

Tameka Norris

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Tameka Norris is a New Orleans-based artist who deals with complex issues of race, gender and economic inequality in her multidisciplinary work. With pieces ranging from collage relating to a home destroyed by Hurricane Katrina to hip-hop video-art and Drake remixes, her exploration of societal disempowerment is multi-faceted and intensely engaging. We spoke to Tameka about Cindy Sherman, Beyoncé, feminism and the gentrification of New Orleans to find out more about the narratives of power play that intersperse her work.



Olivia Jasmine Singer: How did you get into making art?

Tameka Norris: When I was a little girl I would dress up and pretend to be Cindy Lauper or Michael Jackson: I would take on characters and wanted to navigate space within them. My mum was a radio DJ, and she was a single mother so I would sleep at the radio station with her. She'd do her job playing urban contemporary music and I would go into the empty booth, put a spotlight on and perform. Then, when I was in my early 20s at community college in Los Angeles, a girl walked up to me and told me she wanted to photograph me. She took me to this stereotypically urban setting, graffiti everywhere, and shot some photos. During the process I thought, "wow, she's directing me but the end result is my likeness, my image and my identity." I couldn't figure out how that was tied into her work: I thought, "how can I own my own image?" If I tell somebody to take a picture of me, it is my photo. If somebody asks to take a picture of me, it's their photo. I wasn't clear on the language of ownership but I had this instinct that told me that I should frame my own body in space, I should decide where my body goes and how it goes and what it wears.

That theme of ownership and being made subject of is such a theme in your work – so much of your work is about how people were made subject of the narrative that was tied up in Katrina. How did that affect your work?

That was a very powerful moment for me. I was in community college taking these classes – but I just did whatever the assignment was that my teacher told me to do. The day that Katrina hit was the first time that I made a painting with a purpose, out of necessity, because it was the only thing I could do to respond to the situation: I had to let what I was going through manifest itself. I was watching repeated images of what was happening, not having any contact with my family, not knowing what their situation was and I just responded artistically to the things that I was seeing.

Most of my family was actually in Gulfport-Biloxi and the difference with the storm there was that they didn't have the flooding but they had the storm itself – the wind – so everything was flattened. In New Orleans, there were structures remaining but back home everything was just gone. It was hard to try and wrap my head around: where's home after that? So I had to adopt New Orleans as an extension of home because it was the most recognisable site for me.

Do you think that Katrina operated as a catalyst for discussion around race relations in America?

Sure, I think it was a catalyst for discussion but I still don't know where that discussion is going. I decided after grad school to move back because there was no way I could stay away any longer, I needed to go and immerse myself: what did progress look like? What did gentrification look like? I knew what I was reading and I knew what my family was telling me but I needed to see for myself. For five years, my work was nostalgia, loss, remembering, trying to re-map, re-place, bring back things. And then not just for the work but for my personal health, too, I had to stop trying to bring it all back together and accept what was going on around me and figure out how to move forward.

Now you live in the 9th ward?

Yeah. I wanted to live in the centre, the heart of where this all happened and I live within three blocks of where I spent summers when I was a kid. The house is unrenovated, you can feel the spirit and it's janky: there are air-leaks everywhere, there's a bullet hole through my window, the floors are uneven but it was really important for me to be there.

Is the area changing with gentrification? It's bizarre to have something destroyed be given this new identity.

It's weird – because I'm an artist, I'm on boards of organisations in New Orleans and I have this 'status'. A lot of the people of colour in the city, they're considered just to be 'people in the community' and *those people* don't have a voice, *those people* don't have an education in books, *those people* don't have resources. I look just like them but I have all these different resources and it's difficult. Sometimes there are people in that community who don't *look* like me, but we have the same type of educational experience and so they expect me to be on their side because they feel like my mentality might be more in line with theirs.

More in line with theirs because you are similar on that tangible level...

Exactly. But on the other hand, if I stand up for 'my people' – and they're all my people, everybody's my people, both sides are my people – but if I stand up for the black community, the organisations are like, "well, we didn't invite you here to do that, we want you to fulfill our quota but still play by our rules." It's really complicated and it's hurtful to see the politics of what is expected of me because of the position that I'm in and the opportunities that I have, the access that I have. Who do I extend that hand to?

I really love your adaptation of Michelangelo's *Venus of the Rags*: I think it's a very interesting look at the way the black female body figures into a western canon of art. When was it that you started wanting to subvert that traditional narrative, one that is projected onto the "people in the community" in New Orleans?

