

Tameka Norris: 'I'm the black Cindy Sherman'

She was a rapper who toured with Coolio. Then Katrina struck her home town and her life changed for ever. Tameka Norris talks about studying art at Yale, remixing Amy Winehouse and why she's having her tattoos removed

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The art world is not so different from the music industry: there's still a lot of exploitation. But with art I can exploit myself ... Tameka Norris. Photograph: Sarah Lee for the Guardian

"It's a pile of crap," says Tameka Norris, pointing at the canvas of detritus from Hurricane Katrina, which decimated her hometown nine years ago. Most of her family had their houses flattened when the storm hit. She was in LA pursuing a rap career, but decided to move back to New Orleans a couple of years ago to document the changes in her area: "What I want to show is not just about what happened to me, it's what happened to our nation," she says.

All around the gallery hang similar scenes: the area's traditional shotgun houses remade in fabric. But the stars and stripes, leopard print and batik squares add up to a picture larger than just one Louisiana town: she's made a mishmash of patriotism, consumerism and diversity that could sum up America itself.

Across the room is another pile of fabric, this time on a video screen. Norris stands before the heap of clothes, naked. A man discusses her body. This is her take on Michelangelo Pistoletto's *Venus of the Rags*, in which a classical nude statue stands surrounded by a mountain of fabric. "There's a jarring difference between my body and Venus's," says Norris. "Venus is timeless and ideal, and I have these butterfly tattoos I got on the Venice Beach strip in the 90s."

Norris started out as a rapper, touring with Coolio as a teen, before quitting music for Yale school of art. "The art world is not so different from the music industry: there's still a high level of exploitation. But with art I have the opportunity to exploit myself – or choose how it's going to happen."

So is she trying to become the first black Venus? "There's this weird contradiction ... I do want to become Venus, but for that, I have to allow my body to become a sculpture." How? "I'm getting my tattoos removed." And why is a man telling you that you look beautiful in the film? "I just asked a photographer guy to press record. I didn't ask him to talk; he just took that on. I'm the model and the director here ... But it's like he's discrediting a woman for her ability – and that's happened in art for ever."

Norris has made many performance pieces that recreate works by white artists, to install herself – as a black woman – into art history. She's riffed on a Marina Abramovic work, in which she repeats the mantra "Art must be beautiful, artists must be beautiful" as she rips afro combs through her hair and weeps. "Marina was this ideal, and I wanted to see the differences between us," she says. "When Marina brushes her hair it had a certain look and sound, and my hair is very different and was making this harsh sound."

"Obsessed" with women who have been demonised by the media, Norris has recorded tracks such as a discordant punk version of Whitney Houston's *I Will Always Love You* and a rendition of Amy Winehouse's *Back to Black*. In her version, the trademark beehive is replaced with Norris's dreadlocks, and she ends up voiceless, unable to perform. "Back to Black is Amy co-opting Motown black music, so I'm co-opting a white British girl co-opting Motown." But it also resonates with her in terms of relationships she's had with white men. "The metaphor is different for me. The lyrics go: 'You go back to her and I go back to black.' But I'm still stuck in this skin and everybody else gets to move on with their life."

Having grown up on the Mississippi gulf coast, known for its musical roots, and gone on to be the only black woman at her Ivy League college, at 34 Norris finds herself in what she describes as the "perverted" position of being able to fuse high and low culture, art and rap. "Music is all about sampling, taking, borrowing, remixing," she says, "and that's exactly what my

what my artwork is."

Her film **Successful-Mercedes Benz** remixes Janis Joplin's Mercedes Benz and Drake's breadhead anthem **Successful** – 'I want the money, money and the cars, cars and the clothes, and the hoes, I suppose' – as her tapping toes shift from dull to hot pink, grubby to glamorous. "Young people think bling culture started with rap," she says. "But here's this old white rock star lady, who's not just wanting something – she's praying to God for it. That's intense. I want to show that the striving and desire are always there."

In another riff on rap culture, she became a character called **mynameisnotshorty** for her take on a Lil Wayne track, **Licker**. In the music video, she "treated the college campus like a nightclub and the Matisse sculptures like they were girls, so groped them and skeeted champagne on them". Licker opens with the lines: "I'm that black Cindy Sherman and that little Kara Walker, like Basquiat resurrected from the dead motherfucker".

Does she really believe she's the black Cindy Sherman or the next Basquiat? "Since Licker, there's been 20 songs of rappers referencing Basquiat. You've got Jay-Z's Picasso Baby, Kanye, even Rick Ross."

So did Jay-Z and Kanye rip her off?

"That's what rap's all about. Rappers go, I'm the baddest ... then compare themselves to the biggest mafia killer guy. I like the idea of combining art academia and rap braggadocio. I can't compare myself to Al Capone, I don't know anything about him. But I can say I'm the black Cindy Sherman."

• Tameka Norris: **Almost Acquaintances** is at Ronchini gallery, London W1, until 29 March.



Tameka Norris's **Pass Rd** (2014), a depiction of some of the destruction that followed Hurricane Katrina