

Artist Cory Williams turned from graffiti to murals

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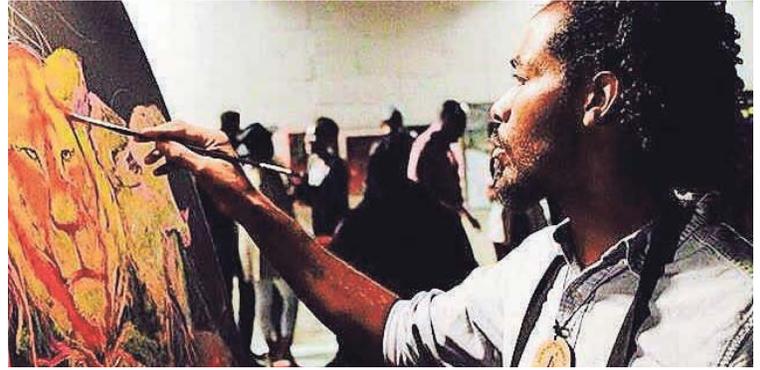
At 29 years old, muralist Cory Williams is a self-made millionaire. He pulls out the dollar bill from inside his wallet as proof. Sure, the money is augmented with six zeros in black sharpie, but for the emerging artist it's a start and a promise. It's also a reminder of his first piece — a drawing on salvaged wood — that he sold as an artist at what he describes to be the lowest point in his life.

Williams spent a year homeless and living in the student art studio at Florida A&M University, unbeknownst to his teachers and colleagues. He found the untouched planks in that studio and began sketching a portrait of Nelson

Mandela, drawn starkly in black and white charcoal and graphite pencil. The man who bought it didn't offer much money, but it was enough to give Williams the confidence he needed to get back on the right footing. In 2011, he graduated with a Bachelor's in Fine Arts and minor in agronomy, the study of plants and agriculture.

"For years all I did was create and paint, going over old paintings, and working small jobs to pay the bills," says Williams. "It was a real struggle, but within that chaos I learned so much about myself. You endure pain to become stronger, humble, and patient because then your work will speak for itself."

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ALVIN MCBEAN

Artist Cory Williams as he works on a recently completed painting.

Williams

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His first gallery showing was in his childhood living room. Recognizing her son's burgeoning skills, his mother orchestrated the event one morning, waking him up early to get dressed in his finest clothes. He awoke to see his sketches and drawings hung up on the walls, and distinctly recalls the sparkling water set out on the table with family friends milling about in support. Born in Saint Kitts and Nevis and growing up in Miami, Williams was first inspired to sketch his father — a bodybuilder and Caribbean graphite artist — as a superhero.

However, in college he didn't pursue the visual arts rights away. Williams was awarded a music scholarship to FAMU and played trombone, baritone, and tuba in the Marching 100. His re-introduction to art on campus came much later, when he was caught with spray cans and a stencil making a quick graffiti image of Maya Angelou. He heard a shout from behind and started running, only to be halted by art professor Omar Thompson.

"He stopped me to ask if I was an art major," recalls Williams, who was escorted to the professor's office. "I just saw being an artist as a job and told him I wasn't a major because there was no money in art. I see now in my career what you have to go through to make a voice for yourself."

Williams channeled his affinity for graffiti into murals, preferring the larger, longer lasting aspect. His first commissioned mural was for a church, working in tandem with FAMU professor Harris Wiltshire who then saw how fast Williams worked and kept



sending mural gigs his way as well as submitting his work into shows. Wiltshire became an immediate mentor, and though Williams resisted his toughness in the classroom, he ultimately thanks him for improving his work ethic and respect for the form.

Williams' paintings seek to find the symbolism of life, which manifests in images of flowers, stones, and women. The latter are a prominent feature in his works, as Williams believes everyone should tap into an emotional strength associated with femininity. Books and poetry are main sources of inspiration, helping Williams craft his own stories and narratives that portray a straightforward conciseness. Research is a major part of his artistic process, and he references visuals that portray principals of design, lighting, and story.

