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Black Excellence in Art/Art Education: A Critical Portrait of Murry N. DePillars

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Abstract: This article addresses how research can uncover and amplify long-marginalized histories to transform the field of art education through examination of the life and work of Dean Murry DePillars. Dr. DePillars is the longest serving dean of the School of the Arts (VCUarts) at Virginia Commonwealth University (1976-1995) and the first African American to serve as dean of VCUarts. Little research exists on art educators as artists, specifically Black art educators as artists, administrators, and leaders of universities/art programs. DePillars was not only an administrative leader, educator, and scholar, but a renowned artist and arts activist. In presenting this research, we hope to broaden and deepen the knowledge of DePillars as artist, art educator, scholar, and administrative leader and create a model for similar critical portraiture research on other marginalized artist/art educators.

Keywords: *Artists as Educators, BIPOC Artist-Educators, Critical Portraiture, Critical Race Theory, History of Art Education*

Introduction

He [DePillars] said, “I have attempted to celebrate, affirm, and present the augustness of the Black presence.”—Murry DePillars, 2018

Understanding the history, experiences, and efforts required for African Americans and other people of color to thrive and succeed in the United States and worldwide is important to the evolution of art education. *The 1619 Project*, developed by Nikole Hannah-Jones along with other writers from the *New York Times*, was designed to “reframe the country’s history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the very center of the United States’ national narrative” (2019). Similarly, the groundbreaking text by bell hooks titled *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (2000) called for inclusion, in the mostly White women’s liberation movement, of all feminists, regardless of gender, race, or class privilege and recognition that BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) women are further marginalized than White women (12). Using direct language, the work of these two public pedagogues reaches beyond academia to the general public, uncovering the narratives and experiences of BIPOCs that were silenced and ignored through systemic oppression. This research seeks to add to the growing scholarship of art education historians, such as Ami Kantawala, Sharif Bey, Marinella Lentis, and others, by centering untold histories of BIPOC art educators, moving them from the margins to the center. Black scholars, educators, and

artists along with their co-conspirators must continue expanding and reframing art education history so as to transform the field of art education to make it more inclusive, diverse, accessible, and equitable.

Why Is This Narrative Portrait Significant?

Colleges and universities across the globe are being called to account by their student bodies for continuing to uphold White supremacist behaviors; from hiring practices that privilege cisgender White males, to heteronormative teaching approaches, and ignoring shameful histories of profit from slave labor and land grants (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Kerem 2018). Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), which is situated in Richmond Virginia, is the capital of the Confederacy and one of the largest art education institutions of higher education. Monument Avenue, a landmark in Richmond, which was listed as a “national historical landmark district,” with its four statues of veterans from the Confederate side of the US Civil War, serves as a brazen reminder of the Confederacy’s “lost cause” and the ways institutional racism lives in plain sight (Buffington 2018). Only after the high-profile incidents of racism and White supremacy at the Mother Emanuel church shooting in Charleston, South Carolina (2015), the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia (2017), and the murder of George Floyd (2020) did the Commonwealth of Virginia, city of Richmond, VCU, and other universities make visible efforts to address structural racism in their racist histories and develop policies and practices that are more equitable and inclusive (Nasim 2020). For institutions like VCU, this means hiring and retaining more diverse faculty, recruiting diverse students, taking an active role in supporting the untapped potential of the Richmond community in which VCU is located, and making greater efforts to forefront the histories and contributions of marginalized peoples in laying the foundation of Richmond and the university.

As part of its fiftieth anniversary celebration in 2018, VCU held a day-long symposium of presentations and panel discussions with students, alumni, faculty, and staff. The symposium highlighted the institution’s history—a merger of two renowned colleges during the civil rights era, the opportunities and challenges the merger presented at a turbulent time in US history, how the institution has evolved, and plans for its future. The event provided the impetus for us as art educators to pause and reflect on the history of the School of the Arts at VCU (VCUarts), the art education department, the history of art education as a field, and the ways in which histories are researched and told. One name in particular came to mind in 2018 as we discussed the history of VCU’s art education department and the art school: Murry DePillars, who was longest serving dean of VCUarts and its first Black dean. We decided that Dr. DePillars needed to be remembered and recognized for his many contributions, not only as dean, but as an artist, art educator, scholar, creative visionary, and administrative leader. In the fall of 2021, the Fine Arts Building on VCU’s campus was renamed for DePillars.

The history of art education as a discipline mirrors that of the broader field of education in that the narratives, theories, and research contributions of White males dominate (Bolin, Kantawala, and Stankiewicz 2021). Similarly, the art world is influenced by the works and histories of White male artists, overshadowing the contributions of women, people of color, LGBTQIA+, differently abled, and other marginalized groups (Bishara 2019).

