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V.I.'s Thriving Art Culture on Display at Annual Congressional Art Competition Ceremony on St. Croix; 1st Place Winner Headed to DC

Art / **Published On May 10, 2021 05:20 AM /**

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Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett, Carlan Joseph, SCEC art instructor Danica David, Deonna Gumbs, CHS art instructor Niarus Walker-Benjamin, Dalma Simon, and VICA Special Project Coordinator Kendell Henry. By. OMAR BALWANT/THREI-AYEM

The office of Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett in collaboration with the Virgin Islands Council on the Arts (VICA) announced the winners of the Annual Congressional Art Competition before a small audience of family, friends, and art teachers at the St. Croix Dorsch Center in Frederiksted town on Friday. Each winner was presented with a certificate and a gift bag of various painting and drawing tools. The first prize winner from the territory will travel to Washington, D.C., according to Ms. Plaskett.

The Congressional Art Competition is a sanctioned competition by Congress that annually invites artwork from high school students from each congressional district across the nation since 1982, according to the [House website](#). Winning art from all over the nation is displayed on the walls of the Cannon tunnel in Washington D.C., an underground tunnel connecting the Cannon House Office Building (where the House Representatives' offices are) to the U.S. Capitol building (where Congress meets). On a daily basis, people who commute between the tunnels—referred on the Hill as “tunnel rats”—for work view and talk about the art.

“Each year, our art stands out and it’s an expression of the Virgin Islands,” said Ms. Plaskett. She shared some of the comments she receives about the art that comes from the territory’s high school artists.

There were twelve submissions displayed at the Dorsch Center from the following participating schools: All Saints Cathedral School (STT), VI Montessori School & Peter Gruber Academy (STT), St. Croix Educational Complex, and the St. Croix Central High School.

Below is the winning artwork for the territory:



(Left to Right) First place winning artwork by Deonna Gumbs (16), St. Croix Central High School | 2nd place winner Deja Simon (18), VI Montessori School & Peter Gruber Academy in STT | 3rd place winner Carlan Joseph (17), St. Croix Educational Complex (Photo credit: Omar Balwant aka THREI-AYEM)

Carlan Joseph, a St. Croix Educational Complex student, said his multi-media self-portrait conveyed being in deep thought and sadness during the pandemic. He credited and thanked his older brother, an artist, for being the person who first fueled his intrigue for the arts. He also shared that Ms. [Danica David's](#) advanced art class taught him alternative techniques and expanded upon his prior skills and knowledge.

In contrast, Deonna Gumbs of the St. Croix Central High School shared in an interview with the Consortium that she plans to pursue a career in the medical field as a sonographer while exploring art in her spare time as a hobby.

Speaking on her inspiration for her piece, Deja Simon of the VI Montessori School & Peter Gruber Academy in St. Thoms, told the Consortium, "There were several articles in the news of women who, during the pandemic, balanced caring for their families, working a job, grocery shopping, and more. They are the angels of their families." Ms. Simon was not present at the ceremony as she resides in St. Thomas; however, her father attended and accepted her certificate and gift on her behalf.

You may have seen Ms. Simon's artwork before. In 2020, her artwork was displayed on the V.I. Lottery's November 12, 2020 ticket after she won the Inside Out Expressive Arts Program's 2020 Art Contest themed "Love and Change in the Time of Corona" for the St. Thomas/ St. John district. She was also the first-place winner of the V.I. Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Council's teen dating violence art competition that was displayed on St. Croix at Crucian Heritage and Nature Tourism (C.H.A.N.T.) [during Youth Art Month 2021](#). While in college, she anticipates dedicating her breaks and summers to her craft, she said. Ms. Simon currently completes commissioned work orders and sells prints and more through her website www.artbydejaboo.com.

The announcement of the winners and display of artwork for the annual Congressional Art Competition at VICA alternates between St. Croix and St. Thomas each year, so next year's ceremony will take place on St. Thomas.