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salute to scholars

Bold, New Steps for College Success

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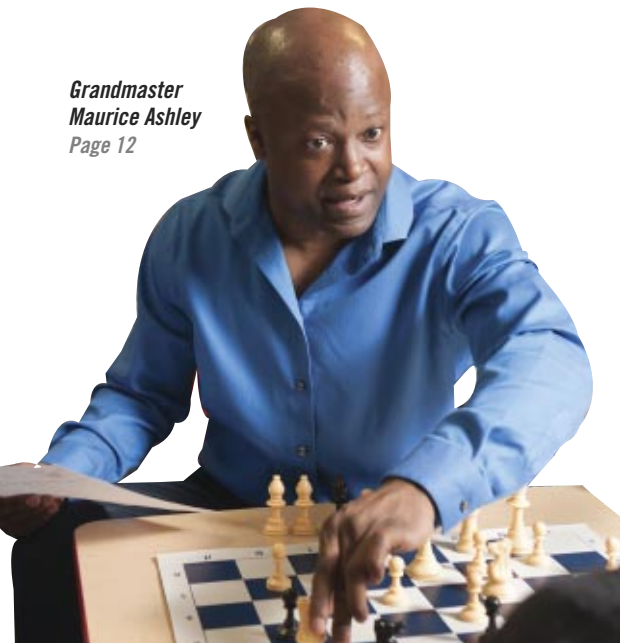
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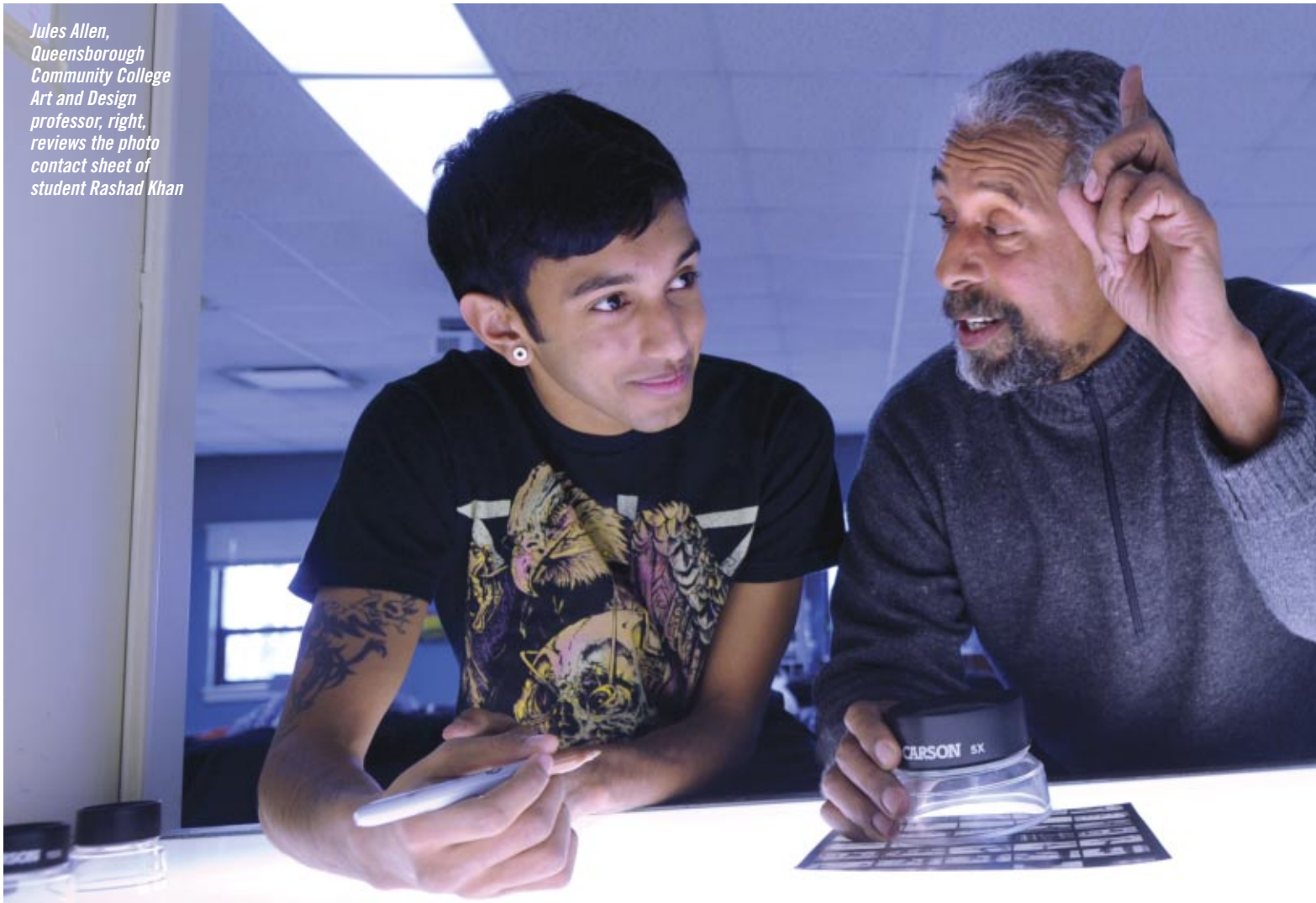
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Jules Allen,
Queensborough
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Art and Design
professor, right,
reviews the photo
contact sheet of
student Rashad Khan



