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Portrait of a teen as a young scientist Artist captures Newark's promising students *DAN BISCHOFF STAR-LEDGER STAFF*

ART

Portraits of Science Explorers by **Mary Alice Copp**

Where: The Newark Museum, 49 Washington St., Newark

When: Through Feb. 18. Noon-5 p.m. Wednesdays-Fridays; 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturdays-Sundays

How much: Suggested contribution \$7; \$3 seniors, children, and students. Call (973) 596-6550 or visit www.newarkmuseum.org

Mary Alice Copp has just opened a show of portraits at the Newark Museum that are also for and by the museum. They are likenesses of gifted Newark high school students enrolled in the museum's Science Explorers' Program, which brings teenagers into the museum for semesters-long prep work before they go to college.

Copp, a Morristown painter who has been artist-in-residence at Harvard's Lowell House, has been working on this project in the museum for the last four years, and the result is 15 portraits, more than half of them group portraits featuring two or three sitters. The conceit was that the subjects could choose where they wanted to be pictured. They could pose in front of any museum display, whether it was high art (like the carved stools in the "Expanding Africa" section or Hiram Powers' "Greek Slave," the Victorian marble with its chiseled chain links) or in front of a science exhibit. **Copp** would then meet her subjects for 10 hours or so of posing and produce, with some studio work on her own, the finished painting.

You don't often see a show that is made up of a dozen or more portraits of teenagers. Young people, after all, don't usually have the money to commission an oil portrait. It's even more rare to see portraits of so many inner-city kids, especially posed in an art museum setting. This very unusual show is just effortlessly charming, and the paintings far more interesting than you might imagine (or this bare-bones description can justify).

Take the portrait of Ryan Silver, now a student at Rutgers-Newark, posed diffidently next to a starfish and a large, vase-like fluted shell. Silver exudes a kind of energetic good-naturedness in the picture, his silhouette making an undulating shape that echoes the ribbony pink top of the shell. Stylized as it is, his likeness comes across as remarkably true to life.

"I think as I've been learning to paint I've sort of naturally been moving toward a greater precision of style," says **Copp**, who acknowledges her admiration for the late portraitist **Alice** Neel, who summered for much of her life in Spring Lake. "Teens, of course, are so conscious of how they look, and I really did bear down to get it just right. Some of that was simply out of respect for the students, who really are amazing kids."

The feeling was, by all accounts, mutual. Doyin Aderinto, a Science High grad now at Rutgers-Newark, who posed with two friends in front an Asante textile in the Africa gallery, said, "I really like art, and I never in the world thought I would ever be in a painting. It was really nice, seeing how it took shape. And it was very

flattering, too."

Copp's project actually grew out of a show she had in the Pierro Gallery in South Orange several years ago, in which she showed her group portrait of a family of children from Kosovo whose mother had died of cancer and whose father was shot to death before their eyes. **Copp** did the painting during her Harvard residency. Former Newark Museum curator David Palmer saw the painting and suggested she might want to paint the high school students in the Science Explorers' Program.

Now, after four years of concentrated work, these portraits are something of a valedictory for **Copp**. After living here for the past 31 years, she and her husband have decided to move back to Monterey, Calif., where she was born and raised, leaving sometime in the next six weeks. The kids who joined her in this remarkably intimate project aren't likely to forget **Copp**, any more than she will Newark.

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