

# Art in America

## Roving Eye: The Gifted and Talented Clifford Owens

renaud proch 06/15/12

On a Tuesday in late May, I headed to Third Streaming in SoHo, one of the city's most interesting art spaces to have opened its doors in the past couple of years. Artist Clifford Owens had curated a performance series, presenting works by four artists who had been his students. The event served as an appetizer for "Gifted and Talented," an exhibition of Owens's four protégés, opening the following week.



The gifted and talented in question were Tom Chung, Élan Jurado, Ali Kheradyar and Tameka Norris. Performing one after the other, they each started at a different corner of the gallery, moving the crowd from one side of the space to another, so that the viewers became part of the material that made up each work. I saw here the mark of Owens, who had similarly exercised his control over the audience at the live performances that accompanied his solo exhibition at MoMA PS1 earlier this year.

At every overture, with each reconfiguration of those in attendance, I got a deeper sense of the audience. There were several generations of artists there who had been giving so much to one another: Geoffrey Hendricks, who had taught Owens, was in the front row; across the room I spotted Martha Wilson and wondered whether this moment would have been possible without the precedent she had set with *Franklin Furnace*; plus Maren Hassinger, Xaviera Simmons, and a whole new generation of artists, no doubt gifted and talented, too.

Owens's selection represented a variety of concerns of contemporary performance, but I was particularly struck by Tameka Norris's work. The very recent Yale graduate began quietly, standing in the far corner of the gallery, obscured and protected by the crowd. Wearing an orange jumpsuit, she held a knife in one hand and a lemon in the other. After running the blade through the lemon once, she brought it to her mouth and, left to right, slid it to cut into her tongue. She then pressed herself against the nearest white wall, her mouth open and, with careful side steps, began sliding her body towards the other end of the room. Inch by inch, she left a trace of blood and saliva, across one wall and onto the next, until she had circled back to where she began. Moving as one, the audience backed away and gathered in the center of the space. Silent, we were being rounded up, captivated by the artist's action and her moans.

The symbolism at play--the cut tongue, orange jumpsuit and brownish red landscape of blood drawn on white walls--anchored the work in contiguous themes of expression, freedom, isolation and self-inflicted violence. Each gesture carried a ritualistic weight, and at times throughout the performance I thought of Ana Mendieta's *Body Tracks* (1974). But the horizontality in Norris's track made it less of a shrine and more of a fence around us. With a painful yet simple gesture, Norris had redefined the dynamics of the evening. Taking ownership over the crucial boundary that is the white wall, she temporarily disrupted the spatial order of things.

For a moment, the tacit social contract between the artist and the viewers broke. As the audience was pushed to occupy center stage, we no longer knew our place. Without looking at us once, Norris had disarmed our gaze, and so we stood vulnerable until she disappeared from view.

Taken together, the four performances of the evening formed a strong testament to the genre's ability to mine the grounds of human condition. Jurado's playful, naked air guitar rehearsal brought together subconscious anxiety and teenage angst, while Kheradyar turned a strange beauty ritual--the bleaching and subsequent dying of her pubic hair--into a repeated series of emotionally detached minimalist gestures. Chung, in a more theatrical delivery, shared intimate narratives that investigated unsettling and shifting notions of identity and sexuality. In four different ways, they exposed the lasting angst provoked by a perceived state of vulnerability in today's context of crisis and structural uncertainty.

Above, Tameka Norris: Untitled, 2012, performance still. Courtesy Third Streaming.

**find this article:** <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/finer-things/2012-06-15/roving-eye-gifted-and-talented-clifford-owens/>