Design class was a turning point. It reminded me why I wanted to do this work in the first place.

Beyond that, she became the kind of mentor I aspire to be. As my thesis advisor, she showed me that what truly matters as a professor isn't just lectures or publications — it's how you support your students. Every time I talk to her, I leave feeling motivated, with new opportunities in hand. That's the kind of impact I want to have in my own career.

**Q: What's the best piece of advice you'd give to those still in school?**

**A:** Talk to your professors! They are your best advocates and support system at ASU.

For art students specifically, I highly recommend checking out the [Art Resource Center](#). It's a local community space open on Wednesdays and Saturdays, where students can get materials on a pay-what-you-can basis — and it's free for educators. They have everything from a bin full of empty medication bottles to tile, oil paints and even a mini library. But don't just go there to collect supplies — volunteer! It's an incredibly supportive space that has helped me with thesis research and countless projects. I can't recommend it enough.

**Q: What was your favorite spot on campus, whether for studying, meeting friends, or just thinking about life?**

**A:** I'm very passionate about study spots, so this is an exciting question for me. My top two favorites are the Social Sciences Building near Hayden Library and the Farmer Education Building courtyard. Both spaces are peaceful, filled with plants and have a calming atmosphere, making them perfect for studying.

**Q: What are your plans after graduation?**

**A:** I was recently accepted into the master's program in [cinema and media studies at the University of Washington](#). I'm beyond excited to start this next chapter in the fall. After my master's, I plan to pursue a PhD and become a professor, spending my life teaching and doing research. That's my absolute dream.

**Q: If someone gave you \$40 million to solve one problem on our planet, what would you tackle?**

**A:** I'd take the money, but instead of trying to solve a problem myself, I'd invest it in organizations already doing meaningful work. There are so many incredible initiatives out there, and they are far

better equipped than I am to tackle major global issues.

That said, I would focus locally on education. Supporting teachers and increasing access for students is how we create future problem-solvers. If we want to change the world, we have to start by giving people the tools and opportunities to do so — and right now, education needs that support more than ever.

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*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## Main image



Leah Donnelly earning a bachelor's degree in media arts and sciences this May and is an Outstanding Undergraduate Student in the Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts. Photo by ASU Brand Team