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Hansen: Joslyn's first all-black exhibit resonates with Omaha students. 'I've never seen art like that'

By Matthew Hansen / World-Herald staff writer Mar 1, 2019 Updated Mar 2, 2019



Students from Omaha's Nathan Hale Magnet Middle School tour the Joslyn Art Museum's "30 Americans" exhibit, including a large oil canvas by Kehinde Wiley.

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Jacquelynn Davis stands silently in the middle of Joslyn Art Museum, her 12-year-old eyes glued to two images hung side by side on a towering white wall.

As her Nathan Hale Magnet Middle School classmates noisily mill around her, the seventh-grader stares wordlessly at two rhinestone-studded paintings by artist Mickalene Thomas. She stares, and she keeps staring, and she sees something she has never before seen when she has looked at a great piece of art.

She sees herself.

“She’s so ... glossy with the makeup and the lip gloss,” Jacquelynn says of the figure in one painting. “So fancy like you want to be, doing yourself up every morning.

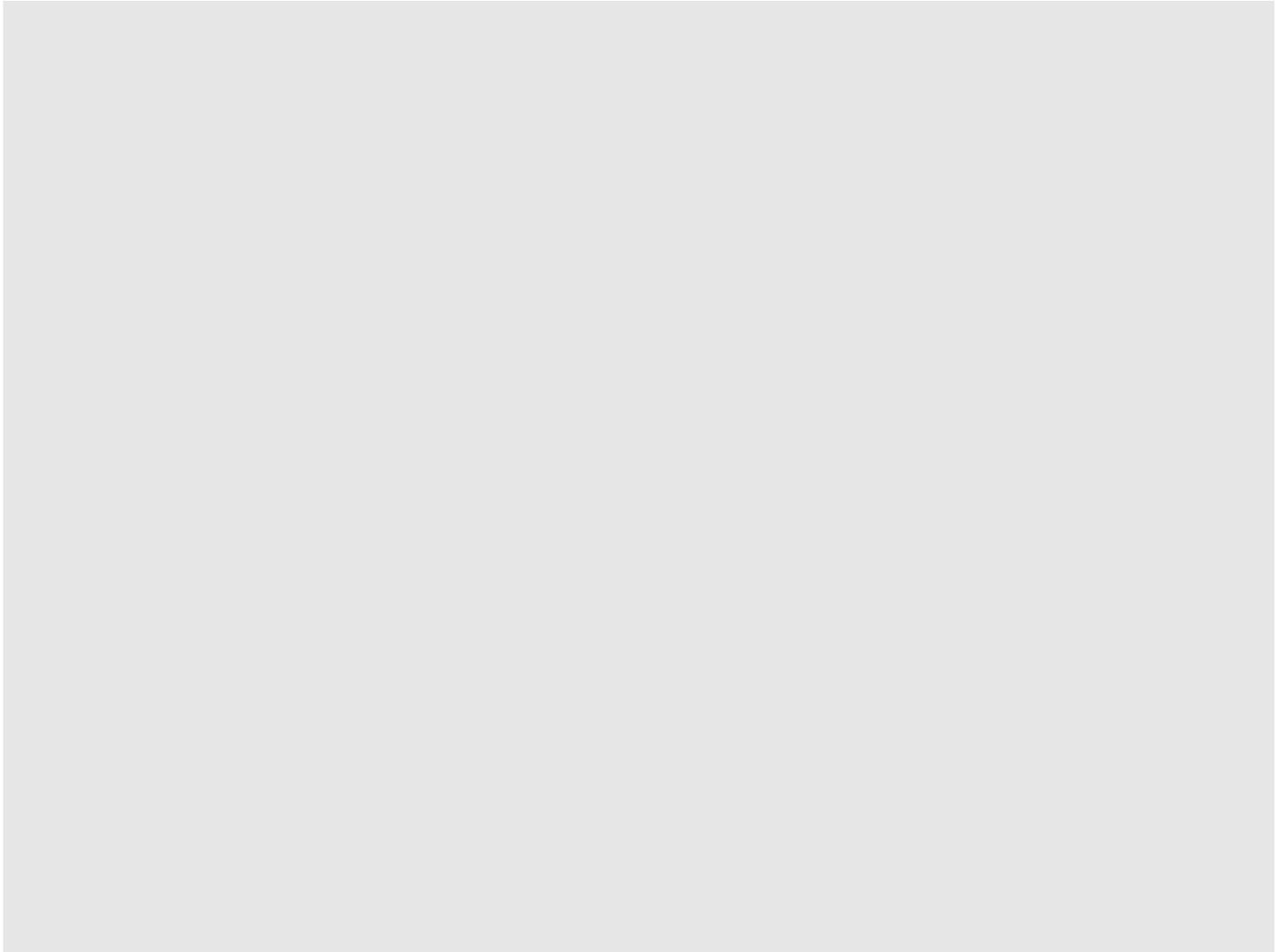
“I’ve never seen art like that,” Jacquelynn says. She smiles. “That’s just like me.”

For the first time in its history, the Joslyn Art Museum is showing a major exhibition focused solely on the work of African-American contemporary artists — on art made by artists who are black like Jacquelynn Davis.

