

Against Tough Odds, a High School Arts Program Fosters Success

By **Miranda S. Spivack**

May 3, 2016

DISTRICT HEIGHTS, Md. — Inside a crumbling school building in a neighborhood dotted by pawn shops, fast-food restaurants and strip malls, a security guard is shouting into the girls' restroom to make sure there are no problems. Outside, a gaggle of boys is smoking. Trash overflows from a bin just beyond the school's fence.

Oblivious to the grim surroundings, young artists are hard at work inside the building, Suitland High School. Those artists are eager participants in a rigorous, four-year academic and arts program that has survived budget cuts, neighborhood violence and a constant shortage of art supplies. Although the program, the Center for Visual and Performing Arts, founded in 1986, has had dwindling enrollment, it has been a crucible for emerging artists, many of them African-Americans, and some now rising to national prominence.

Sam Vernon, Suitland class of '05, is represented in three current shows in New York City, including one at the Brooklyn Museum. Eric N. Mack, Suitland '05, is preparing a show that opens in the fall in Paris. The two artists said that the world inside the Annex, as the arts center is known, was where it all began — where they spent up to four hours a day with art teachers, all practicing professionals. Close friends since

ninth grade at Suitland, both Ms. Vernon and Mr. Mack went on to Cooper Union and later Yale. Several of this year's Suitland graduates are also headed to well-regarded college arts and design programs, many with substantial financial aid. Among them is Malik Mills, 17, who managed to produce finely detailed pen-and-ink drawings even as his family members faced eviction from their home. "My photography teacher was the first person to introduce Conceptual art to me," he said.

For students intent on a career path in the arts, "Suitland is an exemplar program for what we seek to see in schools all over the country," said Jeff Poulin, arts education manager for Americans for the Arts, a nonprofit advocacy group. Yet programs such as Suitland's, he said, are always at risk in public school systems with tight budgets.

The Suitland program, which began as a magnet curriculum to comply with court-ordered desegregation in Prince George's County, Md., is today largely African-American. Suitland's arts programs have not fully recovered since countywide budget cuts in 2008, and a subsequent threat, eventually lifted, to a system that buses students from across sprawling Prince George's County. The seven teachers often dip into their own pockets to pay for supplies, after quickly exhausting the \$1,000 annual allowance they each receive to cover all 65 students in drawing and painting, photography, printmaking, computer graphics and art history.

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Officials who manage the nearly \$2 billion budget for 130,000 county students from kindergarten through high school said that they were looking for ways to support Suitland's program, even as they worked to integrate the arts more fully into mainstream classrooms.

Phyllis Wilson, who leads the visual arts program at Suitland, said the class of '05 “was an intense group.” She added: “We didn’t have to motivate them. They motivated each other.”

Recalling the rigor of Ms. Wilson’s drawing class, Ms. Vernon said, “we were made to draw straight lines from one side of an 18-by-24 page to another, for two or three weeks before we could even go on to observe objects and still lifes.” Students receive a grounding in the basics in their first two years, before choosing a concentration, and there are frequent critique sessions.

“The teacher-student connection is very deep and very long term, and helps us develop and flourish as artists,” said Yaa Cunningham, 17, who will attend the University of Rochester in the fall and plans to study art.

Ms. Vernon, 28, recalled the program as “this magical thing.” She creates eclectic collages and designs with often subtle messages about the African-American experience. Last year, Complex.com, which focuses on youth culture and design, tabbed her as one of 15 young black artists “making waves in the art world.”



Sam Vernon, Suitland class of '05, is represented in three current shows in New York City, including one at the Brooklyn Museum. Benjamin Norman for The New York Times

Ms. Vernon said that Suitland's program helped her step outside traditional art. At the Queens Museum, Ms. Vernon's "Louis & Sam," in the International 2016 show, plays off Louis Armstrong's little-known collages. For the Brooklyn Museum, she produced a black-and-white series of drawings and designs on vinyl; it is in "Disguise: Masks and Global African Art," a show exploring the evolution of the mask and contemporary forms of disguise that opened on Friday. And in an artistic trifecta that many more mature artists can only envy, she recently mounted a 12-foot-tall black-and-white collage for a pop-up exhibition at the Kings Theater organized by the singer Lauryn Hill as part of her recent concert.

Mr. Mack, 28, was recently named to Forbes's "30 Under 30" promising talents in visual arts and design, wrapped up a fellowship at Studio Museum in Harlem in 2015 and is represented by the Los Angeles gallery Moran Bondaroff. For one recent piece, he bought men's jackets secondhand and used grommets to outline what looked like bullet holes in the fabric. "It's the body kind of dealing with a subtractive form, which in itself is an inherent, violent act," he said. "And it transforms the body into another space. What people ended up bringing to the piece was it was like the body being shot."

Mr. Mack got his first taste of art as a child, visiting the National Gallery in Washington; his father was a security guard there and his mother worked in the archives. When it came time for high school, his parents wanted him out of their tough Capitol Heights neighborhood. His brother had been a student in Suitland's main building, so Mr. Mack knew a bit about the arts program. Once there, he focused on photography, sculpture and painting, which influence his work today.

"A lot of my work right now has to do with imaging, re-presenting everyday images and surfaces," Mr. Mack said. The Suitland teachers encouraged students to get out of their classrooms and see the works up close. In addition to the National Gallery, Mr. Mack discovered the Hirshhorn Museum. "I saw newer, more controversial works that went against the grain," he said. Those visits helped him realize that he could "antagonize and interrogate the tradition I was used to understanding in painting."

David Humphrey, a New York artist and curator, first met Ms. Vernon and Mr. Mack as graduate students at Yale, where he served as a critic on review panels. Both artists, he said, "are very cogent and motivated," adding, "They have the kind of focused tenacity to ride all the ups and downs and turns of their careers."

At Suitland, teachers hope the program survives long enough to produce a few more like them.

Correction: May 3, 2016

An earlier version of the dateline on this article misidentified the site of Suitland High School. It is District Heights, Md., not Suitland, Md.

A version of this article appears in print on May 4, 2016, on Page C1 of the New York edition with the headline: A Crucible for Young Artists in Tough Surroundings