Learning to Look Before You

The Art of Photography From an Artist

By Richard Firstman

ONE MIDSEMESTER DAY at Queensborough Community College, Colleen Abbate arranged an array of black and white photographs on the black-board ledge in the college's photo studio. Then she stepped away and glanced back and forth between the images and her professor's panning eyes.

"What is that — it looks like a Diane Arbus photograph," Jules Allen said, casually tossing off a comparison to one of the most famously idiosyncratic photographers of the last century. His students are accustomed to such references, even if they don't always get the references, or the compliments.

"What was it — Halloween or something?" Allen asked.

"It was the Polar Bear Club where we jumped in the ocean in January," explained Abbate, a Navy veteran.

"You went into the water in January?" Allen asked, as if simultaneously appalled and delighted. That's another thing his students are accustomed to: the exaggerated tease.

"We did it for the Make-a-Wish Foundation," Abbate explained, but Allen didn't care: "You went in the ocean when it was zero outside? You're crazy!"

Allen, a professor of art and design who's been a fixture at

Queensborough for more than three decades, is a renowned art photographer whose work, primarily focused on the contemporary African-American experience, is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Smithsonian and the National Gallery, among others. His books include studies of nude black women, denizens of Gleason's Gym and people who wear hats. A forthcoming volume looks at the culture of black marching bands — a "precision-based art form that fully embodies the love of the public event as a spectacle," as Allen sees it, and "breathes the soul and spirit of Africa within the modern world."

Allen brings serious intellect to his photography, but to his students he's an amalgam of personality and attitude — a professor apt to tell a student, "It's disgusting how good that photograph is." He's demanding but playful, worldly and wide-eyed, insightful and inciting.

And, at 67, still very cool.

"That's a beautiful photograph of that parrot," Allen said, moving to another photo. "Is that your bird?"

"It's my boyfriend's," Abbate said, "but I bought it."

"Okay, go to work on these three, they're killers. Burn the sky on that one."

"What about that one over there, with my daughter crying?" Abbate asked.



Shoot

“That one’s too muddy,” Allen said. “Why’s your daughter crying? Because you wouldn’t pick her up? You were being mean.”

“She’s like 45 pounds!”

“That’s impossible. You told me she’s 2 years old!”

Allen is always getting into it with his students, always asking questions, whether about their photographs or their lives, or, as is often the case, both at once. “I’m always asking them, ‘Where you from, where’re your parents from, where do you work, where’d you get those boots,’” says Allen, who once worked as a psychiatric social worker in a county jail in his native California. “I want to know who you are. Let’s get this going, let’s take an interest in the world, pay attention, ask questions. When you learn to investigate in here, it’s going to translate outside.”

Abbate said her daughter was almost 3. Then she headed off to the darkroom. Like most of Allen’s students, her experience didn’t go much beyond snapping pictures with her iPhone before she enrolled in his Photography 1 course, but she discovered a new world in old-fashioned film photography.

