

# Making Their Mark On Art

## LASA Students Show Their True Colors Through Their Creations

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One artist feeds fabric through a sewing machine, while another stomps her feet, the decorative bells at her feet shaking and ringing. One student brushes swaths of bright colors across a painting, as another places the tip of a calligraphy pen to a piece of paper. All of these artists have something in common – their use of art as a means of cultural and self expression.

Senior Abasifreke Udosen is a budding fashion designer at LASA. She has always had a love for fashion but, as she's gotten older, she feels that her Nigerian heritage has influenced her designs more. "I have been working with my mother, a fashion designer herself, since I was in grade school," Udosen said. "However, it was only when I reached middle school and started forming my own sense of style that I was inspired to design my own clothing, which led me to where I am today."

Udosen said that the clothes she makes are a way for her to express the different cultures that have influenced her identity. She combines styles from different countries and time periods to create unique multicultural pieces.

"A major theme in my fashion and my clothes is the duality of culture that I have experienced and my attempt to express how those two aspects can be combined," Udosen said. "I like to play with a combination of black streetwear and early 2000s fashion with Nigerian prints, and I like to highlight the systemic separation that has occurred within the Black diaspora between Africans and African Americans."

According to Udosen, Nigerian culture has had a huge influence on how she thinks about designing her clothes. She likes to utilize trends and styles she has seen in Nigeria.

"The influence of my culture is quite clear because I make Nigerian clothing with American patterns," Udosen said. "On a deeper level, I make this clothing and wear it because it allows me to express my identity in a way that is very true to my spirit. The clothes I make appeal to me, and I believe that my specific tastes are rooted in my culture and the pieces that I would see people wearing when I visited home."

Sonali Srikanth is a sophomore who also tries to combine different cultures through her art. Srikanth is a Bharatanatyam dancer, a form of classical dance that originated in southern India, and she has been dancing for nearly 12 years. According to Srikanth, there are a lot of opportunities within dance for her to play with cultural expression and fusion.

"We have a lot of these fusion-type dances, which are a little bit of Bollywood and a lot of Bharatanatyam, and they've actually gotten a lot of traction," Srikanth said. "We do group dances with fun choreography, and it's different from the traditional style."

According to Srikanth, Bharatanatyam dance has helped her connect more with a culture that she feels geographically removed from. It's been a valuable way for her to feel more a part of Indian culture even though she isn't able to visit India often.

"A lot of times, I'm not really close with my culture," Srikanth said. "My family doesn't follow every tradition to a tee, and we don't celebrate every holiday all the time. Dance helps me feel connected to my roots because I wasn't born in India. I go there for vacation, and it's not like I live there. So this is the closest I get to my culture."

Dance isn't just a way for Srikanth to connect with her culture – it also provides an outlet for her emotions, according to Srikanth. She loves dancing and getting to be part of a larger community.

"I like stomping," Srikanth said. "It helps with my life, like with anger, and you wear bells on your feet. I love hearing the clean sound of a stomp that hits the beat, and that's really beautiful. I also really like doing expressions and telling a story through movement."

Srikanth also loves that Bharatanatyam dance has allowed her to be a bigger part of the Austin community as well. Through dance, she gets to engage in many celebrations and performances in Austin.

"We get invited to a lot of places to showcase our dance, a lot of Diwali festivals, and a lot of Indian festivals in general," Srikanth said. "... And then this summer, I have my Arangetram, which is

my big dance graduation of all my years of learning coming to a single performance."

Tracy Li is a junior who practices Chinese calligraphy. She agrees that her art has also allowed her to feel more connected with her heritage.

"I feel like cultural expression is really important, especially with my family since we're so disconnected with the [Chinese] culture," Li said. "Because my parents miss their time in China, my calligraphy is a good activity to help keep in touch with my culture. It's also important because it allows myself and other Chinese people to form a better connection to our culture through art."

Li thinks it's especially important to find ways to connect with one's culture when one lives far away from it. She said that learning calligraphy has brought her a lot of joy.

"Because there's such a geographical distance between me and China, and especially my heritage, engaging in cultural activities such as calligraphy really helps me keep in touch with that cultural aspect," Li said. "It gave me peace within myself when I decided to get into calligraphy."

Akhila Jallepalli is a junior at LASA who plays the violin and performs both classical music and Carnatic music. Jallepalli explained that Carnatic music is a classical Indian type of music that is difficult to compare to Western music genres.

"It's kind of hard to describe the music because there are so many different styles and genres," Jallepalli said. "The most mainstream music I can compare Carnatic music to is like the Quran or the Torah."

According to Jallepalli, Carnatic music has allowed her to meet new people and be inspired by other musicians. Indian vocalist Bombay Jayashree and American violinist Hilary Hahn are artists Jallepalli looks up to.

"Music makes me feel more connected to my culture," Jallepalli said. "I learn more about my religion and traditions, which is cool. I also meet many other musicians. It's really inspiring to meet others who are so accomplished in their art."

