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CITY, NEWS

MFA recruits teens to assemble major art exhibition

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by Angela Yang



Boston's Museum of Fine Arts unveiled "Black Histories, Black Futures," an exhibition curated by six local teenagers featuring works by 20th century black artists, on Martin Luther King Jr. Day. RYAN GREGORY/ DAILY FREE PRESS

STAFF

Kicking off its year-round 150th anniversary celebration, Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts revealed on Monday its first ever exhibition organized completely by teenagers. “Black Histories, Black Futures,” unveiled in congruence with Martin Luther King Jr. Day, will remain on display for 18 months.

Six local teenagers — all without backgrounds in fine art — put together the showcase of approximately 50 paintings after undergoing a six-week program of “very rigorous” workshops to learn curatorial skills, according to MFA Associate Curator of American Paintings Layla Bermeo, who helped spearhead the project.

In July, the museum took on two participants each from partner youth guidance organizations Becoming A Man Boston, The BASE and the Bloomberg Arts Internship program. The summer workshops taught the teens how to examine art, conduct research, write wall labels and install an exhibition.

Bermeo said she aimed for the workshops to help them develop skills transferable to any field, including ones not related to art.

“So, working on communication, working on writing, working on just the act of kind of describing things that you see,” Bermeo said. “These are, I think, skills that curators use but also very valuable tools in other fields.”

The final creation is divided into four thematic sections, each featuring the work of various black artists from the 1900s. Bermeo said the curators selected pieces from prominent creators nationwide, but also took an approach that the MFA did not expect: they localized the exhibition.

“There is a broad range of black artists on view, but each section includes at least some work by Boston artists,” Bermeo said. “And that to me has been really exciting, to see the ways in which these young people, because they are part of the city here in Boston, have really brought renewed attention to black artists from Boston.”

Bermeo said the emphasis they placed on Boston-based artists is something she thinks the museum will learn from.

“It was really the themes that the young people developed,” Bermeo said, “and their kind of interest in artists who have connections to Boston, that made [the exhibition] possible.”

Shawn Brown, executive director of BAM Boston, said he hopes this project will catalyze more engagement between young people and the arts. Brown said any black and brown kids in Boston have institutions like the MFA right in their backyards, but they cannot appreciate what they had never been exposed to.

“We’ve seen the impact that this experience has had on our on our scholars just in terms of the leadership qualities that they’ve had to display,” Brown said. “They had full autonomy to create this exhibition and use their creative juices. It’s been amazing to watch.”

The two curators from BAM were initially uninterested in working at the MFA, according to Brown. In fact, high school juniors Armani Rivas and Jadon Smith had never set foot in a museum before.

“But then when they got there, they just really fell in love with the work and gained a greater appreciation for the art and the culture of the museum,” Brown said. “One of the things that our scholars have learned from this experience is that it challenged [the students]. It opened their eyes to something different.”

When the boys returned to school in the fall, Brown said, they began conversing with their peers about the work they were doing at the MFA and sharing their newfound appreciation for the arts.

“So, now I’m presented with a problem, which is a good problem: I have more scholars now wanting to work at the MFA or be a part of that program,” Brown said. “It’s a beautiful, beautiful problem to have.”

MFA Chief of Learning and Community Engagement Makeeba McCreary, who also sits on BAM’s Advisory Council and helped facilitate the partnership between the MFA and BAM, said she believes the museum should be a place where young people can find success even if they had never explored within its walls.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about working on designing another partnership with the Boston Public Schools for teen programming, and then we’ll continue the curatorial study hall [the summer workshops] beyond its pilot,” McCreary said. “We have to do some assessment and evaluation, but we really want to make sure that we continue to have that opportunity as well since it’s so successful.”

On opening day, visitors didn’t have to look far to wander into the exhibition, which is centered on the ground floor near the entrance of the MFA.

Kala Brzezinski, 27, of Watertown visited the museum to see another exhibit that she had heard would soon close down and happened to walk into “Black Histories, Black Futures.”

“This is the first time I’ve ever seen anything like this that was actually done by young people,” Brzezinski said. “I think it’s a very exciting thing for the institution of the MFA to invite younger people into the exhibition. I think that’s great.”

Carol Phenix, 66, of Concord, New Hampshire is an art school graduate and said she believes young people’s appreciation of art is sometimes natural and sometimes learned.

“I think that some individuals come with their interests and their talents,” Phenix said. “There are others whose interest is awakened by exposure, and perhaps never had exposure. It’s a bit of a gamble.”

East Boston resident Carolyn Aquino, 29, decided to visit the exhibition after searching for accessible Martin Luther King Jr. Day activities and discovering the museum was offering free admission for the holiday. She said she thinks it’s nice the MFA granted youth an opportunity to actualize their creative visions.

“I think young people right now are living in a very interesting time where there’s a lot of historical baggage, but also a lot of things that are happening politically and in general,” Aquino said. “It’s really interesting that they get an opportunity to express themselves in a museum like this, where the audience is maybe predominantly white and wealthy.”



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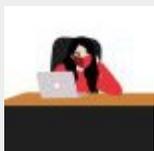
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