Art Education Histories of Artist/Educators

Little research exists in the field of art education about art educators who are recognized as artists by the art world, and even less on Black art educators as artists. In recent years, more research has been published about artist/educator identities and the role of studio practice in the lives of art educators (Lewis 2019; Klein and Miraglia 2018; Sullivan 2010). The life of Dr. DePillars presents an excellent example of an artist, art educator, scholar, administrative leader, and creative visionary and the ways history is often told as fragmented stories by examining the contributions of one person as separate, discrete experiences rather than a more holistic life story. For example, as an MFA student at Howard University, a historically Black university (HBCU), Pamela Lawton first encountered DePillars the artist in African American art history classes and was unaware of his role as an art educator. However, Ryan Patton learned of DePillars first as an administrator, then as an alumnus of Penn State, and later as an artist.

History is not one grand narrative or static story, but a dynamic, multifaceted saga that continues to unfold and change over time (Louis 2020). Historiography is the study of the methods of historians in developing history as an academic discipline, and by extension is any body of historical work on a particular subject. Historiography was more recently defined as “the study of the way history has been and is written—the history of historical writing,” (Furay and Salevouris 2009, 223), which means that “when you study ‘historiography’ you do not study the events of the past directly, but the changing interpretations of those events in the works of individual historians” (Furay and Salevouris 2009, 223). Context and what we value as historians and society matter in the histories we create, preserve, and retell. “Meaningful historical research uses theoretical frameworks to construct interpretations of the past that can raise questions to inform present praxis” (Stankiewicz 2009, 1).

In thinking about how best to portray Dr. DePillars, we decided to interview people familiar with him in each of his roles: artist, art educator, and administrative leader. Through *Critical Portraiture* (CP) (Lawton 2017)—a hybrid qualitative research approach blending the portraiture method with Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a conceptual framework (Chapman 2007)—we construct a holistic portrait of DePillars as an artist/educator/administrator.

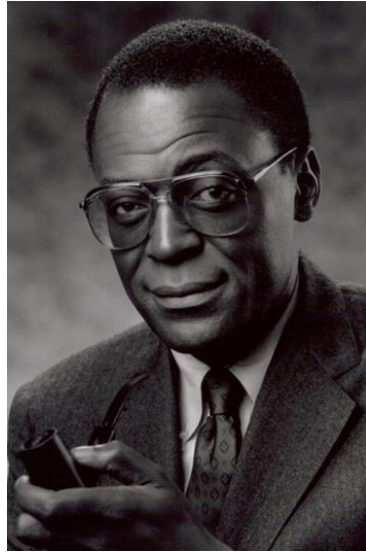


Figure 1: Murry N. DePillars

Source: The Estate of Murry N. DePillars, @ Courtesy of Mary L. DePillars

The portraiture research method developed by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1986) uses narrative to “document and illuminate the complexity and detail of a unique [person], experience or place” (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997, 14). The resulting portrait includes the voice and perspective of the portraitist(s)/researcher(s) on the frame, not within the picture but part of it, as witnesses and interpreters of the story (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997). CRT is “a framework or set of basic perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of society that maintain the subordination and marginalization of People of Color” (Solorzano 1997, 6).

CP as Historical Research Methodology

CRT is an approach to arguing how “value-neutral” laws have played a significant role in maintaining racially discriminatory outcomes and unjust social order. CRT is a useful method to highlight the intersectional ways race, class, gender, and disability can inform historical research. CP “highlights the self-determination and resiliency” (Lawton 2017, 104) of BIPOC art educators in shaping curriculum, professional development, teaching, research, and studio practice in the field of art education to develop equitable policies, practices, as well as racial and cultural pride. As a qualitative research method, CP (Lawton 2017) employs the five characteristics of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997) through the conceptual framework of the five features of CRT (Gaztambide-Fernández, Kraehe, and Stephen Carpenter II 2018), examined through the lens of racism as defined by CRT theorist Daniel Solorzano (1997). Solorzano explains that racism has “(1) both micro and macro components; (2) institutional and individual forms; (3) conscious and unconscious elements; and (4) a cumulative impact on both the individual and racial group” (1997, 6).

The five essential characteristics of portraiture + five features of CRT + four factors of racism = CP:

