

Westbury Arts nonprofit showcases Black artists



Artist Nichelle Rivers, left, and Westbury Arts board director Jacki Beder with some of the work on display at Westbury Arts for Black History Month. Credit: Danielle Silverman

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When Nichelle L. Rivers paints images of Black people, her obsession with color doesn't allow her to use just one.

A painting of civil rights leader John Lewis titled "Good Trouble" has blue, red, and yellow hues through him. Jazz musician Thelonious Monk's portrait contains shades of purple, orange and other colors.

For Rivers, her work pays homage "to shoulders of the people that I stand on." She said just using black or brown colors is not enough because people of color come in different shades.

"When we were growing up, we were taught about Michelangelo, we were taught about Picasso, all these white men," said the East Islip resident, who is

from Memphis, Tennessee. "We weren't really taught about different perspectives when it comes to the arts."

Her work is among those of several Black and African American artists who will have their paintings on display at Westbury Arts, a nonprofit dedicated to providing arts and cultural programs, for Black History Month.

The paintings chosen by Westbury Arts board members will be centered on the theme "Creative Visions of 'Community and Cultural Reflections,'" depicting Black artistic perspective and expression which some artists and local leaders want to see more of on Long Island.

"Most of the work that you will see will have some type of connection to music, movement, a cultural aspect of who I am and my identity as a Black woman," Rivers, 50, said looking at her paintings.

Jacki Beder, a board director at [Westbury Arts](#), helped curate the art that will be on display for the public starting this Friday for free all month at 255 Schenck Ave. Along with the art, a live performance will be held on Saturday at Westbury High School.

"Our focus is to speak to the Black community and the community at large and just unite around art but in a way that is authentic for our culture," said Beder, a Westbury resident.

From James Baldwin on a briefcase to penciled drawings of Frederick Douglass and Shirley Chisholm, paintings by Black and African American artists fill the gallery.

Locations featuring artists of color can be hard to find. "These venues are out there and we have to find" them, said Georgette Grier-Key, who serves on the boards of both the Museum Association of New York and the Preservation League of New York State.

Grier-Key, who is the executive director of the Eastville Community Historical Society in Sag Harbor, one of the country's earliest known communities made up of free African Americans, said that while Long Island as a whole has communities of Black and other artists of color "the places that we can show [them] is very limited."

Artists should "not also be put in a box that we are just doing Black art or that Black History Month is one month or that it's a subset to American history because it is American history," Grier-Key said.

Galvin P. Bisserup Jr., president of the Long Island Black Artist Association, which is dedicated to helping artists in Nassau, Suffolk, Queens and Kings counties, said there's always been a shortage of opportunities to exhibit art.

"When we show art, we are showing off our culture which is our history to a larger history that knows very little about us or are miseducated," said Bisserup Jr., 75, of Roosevelt, a professional photographer. "The cultural elements are part of the American fabric."

David G. Wilson will have five pieces of art on display at Westbury Arts including a piece called 'Madonna of the Nappy-head Christ.'

Wilson, of Springfield Gardens, Queens, said his upbringing in Dominica was "flooded with British and French history but absolutely nothing about our own African history or Caribbean history" which continued while studying at York College.

"In my work I'm saying that this is how you perceive my ancestors as chattel, as objects, property, to be bought and sold," said Wilson, 68. "But there is an unmistakable humanity in there that most people see but didn't know."

While Wilson receives inquiries, including at the Great Neck Library, to have his art featured, he would like to showcase work regularly.

"I've been rejected in numerous places but of late, I've been getting a lot of invitations so I take advantage of them," he said. "I would like to show them for the entire year."