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## “Listen to Nothing, but Listen to Everything”: A Conversation with Tameka Norris

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2 DAYS AGO

Tameka Norris caused a stir this winter following her Performa 13 piece, in which she appeared to cut her tongue with a knife and then used it to paint a line on a wall at the Studio Museum in Harlem. With early aspirations to become a rapper, Norris found her way into art through music, which is evident in video works she created as an undergraduate at UCLA, like *Licker*. After finishing her MFA at Yale School of Art in 2012, Norris has completed numerous residencies, exhibited across the U.S., and will soon have her first solo show in Europe. 2014 bodes well for Norris, now a professor living and working in New Orleans, as her upcoming projects include a solo show at Lombard Freid Gallery and a feature-length film to premiere at the Prospect 3 Biennial in New Orleans. We caught up with the artist in anticipation of her Lombard Freid show, to learn about her practice, background, and inspirations.

**Artsy:** What can we expect from your upcoming show at Lombard Freid? How does it differ from your show at the gallery a year ago?

**Tameka Norris:** You can expect large-scale paintings. Larger than me. Open house painting; this new sculptural way that I'm dealing with the paintings like a minimal tent. It was much more of a production this time and the use of materials like the fabrics really speak to my travels, using fabrics from India, from Europe, from Africa, by way of Harlem.



Tameka Norris  
*How to Write a Cursive*, 2014  
Lombard Freid Gallery



Tameka Norris  
*Waffle House*, 2014  
Lombard Freid Gallery



Tameka Norris  
*Piggy Wiggle 2*, 2014  
Lombard Freid Gallery

**Artsy:** Can you tell us about your work for the upcoming Prospect 3 Biennial? Is this work informed by its location in New Orleans?

TN: I'm making a feature-length film; it's currently titled *Meka Jean: How She Got Good*, in collaboration with Garrett Bradley who is a young woman that I met when we were both at UCLA. She was in grad school in film, I was in undergrad in art, and we both made our way to New Orleans, one way or another and we realized how we were dealing with parallel territory within our practices.

This film is very much informed by the location because it's about a character, Meka Jean, an alter-ego of mine, as she's becoming acquainted again with home after it's been destroyed and is being rebuilt. Franklin Sirmans, the curator of the Biennial, says that he's coming at it from the approach of the novel *The Moviegoer* by Walker Percy; it's the story of this guy who comes back to New Orleans after the Korean War and is experiencing life in a new way, and I feel like this film is somehow a contemporary version of that.

**Artsy:** Your work spans painting, video, performance, and music—how do you bridge so many different media? What has inspired you to work this way? What is it like translating this into a gallery or museum exhibition?

TN: My mom put together this scrapbook of pictures of me over the years and gave it to me as a gift, and I guess it's the evolution of this character that I'm returning to in the film. I seem to want to play with clothes and dress up and have this persona. I guess maybe that's my first memory of tapping into some sort of artist identity. It was mostly [about] engaging music and wanting to be like Sheila E, Cyndi Lauper, Janet Jackson, Prince, Michael Jackson, or Boy George—all these gender-bending, really interesting characters I sit in between. So this idea of bridging the media, music has been the propelling force and I wanted to be a rapper and I had lots of opportunities in Los Angeles, some that were of integrity, others that were not.

I wanted to be considered smart and maybe a scholar and I don't think I could articulate that at a certain time, but once I got to Santa Monica College my mind started getting blown. I spent five years there and ended up at UCLA and when I did that I figured out I could make interesting paintings, I could make things that people were into like conceptual photography, bring my music and my voice and my language into my work.



Tameka Norris  
*12 Times Table*, 2014  
Lombard Freid Gallery



Tameka Norris  
*Post-Katrina Painting #10*, 2013  
Lombard Freid Gallery



*Untitled (Final Performance, Yale School of Art) Manifesto*,  
YouTube



Tameka Norris  
*Untitled (self-portrait)*, 2012  
Lombard Freid Gallery

Translating those things into a gallery space or a museum really makes it safe, it calls it what it is, it calls it art. Sometimes I don't mind when things sit in a space where people are uncertain about what it is.

**Artsy: Can you share any anecdotes about your professors and what it was like to study under such established artists and scholars at UCLA and Yale?**

TN: What's crazy is I really didn't know the amazing achievements of the professors that I worked with at UCLA —[Barbara Kruger](#), [Lari Pittman](#), [Andrea Fraser](#), [Mary Kelly](#), [Cathy Opie](#), [Rodney McMillian](#)—but it was great. I realized over time how amazing these people were and I'm kind of happy that I didn't know because it made my experience feel a lot more genuine, and it allowed me to be really bold at times, like when Lari Pittman would say “we're gonna have to end class a few minutes early I have to go to a meeting for Skowhegan something or other” and I'm like “What's that?” and he tells me what it is and I'm like “oh yeah I think I saw that, I think I should go there, I wanna go there, older more experienced artists go there, I'm a little older, I need that.” It was really great, undergrad was a really, really beautiful, sweet, tumultuous experience, and it's something that I'll never forget. I was a little bit older and I just really cherish the way nobody bothered me when I was sleeping in an open studio space for five students with an air mattress and a coffee table and a crock pot.

And Yale, Yale was tough. I just can't even speak on it, it's just still a little too raw. It was a very tough time for me.

**Artsy: What's the most important thing you learned in art school?**

TN: Listen to nothing, but listen to everything.

**Artsy: Could you talk a little bit about your Performa 13 performance? How does that work fit into your career thus far?**

TN: Performa. God, this, this performance, this notorious, tough performance. I never intended to do it more than the one time I did it at Yale. It was meant to be an exiting gesture, leaving my mark, leaving my DNA forever, within a space that I absorbed so much from. The second time I was invited by Clifford Owens to do it at Third Streaming, [which was] like me saying “no, I'm not gonna do the New York thing, I'm gonna go to New Orleans and do it a different way.” Then the third time I was invited by Valerie Cassel Oliver, curator at the CAM Houston, to do it for her

show “Radical Presence,” an exhibition of black performance artists over the last 50 years or so, and another situation where I felt like I should do it and this is me being a part of this historical event among these artists that I learned about in school—David Hammons, Carrie Mae Weems, Terry Adkins, Clifford Owens, William Pope.L, Adrian Piper, Ulysses Jenkins, Lorraine O’Grady, the list goes on. Then at Studio Museum, for Performa, which is kind of me making my mark in this larger context of performance. It’s been this gesture that has meant different things at different times.

**Artsy: Were there any reactions to the work that surprised you?**

TN: [During Performa] Valerie Cassel Oliver’s little son Gio, who couldn’t be more than three or four, was in the audience, and when I was performing he was this beautiful little meditation in my ear asking little questions like “What are we doing? Why are we here? What’s happening? What is this?” He was really curious, but not freaked out at all, while other people are really kind of reacting to the visceralness of what they believe is happening and he’s just got this sweet little voice and it really changed the tone of the work for me. It made that particular performance a really moving one for me.