

A Better Bronx through the Arts

by Noah Fowle



Gallery attendees take in Thad Simerly's installment entitled "a gala notion of galactic dominion" during the Pedestrian show at BRAC. -PHOTO BY WALTER POFELDT

The Bronx River Arts Center puts focus on culture and environment

Looking around the Bronx, it is clear the borough continues to undergo a period of intense revitalization.

From building renovations to refurbished parks to a sprouting art scene, the Bronx is certainly blooming and booming. The Bronx River Arts Center (BRAC) is one of the major forces behind the ongoing push to reinvigorate and in some cases reinvent the borough, particularly in the areas of culture and environment.

Located on the shores of the Bronx River and at the corner of East Tremont and Bronx Park avenues, BRAC is spearheading dual initiatives: one to bring more of the arts to borough residents and the other to educate and involve more volunteer in the clean-up of the Bronx River.

Founded in 1980 as part of the Bronx River Restoration Project, BRAC became its own independent entity in 1987, dedicated to non-profit multi-arts programs. Gayle Nathan, the executive director for the center, said BRAC has experienced a tremendous amount of growth in recent years, including a strong effort to reconnect with its original mission. "We strive to connect the community to environmental activism through the arts," Nathan said. "We keep the center as active, open and inviting as possible, to both kids and

their parents."

Currently, the center holds a number of free visual art classes for children and teenagers. In addition, there are also art and environmental studies for adults and parent-child teams. "Our programs are successful in creating and fostering stronger family ties," Nathan explained. "Kids feel comfortable coming here, and we keep them focused on art because they love being creative."

A high level of professionalism surrounds the center's programs and characterizes its attitude towards art. After-school classes taught by artists range from ceramics to printmaking to photography. There are also bi-weekly museum trips organized by the center's administrators to help expose young people from around the borough to different artwork.

Night classes offered to adults and parent-child teams incorporate the center's environmental initiatives and focus on raising cultural awareness. Classes offer a similar range of artistic mediums, but incorporate specific issues concerning the Bronx River and current restoration projects.

Rosa Ortega, who serves as the center's environmental education coordinator, said she is proud of the new direction the center is headed. "Our instruction focuses on the history of the Bronx, the Bronx River and the restoration process, both environmentally and socially. We teach our participants how their own neighborhoods can become more involved." Ortega said that the response to these new classes has been positive and more and more families are coming out to pitch in. "We are looking to not only educate the community, but to get them to care and to share their own ideas on how to change their neighborhoods," she said. "We teach them how to restructure their area and to initiate change."

Liliana Candelario first began taking photography classes at the center in 1999. Today, she is studying at Monroe College and interns at the center. "This is a great place for kids to be themselves and to find themselves through art," Candelario said. "The center motivated me to go to college."

In addition to providing free education on arts and the environment to the com-

munity, the Bronx River Arts Center also holds shows in its galleries and brings different types of performance art to the borough. Holding between four and five large shows a year, BRAC hosts a variety of performances, including theater, dance, music and poetry.

Carl Eckhoff, who works in the center's education department and curated the galleries most recent show, Pedestrian, said part of the center's goal is also to bring contemporary art to a community that does not usually get exposure to it. "We bring in a broad range of art, all different types," Eckhoff said. "We like to mix it up between emerging artists as well as more established ones." The current show, Pedestrian contained exhibitions that interwove their audiences into the piece creating more of an exchange than just a passive viewing.

Following the opening Luis Chaluian presented portions of his El Extreme Cabaret. The eclectic performance included theatrical monologues, short films, poetry and song. It is this type of experimental and diverse art that the center is bringing to the Bronx every day.

On March 10, the center hosted a poetry reading and workshop by Bronx native Joan Murray. Ortega said there were a number of reasons for bringing Murray to the center for her own evening. "We like to showcase and support local artists that generate from our area," she said. "Murray's writing has

always been geared toward nature, and it appeals to our double mission by incorporating awareness."

For more information about BRAC or to learn how to sign up for courses this spring visit www.bronxriverart.org or call (718) 589- 5819 extension 13.



Gladys Perez, a Bronx native, performs a monologue in Spanish at BRAC. -PHOTO BY WALTER POFELDT

Joan Murray (far left) held a poetry workshop for teens and adults at BRAC on March 10. -PHOTO BY GARY MARKS



Vanessa Woods, who also works at the BRAC, stands before her black and white prints that make up the Liliana Portfolio. -PHOTO BY WALTER POFELDT/NF

