

ANCESTORS KNOW WHO WE ARE
INTERVIEW WITH JOELLE JOYNER

Interviewer: Tell us about yourself.

Audio Description: An animated drawing of the speaker standing in front of a gray painted background of a cityscape. On screen text. Avatar created by Joelle Joyner.

Joelle Joyner: Hello, my name is Joelle Joyner. I'm a 21-year-old college student and artist from Detroit, Michigan, born and raised. I'm a multimedia artist who specializes in digital art. I am particularly interested in creating portraits.

Interviewer: How does your background influence your art?

Joelle Joyner: I'm of African American and Meherrin descent. The traditional name for the Meherrin is Kauwets'a:ka, which translates best to "canoe-rowing people." I started making art as a child in southwest Detroit, which has a relatively large Indigenous community compared to other parts of the city, particularly Anishinaabe people—the original people of this region—and many people with Indigenous roots in Mexico and Central America. Most of my subjects were and are now people of color. I love drawing my friends and the people around me, exploring those features and cultures. It's where I became interested in art as a passion.

Interviewer: Who inspires you?

Joelle Joyner: So many of my family members give me inspiration, but the one that comes to mind is my great-grandmother, Iris Pierce Joyner, or Grandma Iris, as we call her.

Audio Description: A digital drawing of a person with white hair and white in their eyebrows, wearing a white shirt. A gold halo surrounds their head. The background is blue and red.

Joelle Joyner: She's my dad's family matriarch. Her parents both descended from the Meherrin people. The Pierces, Lassiters, Weavers, Halls, and Reids are some of my Meherrin familial lines. Most of my dad's family is still on the East Coast; therefore, reconnecting to Meherrin culture was not easy, given the distance, but I felt I must. When she was growing up, she didn't have the opportunities to learn the language or learn and express our culture as much as I do today. I do these things, such as art, volunteering with my local Indian center, dancing, to honor her and my other ancestors.

Interviewer: Describe one of the artworks in the exhibition.

Joelle Joyner: I want to share the story of the painting *Marigold*, one of my favorite artworks I've ever done. The image is of a young, brown-skinned woman wearing a red shirt, gold necklace, hoop earrings who has a marigold flower behind her left ear and long flowing brown hair. She gazes forward, with her

hand posed under her chin, her face highlighted in heavy sunshine as she sits under an opening of green tree leaves. This is a portrait of my good friend Christiana Castillo. She is an artist and poet based out of Detroit, Michigan. This was the first portrait I completed after receiving my new tablet, which has its own special connection to Christiana. One day last year, she and a few others learned I was doing all my digital art on a 2014-era iPad with an outdated app only using my fingers, which is all quite challenging. Everyone was a bit shocked, almost in a pitiful way. The new tablet was too expensive and I just didn't have the funds, so I did what I had to do to make it work; however, after this conversation, Christiana and my other friends helped me raise funds to receive a new iPad. I want to give a special thanks to Kirsten, Nicole, and, of course, Christiana. For the piece *Marigold*, I wanted to show my appreciation. I asked Christiana what picture she would love painted and she sent a selfie and I used it as a reference. It was quite challenging since I've never done any art with this machine—a lot of trial and error—but, being self-taught, I was used to learning the reins of digital art the hard way. But as the portrait *Marigold* came together, I realized this is one of my favorite works of art. It has a bit of mystery in it, colorful depth, and drama. It has a joyful but also really serious tone.

Interviewer: What is your favorite medium and why?

Joelle Joyner: My favorite has to be digital. I fell in love with the medium after a chronic condition of surgery left it hard for me to continue doing traditional graphite art. Digital art became very convenient and accessible given my physical state. On top of the accessibility digital art gave me, I feel I have more creative freedom. I have more freedom to do intense colors, graphics, and unique textures. Moreover, I don't need too much space or supplies. It's very portable. I love doing art on the go.

Interviewer: Why do you create art?

Joelle Joyner: For most of my life, I usually did art as a hobby. It wasn't until, I think, high school when I realized my art could have a real positive impact on people. I remember drawing and people being so happy to see the finished piece. I started using art as my way of gift giving. Either it be for a birthday or graduation, I would give people drawings of themselves, family, pets, or even their favorite celebrities. It slowly became my way to express admiration and appreciation of people and others around me.

Interviewer: What memorable responses have you had to your work?

Joelle Joyner: I think one of my favorite reactions, and a time I realize my art could have an emotional effect on a person, is when I gifted another artist a portrait of themselves and they started crying. I really wasn't expecting that. Never seen anyone cry when they saw anything I've done, so it almost made me cry and it was quite moving. Another time I did a sketch, I drew [an] Afro-Indigenous jingle dress dancer and a person I didn't know commented and, I quote, "This is everything that I needed right now. She looks like me. I haven't felt the pain of that sort of need in a long time," end quote. This woman's comment really moved me, and I realized that I can help people indirectly—make them feel seen. I also received similar responses from the storybook I illustrated. I drew Indigenous children and families that didn't look just one way. I wanted all Indigenous people to be seen, whether light or dark, brown eyes, blue eyes, green eyes, thick, curly hair, or straight, light hair, plus size or skinny, if they're in the city or on the rez. There's no one way to look or live. When the book was released, I received so many positive responses on how the art made them feel seen and kids seeing kids that look like them.

Interviewer: What does it mean to be Black and Native or Afro-Indigenous?

Joelle Joyner: I think it is a combination of understanding your genealogy of your African and Indigenous American ancestors, where they come from and their stories, along with being active in your communities. It's learning from generational trauma and resilience and finding pride in their stories.

Interviewer: What role can art play in society?

Joelle Joyner: Art is, in my personal opinion, the best way to understand the human experience. It's a communication that can be used to tell our stories, our emotions, and our cultures. Art is used as a sign that a civilization was present and a portal to see into the world of the artist. Art can also be a tool for social change, especially in our modern movements. Art is used as a vehicle to show the faces of the movement and who or what they're fighting for.

Interviewer: What brings you joy?

Joelle Joyner: I would have to say it's making people happy. I love when I volunteer or assist people and seeing them smile or when someone sees my art, I love to see a positive emotion. Seeing that any work I can do makes someone happy is the best feeling in the world. I don't do art for fame or recognition, but I just like making people smile.

Audio Description: Logo: National Museum of the American Indian. Smithsonian.