“Half of them take it as an elective and they get hooked,” Allen says. “It’s interesting that the majority want to study film, not digital. They fumble and stumble at first. They don’t know what visual thinking is, and they’re afraid of the chemistry in the darkroom. Learning this visual competence along with the mechanical competence is overwhelming.”

Allen has been teaching at Queensborough for more than 30 years, full time since 1998. He’s always had a simple approach: Don’t try to teach a student how to see but how to look. “Visually, they don’t know what they’re looking at so when they show me a photograph I ask them a lot of questions: What’s going on in this photograph? Why did you take the photograph? Who is this person? Who is he to you? What’s he looking at? I used to say this about raising my children: I didn’t lead them, I fol-

lowed them and encouraged them and made sure wherever they were going they were exploring their own sensibilities.”

Of course, as any teacher or parent knows, sometimes encouraging involves a little pushing. Out the door, in this case. For Allen, teaching photography to community college students means insisting they break out of their cocoons.

“They are required to go to the International Center of Photography, they are required to go to the Museum of Modern Art. I tell them: ‘It is mandatory that you look at magazines and books, that you look at a newspaper, that you see films, that you listen to music, that you eat, that you cook. All of it goes in. The ones who take it seriously find a way to learn photography.’”

He pointed to a photograph by Angela Kaffetzakis, a second-year student. “This is pretty amazing, just three semesters of photography. This is fine work and I celebrate it and I support it but I don’t let her off the hook. Once you commit, that’s it, you’re in. I fight you to the bitter end. You can learn to do this. And then it’s not a matter of can you but will you. This is a tough ballgame, photography, and it’s getting tougher. Talent is one thing but character, integrity, discipline and focus — that changes the game. We have students go from here to SVA [School of Visual Arts], Pratt, Purchase.”

Allen paused to call over to another student. “Sequoia! First of all, that’s a name to die for. Do you have some photographs with you?”

“It’s in the thingie,” Sequoia told him.

“What’d I tell you about that word? There’s no thingie in here.”

Jules Allen grew up in San Francisco, the son of cultured, working-class parents. “My father was a barber and worked in the post office, but he was a very well-read and aesthetically polished cat. He was very, very finished. We had prints of Picasso and Degas on the wall, Duke Ellington, we subscribed to the New Yorker and GQ. I was the only black kid around with that stuff.”

But Allen says he was still a street kid as a teenager, a little too easily tempted by trouble. Then one day he saw a picture of a striking-looking black man in Life magazine. “I asked my father who it was and he says, ‘That’s Gordon Parks, he’s a famous photographer.’ He had this shearling coat on with the collar turned up, the hair and that moustache. He was

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beautiful. Then my father showed me these photographs Parks had done of Malcolm X. And my eyes lit up. I said at that very moment, ‘I’m gonna be a photographer.’”

Someone Allen knew, an amateur photographer, told him about a public darkroom run by San Francisco’s parks and recreation department. “It was my saving grace — it opened a whole new world for me,” he says. “It gave me something to think about other than being slick, trying to get something for nothing.” Discovering Gordon Parks,

learning how to make pictures, “I learned that you could be creative and that was okay. It didn’t just belong over there” — he motions as if to the other side of the tracks. “We could have it too.”

But Allen was still a kid, too unfocused to think about a career and with a high school education he describes as “most poorly.” And then came the draft. Allen went to Vietnam in 1968, though he managed to bring his camera with him and even found his way to a darkroom. “I was a resourceful cat,” he says. “I took a lot of photographs. But it was a horror. A horror. And when I got home my mother got rid of all of them. She said, ‘Baby, you’re home, you’re safe, it’s over, let it go. You don’t need to see any of that ever again.’”

The war did what war tends to do — beat the foolish youth out of him. “When I got home I bought a VW Beetle and drove around the U.S. because I had just been in the war and I wanted to see what this country was. Then I went back home and I said, ‘I’m through with the streets. I’m going to school.’ I settled down, started reading books.”

Allen enrolled at California State University in San Francisco and started out as an English major. But photography still was inside him. “One day I wandered into the art building and I met Jack Welpott,” a prominent photographer who was at the center of San Francisco’s thriving photography community, which included his mentor, Ansel Adams. “He invited me to his house and there was a wall of art books, art was everywhere — drawings, paintings, sculptures — and everything was creative and personal. He made the furniture. And I’m like, ‘Bong!’ I said, ‘You can live like this?’”

