The Black Cultural Center Explores Detroit

In five days filled with research, master classes, tours, performances, lectures, food and fun the BCC Performing Arts Ensembles traveled to Detroit, Michigan and Windsor, Ontario, Canada to study our fall semester theme “Black Detroit: The History, Movement & Music That Changed A Nation.”

The October 5-9 tour serves as a “map” which Artists-In-Residence and performers will use to share the tour experience at the annual Cultural Arts Festival on Friday, November 30, 2012 and throughout the semester. The tour participants included BCC staff, ensemble members, Artists-In-Residence and Purdue photographer intern, Steven Yang.

Tour participants pose in front of the International Underground Railroad Memorial. The International Memorial consists of companion monuments in Detroit and Windsor, Ontario, Canada. Detroit was one of the largest gateways out of the country to freedom for enslaved Africans who sought freedom in Windsor. Several churches served as places of refuge as freedom seekers made their way to freedom.

Purdue alumni from the Detroit region joined tour participants at the Charles Wright Museum of African American History and shared their personal keys for success. Alumni include a retired executive from Ford Motor Company, former Purdue football player, a preacher, veterinarian, financial advisor, and several engineers.
Tour participants stand in the atrium of the Charles Wright Museum of African American History as docents prepare them for a tour of their dynamic facility. The museum is the world’s largest institution dedicated to the African American experience. Robert L. Smith, the Vice President of Education and Exhibitions at the Museum is a Purdue alum.

Rev. Nicholas Hood Sr. graduated from Purdue in 1946 and is featured in the documentary *Black Purdue*. He is Minister Emeritus at Plymouth United Church of Christ. Rev. Hood hosted a luncheon for tour participants at his church. He shared how his experiences at Purdue have impacted his life. He encouraged students to always remember to pay it forward as a way to honor those who paved the path for your success.
BCC Cultural Arts Festival: From Midnight to Dawn

Loretta Davidson, Staff Writer

On November 30th, the Black Culture Center ensembles will present a performance featuring the musical, historical and cultural significance of black Detroit.

For the past ten semesters the Black Cultural Center has selected a fall theme. Once the theme and location is chosen, ensemble members, Artists-In-Residence and BCC staff travel to conduct hands on research related to the theme. The Cultural Arts Festival is a performance where students and Artists-In-Residence showcase the results of the research tour experience.

Dr. Twana A. Harris, full time Artist-In-Residence and director of the Black Voices of Inspiration is also serving as CAF director this year. According to Harris, “This year’s Cultural Arts Festival will be fueled with musical and artistic creativity as well as stories of the passionate struggle of identity and quality in the city. It is a story about migration. A story of movement from Africa to America, from Detroit (Midnight) to Dawn (Canada). From bondage to freedom. From Motown to Techno…our show has it all.” The show will feature original poems and monologues from the Haraka Writers and New Directional Players, familiar vocal music from the Motown era by BVOI, as well as beautifully choreographed dances by the Jahari Dance Troupe. Harris has directed CAF for several years and helps to facilitate the integration process of each of the ensembles, providing vision for the show. People can expect an interactive show that will share history, legend, wonderful music, splendid dance, dramatic interpretations that may make you laugh and cry. The poetry presented will make your intellectual wheels turn, and much more. Audiences will be entertained and educated. We look forward to seeing you there!
During the writing master class, taught by Hilda Vest, at the Virgil Carr Center students work on poems with the theme of what is home. Vest is a published poet and past owner of Broadside Press. As part of the master class students were able to share their work. The Virgil Carr Center, named in honor of Virgil H. Carr, past Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Arts League of Michigan is a premier center for African and African American cultural arts programming.

Researching black Detroit would not be complete with out a stop at Hitsville U.S.A., the Historical Motown Museum. It is no surprise that this is one of the city’s most popular tourist attractions. The museum is the home of the original Motown recording studio and also houses a fully restored apartment that served as Berry Gordy Juniors home. In addition to endless Motown memorabilia, tour participants got to stand in the original studio and sing where some of Motown’s greatest hits were recorded!

Sandwich First Baptist Church is the oldest active black church in Canada. A group of emancipated Africans began meeting informally in 1820 and 20 years later an official congregation was formed by eleven fugitive slaves. The church was a stop on the Underground Railroad. Designated as a National Heritage Site in 1998, visitors can still view the trap door in the church floor where slaves escaped to hiding places from bounty hunters.
Master classes in visual arts, Motown Dance, vocal and techno dance instructed by several artists from Heritage works, continued at Gull Lake Ministries Retreat Center. Vera Smith (visual artist), Emmanuel Green (Motown dance), Monica Blair (vocal) and Alisha Ellis (techno dance) assisted participants in building the skeleton for the November 30th Cultural Arts Festival. In this picture participants are working on group movement for scenes of the show.

