Diversity (2012), a quilt by Sandra Noble, appeared in an exhibition honoring Tim Shuckerow, retiring director of the Art Education/Art Studio programs at Case Western Reserve. The show highlighted African American alumni artists who earned master’s degrees in art education; Noble has been a long-time lecturer and student-teacher supervisor.
ART, CULTURE, COMMUNITY

An exhibition illustrates the legacy of retiring art educator Tim Shuckerow

BY MICHAEL GILL

In February, the hall outside Jerome White’s classroom at Roxboro Middle School in Cleveland Heights popped with color. White (GRS ’94), an art teacher in the Cleveland Heights-University Heights City School District since 1997, had developed lessons for Black History Month to enhance his students’ artistic skills and deepen their understanding of Black culture. One class had created portraits of noteworthy African Americans, repeating the images in different colors, in the style of Andy Warhol. Another class had learned how to use a grid to enlarge images of Redtail fighter aircraft—the planes flown by the legendary Tuskegee Airmen during World War II.

Those lessons were spun from threads woven all through the teacher’s life. A prolific muralist and an accomplished painter on canvas, White discovered his talent at Roxboro, where as a fifth grader he was official artist for the school newspaper. He attended Tuskegee University, a historically black institution, and his grandfather, Fred Brown, was a physical education instructor for the Tuskegee Airmen, whose story inspired White to create a children’s picture book, *Red Tail Dreamer*, in 2017.

His career was also shaped, White says, by his studies with Tim Shuckerow (GRS ’76), the director of the Art Education/Art Studio programs in the Department of Art History and Art at Case Western Reserve. Shuckerow, who is retiring in August after 32 years at the helm, has actively recruited art education students from backgrounds underrepresented in the teaching profession. Of the 206 students who have earned bachelor’s or master’s degrees under his guidance, one-third are members of racial or ethnic minorities or special needs students. African American alumni make up 9.2% of the total—one of the highest proportions of any art education program in Ohio.

Just as important, his former students say, Shuckerow affirmed the cultural resonance of their teaching and art-making. “He would talk about culture and how that influences what artists create,” White recalls. “That carries into my own work. You create what you know, or what you are drawn to. I think that is what makes each artist unique.”

White was one of the featured artists in the African American Alumni Art Exhibition at the university’s Art Studio Gallery this spring. Curated by Shuckerow and Georgio Sabino III (GRS ’09), the show was both a tribute to the artists and an illustration of Shuckerow’s proudest achievement. During the public opening, which attracted more than 220 visitors, he remarked, “My legacy is diversity.” And the lessons he imparted as a teacher of teachers will have an impact on the
Shuckerow has built significant collections of ethnographic art and artifacts, including drums, sculptures, ceremonial robes and ritual masks gathered over the last 40 years, primarily from Nigeria and Cameroon. Shuckerow says that his lifelong appreciation of diverse cultures began during his childhood in Avon Lake, Ohio. His parents were hosts for the Friendly Town program, in which suburban families welcomed children from the city into their homes during the summer. After earning a bachelor of fine arts (BFA) degree at the Cleveland Institute of Art and a graduate degree in art education at CWRU, Shuckerow spent his early career teaching students from every socioeconomic class, making his way from Cleveland’s East High School to University School in Hunting Valley, Ryan Junior High in Fairbanks, Alaska, and Shaker Heights High School. Once he returned to CWRU as program director in 1987, Shuckerow started to infuse the curriculum with his belief that culture informs artistic creation, and that teaching art really is teaching culture.

Calling himself “an old hippie,” he says that he wanted the program to “give a sense of love and peace. To teach not what is ‘white’ or ‘black’ in culture, but what is common.”

