THE RELUCTANT ARTIST

When you invite people into your home to celebrate your birthday, you expect to get a little bit of attention. What Anthony Marc Williams ended up with, however, was a lot more than he’d bargained for.

Besides the birthday wishes, the cake and that canned little ditty that everyone dreads, Williams got an invitation to display his artwork – his personal creations – at the Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture.

“When I saw Anthony’s work at his home, I was thoroughly impressed by his talent,” says W. Marvin Dulaney, executive director of the Avery Research Center. “I saw that Anthony’s work was very special and that others would definitely enjoy seeing them in a public exhibition.”

But the thought of being in the public eye, of opening up his personal pastime to public scrutiny, was less than appealing to this assistant professor of philosophy. And so he declined Dulaney’s offer.

“I was reluctant to put my work out there for a variety of reasons,” says Williams. “It’s something that is very personal to me. My work is an extension of myself.”

Williams, who had been classically trained in piano, began exploring visual art as a means of relaxation when he was working on his dissertation at Duke. The smooth, connecting curves he created gave him an escape from his studies.

“Creating art has the feeling of complete freedom and of being entirely absorbed in the moment,” says Williams, who – after earning his Ph.D. – continued to work with oil pastels, honing his technique and creating his own unique style. Still, even after he began decorating the walls of his own home with his paintings, he didn’t intend for them to leave his personal domain.

But – after 18 months of encouragement and persuasion from Dulaney – Williams finally agreed to an exhibit.

“Despite feeling vulnerable about the judgments people are inclined to make in the setting of a gallery, I consider the shared experience of art to be of the highest value,” explains Williams. “It is in the shared experience that my work comes to its proper fruition.”

That’s because Williams’ art depends on its audience’s imagination to perceive and recognize an object – to take the shapes that are there and make them into something they otherwise wouldn’t be.

“I find it interesting that human beings have an imagination and a system of concepts to employ in the activity of coming to understand a piece of art, particularly when it is representational,” Williams says. “There is, or can be, an ‘ah-ha’ moment when the viewer recognizes the intent of an artist.”

And, although the intent of this artist was never public display, Williams is realizing that his work is worth sharing, and he is happy that he was able to do so in the welcoming and nurturing environment of the College.

“The experience has made me feel incredibly grateful, but at the same time it has been humbling,” he says, adding that he hopes that – by agreeing to exhibit his work – he can encourage others to share their artistic talents. Because, after all, “The positive thing is the sharing itself.”

Anthony Marc Williams’s exhibit, “Intimations of Humanity,” will be in the Benjamin F. and Jeanette K. Cox Exhibition Gallery at the Avery Research Center through December 14.
While all the other children would play, Lucille Akinjobi would just sit and watch her mother. She would watch her fingers as they folded, wound and coiled the sweetgrass reeds over and over. Something about the swift motion and the spiraling coils captivated the 5-year-old. She was hooked, and she wanted to try it herself.

“I remember during the summer, my mother would be sitting under the tree, weaving a basket, and I would be sitting on the ground next to her, and I would take all the little pieces that fell – the brown reeds that you don’t use and the ends you trim off – and I’d try to weave a little basket,” says Akinjobi, a custodian at Patriots Point.

And – while she may not have been able to do much with her mother’s discarded trimmings when she was 5 – by the time she was 7, she was making sweetgrass baskets all on her own.

Back then, Akinjobi thought everyone made sweetgrass baskets. And, in her world, they did. Her mother, her aunts, her brothers, her sisters, her cousins: All took part in the basket-making process. It wasn’t until she grew up a little that she realized how special the craft really is.

“It’s amazing because, in the whole United States, you only see sweetgrass baskets being made here in this little part of the Lowcountry,” says Akinjobi, who has been selling her baskets at a stand on Highway 17 since she was 14. “People come from all over to buy them and see them being made.”

It’s clear that sweetgrass basketry is a source of pride for Akinjobi. And rightly so. It’s a tradition with tremendous cultural and historical significance. But, more important for Akinjobi, it’s a creative outlet – something to inspire her.