1. *Context*: framing the setting of the portrait, when and where—historical, cultural, geographical, ideological, from the researcher’s perspective (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997) + *Perspectivism*: a “call to context” (Gaztambide-Fernández, Kraehe, and Carpenter II 2018, 8) digging below surface background, examining contextualized experiences through counter storytelling and revisionist historiography = *Perspective Context* and includes all four factors of racism as described by Solorzano;
2. *Voice*: expressing a point of view—of both the subject and the researcher (autobiography, duo-ethnography, etc.), interpretation, assumptions (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997) + *Intersectionality*: race interconnects and overlaps with other social groupings, such as gender, class, ability, age, and sexual identity; marginalized groups within an oppressive discriminatory system (Gaztambide-Fernández, Kraehe, and Carpenter II 2018) = *Harmonic Voice* and includes Solorzano’s racism factors 1, 2, 4;
3. *Relationship*: empathetic regard, individuality, contrast, connection, position of the researcher to researched (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997) + *Critical Liberalism*: a deep examination of liberal discourses that uses neutrality, meritocracy, and post-racialism as analytical tools that further discriminate against racialized people and uphold White privilege and supremacy (Gaztambide-Fernández, Kraehe, and Carpenter II 2018) = *Critical Kinship* and includes Solorzano’s racism factor 3;
4. *Emergent Themes*: searching for patterns and naming convergences, connections between historical and contemporary art/art education pedagogies and philosophies (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997) + *Anti-Essentialism*: notes that race is a social construction not based in biological fact, but its impact has real consequences for racialized people (Gaztambide-Fernández, Kraehe, and Carpenter II 2018) = *Converging Constructions* and includes Solorzano’s four factors of racism;
5. *Aesthetic Whole*: assembling all the features of portraiture; using archival (primary and secondary) sources and interviews to interpret, analyze, and compose the portrait (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997) + *Systemic Injustice*: racism is an endemic and persistent component of the US sociopolitical system (Gaztambide-Fernández, Kraehe, and Carpenter II 2018) = *Structural Synthesis* and includes Solorzano’s four factors of racism.

Perspective Context: Framing the Portrait

Born in 1938 in Chicago, Dr. DePillars’ parents moved from Mississippi as part of the first Great Migration, fleeing racially motivated violence and discrimination for a better life in the North. Langston Hughes’ 1948 poem, *One Way Ticket* (2012, xvii) captured the emotions of many Black people at the time.

I am fed up
With Jim Crow laws
People Who are Cruel
And Afraid
Who lynch and run,
Who are scared of me
And me of them.
I pick up my life
And take it away
On a one-way ticket—
Gone up North,
Gone West,
Gone!

Significant numbers of Blacks improved their lives and social conditions in Chicago, but crowded tenement housing, limited educational opportunities, violence, discrimination, and segregation were part of the city experience for newly arrived Blacks; thus, all of Solorzano's factors of racism were rampant at the time DePillars was born and continued through the majority of his adult life. At the time of DePillars' birth, Chicago was experiencing a Black cultural renaissance. DePillars (2012) himself wrote about the Black Renaissance in Chicago: the antecedent years (1870–1923), the Black Renaissance (1930–1940), the second wave of national arts prominence (1941–1960), and Chicago's impact on the national Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

As a child, DePillars lived in the near South and West sections of Chicago, which were known for its jazz and blues clubs. He would often slip in to listen to renowned performers like Dinah Washington, Muddy Waters, and many others (Brooks 2002). His love of jazz stayed with him, visible in the vibrant colors and rhythmic patterns of his paintings. As an adult, DePillars loved listening to jazz as he painted, amassing an impressive collection of jazz recordings and studying the history of jazz (Brooks 2002). Many of the AfriCOBRA (Wikipedia, n.d.) artists, the Black art collective that DePillars was a member of, created works that connected music and color, "attempting to stretch and extend their use of colors across the full range of the spectrum much like Coltrane attempting to squeeze a multiplicity of tonal patterns and textures out of every note played on the saxophone" (Neal 1979). One of his many accomplishments as dean of VCUarts was developing the jazz program within the music department, by bringing in famous jazz musicians, guest artists, instructors like Ellis Marsalis, and personally organizing campus and city jazz festivals. These efforts helped pave the way for Richmond hosting one of the largest jazz festivals on the east coast.



Figure 2: Wynton, 1999 from the Music Series, Acrylic on Canvas, Murry DePillars (1938–2008)
 Source: *The Estate of Murry N. DePillars, @ Courtesy of Mary L. DePillars, Photo by Terry Brown*

Phillip “Muzi” Branch was an undergraduate art student at VCU during the early years (1971–1980) of DePillars’ tenure there. Muzi and his brother James “Plunky” Branch were also jazz musicians, and DePillars helped them attain grants to start their arts non-profit, “Branches of the Arts,” in 1975, which hosted art exhibitions, dance and theater performances, and jazz festivals all over Richmond, including at VCU facilities that DePillars permitted them to use. Allowing Branches of the Arts to use VCU facilities via their connection with DePillars assisted in the expansion of the VCUarts programs and aided DePillars in hiring notable jazz musicians as faculty (Phillip M. Branch, interview with authors, September 25, 2018). These hires also caused some friction with the predominantly White arts faculty as these high-profile musicians were not college educators but performers (Joseph H. Seipel, interview with authors, September 12, 2018).