The show, “[30 Americans](#),” features some names that casual art aficionados will recognize: Jean-Michel Basquiat, Carrie Mae Weems and Kehinde Wiley, who painted Barack Obama’s presidential portrait.

The show struck me as spellbinding, exhilarating and unsettling when I walked through it recently. But I went to see it again last week because I wanted to try to see it through the eyes of a group of Nathan Hale Magnet Middle School students, most of whom are black.

They are also 12 and 13 years old, which means some laughter when they walk into the exhibit and pretty quickly pass a portrait of a nude man. But, next to that nude, they stop to consider a portrait of a black man in a pinstriped, 1970s-era suit. He's proud of who he is, a teacher says to them.



Seventh-grade students from Nathan Hale Middle School, Dania Parker, 12, left, and Maurissa Martin, 12, tour 30 Americans.

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The teens stay clustered in tight groups at the beginning, flitting left and right and glancing at a painting of black figures in orange prison jumpsuits and another painting of Carl Lewis appearing to long jump out of a prison yard. To my eyes, the work screams out this sobering reality: Roughly one in four black men will spend time behind bars during their lives, according to studies of the U.S. prison population.

But the teens seem far more interested in the art that depicts black people as powerful, graceful, beautiful. The girls linger around the Mickalene Thomas works that depict strong women. And, an hour after he walks by the portrait of the black man in a pinstriped suit, 13-year-old Racari Carr is still thinking about that man and his suit.

“It was my favorite,” Racari tells me. “He didn’t care what anybody thought. He was just happy. He was proud.”

Midway through the exhibit, a group of students stops in front of a piece of art with Laura Huntimer, the Joslyn’s director of school programs. The piece by artist Rodney McMillian is a large section of stained carpet. Huntimer asks the kids if this is art. Heck no, they say.

Then she starts to ask them what they think made the stains on the carpet. Mud, one student says. Blood, says another. She asks them to consider the families who lived with this carpet in their living room. What were their lives like? Why did this carpet get so dirty?

“It makes you think,” Huntimer says. “It tells a story.” The Joslyn school director again asks the student if this is art. Some now nod yes. Some, no.

“It smells like blue cheese,” one boy says, and the group snickers.

There is no laughter when we enter the next room. In this room, there’s an installation called “Duck Duck Noose.” The installation features a circle of Ku Klux Klan hoods surrounding a noose that jolts the viewer, practically orders him or her to think about the lynching of African-Americans.

The kids do not know what to make of this.

“Whoa!” yells one. “That’s racist!” says another. “KKK,” a quiet girl whispers to her friend.

The teachers gather the students and explain: This is art. This is history. This is meant to be shocking, thought-provoking, scary, heartbreaking. It is meant to make you think.

The students nod their heads and walk quietly around the installation, trying to weigh its meaning. Soon they are through the exhibit, clustered in small groups, talking about what “30 Americans” means to them.

“When I heard that this was all black artists, I was like, ‘Whoa!’” says 13-year-old Montrell Jackson, bugging out his eyes for effect.

“I wear an Afro like that,” says Jacquelynn Davis, still thinking about Mickalene Thomas’ rhinestone-and-acrylic painting of the strong black woman.

“That carpet was telling a story about how many people lived on that carpet,” says 12-year-old Dania Parker. She stops to write a comment in a guest book at the end of the exhibit.

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After she’s done writing, I stoop down to read it. In loopy middle school cursive, she has written, “I really loved it — Dania.”

It’s time to get back to school on this Friday afternoon, but before the middle school students leave, there are only two things to do. The students leaf through the family gallery guide pamphlets that they helped make. Earlier this year they partnered with University of Nebraska at Omaha students on a project to produce the pamphlets. The UNO students interviewed the middle schoolers about race and identity and included their comments in the gallery guide.

And there is just enough time for a photo. The class congregates in front of the very first piece you see in the exhibit, a large blinking neon sign.

The students sit on the floor and crouch in rows and look dutifully at the adults’ iPhone cameras as they snap frame after frame of young black men and women inside Omaha’s art museum.

As the students of Nathan Hale Magnet Middle School pose, the large neon sign behind them blinks on and off, on and off. America, it blinks. America. America.

Photos: Our best shots of 2019 (so far)

Take a spin through the best of our staff photos from 2019. The gallery will be updated throughout our journey through the next year.



Lincoln East's Charlotte Bovaird practices her shot and she and her teammates warm up in the hallways before the start of the game. Lincoln East played Millard South in a Class A first-round basketball game during the girls state basketball tournament at the Pinnacle Bank Arena in Lincoln, Nebraska.

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Elkhorn South's Rye Gray (40) fights for a rebound with Millard South's Ross (0). Sidney played Elkhorn South in a game during the girls state basketball tournament at the Pinnacle Bank Arena in Lincoln, Nebraska. Elkhorn South defeated Sidney.

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Columnist Matthew Hansen is from Red Cloud, Neb. He likes the Chicago Cubs, facial hair during the winter months, Wilco and some other fairly stereotypical stuff for a guy who drives a Jetta. Follow him on Twitter @redcloud_scribe. Phone: 402-444-1064.