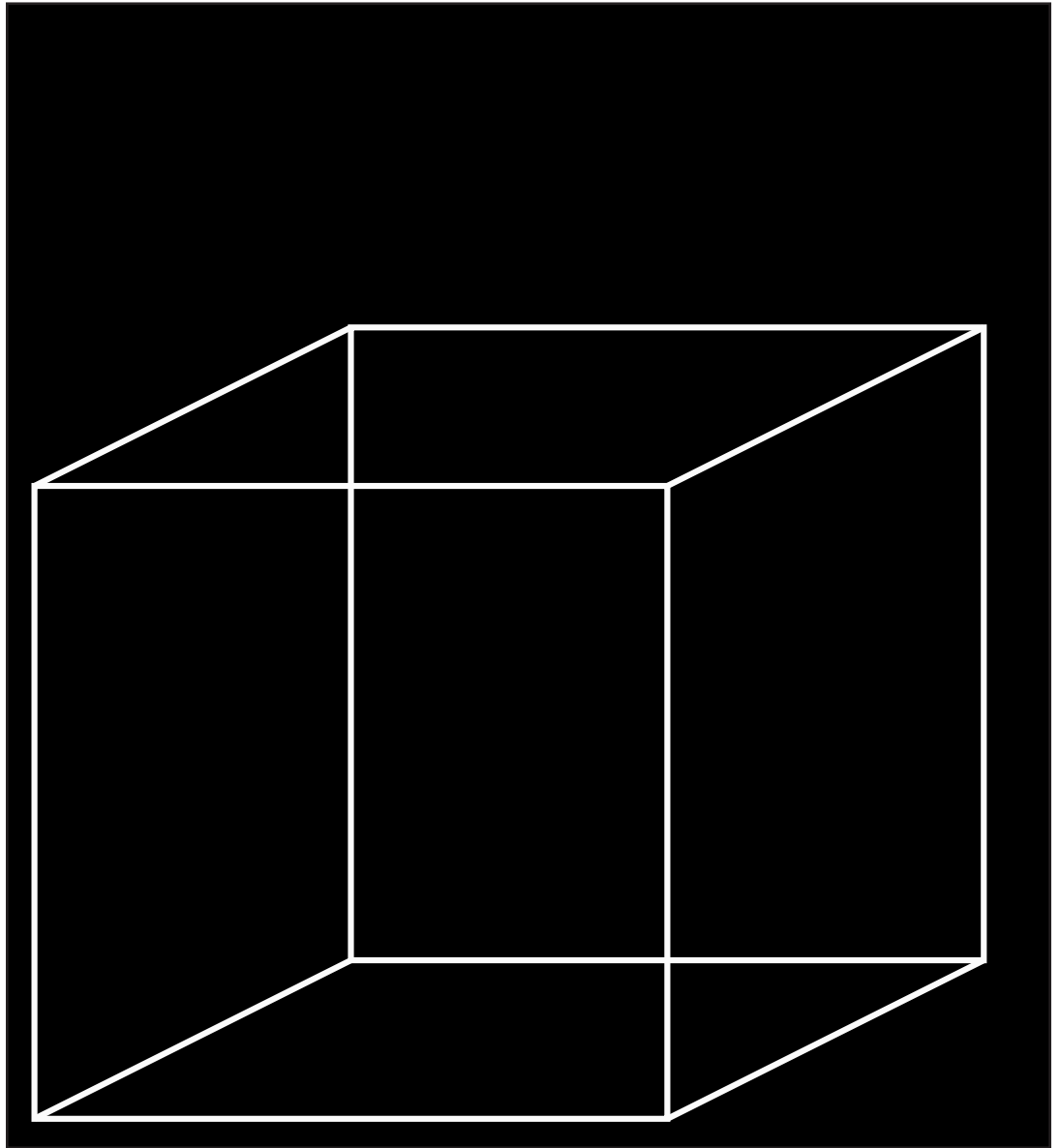


Dimensions  
Winter 2011



## Tameka Norris Susanna Koetter & Emma Sokoloff

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### ARTIST PROFILE

“Im that black Cindy Sherman and that little Kara Walker. Basquiat resurrected from the dead motherfucka... All up in UCLA!”