Art in its various forms influenced DePillars’ life from a very early age. He recalled his parents, neither of whom had an art education, supporting his involvement with art. They encouraged him to talk about his work and ensured that he had the art supplies he needed (Brooks 2002). His community reinforced his parents’ support, inquiring about his progress. In his interview with DePillars, Brooks (2002) quotes him, “Sometimes when I stepped off the bus with my portfolio on my way home, someone from the local pool hall or neighborhood store might yell out, ‘You got something for me to look at?’” (2). Beginning with his early childhood drawings and throughout his career as an artist, DePillars depicted Black people and Black life. Many of his high school drawings were of people he knew and his environment (Brooks 2002). This family and community support influenced his interactions with young Black art students on VCU’s campus—most of whom had no Black art mentors or role models to discuss their work with. DePillars became that mentor, having lunch with students, keeping an open-door policy at his office—students didn’t have to make

an appointment—and he even held critiques at his home for these students. His conversations were about art, the students’ work, and how they could improve. He set for them an example of how to be an artist and what an effective and caring administrator looked like.

He would always say to all of us [Black art students] if you don’t see me on weekends or you need me, come, this is where I live (pointing out his house by campus). We would go by his house and he was painting, he was working...of course he wasn’t letting VCU know that (William Johnson, interview with authors, December 20, 2018) due to the highly sociopolitical nature of his work.

He not only opened doors for them on campus but opened their minds to possibilities and improvements in their artmaking, providing them the same crucial network of support he received as a developing artist in Chicago. DePillars told students that “they needed to study anatomy and drawing. Most of the books he would recommend were in the way of history, African/African American history” (Phillip M. Branch, interview with authors, September 25, 2018). While they did not meet on a regular schedule, it was understood that DePillars’ “door was always open, not only to his office, but his home” (Phillip M. Branch, interview with authors, September 25, 2018).

As a high school student, DePillars was interested in studying architecture. The city of Chicago is home to the works of several renowned White architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Louis Sullivan, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and David Adler who shaped the *Chicago School* style of architecture. There were also African American architects in Chicago whose work DePillars may have been familiar with, such as Walter T. Bailey (1882–1941), the first licensed African American architect in Illinois. After gaining prominence in the South, Bailey received a commission to design the National Knights of Pythias Temple on the Southside of Chicago, in an area known as *Bronzeville*, or the *Black Metropolis*. Bailey worked in Chicago from 1924 until his death in 1941.

At the predominantly White Crane High School that DePillars attended, the one “required” Black student was already enrolled in the architecture course, so DePillars was placed in a studio art class (Brooks 2002). This unwanted detour, an example of the impact of institutional racism on the individual/group, proved to be fortuitous, providing him with exposure to African art and culture and access to an art teacher role model, Anna Robinson, who demonstrated how to incorporate the rich legacy of African culture into one’s life and teaching. Robinson had taken trips to Africa and shared images and stories of the art and culture she encountered there with her students (Brooks 2002). Inspired by her teachings, DePillars began developing his unique artistic voice (Brooks 2002). During the same period Chicago was experiencing a second wave of national arts prominence (1941–1960), providing access to works by the city’s leading Black artists and art classes. The Wabash YMCA founded in 1913 was instrumental in the formation of the Chicago Art League, led by Black artists Charles Dawson and William Farrow. “The league formed because ‘art is fundamental to good citizenship’” (DePillars 2012, 171). The members of the Chicago Art League “promoted

citizenship by highlighting works created by black artists, recruiting young persons to study art as an avocation, encouraging more black Chicagoans to attend exhibitions and lectures at the Art Institute of Chicago, and applying art to social problems by aesthetically enhancing the city's black communities" (DePillars 2012, 171–172).

Another key source of African American art and culture was the South Side Community Art Center (SSCAC), also located in the Bronzeville area of Chicago, which was established by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1940. Of the over 100 community arts centers established by the WPA, the SSCAC is the only one still in operation. The mission of the SSCAC is to "preserve, conserve and promote African American art and artists, both the legacy and the future, while educating the community on the value of art and culture" (SSCAC, n.d.). The SSCAC provided exhibition and meeting space for local Black artists, and it also conducted free art classes in a variety of media taught by racially diverse artist-educators. Like Hull House, it was one of few spaces where patrons of all races were welcomed. Established Black artists working and exhibiting in Chicago during DePillars' formative years as an artist include Margaret Burroughs, Charles White, William Farrow, Archibald Motley, William Scott, Charles Sebree, and Eldzier Cortor—just to name a few. Several of these artists attended the Art Institute of Chicago, one of the few art colleges in the country at the time open to aspiring Black artists.

After graduating high school, DePillars attended college for a short period before being drafted to serve two years in the army (1961–1963). The strict discipline he experienced while in the military developed his powers of concentration leading to a lifelong interest in reading, specifically texts on education, religion, history, and politics (Brooks 2002). In addition to works of well-known White writers like Ernest Hemingway and Arthur Miller, he read those of African American authors such as James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison. He also read art historical texts, noting a dearth of information on the art, culture, and history of Africa and the African diaspora (Brooks 2002).

