

## Tameka Norris' characters push our buttons in exhibit at New Orleans' CAC



Advocate staff photo by John McCusker -- Artist Tameka Norris with her visual installation at the Contemporary Arts Center: 'You get to play characters, that, in my case, I create myself.'

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### video / GAMES

**By Margaret Quilter**

*Special to The Advocate*

New Orleans-based artist Tameka Norris explores themes of pop culture through music, painting and performance in her first solo video exhibition, “Family Values,” at the Contemporary Arts Center.

Norris’ video works, although exploring a central theme, conjure up widely varying emotional responses, reactions and thoughts from the audience — mainly through the characters that she develops and plays.

“There is something about art and performance that allows you not to just play a defined character. You get to play characters, that in my case, I create myself,” Norris said. “Character development is really interesting; it helps me tap into personal history and memories.”

In the main feature of her exhibition, *Purple Painting 2011*, Norris portrays a purple-painted character who lyrically chants a rap while eating a banana.

The video, projected on the wall in her exhibition space, enhances the uncomfortable quality of the work — one that Norris herself admits she has trouble watching.

“I am recreating a level of embarrassment for the audience,” she said. “The audience has to sit in that space with other people and they are all seeing it and hearing the sounds at the same time, and they’re embarrassed for the character. They’re embarrassed standing there listening to it.”

By necessity, she said, the video is “strange and abstract.”

“Even I’m still trying to understand in a way,” Norris said.

In her other works, Norris has adopted popular songs and art and has turned them inside out to find new meaning, such as her remake of Bruce Nauman’s “Walking in an Exaggerated Manner” and a remixing of Janis Joplin’s “Mercedes Benz” to the soundtrack of a Drake song.

“I’m trying to present this idea of then and now, different cultures, rock ’n’ roll culture versus rap culture ... this idea of bling is not new,” Norris said.

Yet another piece, *Free Bird*, where Norris dances on a beach to the Lynyrd Skynyrd anthem, explores the idea of reclaiming popular songs and finding new meaning that identifies with personal history.

“How do you take a song that is loaded with such a type of a history, type of people — the Rebel flag, the good old boys — but it is a beautiful song none the less,” Norris said. “How can I take that, and knowing what I know about my own history and the history of the South, try to reclaim it?”

Born in Guam, Norris moved to Gulfport, Miss., with her family when she was 3.

She received her bachelor’s degree from the UCLA School of Art and Architecture and a master’s of fine art at Yale School of Arts, and now teaches at Dillard and Xavier universities in New Orleans.

It wasn't until graduate school that Norris truly started exploring video; previously she was focused on painting and music, but has since found a way to mesh the different media together.

“I was really struggling with this idea of painting and performance and how painting can still be a performative action, how can I collapse these things that don't have a hierarchy for me. A tube of paint versus a microphone: It's all fair game to me.”

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