Well, I left Mississippi when I was 17 and I moved to Los Angeles to become a rapper... I was gonna be the next Lil' Kim: I had a record deal, I even toured with Coolio! [Laughs] But when you're a young girl with no education, just wanting to be down, you make some decisions that aren't of integrity. I was rapping and the lyrics were really raunchy: it was everything that I was being taught by the media about how to project myself as a woman of colour. One day, some guys left a Portishead cassette tape at my house and I was like, "oh! *This is me.*" I got obsessed with Beth Gibbons in her tattered sweater and shitty shoes, smoking cigarettes and singing on stage. She wasn't flaunting anything but it was the most powerful thing I'd ever heard. After that, I went to the record label and I put *Dummy* into the cassette player and they were like, "oh, nonono." But after I'd heard that sound, I knew that there was something bigger for me to express musically and they dropped me from my deal and I moved on. Then I realised that no one was gonna record me because I wasn't talking about all *that* [gestures at her body] anymore. So, I went to audio engineering school to learn how to make my own records and record my own stuff and then I went to get jobs in recording studios. I was like, "I wanna be an engineer, that's hot, that's where it's at, I'll give up being a rapper if I can be the badass female audio engineer and I can record all the rappers – then I'll be way more powerful. I don't need to be their entourage, I'll be the one making their music sound good." But every studio I went to said that I was too much of a distraction, too little, too pretty, it'd be too unsafe to send me out to get food. Jesus, I'd done all this work, I had the credentials, I had the skill set and they *still* wouldn't let me in there because I was a 'distraction'. They needed an old white guy with a beard to do that job. So all that stopped but I had this background in music, in hip-hop: sampling, borrowing, stealing, appropriating. In my artwork, it's the same pedagogy as for that music: texture, producing, curating. So it's not like I tried to be transgressive: I just used the skills that I had. I knew that I could rap and I knew that I could shake it around and I knew that I had gotten into UCLA so – even after five years of community college – I wasn't a dummy. And I didn't wanna *not* be a rapper, I still want to tour, I wanna be like Peaches: she's almost 50 years old still rapping on stage.

It's funny seeing your video *Licker*: without any context, it's almost a direct replication of conventional hip-hop videos, just in a different setting.

Licker comes from *Lollipop*, the Lil Wayne song. I love Lil Wayne [she cringes] – I still have that conflict between critique and desire. It changed for me when I was teaching high school and I was letting my students listen to their headphones while they worked and this 14-year-old girl was singing a cappella, "gonna lick lick you like a lollipop, shawty wanna thug." It was so powerful to hear it come out of this little girl's mouth. And believe me, when I was driving to school that day I was probably listening to that song and singing it too – but as an adult I can know what it means to me and it doesn't define me. But music is powerful and these lyrics become mantras so, to hear her in this room where everybody could hear her moved me – I was like, "fuck, I need to respond to that. Shit, *I'm* a licker. She's saying she's a licker, well I'm a licker, too." So the character in the video became a licker, someone that sits centrally inside of those projections, identifying the conflict but still desiring it. I was at UCLA still wishing that I was Karrine Superhead Steffans. Still wondering, "can't I just go suck Lil Wayne's dick?" And I had to be honest about that conflict within myself, so I made a rap video where I do that braggado, but I'm not as bad as Al Capone or whatever people say... I'm the black

Cindy Sherman and I'm the little Karen Walker, like Basquiat, resurrected from the dead motherfucker. And instead of having champagne skeeted on me, I skeet champagne onto some five-kabillion-dollar Henri Matisse sculptures that are in the UCLA Sculpture Garden. I wanted to find out what it did to flip it around but still emulate the gestures: I still wanted to feel this strange empowerment that somehow still sits centrally within me, that there's a power in shaking one's ass and in polarising someone with my 'siren seduction'. I remember when I did it, my professor Barbara Kruger asked me: "how did this happen?" It shut everyone down. We shot it in two days on campus at the weekend, so nobody saw it, and when I showed it for an exhibition, everyone felt like I did it behind their backs. They couldn't believe this happened 'on their dime'.

I thought it was interesting when I saw you are a fan of Big Freedia: she performs a similar play on bodies being made subject. I wanted to ask how you felt about the Miley Cyrus debacle: whether you thought that a white girl performing those gestures in a pop context, accessorising it with black women's bodies, changed their meaning?

I'd be curious as to what you think the different meaning is?

When I see Big Freedia doing exactly the same moves that I see women doing in Lil Wayne videos, there's something different about it. When I saw Miley doing it, there was something different still. The things that made me uncomfortable about that one performance at the VMAs were manifold: the combination of a white girl looking like she'd been sold into a role of black female sexuality that's already been sold so many times, while accessorised by the black women whose sexual identity she was co-opting. I didn't think, "fuck you, Miley", I thought "fuck you, whichever system arranged this idea of empowerment."