Second Baptist Church of Detroit is known as the oldest religious institution owned by blacks in the Midwest. The church served as a “station” on the Underground Railroad. During a tour of the downtown church participants learned that approximately 5,000 enslaved Africans passed through the station before going on to Canada. Additionally the church also established Detroit’s first school for black children in 1839.

At the Virgil H. Carr Center tour participants were treated to a performance of Jo!: Africa to America, A Dance Odyssey. The show combines Anthropology and dance to examine the historic and cultural relationship between Africa and African diasporic communities as expressed through dance.
As part of the tour participants enjoyed a performance of “Makin Free” by Heritage Works, a Detroit based cultural arts organization. Heritage works has a special focus on providing culturally enriching programs which focus on youth and families. According to their website their mission is to “promote youth and community development through cultural arts traditions.”

Also as part of the tour participants were able to engage with Detroit residents as part of a panel discussion titled, “The Rise, Fall and Rebirth of Detroit.” Panel members included: Pastor David Jarrett of Bethel AME Detroit, Mrs. Marian Stephens, retired art teacher; Piper Carter, fashion photographer; and Chazz Miller, artist and founder of Public Art Workz (P.A.W.S.)

In the audience were several members of the Detroit Westsiders. The “westsiders” are residents from one of the city’s most progressive black neighborhoods circa 1920-1950. As an organization they actively research and preserve the history and memories of the community.

At the Virgil Carr Center participants received master class instruction in Detroit Bop from Greg Maddox. Detroit Bop is a steppin style ballroom dance popular in the Detroit area. They also participated in a gospel vocal workshop taught by Dr. Rudy Hawkins.
Cataloguing the Purdue University Black Cultural Center Art Collection

By Latoya Hobbs, MFA Candidate and BCC Student Staff

This article is an excerpt taken from a presentation given by Ms. Hobbs, “Access to Black Art in the Digital Age,” at the 22nd Annual Association for Black Culture Centers Conference hosted at Purdue University.

“Art is not a luxury as many people may think- it is a necessity. It documents history; it helps to educate people and stores knowledge for generations to come.” -Samella Lewis

This statement is very fitting for this conference because it reflects our function as cultural centers, which is to document our history as products of the diaspora and educate current and future generations about that history. This documenting of history has been a necessity our community prior to the “Age of Obama” and will continue to be long thereafter. The first area I want to address relative to my topic is the proper documentation of artwork. This applies to the artwork of an individual collector or the collection of a larger institution, in our case cultural centers. When acquiring a piece of art it is extremely important that you make sure you have the following information: Artists name, title of work, and medium (gives information on how to preserve/clean/store the work), dimensions, (needed in case the work is going to travel/make sure the space can accommodate the work), production year and artist statement (general statement about the artist or about the work in particular). In addition to helping identify the work and give information about its concept/subject matter, this information helps you properly access the value of your artwork or collection.

Another area that you want to be knowledgeable of is how to properly present, preserve and store artwork. Framing is the most traditional way to hang works on paper and paintings on canvas) First purpose is to protect the work, 2nd is presentation. Now, contemporary artist are exploring ways to display their work but the most important thing is to make sure the method is archival, or acid free. When presenting and storing fine art originals you want to use materials without acid because overtime the acid eats away at the artwork. Use clean and dry areas to prevent staining and molding, particularly with works on paper. When you hang or store artwork, you want make sure they are not in direct sunlight because it causes the color to fade.

Now I want to talk a little bit about the process of cataloguing the Purdue University. BCC art collection. I initiated this project because after frequenting the BCC I noticed that there was information posted about the artifacts in the display cases, but not any information listed about the artwork on the walls. Also, when students and other patrons would inquire about the art in the collection the student staff would only be able to give info about the two main pieces near front desk area. The first step in this process was gathering information about all the artwork. From there I took photographs of the work and compiled all of the information into an image list. I also started an Artist Biography list. This gives you all the important information a person would need to know about the artists in the collection. The next phase of the process is three tiered. It involves: electronic and written records, wall labelling and electric cataloguing. I have been working on the first two stages of this process simultaneously and they have been an ongoing process, but once the information gathering and documenting process is complete the goal is to construct an online database where patrons can view the BCC Permanent Art Collection digitally.

Jeff Donaldson, Victory
Screen Print, 34½” x 22½”

This work is featured in the BCC’s permanent collection.
Quotes from the Research Tour...

The Heidelberg Project is an open air art environment in the heart of an urban community on the east side of Detroit. Many of the installations consist of objects found in the neighborhood.

“Our experience in Detroit was rich in history. The pride the people had in their city inspired each of us to appreciate ourselves, our history and our respective art.”
- Brandi B. Smith

The trip was very informative in my scholastic research of Detroit. It absolutely captivated my cultural awareness.”
- Nico Whitehead

“Detroit is a strong city that has a ton of culture and history. I never saw a negative or dangerous city while I was there. The negative connotations will soon be in the past.”
- Camille Applewhite