Anna Arnold (GRS ’10) remembers Shuckerow encouraging her to pursue a graduate degree. Like him, she had earned a BFA at the Cleveland Institute of Art; then she had started working with young people in a city-sponsored mural program in one of Cleveland’s most under-resourced communities. The program, which operated out of a local recreation center, “was not about making art, but more about helping people,” Arnold says. “Helping kids. Some of the things that you’d read about in the paper—this is where that was happening.” It was 2007 when Shuckerow first contacted Arnold—“out of the blue,” she says—about enrolling at Case Western Reserve. “I thought working at community rec centers was what I was going to do,” she recalls. “I wasn’t at all thinking about grad school. I told him I was not ready. But Tim—he is relentless.” In 2008, he called again. “He told me he had followed my work for years, and he said, ‘I know you’re ready.’” Arnold was in her late 40s and, by her own estimation, one of the program’s oldest students when she started. Her parents were aging, and when her father became ill, she had to take time for her family. It was then, she says, that she became aware of Shuckerow’s compassion—a quality she now associates with leadership. “I remember the support of my classmates, too,” Arnold adds. “It was like, we were all in this together. We used to go to the university’s Squire Valleyewee Farm during the summer to get to know each other better.” She recalls an exercise in which students were assigned to make two masks—one as realistic as possible, a self-portrait, and the other representative of another culture. “Tim always encouraged us to learn about cultures that are different from our own.” The farm was a great place for bonding. Shuckerow taught the students raku, a centuries-old technique for firing ceramics, which requires teamwork. “We’d play drums together,” Arnold says. “There was a wooden silo at the farm, and we’d go in there and play drums and sing, and Tim would tell us to ‘Let it all out.’” “He tells me I am too quiet now,” she adds with a smile.]

Today, Arnold teaches art as a part-time faculty member at Ursuline College. But she says that the master’s program also prepared her for her main job—director of Ursuline’s Florence O’Donnell Wasmer Gallery. When she applied for the position, she was asked to give a presentation about her approach to gallery programming. She walked in with specific ideas for shows, community involvement and other initiatives, and when she was finished, the people interviewing her were completely silent. “I learned later they were stunned that I had the whole year all planned out,” she says. “Now it feels like everything I’ve done led up to this.”

On a winter afternoon in the gallery, Arnold gestured toward the walls, which were filled with student works for the spring show, called “Community: Together, We Can.” In front of her on a desk were materials for a workshop she’d teach for nursing students that night. “I love it,” she said.
In an article about Arnold’s role as the “guiding light of Woumbe Gallery,” Douglas Max Utter, a noted writer on Cleveland art, described her as a “multimedia diva of street-Pop.” Her paintings in the alumni exhibition were in that vein, portraying diverse and iconic figures such as Vincent Van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Frida Kahlo and Muhammad Ali, all in vibrant acrylic on canvas.

A look around the exhibition showed the influence of culture in works of one artist after another. Jerome White’s contributions included a pair of oils portraying African Americans in profile with imagery sculpted into their hair. In The Jungle, a man’s hair takes the shape of animals from the African continent. In the image implies, there is an ongoing camaraderie among Shuckerow and many of his former students, including Tucker White (GRS ’91), Gina Brent (GRS ’92), Napoleon Dismuke (GRS ’01) and Travis Williams (GRS ’17), all of whom were represented in the exhibition.

Carver taught for 23 years at the Cleveland School of the Arts, where he showed his students that “everyday life is an art form.” He would ask them: “Did you decide what clothes, what colors you were going to wear today?” That is art. The way you communicate with your friends and family—that is art. The way you handle yourself, your body language, is dance.” Among those students, he proudly remembers a young painter named Darius Steward, who has since become a practicing fiber artist. Her exquisitely crafted, brilliantly colored quilts provided an evocative transition between the fine art presented in much of the gallery and an area filled with objects from Shuckerow’s ethnographic collections.

One item on display was a ceremonial robe made for Shuckerow during a 2007 trip to Cameroon. Tribal leaders, impressed by his affinity for their culture, gave him the honorific title “Woumbe”—meaning “chief”—and a robe made for Shuckerow during a 2007 trip to Cameroon. Tribal leaders, impressed by his affinity for their culture, gave him the honorific title “Woumbe”—meaning “chief”—and a robe made for Shuckerow during a 2007 trip to Cameroon.

The collections, while fascinating in their own right, have also served an educational purpose. Since 1989, Shuckerow has incorporated authentic costumes, instruments and other objects into more than 100 multicultural performances at school assemblies and teacher training workshops. He estimates that more than 20,000 students and teachers have experienced these performances as participants or audience members, in venues ranging from local public schools to the Cleveland Museum of Art to New York’s Lincoln Center.

Shuckerow also developed a six-week summer program that gave fifth and sixth graders the chance to perform with artifacts from his collections. Known as smartART in the City: A Summer of Self-Discovery, the program was sponsored in 2007, 2008 and 2009 by the Cleveland Foundation, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District and UBS Financial. Shuckerow hopes to find a nonprofit home for his collections so that they will continue to further the work he believes in.

“We’re teaching culture,” he says. “It’s not just about how to do a watercolor painting, or how to teach a certain medium, but how to inspire the community.”

Michael Gill, an arts journalist, arts administrator and practicing artist, is a co-founder of Collective Arts Network in Cleveland and the founding editor/publisher of CAN Journal.