“I just enjoy the different styles that pop up in my head,” she says. “I think it comes from being exposed to people and lots of different designs. When I see something I like, I think, ‘That looks very interesting, let me see what I can do with something like that.’ It’s a lot of fun.”

That’s not to say that it’s easy, though. “It takes a lot of concentration. You have to always think that this is your gift to someone, so you have to give it time,” she says, noting that, while a smaller basket may take three or four hours to complete, the larger, more complicated baskets can take up to six months. “You have to take pride in it. Every basket deserves attention.”

Akinjobi estimates that she makes 125 baskets a year, most of which are commissioned by previous customers, people who stop by her stand and – most recently – MUSC, which ordered 30 baskets for its Ashley River Tower hospital, opening in January. Needless to say, she stays busy. So busy, in fact, that she doesn’t get to her basket stand as much as she would like.

“I enjoy going to the stand. It’s just fun to see people stop by and ask all the questions,” she says. “People bring baskets for repair and tell me how their mother bought it along here for 25 cents a long, long time ago – when all this wasn’t even here.”

A lot has changed since then. Mt. Pleasant has undergone large-scale growth, sweetgrass materials have declined due to the development and you’ll be hard-pressed to find a basket for 25 cents.

But, as Akinjobi points out, “It’s a craft that lasts a lifetime.”

And that has certainly proven true for her. 📜

To order or purchase one of Lucille Akinjobi’s baskets, contact Mark Sloan at 953-7891, or sloanm@cofc.edu.
HIGH MARKS: Two Professors Make the Grade

The College may not have a football team for them to rally around, but the students have found something even better to cheer for: their professors.

And it seems they’ve been cheering quite loudly. Loud enough, at least, to earn places for two of their favorite teachers on RateMyProfessors.com’s list of the highest rated professors in the country.

Devon Hanahan, instructor of Hispanic studies, ranked second, and Martin Jones, professor of mathematics, ranked sixth out of more than a million professors evaluated on the website, where students can go to anonymously rate their professors and to read others’ comments before registering for classes.

The comments students have left about Hanahan and Jones say it all. “I hate math, and by the end of the semester I actually enjoyed it,” says one of Jones’s students. “If you hate math, he will change your mind,” echoes another.

That ability to change students’ minds stands out in Hanahan’s comments, too. “She makes me want to learn Spanish, and I’ve always hated it,” one student says. “Her class was the first class I ever felt comfortable to speak Spanish in,” and she “has made me want to minor in Spanish,” comment others. Says one student, “I have no idea how she does it!”

It’s easy, Hanahan says: “I just try to remember what it’s like to be a student, and what I liked my teachers to do. I liked getting my tests back the next day, I liked lots of comments on my homework.” And she liked when her calculus teacher would bring candy to exams. “She’d say, ‘If you have candy, it can’t be that bad,’ and that’s something I’ve always remembered. Candy somehow takes the fear away.”

Taking the fear and intimidation out of speaking Spanish or solving math problems makes all the difference for students.

“Have any questions, fears, apprehensions or delusions about math?” writes one student on RateMyProfessors. “If so, then Mr. Jones is the teacher for you.”

Despite all the positive feedback, neither Jones nor Hanahan are fazed by their rankings.

“It was nice to splash in the pond a little,” says Jones, “but I don’t think it’s of too much consequence.”

Hanahan agrees that – although she is happy to see that her students appreciate her – rating systems like this can’t present the whole picture.

“There are so many great teachers at this school – and all over the country,” says Hanahan. “It’s hard to take it too seriously.”

Her children, on the other hand, are ecstatic. They keep “telling their friends that their mom is the second best teacher in the country,” she says. “I told them that that’s like saying that the second most popular video on YouTube is also the runner-up for the best picture at the Oscars – and that I’m the YouTube video, not the Oscar.”

