

PICTURE THAT!

HOW JOHN JAY PUTS THE "ART" IN JUSTICE

By Jennifer Nislow



FAITH RINGGOLD: THE ART OF CIVIL RIGHTS
6 June - 7 October, 2011
6th Floor President's Gallery

A highlight of the exhibit, curated by Lisa Farrington, Chair of Art & Music and recipient of 22 honorary degrees and countless awards, is a recent gift to the College from a Birmingham City Jail—a suite of eight original hand-pulled serigraphs based on Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" written by Martin Luther King Jr. in response to a Birmingham newspaper's editorial that called for a "one-man, one-vote" constitution. The serigraphs are evocative accompaniments to the original letters and are displayed in the Department of Art & Music.



ARTIST FAITH RINGGOLD'S SERIGRAPHS BASED ON MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'S "LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM CITY JAIL."



Professor Lisa Farrington, Chair of the Department of Art and Music

Some people might think that a music and art program would fit awkwardly into John Jay's mission of educating for justice. Yet for Marisa Simon, a BA/MA student who minors in art, taking studio classes in ceramics and digital photography has fostered a sense of dedication, devotion and "sticktoitiveness" that she knows will transfer to her work as a law enforcement officer.

"This really translates to any position in criminal justice," said Simon. "Whether you want to or not, you have to have those qualities to get the job done. When you look at it, having an art program here makes sense."

Art at John Jay as both an academic pursuit and a showcase for justice-themed works by established artists has seen a resurgence in recent years. In 2008, the Department of Art, Music and Philosophy was split to create a separate Department of Philosophy and a Department of Art and Music. The physical space that houses Art and Music, under the leadership of

Chairperson Lisa Farrington, was redesigned. More artists with expertise in musicology, photography and video art became faculty members, and new art history classes that explored Latin American and African American art were developed. In addition, the College received a grant to buy Apple computers with music technology software installed.

"The more we put into the program, the more students seemed to gravitate toward it," said Farrington, who came to the College after a career that included curatorial work at the Museum of Modern Art, graphic design and the teaching of art history. Farrington is author of *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists*, published by Oxford University Press in 2004.

"The number of students in the last couple of years really increased dramatically," she said. We can't run enough sections of ceramics and digital photography to meet the demand of students," said Farrington. "We have a school filled with these people who are creative but have nowhere to tap into their creative side. It just seems a natural fit for humankind, much less John Jay students."

Among the classes offered by the Department of Art and Music are Introduction to Drawing and Painting; Design Foundations; Introduction to Photography; Introduction to Sculpture; Graphic Arts; Art of the Italian Renaissance; the Art of Africa, Oceania and the Americas; Art and Architecture in New York; Body Politics and Art in Global & Historical Perspective; African American Women in Art, and Issues in Art and Crime. An Art minor requires that students take six courses, evenly distributed between studio and art history classes.

According to Farrington, police departments in both Chicago and New York City require officers to take museum studies classes to learn how to observe. In our visually-driven world of texting, video games and computers, she asserts, nobody reads anymore. And still students are not taught to see critically.

"That's what you do in art history classes, as opposed to studio classes where you make art," said Farrington.

While she can provide an overarching vision of why art is an important component of the academic curriculum at John Jay, Adjunct Professor Cary Lane offers a more street-level view. Lane is a working forensic artist who has assisted the Yonkers, NY, Police Department.

In his class, students explore the skull and muscles, traditional portraiture, forensic art software, facial anatomy, variables of gender, culture, age and race, even how subjects' lifestyles can alter their faces.

"Being a practicing forensic artist and painter informs my teaching," said Lane, "but having taught communication skills at John Jay for 10 years really helps me develop students' critical, college-level thinking. So we do many anatomical drawings, but we also do a lot of listening, note-taking, observing and presenting. These are highly effective, transferable skills."

That's what Anastasia La Douceur is counting on. La Douceur, an International Criminal Justice major, is interested in the investigation of transnational crimes involving major works of art. Many of these, she notes, involve one culture stealing works from a different culture. Having a better appreciation for art will provide her with the skills necessary for evaluating the worth of a particular piece, contends La Douceur.

