TO TELL THE TRUTH

The first comic book that Zaire Miles-Moultrie ever received was a 1994 edition Spider-Man with a holographic cover—a birthday present from his uncle. It inspired Miles-Moultrie to use his passion for art to delve into layered storytelling. From then on, he made his own comics, honing his drawing skills and attempting to “tell big narrative stories.”

Now, Miles-Moultrie is a senior at UNCG, pursuing a degree in entrepreneurship with minors in art history and arts administration, and a BA in studio art, with a concentration in printmaking and arts administration. When he applied for college, Miles-Moultrie told himself that if he got into Chapel Hill, “But if I got into UNCG, I was going to be anybody who I wanted to be.”

When he landed at UNCG in 2019, he chose to pursue the arts. In one formative interaction, Miles-Moultrie had a conversation with his professor Miranda Reichhardt about pursuing drawing as a career. Her response? “What are you doing?”

“It wasn’t in a malicious way,” Miles-Moultrie explains. “It was asking me to try and think deeper about how I make my art and what I’m trying to say to the world.” Reichhardt’s existential question led him to an answer: He wanted to make art that portrayed truth without sugarcoating reality.

That’s what lay behind his 2022 show at the Greensboro Project Space, “The Lion, the Jackal, and the Man.” For the project, Miles-Moultrie conducted hours of research into African history, helped by art history professor Elizabeth Perrill and a team of research librarians. He says the process required unlearning negative Western constructions of the continent and its people.

In one issue of the London Illustrated News from 1870, Miles-Moultrie found images of Zulu men who were described as “animals,” their hair described as “exotic.” This was a lightbulb moment for the artist. He took the images of the men and glorified them on paper, emphasizing their hair, their adornments. “I wanted to give them back the energy they deserve,” he says.

For the project, Miles-Moultrie and his colleagues dissected each other’s works for hours, nitpicking them to see which would fare best against the competition. In the end, Miles-Moultrie submitted “Beautiful Black Pearl,” a collage he made from a 1600s print of a Black woman wearing pearls. Miles-Moultrie dresses her in extravagant clothing, framing her face with flowers and setting her in an otherworldly, celestial background.

The piece involved deep research about this community that I never really thought I would have.”

Looking back to when he decided to apply to UNCG, Miles-Moultrie says that he wouldn’t change a thing.

After the art show, Miles-Moultrie learned of the national AXA Art Prize competition through a professor who encouraged him and some fellow students to apply. Miles-Moultrie and his colleagues dissected each other’s works for hours, nitpicking them to see which would fare best against the competition.

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“By using printmaking and drawing as my medium of choice, I can express myself, my voice, and message in a multitude of ways while also paying homage to inspirations. My art, designs, drawing, and prints are collages of the many ideologies that I have come to learn, accept, and embody.”

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