



By Mindy Lucas

Amiri Geuka Farris was just 17 years old when he won his first major art award as part of the Congressional Art Competition, in which a winner from each congressional district is selected, then honored at the nation's capitol.

It was a big deal not only because Farris got to go to Washington, D.C. where he met California Congresswoman Maxine Waters and actress Sarah Jessica Parker among others, but also because no one at his West Palm Beach, Florida high school, including Farris' principal, knew who he was or that there was such a talent in their midst.

Like some sort of campy '90s movie or teenage fantasy come true, it was a heady moment for Farris to suddenly be propelled into the limelight in such a high profile way. Not only was it the start of something big for the naturally quiet artist, it was also a lesson in learning how to toot one's own horn.

Farris will also tell you he's perfectly fine with doing his own thing and letting the chips fall

where they may.

“I knew then I was going to have difficulty,” said Farris, who recently sat down at Penn Center on St. Helena Island to talk about his work, on exhibit there, and his career in general.



A contemporary painter and mixed media artist who seems to have found personal and professional reward in being true to himself, Farris donated several large scale pieces to Penn which now hang in the Visitors Center.

Several others, part of a private collection that was donated by art collector and philanthropist, Dr. Fred Hicks, are also displayed in the center’s administrative offices.

The pieces portray joyful, ebullient scenes of Gullah-Geechee people set in nature or pictured with elements of the Lowcountry – water, plants, baskets overflowing with the fruits of one’s labor. Their faces and expressions are immaculately done and distinctly Farris.

The fact that a Farris painting has a look and feel that is all Farris is something the 44-year-old was able to accomplish quite early in his career, though he says he was older when it happened. The paintings at Penn Center were mostly from around 2008. Since that time Farris has been moving beyond those earlier works, seemingly in search of something new.

Early Life

Born in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, Farris actually grew up in vibrant West Palm Beach, Florida, a multicultural beachfront city about an hour north of Miami.

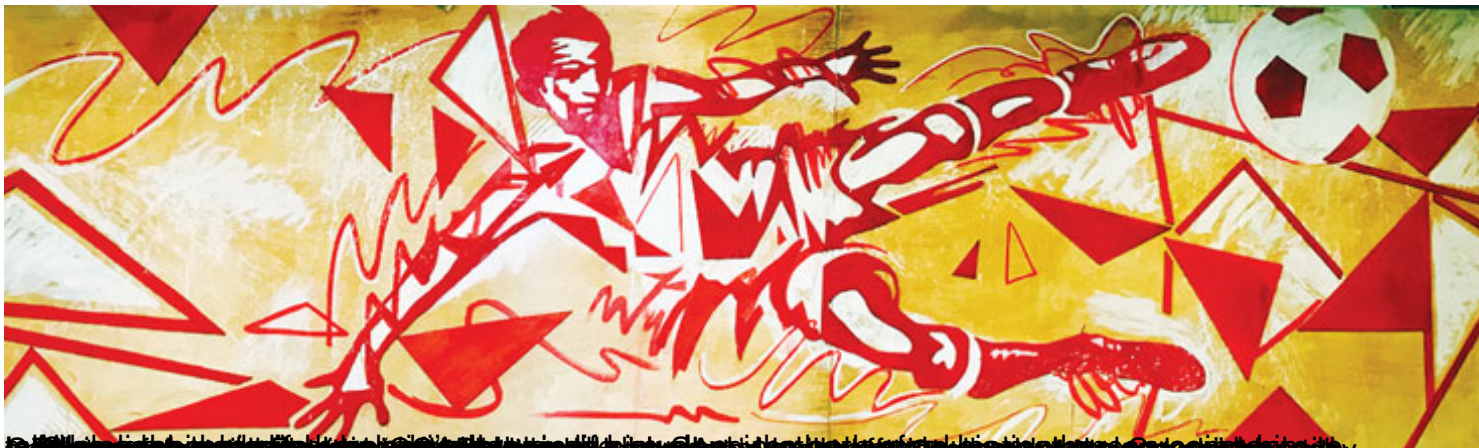
Because his school didn't offer art for younger children, his mother, a Kindergarten and science teacher, began sending Farris, as young as 6 and 7 years old, to adult art classes at the local arts center.

"The teachers would say, I don't think he's advanced enough to be in here," he said. But those skeptics usually changed their minds once they saw the young prodigy's work, even when it came time for life drawing, or drawing using nude models.

Farris thinks it was probably his quiet, extremely focused nature combined with a strong work ethic that won the respect of many of the adults in those early classes.

"They saw I could draw and would say, 'Where'd you learn how to do that?'" he said.

By the time Farris got to high school he was taking art classes nearly every day after school, and also helping to paint and design sets for a local performing arts theater, where he also became interested in performing arts.



[A recent "Action Painting" by Amiri Farris](#)