

The Star-Ledger

Saturday, May 28, 2011

Jersey City teen is good as gold in national award for artists

Portfolio of works joins the likes of Warhol and Posen in conveted exhibit

By Meredith Galante
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Muscular brushstrokes bring to life the painting of a young black man who is set against a textured white background. Shades of red, yellow, orange outline angular features on his bowed head. His closed eyes suggest deep thought.

This 24-by-36 inch painting, "Dans L'air," loosely meaning in French "There is a sad or happy air," is a self-portrait of Leonardo Laurenceau — one of the most talented young artists in the country.

The 17-year-old from Jersey City will confess the portrait is part of a story about a boy on the verge of becoming a man.

Laurenceau won this year's Art Portfolio Gold Award from the Scholastic Inc. Art & Writing Awards, joining several world-renowned alumni including Richard Avedon, Philip Pearlstein, Andy Warhol and Zac Posen, among other artists who've garnered the distinction over the past 87 years since its inception.

"Leonardo's work was so surprising and fresh," said Gary Schneider, the director of education at the Montclair Art Museum, where "Dans L'air" and the rest of his eight-piece portfolio was exhibited earlier this year. "He has a 'painterly' style. He uses paint in a way that you see the brush strokes. It's also very well composed and it has boldness that's almost more like graphic design; yet the background is so expressive."

He is one of 16 young artists in the country to receive the portfolio gold honor — a contest that started with 186,000 Submissions. Laurenceau, who studied art at Jersey



NOAH K. MURRAY/THE STAR-LEDGER

The work of Leonardo Laurenceau, winner of a Scholastic Art Portfolio Gold Award of painting, was called "surprising and fresh" by a regional art jurist.

City Arts High School, takes home a \$10,000 scholarship with the honor.

Laurenceau and the other national winners will be handed an award Tuesday at Carnegie Hall in New York City. Laurenceau's portfolio paintings will be on display at the World Financial Center Courtyard Gallery in Lower Manhattan from Wednesday through June 19. Fellow Jersey City Arts students Phong Tran won a silver for her portfolio and Nina Bell was recognized for an individual painting.

New Jersey had top honors in the writing competition, as well: Amanda Unger, 17, of Bayonne earned a Portfolio Gold award for her six short stories, winning the \$10,000 prize. Her work may be viewed at artandwriting.org/Media/2542 or purchased in her co-authored book "This is Ink" on lulu.com.

Schneider, who moderated the jury panels in the regional art competition, said Laurenceau's work reminds him of Kehinde Wiley, a New York-based portrait artist of contemporary urban African, African-American, and Afro-Brazilian men in heroic poses.

"I like to tell stories through my painting," said Laurenceau, who will graduate from McNair Academic high school. "I'm not very good with words, and my feelings come out best through my paintings. You are your own convenient model; so I tend to come out most in my paintings."

Laurenceau's passion for art was fostered at home. His father, Jean Leon, was born in Haiti, and was a professional artist for some years. Pictures of the Haitian countryside

fill their home, all done by Jean Leon.

Laurenceau's twin sister, Ariane has the art gene, too. At 18 months old, he and his sister started painting each other's faces, stirring aggravation from Yvette, their mother. Still paint is a messy problem in the Laurenceau home. "Sometimes I want to scream with all the paint," Yvette said. "But I won't. How can I yell when I know it's something he loves to do?"

The twins were enrolled in the Artistically Talented Children program in middle school and were both accepted to Jersey City Arts High School.

Now they stay up late some nights critiquing each other's work, or just talking — it's nice to have the perspective of someone of the opposite sex, Ariane said.

The duo recently shared their senior exhibition display at City Hall in Jersey City. It was one of the last things they'll do officially together before Ariane, who won a gold award at the regional competition, goes to the New Jersey Institute of Technology for engineering and Laurenceau goes to



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Leonardo Laurenceau, who studied at Jersey City Arts High School, wins a \$10,000 scholarship with his award. He is one of 16 young artists to receive such honors out of 186,000 submissions.



Work like “Red Days and Blue Knights” distinguishes the artist as a “very steady, creative force,” in one teacher’s view.

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Leonardo Laurenceau

the School of Visual Arts in New York City — where he got almost a full scholarship in addition to the \$10,000 scholarship he received for winning Scholastic.

Laurenceau gives credit to his Jersey City Arts teacher Carolyn Frazier for helping win the national prize. Frazier coached him to find beauty in imperfection, he said.

“Leo’s a very steady, creative force,” Frazier said. “And when he’s focused, he has a strong sense of own personal aesthetic

that shines through in his work.”

Before the national competition, Laurenceau entered the regional contest at the Montclair Art Museum, the only institution in New Jersey participating in the program. Senior portfolio judge Joanne Leone said she judges based on the criteria of originality, skill, attention to detail, intelligence and even humor.

“It’s the combination of all the elements that make the difference for me,” said Leone, a full-time artist who taught art in New-




“Dans L’air” is the teenager’s self-portrait that captures a certain sentiment in both its rendering and its French title.

ark public schools for 33 years. “It’s how it all works together. This contest sets out to encourage young artists to pursue their dreams, but we can’t give everyone a gold.”

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Laurenceau’s painting “Vertigo” is among the eight pieces in his winning portfolio.

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