Jallepalli knows that Carnatic music is not very popular in the United States, and that some LASA students don't know what it is. However, she thinks this only goes to show how many unique art forms from other cultures LASA students might not be aware of.

"I guess it shows art that is not really 'mainstream,'" Jallepalli said. "There are so many wonderful styles of music around the world that I feel need to be better known."

Udosen agrees that many art forms from other cultures aren't smaller art forms and artists of color in particular.

"As is with many disciplines, in the art industry there has always been a systematic marginalization of artists of color from the mainstream," Udosen said. "It is so important to work to dismantle these aspects because it often leads to artists not getting recognized for their excellence and talent."

Erika Torii-Karch is a junior artist at LASA. She loves to paint and is currently working on a portfolio that features a lot of realistic images and bright colors.

"My portfolio right now is about joy and how it's expressed in different ways – how I express myself and a little bit of how joy is expressed in people in general," Torii-Karch said. "I'm especially trying to portray how you can use color to express joy within art. That's one of my main themes because like I said, I really like using bright colors, and those are usually kind of joyful."

Torii-Karch said highlighting artists of color whenever possible is necessary to uplift those communities. According to her, it is important that people get exposed to art from different cultures so they can learn new things.

"People of color are obviously just kind of going to be oppressed no matter what they do in some way or another, so it's always important to try and elevate them where possible, especially because art is such a culturally diverse and significant form of expression," Torii-Karch said. "Every culture has such distinct ways in which they create art, and it's important to be able to see all of that because a variety of inspiration is obviously just going to make anyone a better artist."

“A major theme in my fashion and my clothes is the duality of culture that I have experienced, and my attempt to express how those two aspects can be combined.”

– SENIOR ABASIFREKE UDOSEN, DIGITAL ARTIST AND FASHION DESIGNER

**STEPPING IT UP** Sophomore Sonali Srikanth poses dressed in traditional attire for Bharatanatyam, Srikanth's arangetram, or dance graduation performance, is coming up this summer. photo courtesy of Sonali Srikanth

**MOTHER NATURE** Junior Torii-Karch enjoys creating art depicting joy. This piece is a part of her AP 2-D Art portfolio. photo courtesy of Erika Torii-Karch

**VIBRANT HUES** Junior Erika Torii-Karch used markers and colored pencils for this piece. She gravitates towards bright colors, which is reflected in her artwork. photo courtesy of Erika Torii-Karch

**A STROKE OF BRILLIANCE** Junior Tracy Li practices calligraphy with traditional brushes and ink. She gets a lot of her calligraphy inspiration from her grandfather. photo courtesy of Tracy Li

**DRESS OF YOUR DREAMS** A model wears a dress designed by senior Abasifreke Udosen. Udosen's fashion is inspired by Black streetwear, early 2000s fashion, and Nigerian prints. photo courtesy of Abasifreke Udosen

graphic by Lili Xiong, Alexandra Valencia-Serrano, and Amelia Coleman

## LIBERATOR EDITORS TAKE ON BIPOC POP!

**BIPOC BANNER** A BIPOC Pop promotional banner, with artwork by Stacy Robinson, could be seen at the entrance of the venue. Many of the event's promotional content featured artwork created by speakers at the event. photo by Sarah Garrett

for more, see **BIPOC POP** on page 14

## The Experiences of Editors as Event Panelists

The Power of BIPOC Pop event planning all started a few weeks leading up to spring break. The Liberator staff was busy filling out forms and getting ready for South by Southwest when Garcia announced that there would be another event going on the Friday before spring break, which was the BIPOC Pop event, which would take place at UT. When I first heard about it I was immediately intrigued – getting to meet and interview a variety of artists has been something I've always wanted to do, so I signed up as soon as possible to cover it.

In the days leading up to the event, I was informed that the organizers of the event wanted some students from the Liberator to be panelists. As someone eager to cover the event, Garcia asked if I would be interested in being a panelist. When I think of panelists, I usually think of people important in their communities, such as actors in a movie answering audience questions, so I would have never guessed I would be up in a panel.

When I got to the venue I was surprised by how many people were there: in one of the rooms, artists with a variety of unique styles were selling their art. I recognized some of them from social media, such as Emmanuel Valtierra, who I recognized from their aztec style based art. I was able to meet up with him, as well as other artists, and talk about their works and what inspirations they took to do art.

When I was in front of an audience, I didn't feel nervous – I believe that I have great public speaking skills – but I did feel a sense of importance on the stage. People wanted to hear what I had to say, especially in topics important to me, such as representation in the media.

Getting to meet so many people after the panel was particularly fun because I got to meet professors and staff from the university I am now committed to, the University of North Texas. Overall, getting to participate in the Power of BIPOC Pop event taught me that I have a voice and that I can speak up on topics that matter to me.

