



ArtReach Tales from North St. Louis



A student at Summer High School draws inspiration from contemporary artist Keith Haring. Photo courtesy CAM staff.

CAM is pleased to present its annual student showcase from the ArtReach Partnership program, now in its sixth year with Vashon High School and second year with Sumner. ArtReach is the museum's suite of programs for K–12 schools, aimed at providing support where art is needed most in the classroom. For ArtReach Partnership programs, which take place in the classrooms of Sumner and Vashon High Schools, CAM Resident Teaching Artists and museum staff provide weekly art classes throughout the year. An annual exhibition of student work made in these programs is celebrated in CAM's Education Galleries.



Audio Tour

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Digital Guide

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My Home: My World

When Resident Teaching Artist Mee Jey was contemplating what project she wanted to develop with her Sumner High School students, she drew inspiration from the rich legacy of historical architecture in North St. Louis. Throughout the semester, students created collaborative stacked-unit “homes” that explored the idea of home as not just a physical space, but as a nexus of people, structures, and social systems. Students made the units using fabric and cardboard, creating dream versions or fantasy homes rather than exact replicas of their own residences. They were tasked with creating furnishings and other elements to populate the units. The shape the students’ ideas took were entirely left up to them, culminating in a series of wide ranging and imaginative “homes.”



A student works on his home design in Mee Jey’s class. Photo courtesy CAM staff.



Resident Teaching Artist Mee Jey works with students at Sumner High School. Photo courtesy CAM staff.

Visitors to the ArtReach exhibition first encounter a lone tower of fabric-covered boxes perched one atop another. The details indicating doors and windows are inviting enough, but what demands closer inspection is the glow emanating from inside. Looking through a window reveals miniature rooms with wallpaper, furniture, and even a shower fashioned from cardboard, glue, and fabric.

Despite the similarities, this collaborative sculpture created by students of Sumner High School’s visual arts pathway were not attempting to create scale models in the manner of, say, the Miniature Museum of Greater St. Louis, found in the Bevo neighborhood. In fact, Resident Teaching Artist Mee Jey’s focus during the weeks-long project wasn’t so much on the craft of making miniatures as much as the idea of “home”. Jey asked students to consider their respective households, habitats, and neighborhoods as much as their own imaginations as they pictured their ideal “homes.” What do these homes require? What do they currently have that they would bring into these dream houses? What would they need to feel safe and comfortable? Thus students were inspired to work small while envisioning much larger. Now, visitors are asked to peer into the dreams of students and imagine life within these tiny, fabric-clad, soft rooms.

The choice of materials was not merely for their cost efficiency either. Except for the lights illuminating the interiors, the rooms were built using recycled cardboard, fabric scraps, and other leftover craft supplies from Jey’s studio. While one of the aims of ArtReach is to provide classrooms with specialized materials or equipment that might otherwise be less accessible, in this case, the medium furthers the message. Whether the students are thinking about their current places of residence throughout North St. Louis, or are dreaming about future possibilities, the concept of home is what one is able to create from the resources available to them. In a way, making a home does what successful art does: it transcends the materials used to create it.

Mee Jey is a multidisciplinary Indian artist who was honored with the St. Louis Visionary Emerging Artist Award in 2022. Jey has shown works, performed, and been creatively associated with the Saint Louis Art Museum, Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Missouri History Museum, and Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis. She was the Community Artist in Residence at Laumeier Sculpture Park in 2022 and is currently an Artist in Residence at Craft Alliance. She received her MFA degree from Sam Fox School of Arts, Washington University in St. Louis. Jey has a BA and MA degree in History and Archaeology from Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University, respectively.

Participating Artists from Sumner High School:

Quinton Beaver, Journey Chissem, LaShawnda Cloudy, China Edwards, Destiney Evans, Dashon Frazier-Stokes, Brooklyn Govan, De’Andre Harris, De’Antray Harris, Makiyah Harris, Syniah Henson, Haley Johnson, Jayvon Johnson, Elijah Moffatt, Jerrell Reese, Deniyah Shotwell, Ktron Stevenson, Donnell Strong, Syncere Thomas, Frankie Williams, Gregory Williams, Ronell Williams, and Raelet Wilson.



Resident Teaching Artist Bharat Ajari at Sumner High School. Photo courtesy CAM staff.

The Superheroes North St. Louis Needs

Prior to setting their minds on home, Sumner students thought more expansively of their neighborhoods with Resident Teaching Artist Bharat Ajari. The Superheroes project prompted students to consider the kind of superhero that a city like St. Louis needs. After all, most of the superheroes, whether found between the pages of a comic book or on the big screen, call New York City or fictional metropolises home. Students noted concerns that affect their neighborhoods and the city at large and then considered what kind of superhero could address them.

