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Chalk it up to humanity

Dogwood Fine Arts features pastel portraits by Al Harris

INTERMISSION: ART EXHIBIT

By **JULIE YORK COPPENS**
Tribune Staff Writer

DOWAGIAC -- He'll probably never live out his fantasy of playing bass in a great R & B band -- although his deep, musical speaking voice suggests he might have sung backup for Marvin Gaye -- so Al Harris Jr. grooves on paper.

When he finds the right subject, the riffs come easily: "His face, to me, picked up on everything I was trying to say," the pastel artist says of one favored model, an older African-American man who sat for many Harris portraits before his death eight years ago. "It was just me and my pastels playing the blues."

Harris finds inspiration, too, in young faces: pensive, joyful, teasing, hopeful. His art students at Northeastern Elementary School in Kalamazoo often find themselves captured by Harris' camera and, if their expressions harmonize with his mood at the time, immortalized in one of his larger-than-life pastel paintings.

An appealing collection of these now hangs in



Harris



Kalamazoo-based artist Al Harris Jr. achieves luminous skin tones with his pastels -- as seen here, in the student portrait "Danaequa" --



the Dogwood Fine Arts Festival headquarters in Dowagiac -- the most recent in a long series of regional solo and group exhibitions for the artist. Harris, a native of Detroit, came to Western Michigan University to study art education in the 1970s, and he's been an instructor in the area ever since.

He's always interested to see how different audiences -- black and white, rural and urban -- respond to his work. Recent events in nearby Benton Harbor might make it more difficult, but Harris hopes viewers of all backgrounds can experience these portraits in a way that transcends racial identity.

"These two boys interacted just as my brother and I did," he says, pointing to one scene drawn from a neighborhood playground. The young subjects stand close together in their faded T-shirts, confronting the viewer with self-assured stares. "To someone else, that might be an ethnic piece. But to me, it's just brothers. I don't want to say it's 'colorless' because it isn't -- I am influenced by how I grew up. But it is based on my feelings of life. ... I had a *great* life."

The portrait "Virginia's Smile" captures those positive feelings. Animated by the subject's delighted expression and the swing of braids around her face, the piece radiates warmth.

The emotional quality of "Danaequea," meanwhile, is more complicated; the girl, one of Harris' "A" students, seems to linger on the threshold of a troubled womanhood.

"Technically, I'm impressed by the way he takes pastel, which is probably the most opaque of all the painting mediums, and makes it luminescent," commented David Baker, director of the Lyons Gallery of Southwest Michigan College. The gallery featured Harris a couple of years ago, and Baker helped bring the artist to the attention of the Dogwood Festival committee.

"Most of all, I'm impressed by the humanity of the pieces," Baker added. "These aren't just African-American kids; they're *our* kids."

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through meticulous blending.

Photos provided



"Virginia's Smile" is part of a series of pastel portraits by Al Harris Jr., now on display at the Dogwood Fine Arts Festival headquarters in Dowagiac.

Al Harris Jr.: 'Blends'

Through Dec. 26 at the Dogwood Fine Arts Festival Headquarters, Huntington National Bank, 207 Commercial St., Dowagiac.

Gallery hours are from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday. Admission is free. Call (269) 782-1115 for more information.

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