During his time at Prairie View, he concluded that he wanted to delve deeper into art. After graduating, he went to the University of Houston for two years. He was tired of creating art and being in school, so he left both to focus on working white-collar jobs instead. 

“At the time, I thought ‘That’s it. I’m done with art. It’s not for me.’” Johnson explained. “But after doing this series, I started to hone in on the style I wanted to emulate. I also switched from painting with an airbrush to using a paintbrush.”

“I’m a painter,” Johnson said. “It’s who I am.”

Johnson is TCC’s campus support services coordinator and an artist whose pieces can be found in galleries from Dallas to Europe. He grew up in Lake Jackson, a small city outside of Houston, and playing high school was, primarily focused on sports. It wasn’t until he joined the junior that he stopped playing basketball and decided to delve deeper into art. After graduating, he went to Prairie View. Although he didn’t have much support, he decided to pursue his passion for art. “I started working with different artists, and they paid me. It was kind of a small city outside of Houston, and during his time away from the art world, he noticed a shift in the culture. ‘The culture started shifting. A piece titled “Ode to Basquiat” from “Faceblackness.”’

After doing this series, he started to realize he could make money doing it, but his passion opposed his concerns. “By the time I left Prairie View, I had done some commissions for the campus,” Johnson said. “I had done some sports piec- es for there, and they paid me. It was kind of a like a mini school.”

During his time at Prairie View, he went to the University of Houston for two years. During his time there, he concluded that he wasn’t doing enough to create art and that he was facing some challenges. He said people have an immediate psychological response when they see a figure such as Michael Jordan in the art world, but that imagery becoming larger than life on it with the words “ANDRE THE GIANT HAS A POSSE” written in the tail of him. They would go around and put those stickers in various locations, such as New York, California and eventually Paris. “France started to recognize that there’s a phenomenology, or there’s kind of a thing that happens with people see- ing imagery over and over again, and then that imagery became larger than life,” Johnson said.

This concept is what Johnson imple- ments into his work. He said people have an immediate psychological response when they see a figure such as Michael Jordan in one of his pieces. “People want to figure that there’s a secret to success, but there is no secret,” Johnson said. “All you would need to do is keep working and keep getting better. As you work and work and work, it’ll take you in the direction you want to go in.”

Johnson started by doing some black and white photos, some pen and ink drawings, for a style called “Faceblackness” style.”

“With his newest pieces, some of which were sold to Oscar-winning director Spike Lee, Johnson tells a story through use of imagery, dates, words, sayings” and a piece that ties to the art. For example, there is a piece with former President Barack Obama that has the word ‘DREA’ in bold lettering, referencing his presidential campaign. Each piece has an iconic figure in Black culture surrounded with symbolism tied to them.

As Johnson returned to the art world, he also had something new to balance that he didn’t have in 1996. He’s the father of a 16-year-old, so he can’t spend all of his time painting past year, I was doing it, so much,” he said. “I would literally finish a piece and start another one, finish a piece and start another one. My mom was like, ‘Dad, all you do is drawing now. We used to play video games, and I’m like ‘Sean, I’m trying to build something.”

Johnson had difficulty trying to man- age both, but as time went on, he got better at allocating attention to both.

When trying to come up with four words to describe himself, he paused. “The reason Johnson is attached to the term ‘phenomenology’ is because of an old Shepard Fairey art campaign, “Obey Giant.” In this campaign, Fairey gave some people stickers that had the late, great Graffiti Giant’s face on it with the words “ANDERE THE GIANT HAS A POSSE” written in the tail of him. They would go around and put those stickers in various locations, such as New York, California and eventually Paris.

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Michael Johnson

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Culture inspires faculty member’s art

Joe Romero

Michael Johnson