Walking into the second education gallery, we see the results: neon ninjas, red-eyed cyborgs, flaming skeletal monsters, and armed masked vigilantes. Some of these renderings remind us of characters that we've seen before while others look like everyday people. What they have in common is that all of these heroes are Black, representing the population that make up the student body of Sumner and its neighborhoods. The dearth of Black heroes in the comic and animation canon (even with contemporary revisions) has not been lost on Ajari, a lifelong comics and anime fan. In class, he showed students YouTube essays by Black manga and animation fans who talked about how the lack of representations has affected them and their fandom. He then facilitated conversations to gauge the students' own interests and responses. For some students, this

was seemingly the first time that they had reflected on the matter. In the end, students offer their own characters for consideration, where New York City isn't the center of the world and the white body isn't the default superhero.

To hear the students describe their superhero in their own words, visit camstl.org/audio. Just find the numbered track that matches the corresponding pin.

Bharat Ajari is an artist and photographer. He has exhibited his work in several galleries in Missouri, Illinois, and Iowa. He is a former contributing writer for *All the Arts*, a former regional arts magazine. He is an adjunct instructor in writing and psychology at an area university. He also teaches creative writing to incarcerated men through the auspices of Prison Performing Arts. Ajari received his Doctorate of Ministry and Masters of Divinity from Eden Theological Seminary. He has a MA degree in professional counseling from Lindenwood University. He has a BA degree in English with an emphasis in creative writing from the University of Missouri, Columbia.

Participating Artists from Sumner High School: Malik Blockton, Journey Chissem, China Edward, Brooklyn Govan, Syniah Henson, Haley Johnson, Rachel "Inez" Reed, Jerrell "Prince" Reese, Deniyah Shotwell, Ktron Stevenson, Donnell Strong, Syncere Thomas, Romel White, and Frankie Williams.

WTF: Where's the Fun?

It may be hard to believe that the culminating project of a full semester-long residency could be encompassed in a small book, but *WTF: Where's the Fun?* is indeed the result of months of creative making and writing. Visitors are invited to flip through the pages (using the available gloves, please) and peruse poems, sketches, and designs collected from LM Flowers' work with students at Vashon High School. Within the book, visitors will find haikus about Vashon, self portraits, and sketches of tiny superheroes, a coincidental shared theme between the two schools.

Flowers, a successful designer, had the aim of not just facilitating creative design projects for their own sake, but for all of the students' labors to be represented in a fabricated end product, thus the book and corresponding animation. From the title to the layout, Flowers led students through the process of designing and publishing an art book. Students created cover designs and then voted on their favorite. Students who were keen to learn digital skills rendered their drawings in Adobe Illustrator, learning some of the basics of creating vector designs. In essence, the resulting book becomes a snapshot into the students' creative lives, many of whom had no formal art instruction up to that point. Flowers was inspired to commission the animation video using the students' self portraits as characters. Students were able to see their own creations come to life in the hands

ArtReach: Tales From North St. Louis is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis by Miriam Ruiz, School and Community Partnership Manager.

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of local animator Terez Allen, exposing them to yet another avenue for creative expression after a term focused on design.

Upon the closing of the exhibition, one copy of the book will remain as a part of CAM's library while another copy will become an addition to Vashon's library.

LM Flowers is a career entrepreneur: a book publisher, visual artist, and CFO and Co-Founder of St. Louis-based Sis. Art Corp., a family-owned manufacturer of fine art supplies and a brand serving some of the nation's top creatives.

Participating Artists from Vashon High School: Amauri Aaron, Dinah Brooks, Akilah Chatman, Tedynd Coleman, Antoine Davis, Brianna Davis-Bey, Davion Evans, Martell Ferrell, Lonzell Griffin, José Guzman, Dierre Jill, Justice Hurst, Tyrell Jackson, Andrianna Malone, Lisandra Manley, Tramonie McCottrell, Mya McCrary, Demarco Murphy, Donyell Murphy, Donald Partee, Nicholas Randall, Caleb Smith, Sha'kyra Sullivan, Marnesha Wharton, Ariel Williams, Christian Williams, Imagee Williams, and Mauriel Williams.



Resident Teaching Artist LM Flowers works with students at Vashon High School. Photo courtesy CAM staff.



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**Contemporary Art
Museum St. Louis**
3750 Washington Blvd
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314.535.4660

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