I've moved on from the Miley thing, but only to go, "okay, let's talk about Beyoncé, let's talk about what it's like to sing 'Drunk in Love'" – which is a metaphor for drinking her husband's cum. Fair enough, she's married, she can do what she wants, but to call yourself a feminist in public whilst playing into that role... 'Drunk in Love' is written by eight people: seven are men and one is Beyoncé... and you know that she is on that list gratuitously. It's not about her love for her husband and it's not about empowering anybody. I don't think that Beyoncé is articulate or engaged enough to have a real opinion about it: I think that if she were conscious and really thought about what it means to say "eat the cake, Anna Mae" – which is quoting like Turner, that famous moment of abuse in *What's Love Got To Do With It* – well, she hasn't, has she? To put that in a song is disrespectful. Tina Turner paid dues that Beyoncé could never even try to wrap her head around. Tina Turner performed in venues that she couldn't even walk in the front door of; Tina Turner got harassed by the cops like any other Motown musician. I think that, as a woman, if she were really conscious and could pull herself out of the machine that she is in, she would see there is something very insensitive and contradictory about that shit. Now, she can do all that in public but don't then call yourself a feminist. Have that, do that, eat your husband's cum, do what ever you want with it, quote like, but please do not assert yourself as a feminist when you don't even really know what that entails.

And what she does to the black body... when she performed with her husband at the Grammys, they're meant to be a power couple? What does it mean to be empowered? What does that look like? Her husband is in a beautiful suit and she's scantily clad, got hardly any clothes on. If this is her man, and they're equal, why does their power look so different aesthetically? And then, Jay-Z's lyric in his verse talks about catching a charge. Like, he's gonna beat her pussy up so hard, he's gonna catch a charge like Mike Tyson. Which is just reiterating all of this. Sure, this is your wife, you can both do what you want in bed, but know who your audience is. When you're taking audience with Barack Obama, you might wanna sit down for a hot second and think about the larger picture. So the thing with Miley is that I feel like she is a child and she is just emulating what she recognises: she sees Rihanna, she sees Beyoncé, she sees Lily Allen, these are her peers, twerking. It's not really Lily, it's not really Miley: they're just the vessel and that's why they pick people like that, because they will perform that.

As long as there are women out there that will allow it, it will happen. I was less affected by her doing it than I was by the black bodies that were around her. But on the other hand, there's a power because rap

has become popular culture, it's no longer counter-culture. It was a black thing. So I do find some relief in seeing white girls get all ignorant, it actually makes me happy sometimes.

Because at least it's broken through somewhere?

Yeah, it funnels out. It's not unlike anything else: sagging pants, trends that start in lower socio-economic black communities spread out to the suburbs and before you know, you've got white boys sagging their pants and making neighbourhood gangs. It sort of breaks this idea of what a stereotype could be so, on one hand, it's empowering for me to say "I don't give a fuck what Miley Cyrus does" because what she's doing is a caricature of something that's not even real anyways. I don't wanna be like, "she's mocking my culture": that's not my culture, I wasn't born twerking. So maybe she can have at it, put her little grill in and do whatever she wants and if that means other little white girls are gonna go around doing that, I'm glad their parents have that shit to deal with, good for them. Good luck. Figure it out.

And I appreciate Big Freedia, I appreciate that New Orleans has really embraced her and it's done a lot for the queer community in the South so I'm way on board. Should Big Freedia be the one who did that Macklemore song, 'Same Love'? Maybe. But that's the difference between her and a white dude who has access and a college degree. It's about what the industry will allow. There are musicians and rappers out there who aren't talking about popping molly and doing drugs and beating pussy till they catch a charge, but there's also a system.

And in that system, straight, white Macklemore gets to rap about gay rights and win a Grammy.

Right. It's the same as feminism, feminism was not for black women!

Absolutely not. With your take on Abramovich's video *Art Must Be Beautiful/Artist Must Be Beautiful*, I wanted to ask whether you felt like feminism is whitewashed?

I certainly think that during the first couple of waves, black women had more things to deal with: like their husbands being killed. They had to worry about being black first; getting civil rights was key before a black woman could even be involved in a dialogue with white women about feminism. What white feminists wanted were great strivings, but they were things that black women didn't even have access to yet because they were still five steps behind. It's a tough choice: do I support my fellow sister, my fellow woman, regardless of what colour she is? Or do I stay over here, do I survive?

Historically, feminism was always middle class white women fighting a very specific battle.

And I think it's still the same and it's complicated by the media, by pop culture. I think it's really hard because the black female body has been objectified so heavily throughout history: the white body is so virtuous and the black body is so perverse that I feel that this idea of a black woman being empowered within that image and owning a feminist position is almost impossible. If it's not within you to feel virtuous and worthy, how are you gonna? And what is it about the black female body that is so compelling to these women that they want to emulate it? I mean, that's rhetorical, there are a lot of reasons... we don't have enough time to get into how complicated that is. Peaches debuted a film in New Orleans a few weeks ago and I asked her about her appropriation of black identity and queer identity and she was like, "yeah, when I was young I went to Gladys Knight concerts and I wanted that." And she said it so honestly. There needs to be more of that. But that's why she's an artist, because she plays by her own rules, and she's honest and there's power in that.

It's in the intention, and you can feel it.

Yeah, you can always feel it.