Welpott and other luminaries of San Francisco’s thriving photography community became mentors. “All those cats embraced me. They said, ‘This is a tough game for a black kid to be in, Jules, but you got a lot of talent and we like you.’”

Allen switched his major to photography and earned a BFA. And then a master’s in clinical psychology and counseling because he wanted to learn about human behavior — and earn a living. He worked as a psychiatric social worker in the county jail for three years and was planning to get a Ph.D. when it occurred to him that what he really wanted to do was

Please turn to next page

Learning to Look Before You Shoot

Continued from previous page

move to New York — and become a photographer.

“New York had a rhythm, a pace,” Allen says, “and Harlem was like magic to me. I started meeting other photographers and they really helped me get going. Everyone got along around the image, but everyone was scrambling to make a living.”

The first notice he got was a show of street photography at the Studio Museum in Harlem that was covered by *The New York Times* and the *Village Voice*. In the 1980s, he took up boxing at Gleason’s, the legendary Manhattan boxing gym, but found fight training to be a window into the souls he found in and around the ring. He wound up doing more shooting than sparring, “and two years later I had a book” — or at least the makings of one. *Double Up*, Allen’s fourth book, was published in 2011, 30 years later.

Overhearing the discussion, a student asked Allen, “When you do concepts and you focus mainly on blacks, do you feel like that kind of limits you?”

“That’s a good question — you’re a smart man,” Allen replied. “But I think it actually expands me. Diane Arbus said the more specific something is the more general it is.”

“So by focusing on one group of people you’re shooting for the whole world?” the student said.

“Bam!” Allen said. “In order to be whoever you are you have to be who everybody else is. Because everybody has a culture and the closer you are to your culture the more you can give to the rest of the world.”

In the age of camera phones, selfies and underemployment, students often tell Allen that their parents think photography courses are a waste of time. “They don’t understand what their children are doing taking pictures,” he says.

Allen freely acknowledges photography is a tough career to break into, especially photography that aspires to art. Years ago, he found himself confronted with that reality by students themselves. “They said, ‘We’re supposed to make a living doing what you do, this art?’ You’re supposed to be the teacher — teach us how to make a living. They wanted to learn commercial photography but I never did that at all. So I went to the department, got some lights, some backdrops and in my studio I taught myself how to light and put a portfolio together, started looking for work. And before I knew it, I was blowing up. I had all students as my assistants. We were doing advertising, magazine shoots.”

Allen had realized long before that he had the kind of embracing personality that allowed him to blend into the culture he was trying to portray and shoot “from the inside out.” The same personality his students knew. It turned out to have a similar effect with famous and powerful people.

“We went to do Colin Powell at the Waldorf,” Allen recalls. “And he says, ‘What’s happening, man? How you doing, baby?’ He took all that Mr. Secretary of State stuff off.”



BODYMOVES

19 Choreographers at 10 Colleges

Dance, Dance,

By Margaret Ramirez

WITH THE AUTUMN SUN blazing through Hunter College’s north studio, hip-hop choreographer Jennifer Weber leads a brash group of dance students in a master class that attempts to reinvent hip-hop.

As the beat thumps, the dancers follow Weber’s movements, learning an animated routine filled with swooping arms and complicated footwork. Weber then splits the class into pairs, asking them to play off each other’s movements, in a style less like hip-hop and more reminiscent of ballet.

Weber, who is founder and artistic director of the hip-hop dance company Decadancetheatre, is one of 19 acclaimed choreographers taking resi-

dence, rehearsing and teaching at 10 colleges across The City University of New York.

The groundbreaking new residency program, known as the CUNY Dance Initiative, strikes a unique cultural partnership by providing dance companies with free rehearsal space on a college campus, while allowing students and surrounding communities to interact with professional dancers at master classes, public lectures and open rehearsals.

In addition to the Decadancetheatre residency at Hunter College, some of the other dance companies participating in the CUNY Dance Initiative include: Renegade Dance at Brooklyn College; Elisa Monte Dance at City College; Chloe Arnold’s Syncopated Ladies at John Jay College; Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo at Lehman College and