"I think within a window frame you always see possibilities, and you can't really express yourself enough through a small frame," describes Williams of murals' larger frames. "You can incorporate more and of course a bigger scale allows people to see different things. There's so much more you can see when you have more space and of course it will be on the wall forever."

Just four years after graduating from FAMU, Williams' breakthrough mural of his professional career came when he was asked by Street Art Tallahassee to paint for Dreamland Barbecue at the new Centre of Tallahassee. He finished the work in three days, and

to realism in portraiture, looking to master artists like Kehinde Wiley who bring two-dimensional images to life through perspective and color. Williams has also adopted Whipple's idea of "mise en place," or putting everything in its place prior to beginning a painting. Before beginning a mural, he'll often stare at a wall, intermittently closing his eyes to image what might take shape in the space.

"It's not rocket science but we're not magicians," smiles Williams. "The hardest thing about being a mural artist isn't the drawing, but making sure the work has perspective, composition, and design. You could draw something that has composition and design on a sheet of paper, but it takes time when you scale it up and look back at it to make sure the perspective is correct."

The current wall he's using below Harry's Seafood has a natural incline, and thus the women he wants to paint will have an implied upwards motion. He asked a friend to model, coaching her through dancing positions, clutching her heart, and finding movement that would fit his vision. The actual painting of a piece can take numerous hours and days, with Williams risking bad weather and safety on ladders and scaffolding to complete the project.

His background in music comes forward in his expression with colors. Though he's color blind in one eye from a softball accident, he plays up the vibrancy of hues and has a particular fondness for a specific green with hints of turquoise and blue. As the universe was hypothesized to begin with a vibration, Williams incorporates molecules, atoms, supernovas, diamond-shapes and other celestial and scientific motifs throughout his work.

"Music helped me enhance my artistic ability to be more vulnerable because of course when you put something out there that's your full expression, that's you," explains Williams. "In that sense you're giving yourself to the audience as music invokes a frequency that allows you to be more expressive. It makes you move and in essence that's a form of creativity right there."

Currently, Williams is exhibiting in FAMU's Foster-Tanner Fine Arts gallery's art and yoga series. The space will offer two free yoga classes this summer, and the art pieces on exhibit incite a meditative state of mind. Williams' pieces speak to his interests in music, the feminine, and the essence of life. He

hopes people will get involved with yoga and have a visual interpretation of relaxation from his work. Williams also used this opportunity to help promote another artist friend's work, submitting Jessica Herbert's yoga-inspired pieces into the exhibition as well.

This pay-it-forward philosophy stems from a life-long vision to provide a platform where artists can succeed together. In a vision board exercise he taught at a camp for children in foster care, one of his many teaching gigs at various schools and recreation centers, he sketched each child's portrait and had them surround themselves with clippings of their imagined future. These original pieces got Williams' wheels turning for future projects — events to jettison other artists, traveling month to month working on murals, funding a self-sustainable infrastructure for a Montessori school in arts and agriculture—with each goal written in black ink on his one million dollar bill.

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).

IF YOU GO

What: The "Sarapasana: Yoga, Art, and Wellness" Exhibition

When: 1-4 p.m., Monday through Saturday, through July 28

Where: Foster-Tanner Fine Arts Gallery, 1630 Pinder Drive

Cost: Suggested donation of \$2

Contact: For more information, contact 850-599-8755 or fostertannergallery@famu.edu.

the portrait of the Alabama owner now greets newcomers. The work showcases Williams' niche style of "posterized" realism, which he adopted from idol Jeff Whipple, who has taught and exhibited locally and emphasizes breaking visuals down into blocks of color and shape.

Human connection is the subject in his upcoming mural where two women face each other, one holding an exploding supernova and another with a blossoming flower in hand. Even in these fantastical interpretations, Williams is drawn

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