

REVIEW

Tameka Norris: Almost Acquaintances

14 February – 29 March 2014, Ronchini Gallery, London

By Dea Vanagan



Josephine, 2014. Courtesy the artist and Ronchini Gallery, London

When do you know an artwork is finished? According to multidisciplinary artist Tameka Norris, the answer is this: when you want to throw up. This unapologetic attitude bestows upon her work – be it performance, video, photography, painting or music – a certain confidence. As alter ego Meka-Jean or Mynameisnotshorty, she raps about being the resurrection of Jean-Michel Basquiat and the black Cindy Sherman, and her conviction leaves us wondering if Norris will live up to that hype.

She spent most her life on the Mississippi Gulf Coast – infamously torn apart in 2005 by Hurricane Katrina. Residing in LA when the storm hit, Norris developed a disjointed relationship to her birthplace, and ‘post-Katrina’ became the central narrative in her practice. *Almost Acquaintances*, her debut UK solo show, continues this investigation into the decay and fragility of modern life, mediated through her remote experience of Katrina. It features her latest body of work – a series of sculptural paintings made of torn bedsheets, painted and printed fabrics, embroidery and tampered representations of the American flag. Despite visual references to Tracey Emin and Yinka Shonibare, Norris succeeds in creating a convincing artistic voice of her own.

It’s hard to deny a sense of political injustice here, but the works speak quietly and tenderly in contrast to the artist’s often-heated polemic. The paintings are carefully dressed and draped with discarded fragments, and the titles pay homage to the lives and homes that once stood, while the exposed stretcher bars echo the notion of structures stripped of their flesh.

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The strength of her work is in its tension. Norris is attempting to expose the reality of New Orleans as a victim of failed gentrification post-Katrina, and fittingly the show opens with *Empty Lot, Comes Predator* (2014). Here, four painted pink diamonds are configured to resemble an ‘X’ that is reminiscent of the search-and-rescue X-coding that was used to record the number of dead bodies found on a particular site following the disaster. Many of the homes that remained standing after Katrina still bear these codes, the residents lacking the funds for their expensive removal, as a constant reminder of the devastation that makes it challenging for the community to be optimistic about the future. This rather grim reminder is counterbalanced by Norris’s subtle and sometimes playful execution of these paintings – braided rags, personal anecdotes, warm colours and soft textures.

Tucked away on a small screen at the back are two earlier videoworks. In both films the artist casts herself as a Black Venus in response to Michelangelo Pistoletto’s *Venus of the Rags* (1967/74). They endeavour to illustrate her wider practice and exploration of what it means to be a black artist in the canon of art history, and I can’t help but think that if similar works had been given more prominence, it would have allowed for a deeper dialogue with the current work and greater dimension to the exhibition; but ultimately, this is a strong display by a promising young provocateur.

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