DePillars spent part of his service stationed at Fort Jay on Governors Island, a ten-minute ferry ride from New York City, where he was able to broaden his education and interests in multiple art forms. Though DePillars had little money, Max Gordon, the owner of the Village Vanguard, would let him sit at the end of the bar, without paying the cover charge, and listen to jazz performers such as Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Max Roach and others (Brooks 2002). The impression these experiences left on him shaped his interest in promoting jazz—something he was able to continue to support in his role as dean of VCUarts.

After being discharged from the army, DePillars returned to Chicago and completed his associate's degree in fine arts at Kennedy King Community College in 1965. He obtained a bachelor's degree in art education from Roosevelt University in 1968 and a master's in urban studies. Several events and people began to shape DePillars' ideological thinking and approach to artmaking at this pivotal moment in US history. He studied with anthropologist St. Clair Drake, co-author of *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, and political scientist Charles V. Hamilton, who co-authored *Black Power* with Stokely

Carmichael (Brooks 2002). In addition, he read *Sex and Race*, by J. A. Rogers, an examination of how Africans living in Europe, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean adapted to their environment (Brooks 2002). His artistic response to the ideas expressed in these books culminated in a series of works examining Christianity within the African diaspora, questioning much of the Catholic doctrine he experienced growing up (Brooks 2002). The scholarship DePillars was exposed to alongside products of the Black Arts Movement, like the *Wall of Respect* created in Chicago, the Black Power Movement, and race-based sociopolitical events like the silent protest (upraised fists) of Black athletes at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico, coalesced to solidify the sociopolitical ideology expressed in his art, scholarship, teaching, and leadership style. It was during this highly charged period, “the year of consciousness,” (Neal 1979) that DePillars created a series of pen and ink drawings, featuring a militant *Aunt Jemima*, works for which he is well known.

During his time as a graduate student at Roosevelt University, DePillars worked as the assistant director of the Educational Assistance Program at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He came to the attention of Dr. Regina Perry, an art historian and the first African American full-time faculty member at VCUarts. Dr. Perry interviewed DePillars and urged him to apply for an assistant dean position at VCU (Brooks 2002). DePillars, however, was very reluctant to consider a career in the South, especially after spending part of his military service at Fort Lee in Petersburg, VA, just outside of Richmond, VA (Brooks 2002). But the opportunity was a good one, and he applied and got the position. After taking the job, DePillars began work on his doctorate degree in art education from the Pennsylvania State University. Shortly after completing his PhD in 1976, he was named dean of VCUarts, becoming one of the first African Americans to lead a major art school within a predominantly White institution (PWI).

To provide additional context to the historically racist environment DePillars was part of, in addition to Richmond being the capital of the Confederacy which showcased major monuments dedicated to slaveholders, government leaders in Virginia were still actively engaging in racist practices of discrimination. In 1956, Virginia began defying the US Supreme Court ruling to desegregate and integrate schools. Virginia Senators Harry F. Byrd and his son Harry F. Byrd Jr. led a campaign called “massive resistance” to prevent the integration of Virginia schools, enacting laws to remove funding from school districts that followed federal civil rights laws. K-12 school districts across Virginia closed to prevent desegregation from happening. Massive resistance to integration lasted until 1971, the year Dr. DePillars arrived at VCU. As art educator David Burton understood:

I will say for an African-American man in 1970’s Richmond, it couldn’t have been easy. For all his resolute personality, quiet fortitude, and elegant charm, he must have encountered opposition and prejudice. But I never saw any of it. I think his reputation was much wider than Richmond, and the higher-up administration knew they had a prestigious personage in troubled times. (David Burton, email message to authors, September 7, 2018)

Between 1970 and 1976, the years before DePillars became dean of VCUarts, he exhibited his work in venues such as the Museum of Science and Industry (Chicago); the Whitney Museum of American Art (NYC); the Southside Community Art Center (Chicago), and the Studio Museum in Harlem (NYC), to name just a few. In the art world, DePillars was already considered an established artist prior to his final appointment at VCU. “I was unaware of Doc as an artist or a member of [Afri]COBRA until long after he left VCU” (David Burton, email message to authors, September 7, 2018). Given his status as an artist, we found it surprising that many of the faculty we interviewed were unaware of his artistic reputation, despite having his artwork on display in his office.

Harmonic Voice: Creating a Multicultural Arts Community

CP includes the voice of the researcher(s) on the portrait frame. As a Black woman artist/educator/administrator, Lawton’s scholarship, teaching, and art practice investigate the Black art/art education experience through research on Black art educators/programs. Her teaching provides her majority White students with opportunities to learn/unlearn from and connect with BIPOC communities through community-based art education courses in which her students make art and dialogue with members of the community. Her artwork tells the story of mentors who have helped shaped her—many of whom are Black women artist-educators. Similar to DePillars’ work, her print portraits include Adinkra (Ghanaian) textile symbols that describe the characteristics of the subject. Lawton’s presence on campus draws BIPOC students who feel a kinship with faculty of color to seek advice from someone who may better understand their issues and experiences.