But, while Hanahan and Jones may not have come anywhere near the Academy Awards, they’ve both had some outstanding performances in their classrooms – and they’ve both played important supporting and leading roles in their students’ education.

They’ve changed attitudes, taught skills and given confidence.

And that, to be sure, is something to cheer for.

GARDENER’S PICK

Camellia Japonica

AKA: Japanese camellia, common camellia.

ON CAMPUS: Found behind 59 Coming Street, in front of 10 Green Way and on the east side of the Stern Student Center.

DESCRIPTION: Slow-growing evergreen shrubs or small trees (typically 6–12’) with thick, glossy leaves and large, conspicuous flowers (2–5” in diameter) that range from white to red and everything in between. Various cultivars bloom as early as November and as late as May.

WHERE TO PLANT: Plant shallowly in well-drained soil, out of strong sun and wind.

TIPS: Do not overfeed with acid plant food; cut out dead and weak stems any time; prune after flowering. Cutting back severely (so that there are no leaves) can be done safely throughout March and April.
SNAIL MAIL

• To ensure delivery by December 25, bring all standard bulk mailing to mail services by December 13.
• To ensure processing before the holiday break, bring all large, first-class mail to mail services by December 19.
• December 27–28, from 11:00 AM to 1:30 PM, mail services will provide a limited (pickup only) service.
• January 2–4, there will only be one mail delivery/pickup a day, with all normal mail routes resuming on January 7.
• Please address all metered mail with either typed or block letters.
• Please use intercampus mailers for all campus mail, and remember to separate intercampus, metered and international mail.
• Please bring personal stamped mail to the USPS mailbox in front of mail services (do not give to on-campus couriers).

For more information, contact mail services at 953.5534 or mailemailservices@cofc.edu.

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

• Backfilling was compacted and work on the first floor level was completed at the School of the Arts last month. Work on the No. 3 shee wall will begin in mid-December.
• In November, the site of the new science center was prepared with fill material. Test piles will be driven in December, with utility relocation beginning shortly thereafter. The estimated date for completion is late 2009.
• Last month at the Carolina First Center/John Kresse Arena, concrete floors on the hospitality wing were poured and roof decking and upper-level floors were completed. Mechanical, electrical and plumbing rough-in will continue.
• Renovations of 7 and 9 College Street are under way and expected to be complete in March 2008.

LETTING OFF STEAM: Jay Wurscher Powers the College

If there’s one thing we can all agree on, it’s that Charleston is a steamy place. But no one knows just how steamy it can get better than Warren “Jay” Wurscher, manager of the College’s Central Energy Plant. Between the Charleston humidity, the plant’s high-pressure boilers and its underground system distributing steam across campus, Wurscher has a hard time staying cool and dry – even at this time of year.

But, “as long as the buildings have AC and people can take hot showers,” Wurscher says, “I don’t sweat it. I know we’re doing our job.”

It’s the job of Central Energy Plant – which is manned 24/7, 365 days a year – to produce steam and 45° water, which are fed through underground distribution systems to the other buildings on campus, providing them with air conditioning, heat and hot water.

“We can provide these things at a much cheaper rate than if each individual building had its own system,” explains Wurscher. “Large machinery is just more efficient.”

And Central Energy Plant certainly has some large machinery. Fueled by natural gas under a rate-cutting contract with SCE&G, two 350-horsepower steam boilers and two 1,250-ton AC units were installed in 2000, and the 1,500-ton AC unit was installed in 1996.

“We’ve spent a lot of money to keep our equipment energy and cost efficient,” says Wurscher. For example, “lots of things on this campus went to variable frequency drive two years ago, which really drops the electricity down. They’ve already paid for themselves.”

It’s important to Wurscher that these things get done, and that they’re done right.

“There are only two ways to do something: There’s the right way, and then there’s everything else,” he says. “I want everything done the right way the first time. I don’t want to see things that are done ‘good enough.’ You have to do it right.”

Wurscher credits his ability to “do it right” to his 20 years operating a nuclear submarine in the Navy.

