

Introducing *Tameka Norris*

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Meka Jean, Too Good For You (video still), 2014

When I call Tameka Norris over Skype on a gray Thursday morning, I'm reluctant to turn on the video chat. At her request, I do and am relieved to find that she too is still in her pajamas. "Signs of a privileged life," she laughs. Normally Norris would be teaching, but she has the day off.

I met her in March at Lombard Freid Gallery in New York—Norris lives in New Orleans, but travels to New York and Los Angeles regularly. *Too Good For You (Introducing Meka Jean)* was her first solo show in the city, and even before Jeffrey Deitch walked through the door, it was clear she was to be taken seriously.

A multidisciplinary artist with degrees from UCLA and the Yale School of Art, her presence in the space was all-encompassing.

Norris' current work is a mix of painting and collage, video monologues, music videos, and performance. At Lombard Freid, she had layered different types of canvas over large wooden frames to remake the New Orleans landscape she lost after Hurricane Katrina. Colorful fabric scraps representing her past life were painted over with text and the logos for Piggly Wiggly and Waffle House. Seen within the barren white walls and exposed concrete of the gallery, the pieces radiated a certain vigor,

inciting small groups of viewers to huddle around them as if trying to stay warm by a fire.

Meka Jean also made an appearance. This is Norris' alter ego, a character she created to perform original and appropriated music, like the amazing "Too Good For You." Who is this pixelike artist with an obvious knowledge of hip-hop and the nuances of performance in the fine art world?

In 1997, while still a teenager, Norris moved from the Gulf Coast to Los Angeles to pursue a rap career. She did tour, but the opportunities were "limited." From there, she went to audio engineering school. "I went in order to empower myself so I could record my own music," she says. "If no one was going to help me pursue this avenue, I was going to do it myself." It wasn't until she agreed to model for someone in L.A. that she thought about becoming an artist; she enrolled in the same photography program as the woman who took her picture.

"I saw what she did, creating a whole new context, and it became about me making a context for myself. What does that look like? How do I do that?" says Norris. Then Katrina struck.

Katrina was the turning point, the end of many things for Norris. A relationship; her boyfriend at the time broke up with her in the months after the disaster because she was suffering depressive moods. It was also the end of her orbiting creative fields, making work on assignment for other people. Norris recalls the moment when she began to make her own art. She was at home in L.A. when she first saw New Orleans on the news. Unable to focus on school, she began to paint.

"I remember sitting down on the floor. I didn't have real painting supplies at the time or a stretched canvas, but the guy who broke up with me had one of his paintings on the

wall and I took it down, gessoed it over, and painted my first painting on top of his."

With the pieces she made over the course of the disaster and its aftereffects—a renegade school bus, her grandmother's house washed away—she applied to UCLA and got in. She studied under the likes of Barbara Kruger and upon graduating, went to Yale.

"I needed that [academic] platform to be validated. Without UCLA and without Yale, it would be impossible for me to be in the position I am in right now," Norris says. "But I tell my students you can be a part of a system without being complacent within it."



Too Good For You (Introducing Meka Jean)
at Lombard Freid Gallery

This shows in her video work from New Haven, a combination of personal involvement in and social critique on the university arts experience. At times, drawing directly from Alex Bag, another talented female performance artist, a number of the videos show Norris appropriating her classmates' experiences to shrewdly create a hilarious yet discomfiting narrative of privilege.

The common story would have Norris stay in New York after graduating, but instead she



Tameka Norris, Waffle House, 2014

chose to move back to New Orleans. This was due in part to her need to control her image, and maintain some measure of artistic freedom, and in part because of a need for change.

“When I’m in New York, I always feel on, even when I’m getting coffee.” Norris says. “Being a cousin, being a daughter, being a granddaughter, just being a community member was really important to me because those are roles I haven’t been in in a very long time. I’ve just been an artist and that’s only part of a person.”

Having completed a series of successful performance pieces (see her work for Radical Presence, immediately), Norris is currently working on a feature length film with artist Garrett Bradley for Prospect.3 Biennial in New Orleans. About the world she’s entered, on a path few are able to navigate, she says she still feels “like an outsider...really foreign.” But to go back to Lombard Freid, with Norris on the mic, the scene is that of a woman in control, firm in her place, leaving the rest of us questioning our right to be there.