Through his roles as an artist, art historian, art educator, and administrator, DePillars advocated for deeper engagement with the arts and culture of the African diaspora as a means of building knowledge and cultural pride in the accomplishments of Black people. Both his scholarly writing and artworks reflect this. In a book chapter he authored for the art education anthology, *Art, Culture, and Ethnicity*, in 1990, DePillars writes,

To know that the history and culture of Black people can be traced to the kingdoms and nation-states of Africa would have a tremendous impact on the self-concept and racial and cultural identity of Black children. It is important that they know their history did not start with slavery but predates the Anglo-Saxon’s fragile imprints in history. (DePillars 1990, 123)

His works continued the legacy of Harlem/Chicago Renaissance scholars and artists like Alain Locke and James Porter of Howard University, and William Scott and Charles White of Chicago.

As dean, DePillars was able to extend his personal artistic vision of exposure to and appreciation of the history, culture, and artistic contributions of the African diaspora to the VCU and Richmond community. Tapping into his personal interests and experiences with Black art, music, performance, and history, he reached out to his contacts in the Black art world to broaden and enrich the arts programs at VCU. One example was hiring jazz musician Ellis

Marsalis as faculty (1986–1989). He also inspired artists and performers. Saxophonist Anthony Braxton, born and raised in Chicago, released the improvisational jazz album *For Alto* (1971)—the “first full-length album for unaccompanied saxophone” (Braxton 1969)—with a track titled “To Artist Murry DePillars.” DePillars was also a fan of the fashion design program. According to current VCUarts dean, Carmenita Higginbotham, “He led the expansion of the performing arts facilities...reinforced the importance of high-profile fashion shows and he was integrated into the community” (VCUarts 2021a, 0:24). According to his friend and colleague Alvin Schexnider, DePillars helped almost double the student enrollment in VCUarts and worked to find ways to shape a holistic university, bringing “disparate pieces together to create a sense of a school within a university that was still defining itself” (VCUarts 2021a, 0:47).

Critical Kinship: Students, Faculty, Artists, and Administrators

DePillars’ position as associate dean at VCUarts in 1971 coincided with the wave of affirmative action recruitment efforts by the state-supported predominantly White colleges and universities seeking to comply with federal equal opportunity laws originally developed for the workforce (Garrison-Wade and Lewis 2003). In his position, DePillars was able to recruit more Black students for admission into VCUarts. Lawton was also a beneficiary of affirmative action efforts in Virginia’s state universities, having been recruited by the only Black dean (of admissions) at the University of Virginia (UVA) in 1977. In 1978 the landmark Bakke case in California deemed the affirmative action quota system of reserving a specific number of admission slots for BIPOC students as an unconstitutional violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, outlawing the practice in California and raising questions about it across the country. Even today, the US Supreme Court continues to review the constitutionality of college affirmative action initiatives (Liptak and Hartocollis 2022).

Lawton notes that while larger numbers of Black students were being admitted to these PWIs, there was no real effort made to assist them in successfully completing their degrees—the quotas were met, it was up to the students to navigate the racially discriminatory environment on their own. DePillars broke that mold by his continued involvement with students *after* their acceptance, checking in on them, providing encouragement, resources, and rigorous critique, and he made their experiences at VCU very different from Lawton’s college experience at UVA. DePillars was a role model for Black students at VCU. In an interview with *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, art education alumnus Phillip Branch notes, “My biggest personal influence was Dr. Murry N. DePillars...he had a profound impact on my development as an artist and student of black history. It was ‘Doc’ who showed me that I could be an artist and arts administrator” (2014).

Renowned artist/curator/scholar Dr. Leslie King-Hammond was promoted to dean of Graduate Studies at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) in 1976. She met DePillars at various convenings they both attended and developed a professional friendship that she leaned on often. King-Hammond refers to DePillars as a “grand gentleman—masterful and eloquent with a high moral compass” (Leslie King-Hammond, interview with authors, May 3, 2021). “He was a very good listener; he sought to understand what

was going on” (Leslie King-Hammond, interview with authors, May 3, 2021) and would think carefully and meditatively before responding.

