

The Virgin Islands Consortium

F'sted Comes Alive With The Stroke of A Paint Brush

VIC News / **Published On September 25, 2014 09:45 AM /**

Cynthia Graham **September 25, 2014**



This is Part One in a two-part series on the Frederiksted Mural Project and its artistic director, 39-year-old St. Croix native, Lucien Downes.

Amid a sea of parallel-parked cars and quaint, Danish-style buildings; and just a short, leisurely walk from Buddhoe Park and the picturesque Frederiksted waterfront stands this really big-and-beautiful-deal of a community art undertaking--The Frederiksted Mural Project.

You've seen the mural near the corner of King Street, just before the ballpark. Yep. Right there. That 12 foot by 80 foot structure made up of 20 sheets of specially-coated plywood featuring boldly painted, almost-lifelike moko jumbies and happy revelers prancing

through the black-pitch streets of the town from which the project derived its name.

This newest addition to the Frederiksted landscape is the handiwork of St. Croix native, Lucien Downes, and seven young apprentices, ranging from age 14-21.



St. Croix artist and Frederiksted Mural Project

artistic director, Lucien Downes.

None of this would be possible without the efforts of project creator, Elizabeth Keith, a St. Croix resident formerly of Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., who commissioned Downes, artistic director, to do the work. Downes explained how the project took shape following a casual meeting at Keith's home.

"She invited me over and rolled out a long piece of paper with a design on it," he recalled.

Downes said Keith then explained the sketch was the beginning of a project she'd been trying to get off the ground for close to four years.

"She'd seen the mural that was [in the same location] before and it looked so dilapidated," he said, "so she wanted to make something to improve the look and I think she did a great job."

Besides doing some of the early sketching for the project, the great job Keith also did came in the form of securing the project's funding, Downes pointed out. This meant not only was he compensated for the work, but so were the student apprentices.

"She gathered together all the grant monies and funds from various agencies," he said, "and she actually contributed some of her own monies."

It was with this sense of generosity and care for community that the Frederiksted Mural Arts Project was birthed. Then, it was turned over to Downes' capable hands, brilliant mind, watchful eye and skilled brush stroke for completion.

A Team Effort

In order to assemble a team that would bring Keith's vision to life, Downes tapped into the local student pool.

"We put the information online and emailed different art teachers around the island," he explained. "Then, those who responded, we looked at their body of work. It wasn't like a 'Oh yeah, we're going to teach you how to paint' kind of thing. [Students] had to have already come with some basic skills."

And, the budding artists *did* have skills, so much so that Downes praised the group for their "artistic excellence."



Apprentice artists hard at work.

"The kids did an exceptional job," he said. "I was very surprised by the level of artistic excellence that I had working with me--especially at their young ages."

He said the group was comprised of students from St. Croix Educational Complex, University of the Virgin Islands, the Rhode Island School of Design and from Puerto Rico. They all convened on St. Croix for three weeks this summer to work under Downes' guidance.

"My role was selecting colors, dealing with issues that came about, layout, design work; guiding them into making what we wanted to get done," he explained.

Downes also said he welcomed the students' ideas.

"I used a lot of their input," he said. "I would ask them questions to find out how they felt about this or that because I wanted them to experience how a team project was done."

Downes continued: "A lot of people, even though they're artists, we usually work by ourselves, but we don't work in teams, so everyone has their own vision. It was a little difficult at first, because once again, working with different artists, everybody has their own way of seeing things."

However, Downes lightheartedly offered that once the group "got on my page, everything was good."



Frederiksted Mural Project takes shape.

So, just how long did it take for those massive moko jumbies to come to life?

"We started on July eleventh and we ended on August fifteenth," Downes said. "The kids worked for three weeks and the rest of the time it was me and a couple of volunteers fine tuning [the mural]."

Downes pointed out, however, that during the fine-tuning process, where proportions were tweaked and lines straightened, he did not make any significant changes to the work the young apprentices had completed.

"I pretty much respected the bulk of their work," he said. "I didn't touch too much of it so they can still recognize what they did."

More Murals?

As for the idea of having similar murals erected in other parts of the island, Downes confirmed that plans are in the works.

"We are trying to get some funding together to do another project," he said.

Just last weekend, Downes attended the Caribbean Tourism Organization's State of the Industry Conference in St. Thomas. While he said he made many significant contacts at the gathering who expressed interest in him bringing a similar mural project to St. Thomas, for now, his focus remains on St. Croix.

"The next project I want to work on is something for Christiansted, and then we're going to go into St. Thomas and try to do something over there, as well," he said.

And when asked could a community exist without the presence of art, Downes believes the two cannot exist apart from each other.

"I think people in the community now are waking up to [the fact] that we need to include more artistic ventures in the community," he said, "because art is life and it combines people."

It is precisely this connection Downes hopes subsequent mural arts projects will bring to the residents of St. Croix.

"Frederiksted and Christiansted, we're on the same island, but sometimes it seems like it's two different places," he explained. "I think art is a way to combine us."

Downes said this is also true for the entire Territory.

"A lot of people don't realize if we come together and work as one, we could see so much more prosperity as a united front," he said.

The Frederiksted Mural Project apprentice artists include: Nellisa Benjamin, Julian Bishop, Katherine Bishop, Victor Cepeda, Annie Hoffman, Cherise Jinney and Joshua Jeudy.

In Part Two, we will find out more about Downes' unusual path to painting and how he is emerging as a major force in the art renaissance taking shape in the Virgin Islands.

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