LYNN ARTISTIC WUNDERKIND
RETURNS FOR GALA SHOW

BY SOPHIE YARIN | March 1, 2022

Lynn artist Jah'Nyah Spencer stands behind a mural of herself painted on the Commuter Rail overpass in Central Square by Hiero Veiga. (Jakob Menendez)

LYNN — Though she may be young, Jah'Nyah Spencer has already left her mark on the city.

The 18-year-old artist will be featured in Galleries at LynnArts’ (GALA’s) most recent exhibition, “Past and Present: Black Art and Artists,” but the freshman at Cambridge's Lesley University has been an active participant in Lynn's art scene since the seventh grade.
“Lynn in the first place I feel that’s really seen me as an artist and has showed me love and respect and it’s really been a good space for me,” she said, and noted that her longtime involvement with organizations like Raw Art Works and Beyond Walls have been formative in her artistic development.

In fact, her internship with Beyond Walls yielded something most artists — and people — can only dream of: A mural in her likeness in Central Square, painted by Hiero Vega.

“I won’t lie, sometimes I go there and talk to it,” she admitted.

While Spencer is still figuring out how she wants to apply her talent as a professional artist (illustration and animation both interest her), she has considerable momentum as a muralist — and mural subject. After she was immortalized by Vega, Spencer had a number of opportunities to create murals of her own around Lynn.

At the beginning of the pandemic, she created a mural as part of Beyond Walls’ “Truth Be Told” project, and was later tapped to create another at her alma mater, Lynn Vocational Technical Institute.

In 2021, she was one of the participating muralists chosen to execute a Black Lives Matter mural in the vicinity of City Hall.

“I thought it was really cool getting the chance to do the Black Lives Matter mural with other artists and to make a mural at my high school (because) it made me really proud of the fact that I could bring a positive impact to the city,” Spencer said.

She’s no stranger to GALA, either.

“I’ve had my artwork featured in GALA a couple of times before,” she said, adding that “Past and Present” is the first time she’ll be appearing as a featured artist. “I say thank you as much as I can because it’s amazing getting that kind of support. It really is.”

Spencer’s featured work will look similar to her murals: Dreamy-colored portraits — of the people who inspire her and of people she conceives of in her mind — incorporating elements of collage and street art. The results are eclectic and truly as energetic as she is.

“I guess my (artistic) drive has always been me, in a way,” she mused. “Drawing, for me, is the way I connect with the outside world and how I express myself. I’ve never been afraid to speak my mind, but sometimes I don’t always know what to say or how to say it. So, my art has been that outlet for me.”

Spencer’s world is populated by people of color, but the Black individuals she depicts take center stage. Her subjects are not merely people she wants to honor — like Tupac Shakur, some fellow Lynn artists, and her mom and dad — but a reflection of her own aspirations.

“I always looked up to my mom and my grandma growing up,” she said. “These are some strong Black women and they do all these crazy, great things and I always thought ‘I’m going to be a strong Black woman one day, too.’”

Spencer added that she owes her creative spirit to her family, many of whom were recording artists. In fact, she is the only artist featured in “Past and Present” to choose a musician as her featured historical Black artist.
GALA has asked all featured artists in the “Past and Present” show to prepare a small selection of work by a historical Black artist to feature alongside their own. Spencer chose her great-grandfather, Joe Higgs.

“Joe Higgs was actually one of the first Jamaican artists to get their work recorded and pressed in Jamaica,” she explained. “He was always very authentic with who he was and I want to aspire to be like that, to always stay true to who I am.”

Spencer admires Higgs not simply because of their shared relation, but because of his fearless commitment to speaking truth to power. The singer was blacklisted from the Jamaican music industry after one of his songs, which criticized high-level corruption in the country, gained popularity.

“I want to use the platform — even as small as it is right now — to give him the respect and the recognition I think he deserves as an artist,” she added.

Joe Higgs' great-granddaughter will display her art from March 1-8 at GALA, and after that, she'll be focusing on her studies at Lesley. Spencer wants to minor in business to bring her entrepreneurial side to the forefront, and dreams of “having my own clothing brands (or) my own animation studio.”

While the present is full of anticipation and the future drives her sense of creativity, she occasionally has the opportunity to reflect on the past, and how it made her the artist she is today.

“When I was 16, I was struggling with depression and suicidal thoughts. I was surrounded by a lot of teenagers that were facing similar struggles,” she said. “I made the decision that I wanted to not only get better, but be who I actually was: an artist. Aside from doing it for me, I also do it for them, and all the youth of my city.

“Lynn may be the city of sin, but it is also the city of opportunities in the arts. And for those that don’t believe it, I’m a living example of it — and I’m only getting started.”