It was his way of de-escalating and mitigating the excessiveness, the backlash, or over reactions; incivility of others. DePillars’ faculty knew from their experience with him, even when they got upset, that he would act—be responsive and responsible. He had a very savvy way of interjecting solutions to problems—letting others think they came up with the idea. (Leslie King-Hammond, interview with authors, May 3, 2021)

King-Hammond considers DePillars as one of her three mentors (Dr. Tritobia Benjamin at Howard University and art curator Dr. Lowery Stokes Sims were the other two). He was like a “big brother” to her, talking through situations with her and helping her separate professional interactions from personal feelings. Joe Seipel, sculpture department chair during DePillars’ administration and later dean of VCUarts, had similar reflections: DePillars embodied being “a humanist; business is business, personal is personal—you can have a strong aesthetic or administrative disagreement with somebody but that doesn’t mean you can’t be friends” (Joseph H. Seipel, interview with authors, September 12, 2018). Dr. Alvin Schexnider mentions how much he valued Dr. DePillars’ mentorship of him as the newly hired associate dean for VCU’s School of Business in 1979. “He pretty much took me under his wing and I learned a lot from him. He wasn’t only a colleague; he was, you know, one of my dearest friends” (VCUarts 2021a, 1:25).

As one of the youngest members, during DePillars’ membership, in the Black artist collective AfriCOBRA, Akili Anderson remembers first meeting him at a National Conference of Artists¹ convening in the 1970s. DePillars was president of the prestigious group of professional Black artists for about five years and smoothly navigated the often contentious dynamics between artist members, who both admired him and were jealous of him, with grace and aplomb. Anderson considered him a mentor and greatly admired his art skills and ability to lead and organize. However, even given his high position and stature at VCU, toward the end of his tenure there as dean, “he was prosecuted for discrimination [favoritism] in terms of hiring Black faculty and getting Black students in there...and it hurt him” (Akili Anderson, interview with authors, October 19, 2018). This statement denotes how both conscious and unconscious acts of racism played a continuing role in his career at VCU.

Converging Constructions

DePillars encountered several roadblocks at VCU for some of his ideas regarding policies and practices he put into action, or wanted to. Joe Seipel recalls, “Murry was kind of an egalitarian [as a leader] and I think sometimes if you pushed too hard, as I was prone to do, he would want

¹ The National Conference of Artists (NCA) founded in 1959 by artist Elizabeth Catlett and others was the oldest and largest visual arts organization for emerging and established artists of African descent. The organization had chapters in several cities and held national and international convenings (see New York Public Library, n.d.).

me to calm down so other people could be at the same level” (Joseph H. Seipel, interview with authors, September 12, 2018), and this often created tensions between DePillars and department heads. For example, as an art educator, DePillars was interested in supporting arts education in Richmond public schools and at one point asked faculty to work with local high schools painting murals with students. This didn’t go over well as faculty already had a lot on their plate and college faculty were not interested in working with public schools (Joseph H. Seipel, interview with authors, September 12, 2018). Richmond City school students were and still are predominately Black. However, DePillars continued to use his position as dean to innovate by weaving his interests and concerns in uplifting the Black community, showcasing the expressive and cultural products of Black creatives at VCU, and expanding the university’s arts programming into the broader Richmond community. Just as his artworks used pattern, rhythm, and symbolism to reveal connections and convergences between music, Afrocentric aesthetics, culture, and history, he sought avenues to construct meaningful relationships between the arts and other disciplines, such as health and education.

In addition to expanding the visual and performing arts programs at VCU, DePillars had an interest in the therapeutic effects of art. He spearheaded an arts program in the VCU hospital, art on a cart, bringing original works of art to patients in their rooms (Phillip M. Branch, interview with authors, September 25, 2018). DePillars’ goal was twofold: to bring the art and medical campuses together and to provide patients with works of art to look at rather than blank walls in their rooms, thereby expediting their healing process. The art cart developed into an arts and health department within the VCU medical system including mindfulness programs, two art galleries, as well as music and art therapy. Several VCU medical locations have art collections—works by regional artists valued overall at two million dollars (Phillip M. Branch, interview with authors, September 25, 2018). Today his influence in bringing the arts and medical schools together has grown to include faculty research and teaching partnerships, such as “the art of nursing” (Spencer 2017) connecting nursing students to observe and engage with museum artworks as an entry point to consider how perception plays a crucial role in patient care.

Structural Synthesis: Putting the Finishing Touches on the Portrait

There are obvious connections between DePillars’ upbringing and experiences with art and culture in Chicago, his education, military service, commitment to mentorship, and the ideas he developed and enacted as dean of VCUarts. He worked tirelessly to make VCUarts a competitive program in the college art world and sought to make the university and the Richmond community more welcoming and inclusive for Black students and faculty. Laying the foundation for VCUarts’ top-ranked reputation for many years, Dr. DePillars advocated for artistic voice and aesthetic freedom and did so with grace. Everyone we interviewed mentioned his charismatic presence, intelligence, artistic excellence, patience, fairness, and support—all qualities he brought to bear while testifying to Congress after the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) denied VCU’s Anderson Gallery a \$10,000 grant because works in the proposed

exhibition were “sexually explicit and lacked artistic merit” (Washington Post 1992). In his testimony, DePillars spoke about the accomplishments of VCUarts alumni. “The endorsement of free expression is risky yet the benefits for VCU have been returned by distinguished alumni who have been the recipients of Oscars, Emmy’s, Coty’s, Addy’s, Jacob Javits fellowships and I will add National Endowment for the Arts grants” (C-SPAN 1992, 34:35).