"I love the art program at John Jay," she said. "I got the e-mail from Professor Farrington about the Haitian Art and Culture class. I'm Haitian, my parents are from Haiti, so I just jumped on it."

La Douceur was happily surprised to find how many students of Haitian descent were in the class. By the end of the semester, she noted, they had put together a scholarly panel that spoke about Haiti and how they could help the country.

"The class was remarkable because it didn't just teach us about Haitian art, it taught us a whole lot about European and American art, and how it all ties in to the Negritude Movement and the Harlem Renaissance," said La Douceur. "You just learn how the bridges were built and how we have so many different connections with so many countries."

Not only has the program at John Jay given students a chance to learn how to create art and present it, but it has also afforded established artists a space in which to exhibit their own work.

When John Jay's new building opens, there will be a 2,500-square-foot exhibition and event space. The first show that is going up, according to Farrington, is one she curated. The Mid-America Art Alliance organized *Women Call for Peace*, a collection of anti-violence works by female artists of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and other religions, creeds and nationalities.

"It will be a major exhibition and will come with all the attendant publicity and openings and galas," said Farrington. "The works themselves will knock your socks off."



Student Anastasia La Douceur

This year, the College welcomed its first artist-in-residence, Susanne Kessler, whose paintings and sculptures were exhibited at the John Jay Gallery in 2008. Kessler, who is based in Germany, taught a studio drawing class during one of the College's summer sessions in 2011.

"I think of a sentence by Joseph Beuys, who proclaimed many years ago that everybody is an artist. How right he is," she said. "These young people became artists at the moment they started to draw. For some of them it was the first time, but they drew with talent and inspiration."



Students drawing in art studio class

In a meeting with the College's administration, Kessler said she expressed to them her happiness about the commitment of these talented students to art, although they all wanted to become something other than artists.

"I remember how fascinated I was by the strong belief of the College's leaders that being educated in art, being an artist in your heart, makes you a very good lawyer, policemen or forensic researcher, too," she said.

Another renowned artist who has exhibited her work at John Jay is Faith Ringgold. She has pieces in the permanent collection of the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art, among others. In 2010, Ringgold made a gift to the College of the eight original serigraphs she created based on Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*. These have been displayed in the President's Gallery.

More recently, Ringgold contributed another set of serigraphs to the College based on her *Declaration of Freedom and Independence* quilt and paintings currently on exhibit at John Jay.

"I thought it was appropriate because of the nature of the institution; it's an institution in tribute to justice," said Ringgold, who was the recipient last year of an award presented at the College's annual Malcolm/King Breakfast.

Ringgold, who grew up in Harlem during the 1930s and 1940s, recalled a childhood spent listening to a constant discussion about justice.

"Everybody who came to our house, every friend my mother had had issues, openly discussed it," she said. "As a child I listened and listened. I've always been interested in freedom, justice and what people had to say about these issues that pertained to my life," said Ringgold.

"As far as I was concerned, that was my story. What better way to tell it than as an artist? That's why I became an artist, because I wanted to tell my story."



Students completing skull exercises in forensic drawing class.

Marisa Simon, the student who is minoring in Art, took the NYPD exam and hopes to be called up for the next class. She extolled the College's arts program as the "quintessential stress reliever" for the high-pressure work of law enforcement.

In preparing an application for John Jay's Leonard E. Reisman Award, Simon did some research on the College's first president. It appears that Reisman taught a classical music course at the College.

"In the article I found, he was asked why a 'cop school' would have a classical music course," she said. "Reisman said he believed that well-rounded criminal-justice personnel needed to fully understand the citizens they protected."

It is "very, very important," for students to have an art program at John Jay, Ringgold concurred.

"It is part of being a free people, to have a creative society," she said. "One of the main things that are cut out when a society goes down the tubes is the art. The art goes with it." ■

Jennifer Nislow is a senior writer for John Jay College of Criminal Justice.