For her senior thesis as an undergraduate at UCLA, Tameka Norris transposed the language and aesthetic of hip hop onto the backdrop of her college campus. This first line is repeated throughout this 5:47 min long YouTube video, *Licker*, in which Norris traverses UCLA’s grounds, starting from a university hallway locker and eventually moving to an outdoor sculpture garden, where she provocatively mounts and licks the breasts of a multimillion-dollar female nude. This video’s treatment of both popular culture and the narrative of art history sets the stage for her current work as a Yale University MFA student. Understanding that the medium of her work, YouTube videos, is universally available to any web surfer, Tameka Norris confronts the interplay between vernacular and academic culture.

Although enrolled at the Yale School of Art as a Painting concentration, Norris has recently been exploring the possibilities of digital media and its internet existence. But despite her investigation of this technologically current genre, Norris still considers herself a contender within the larger art historical canon. She also views herself as an active (though not at all solitary) member of the greater Yale community. In her *Semester at Yale Series*, Norris weaves together a

conglomeration of observations into caricatures, either of herself or of her peers, each accounting their daily experiences at the Yale School of Art. In displacing sources of her work to an ambiguous realm, Norris unveils an unexpectedly valid encapsulation of her environment. She fluctuates in a personal narrative from what may seem like mockery to startling sincerity, articulating perspective through carefully pieced “momentary truths,” or instances of conversation that are casually mentioned and just as quickly forgotten. She collages the found material of social interaction, using herself as mediator, or medium, to project the ideas of these interactions via constructed personalities.

Norris especially prods the relationship of consumer to producer, observer to artist, artist to art history, in her third *Semester* video, where she performs verbatim the script for Alex Bag’s 1990s video *Semester Series* at SVA. While in her *Licker* video, Norris explicitly references the names of three art stars of the late twentieth century, here she never admits that she is reenacting the work of Alex Bag, a lesser known contemporary figure. In both instances, though, Norris questions whether fluency and familiarity with the art world is necessary for her viewer to fully understand or “appropriately” respond to her work. In fact, upon seeing her third *Semester* video for the first time, Norris’s father telephoned her, upset that she claimed that, “my parents really fucked me up, and so did high school!” In using herself as a vehicle for performance, Norris assumes responsibility not only for herself but also for the institutions she alludes to and represents. The ambiguity of her content and medium—wavering between questions of autobiographical and previously authored narrative, as well as vernacular and formal media—has oddly enough ascribed new,

unexpected interpretations of “true” expression.

Norris notes that she never really considered the extent of her audience until she stumbled upon a forum on Gradcafe, a utilitarian graduate school application networking site akin to College Confidential, where her Semester Series videos were used as a warning to those applying to Yale Art School. Alex Bag’s script includes melodramatic complaints, which naive and paranoid Gradcafe users interpreted as honest words spoken by a possibly depressed and/or medicated Norris. This confusion brings up the point of accessibility and validity, commenting on the arbitrary preciousness imposed on “high” art. Norris’s utilizes YouTube to project herself and her work on a large, even universal, scale. With its pervasive release and cost-free availability, Norris’ work inherently blurs its art historically and/or artistically fluent audience with those unfamiliar. Just as she both presents and risks herself by assuming publicized caricatures, so too does she both valorize and also question YouTube as a new medium in today’s technologically immersed culture. So go ahead, take out your iPhone, and search “Tameka Norris” on YouTube. (That is, if you haven’t already.)

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TAMEKA NORRIS

Still from the *Licker* video  
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Still from the *Semester at  
Yale* series  
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