He also cited a personal example of how censorship in the arts not only suppresses freedom of speech but demonstrates how racism is an endemic and persistent component of the US sociopolitical system (Gaztambide-Fernández, Kraehe, and Stephen Carpenter II 2018).

If I can, I’d like to drift back to the 1960s and a group of Black artists in Chicago, we painted murals, we did what the press referred to as socio-political paintings and so forth. We were subjected, although we were not getting federal money, we were subjected to a form of harassment and censorship that even I doubt if Radice [Acting Chairman for the National Endowment for the Arts] could compare with her first few actions. I as a senior at a college in Chicago was denied an opportunity to put my paintings in a show because I had socio-political images in those paintings and they dealt with the black experience in Chicago. About six years later that same university invited me back, because one of the paintings they would not let me show was shown in two exhibitions at the Whitney Museum and they gave me a one man show. You don’t do those things after the fact. (C-SPAN 1992, 42:19)

As a member of AfriCOBRA, his artworks embodied “aesthetic integrity, artistic and social commitment” through “imagery that illumina[ted] the beauty and glory of the African experience in the West” (Neal 1979). Through his Congressional testimony, we get an in-depth look at DePillars as an artist, scholar, educator, charismatic leader, and advocate as well as a sense of how systems of oppression impacted his career.

Conclusion

Why is Murry DePillars’ story relevant to art education today? The current sociopolitical climate is not so different from the environment DePillars experienced during his career. BIPOC students and faculty continue to experience the backlash of systemic oppression in terms of curriculum, jobs, opportunities, and recognition. In addition, the majority of BIPOC students in US K-12 public schools,

particularly in urban city centers, is disproportionate to the number of BIPOC teachers in these schools. The 2020 National Teacher and Principal survey shows 79.3 percent of all K-12 public school teachers are white (US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2020). This lack of teacher role models of color may account for the low number of students of color in teacher education programs, particularly in art disciplines where only 2.1 percent of all teachers are arts/crafts teachers. (Lawton 2018, 374)

Researching and publishing the histories of extraordinary BIPOC artist-educators like DePillars diversifies the canon of art education history and presents a more inclusive and realistic picture of the field. In purposefully disrupting the normalization of a White, male supremacist canon by attentively including BIPOC artists and scholars in citations and exemplars, BIPOC students in art education programs see themselves reflected in the curriculum, history of the field, and faculty teaching them. DePillars greatly influenced the careers of the alumni we spoke with—many of them are in leadership roles mentoring others just as DePillars mentored them. As an artist, DePillars viewed art as an instrument of cultural education and social change. As an education scholar he wrote:

It is my view that the curriculum plays an enormous role in the identity formation of students. The curriculum, although presented as value free, is powerful...as a powerful shaper of self-identity, it tells us where we have been and where we are, and it quietly directs our choices for the future. (DePillars 1990, 132)

Current VCU president Michael Rao notes that Dr. DePillars has “modeled something that has become known as ‘the VCU culture,’ which is where we embrace students and do everything we can to ensure their success” (VCUarts 2021a, 1:33).

Since beginning this project in 2018 as part of VCU’s fiftieth anniversary, the university has renamed the fine art building in honor of Dr. DePillars, and it has produced several short films with faculty and alumni who knew him. William “Blue” Johnson, former student (1977–1982), commented, “He encouraged me and all of us to network with each other and speak and help me develop a voice through my work” (VCUarts 2021b, 39:24). Brian Jackson, alumni and former student leader, described the impact Dr. Depillars had on him in the following words:

Here’s a man who arrived at VCU stayed there for nearly 20 years, served as dean during a time when our art school was...good, it was more than okay, but he took it to greatness...I’m a big advocate of that art school but it was built by Murry DePillars, like so many African-Americans helped build this country with bricks and mortar in my mind he took that art school from good to great and I think people need to recognize...need to remember that. It’s important that we cement his legacy as somebody who brought VCU School of the Arts to greatness. (VCUarts 2021b, 47:22)

William Johnson’s words sum up DePillars the artist, educator, and administrator: “He was a lover of art, he was a lover of people...he was a lover of education, a lover of truth and he was a lover of being fair” (VCUarts 2021b, 48:49). This critical portrait demonstrates how an African American artist-educator-administrator contributed to the art world, the field of art education, and with extraordinary foresight and leadership, how he laid the foundation for a renowned art school to grow and flourish, with collaborative ties to other colleges within the university and the Richmond community. CP research is one method to educate about the contributions of BIPOC art educators and bring awareness to barriers caused by systemic racism, and the ways in which these barriers can be overcome to transform art education.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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