“There’s no room for mistakes when you’re in a submarine,” he says, “and there’s no room for mistakes here, either. We are a real university, not a fly-by-night university. At real universities, you want that quality experience everywhere you go.”

And Wurscher is doing everything in his power to make that possible.

“I don’t have the brains or the ability to run a university,” he says, “but I can certainly give the people who do have the brains and ability an environment that helps them do their job.”

It’s clear that Wurscher takes his role on campus seriously – despite the playful way he “pings” the bell ringer on his 1949 Schwinn as he rides across campus.

“I love working in this beautiful place,” he says. “But – never mind the old buildings and the trees – it’s the people. I think the people who work here are the greatest people in the world.”

He glances over his shoulder. “Don’t tell anybody,” he winks, “but I’d do this for nothing.”
**BOXES AND BAGS**
Decorate and customize your gift boxes and bags in a unique way and make giving even more fun this holiday season.

- **When:** Tuesday, December 11, 12–1 p.m.
- **Where:** Berry Hall Activity Room
- **Fee:** None
- **Contact:** Linda McClenaghan, 953.8238, mcclenaghanl@cofc.edu

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**JIM ’N NICK’S COUGAR CLASSIC**
Show your Cougar pride at the men’s basketball tournament against JMU, S.C. State and Mercer University.

- **When:** Saturday & Sunday, December 29 & 30, 5 p.m.
- **Where:** John Kresse Arena
- **Fee:** $10/day, cofcsports.ticketsxchange.com
- **Contact:** Kelly Lee, 953.5479, leekp@cofc.edu

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**FOURTH ANNUAL MLK CHALLENGE**
Make a difference in the Charleston community during this annual Day of Service.

- **When:** Monday, January 21, 10 a.m.–5:30 p.m.
- **Where:** Kick off in the Stern Student Center Ballroom
- **Fee:** None
- **Contact:** CHEC, 953.5838, chec@cofc.edu

All information is subject to change. Please verify times, places and registration requirements with listed contact.

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**NEWS BRIEFS: News You Can Use**

- **Joe Hull** was named the College’s new athletics director.
- **Biology Professor David Owens** has been appointed associate dean of the Graduate School.

- As the new home to the **Afterschool and Community Learning Network**, the College received a $450,000 four-year grant from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation to support the program, which promotes after-school and community learning centers for children and families across the nation.

- The Comcast Foundation granted the **Avery Research Center** $11,700 to support its summer camps and the Avery Junior Scholars Program.

- To help the College and **Habitat for Humanity** build a house for a low-income family in downtown Charleston, contact CHEC (Cougars Helping Enhance the Community) at 953.5838 or chec@cofc.edu. For more information, visit cofc.edu/blitzbuild.

- **Reservation requests for use of space** in the Stern Student Center, the Stern Center Garden, Physicians Memorial Auditorium (for non-academic use), Physicians Promenade, Cougar Plaza or Rivers Green are now made through Ed Short at 953.5726 or shorte@cofc.edu.

- **Gift cards** may no longer be purchased with College purchasing cards. Before purchasing gift cards through any other method, consult the Controller’s Office at 953.5570 to confirm compliance with policy and procedure.
Where did that come from?

Thanks to everyone who participated in last month’s photo quiz, and congratulations to Jean Everett, senior instructor of biology, who was the first to guess that the object in question was a piece of sculpture that’s in the Classics Museum on the third floor of Randolph Hall. More specifically, it is a replica of a marble votive relief dedicated to Pan and the nymphs during the 4th century BCE. The bearded head in last month’s photo personifies the Acheloos River in Greece. The original, which is from Eleusis in Attica, is now in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens.

Take a look at the picture above. The object is on campus right now. Do you know what and where it is? The first person to submit the correct answer will win a tasty lunch for two at Liberty Street Fresh Food Company, compliments of ARAMARK. Good luck!

Send your submission to lutza@cofc.edu by Friday, January 18, 2008. The contest is open to all College faculty and staff. One submission per person, please.