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WHAT'S UP?

ON THE RIGHT 'TRAC'

Students in NYC art program, review, meet experts

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When reviewing works of art, high school senior Miriam Haier has a simple criterion.

"I look at something, and if I decide I want it hanging in my room, then I like it," she said.

Though no amount of studying can wipe out a visceral reaction, Haier, 17, along with two classmates from Jersey City's McNair Academic High School, Nikketta Pressley and Daniel Edley, also 17, has become a critic.

All three participate in the Teen Reviewers and Critics (TRaC) Program in New York City, where they receive instruction from celebrated professionals and attend arts events before setting out to compose their own reviews.

TRaC is a free eight-week program designed for high school juniors and seniors under the umbrella of High 5, a non-profit organization that supplies teenagers with \$5 tickets to arts events in and around New York City. It casts a wide net, reeling in students from all five boroughs, Long Island, Westchester County and New Jersey, who converge on Manhattan for classes and to see performances and exhibitions.

Being a critic sometimes means leaving one's own ideas of quality at the door.

"He doesn't like good or bad, or just what happened," said Daniel, explaining his instructor's expectations for the 650-word reviews. "He likes descriptions of what the viewers felt."

Daniel and Nikketta were in the Dance TRaC program, which wrapped up last month. Though both have a background in dance - Daniel is fascinated by ballet, and Nikketta participates in liturgical and West African dance groups - they were forced to redefine their notions of dance.

Daniel described the experience of seeing an East Asian-influenced dance retrospective, where the movements of dancers was "still" and "unconnected" compared to the fluidity of motion he loves in ballet. He learned to appreciate their type of mastery, however, he still finds ballet most thrilling to watch and write about.

Daniel and Nikketta were channeled into TRaC by Holly Smith, an English teacher and McNair alumnus, who seeks to show her students that "the world does not end and begin in Jersey City."

Apart from nervous parents and the apprehension high schoolers feel about navigating Manhattan on their own, Miriam thinks that the city's proximity discourages people from taking full advantage, since they take it for granted.

Miriam is the veteran of the group. She started with Multi TRaC - with a taste of varied realms of arts criticism - as a precocious sophomore, and never tired of it. Last fall, she participated in Visual Arts TRaC.

Highlights include a behind-the-scenes curatorial tour at MOMA and an exhibition on the late David Wojnarowicz - a prominent artist of the 1980s who died of AIDS, whose diaries she has read - but she

also treasures the opportunity to network with artists, critics and curators.

"In addition to the amazing things I'm seeing, it's the people I'm meeting," she said.

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