**AN ACTIVE AUDIENCE** Audience members at the event ask questions and chat with panelists. While the event took place at UT Austin, both students and members of the public participated. photos by Sarah Garrett

**JC RAMIREZ DELGADILLO**

**LILI XIONG**

**ALEXANDRA VALENCIA**

graphics by Amelia Coleman

On the Friday morning of BIPOC Pop, I got lost. I wandered around the UT campus, trying to find Patton Hall, feeling a bit on edge, not because I was lost (it happens on the regular), but because I was walking towards a public speaking opportunity, or in other words, my utter demise. It wasn't really the public speaking that worried me; it was the fact that I was to be giving a talk on a panel about two deeply important facets of my life: my racial identity and the writing that I create.

However, after floundering around for about 15 minutes, I eventually found Patton Hall, and some of my co-editors. The first panel was about the power of BIPOC storytelling in Young Adult Fiction and featured notable speakers such as comic artist Eliamaria Madrid, author Pablo Leon, and writer Julio Anta. As the audience laughed at jokes, expressed their agreement with what was being said, and asked questions, I noticed that the energy in the room felt electrifying. The most remarkable aspect of the event really was that it was a networking and creative space created by, and for, artists of color. Many of the panelists expressed that throughout their careers, they'd walked into countless rooms and professional spaces in which they're one of the only people of color. BIPOC Pop allowed these creators to relate to each other on the struggles they face in their respective fields, as well as exchange ideas on how to uplift each other's art in spite of those struggles.

When it was me, Web Editor-in-Chief JC, and Graphics editor Alex's turn for our panel, "LASA Students do BIPOC Pop," I was surprised at how many people seemed genuinely interested in what we had to say. I think most of them probably hadn't had a single interaction with high schoolers in years because not only did we answer questions about our creative work and journalism, but we also talked about our experiences going to school in the current political and social climate in the U.S. in general. I also rambled on about everything from JK Rowling's absolutely abysmal naming of characters of color (even though she was able to come up with some pretty killer names for white characters) to how I use "cultural connection to my heritage and language" as an excuse to watch hours upon hours of C-Dramas. So really, I think the moral of the story is to never give me a microphone, or a sense of self-importance. But in all seriousness, I do think I made a meaningful connection with the audience.

After our panel concluded, author Curtis Chin came up to me, and we chatted about his upcoming memoir, "Everything I Learned In A Chinese Restaurant." I also had a conversation with an audience member about "Crying in H-Mart" by Michelle Zauner, a memoir which we both deeply resonated with. Alex and I also had an extremely giddy conversation with another audience member in which we obsessed over our favorite Chinese and Korean dramas, and exchanged recommendations. I left Patton Hall feeling excited about the direction the artistic industries were headed and much fonder of public speaking.

At first I was very hesitant and afraid to be a panelist at the BIPOC Pop event, as I felt I didn't have a story to tell, or something to contribute to my panel's discussion. However, during lunch before the start of my panel, two women noticed how nervous I was, and asked me about it. I let them know that I was very scared of public speaking and had many insecurities regarding speaking my personal thoughts and opinions out loud. I also confessed to them how I felt like I didn't know or have anything to talk about. It was then that they asked me my thoughts on my panel's theme and in what ways I connected with it. It was after verbalizing my thoughts that I came to the realization that I did have something, a story to tell and talk about. After the surprising but reassuring talk, I was much calmer and when it was time for my panel it passed by like a breeze. I truly enjoyed it because I felt like I said what I wanted to say and I felt heard. That conversation demonstrated what the event is all about, which is to encourage people of color, especially African Americans and Indigenous people, to tell their stories and create a community where BIPOC creators will feel comfortable and heard talking about their passions and voicing out their thoughts and opinions.

During the event, Stacey Robinson, a comic artist and painter whose art speculates futures where Black people are free from colonial influences, really impacted my views on what it means to be a BIPOC creator. At the event, he talked about how he wrote comics and created art that depicted narratives he wanted to see in the world. He expressed wanting to see African Americans survive at the end of a movie and have a love interest where at the end of a movie they're able to stay together and have a happy ending. He expressed how he wanted to see more of what he didn't get to see during his childhood, so that his children wouldn't have to grow up the same way he did. His story really made me think about what I wanted to see more of in the media. I had never realized or expressed it, but I want to see more narratives about the perspectives of the daughters and sons of hispanic immigrants who were born in the United States, and allow them to have a voice on the hardships they also go through when assimilating into a country that their parents don't really know a lot about, and one where they're just trying to survive in. I want more stories on what it takes to not simply survive in a country, but to move forward and become someone in it.

If anything, the one thing the event and the people there taught me is that everyone has a story to tell, and no matter how nonexistent a person believes their story to be, they have one. When the time is right, they'll learn to embrace their narrative, and freely express it through a variety of platforms. It is the power of BIPOC people to always continue telling meaningful and impactful stories.