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KMA exhibition offers budding 'Picassos' a chance to show their work

By Joyce Corrigan

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“Young Artists” volunteer Marian Swerdlow assists Fox Lane’s Calder Worlock install his “Anthony and Finn” at the KMA.

Joyce Corrigan photo

It should come as no surprise that Pablo Picasso blew everyone away at the prestigious Exhibition of Fine Arts in Barcelona, Spain, in 1896. He was, after all, Picasso. But wait, this was his debut in the art world and his painting, “First Communion,” was created when he was just 15 years old.

It would be a few decades before the Spaniard turned western art upside down, with his cubism, African-inspired abstraction, and sculptures made from household materials, but his formative years were crucial. He was encouraged by gifted art teachers and tutored by his father, also a painter, who occasionally modeled for him. The world owes them a debt, of course, just as we owe the Katonah Museum of Art. When it comes to cultivating young talent in this area, nobody does it better.

This Sunday, Feb. 6, is the opening of the 39th annual “Young Artists 2022” exhibit which showcases the work of high school seniors. The students not only show their work but install and create the images that promote it. The exhibit will run through Feb. 27.

“The work that’s come in this year is fantastic,” says Margaret Adasko, KMA’s curator of education, who notes that anticipation for the show is greater than ever. “Students are really venturing into uncharted directions with new materials, themes and on a much larger scale. There’s really so much confidence in the work.”

A catalyst behind “Young Artists” since she joined the Katonah Museum two decades ago, Ms. Adasko has seen the impact of public recognition on one’s creative convictions, even if this doesn’t happen often enough in our culture. “Throughout high school, the arts are often secondary to academic and athletic priorities,” she remarked. “Young Artists” provides an opportunity to give art center stage and celebrate its value.” Included in the 2022 show are 360 works from 39 schools throughout Westchester, Putnam and Fairfield counties.

Heather Kranz has been Fox Lane’s coordinator for visual art for 30 years and is convinced this year’s work is the most diverse it’s ever been. Her art department opens the selection process to all senior artists. “We prioritize risk-taking, strength of concept, and the skill development and dedication of the artist,” she said, adding, “This is an opportunity for students to see what goes into a museum exhibit. They install the show collaboratively with students from other schools, and then experience the impact of the result at the opening reception. “

“It’s particularly exciting because our 3-D design program has expanded to include fashion and fiber arts,” she said. The highly tactile fiber arts are definitely having a moment in the professional world, too, with art critics believing it an earthy, touchable antidote to our

increasingly virtual world. Fox Lane's Alexa Maldonado used memories of her mother gardening to create a dress with the silhouette of a flower, while Mason Abzun artfully crocheted a work, titled, "Primitive Skirt."

With his highly conceptual "Anthony and Finn," a free-standing figure, Calder Worlock merges the tangible with NU-Tech. Employing Blender, a 3-D computer graphics software toolset, the Pound Ridge resident has spent almost a year playing with deconstruction and reconstruction of the human figure. He realized his vision using papier mâché and everyday balloons (Picasso would love that).

Though he mentions that "Anthony and Finn" happen to be the name of his two best friends, Mr. Worlock clarifies that "The name is really a reference to the balloons that make up the body. They're each weighted variably so they're fun to bat around and dance as you hit them." In this way, he says, they're like puppets, in that they assume personalities as they move.

John Jay High School art instructor, Amy Stockfield, clarifies that it's the students themselves who decide what's on display at the KMA. "They don't create works specifically for the show," she said. "They select from the work they've been doing throughout their four years at their respective schools."

At John Jay, submissions to the KMA show are reserved for seniors who are taking either Advanced Placement drawing, AP 3-D, or honors drawing and who work on self-directed projects. "I don't give traditional assignments," said Ms. Stockfield, "The work they do is based on their individual interests and inquiry, but I do challenge them with new materials and technique," she said, noting, "One of the toughest things is for students to connect their idea to their materials and process."

Ms. Stockfield is particularly impressed with this year's variety of genres and the number of artists willing to tackle difficult subjects. She mentions Naomi Gordin's ceramic piece, "Shoulder Ban" that explores how society controls girls' bodies through dress codes. Kay Boyd's "Petals of Depression," a digitally drawn piece, explores the connection of flowers and grief. "Riley Cryan's colored pencil piece is consciously untitled," Ms. Stockfield noted,

“intending that viewers will draw their own meaning.” The work is inspired by the history of LGBTQ+ people being subjected to torturous “cures” like frontal lobotomies. “The use of clowns highlights the feeling of being considered freaks,” Ms. Stockfield explained.

Ms. Kranz applauds the KMA for making the commitment to mount “Young Artists” each year which, given the size and breadth of the show, is no small feat. “It’s the first look at the next generation of artists, and also highlights the impact art education has in our schools,” she remarked. In many respects it’s a rite of passage for the home-grown artists. “Young as they are,” she remarked, “they’re recognized as valuable members of the community.”

“I can’t speak for other schools, but the students who make the effort to exhibit are often pursuing careers in an art field,” noted Ms. Kranz “What could be more rewarding than a creative career where every day they solve problems, envision design solutions, and make the world more fun, beautiful and interesting? These students are more than just artists, they are empowered, driven agents of change.”

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Joyce Corrigan

Joyce Corrigan, a features contributor, has held senior positions in magazine publishing including co-editor at ELLE, New York correspondent for Conde Nast Traveller, deputy editor at the Sunday Times Magazine UK and editor-at-large at Marie Claire.