



Meka Jean - Too Good For You (film still), 2014. Single-channel music video with sound. 4 min. 35 sec.

A Conversation with Tameka Norris a.k.a Meka Jean

CHARLIE TATUM on May 26, 2015 at 1:45 PM

I first met Tameka three years ago, when I was working as a gallery assistant at Lombard Freid Gallery (now Jane Lombard Gallery) in New York. We bonded quickly over our experiences in the art world, our childhoods in the South, and our collective love for Waffle House. Upon being asked by Jess and Taylor of ARTS.BLACK to contribute to this series on the intersections of race and art, I wanted to give the mic to someone who's been one of my many guides during my re-entry to the South.

Charlie Tatum: I remember calling you last spring, asking you if it were crazy to consider moving from Brooklyn to New Orleans, which I had never visited before. I wanted to return to the South, but a different South from Greenville, SC, where I grew up. You left Mississippi for Los Angeles, then New Haven, before coming to New Orleans. Can you speak a little about what brought you back?

Tameka Norris: I left Gulfport, Mississippi just after high school. I moved to Los Angeles where my biological father was living at that time. I stayed in Los Angeles for approximately 14 years until finishing UCLA, and then moved to New Haven for grad school at Yale. Since most of my family still lived in the South, it was important for me to reintroduce myself to my community, living as both a family member and as an artist and activist of sorts.

I was already in conversation with Franklin Sirmans, the curator of Prospect.3, regarding wanting to make my most ambitious work yet, a film documenting what it means to navigate and straddle multiple worlds—a local community and an international community, living as an artist and interacting with family. What does it mean to come back as an Ivy League-educated artist and then interact with family and community members who have not been exposed to art in the same way? They aren't necessarily uninterested, but not moved by my success because they don't know how to understand what my success might or could mean in the world. To be honest, I don't always know that I understand what my success might mean either.

I had also participated in Prospect.1.5 and the satellite program of Prospect.2 and noticed then the increasingly large number of white artists and transplants occupying once historically black neighborhoods. Part of me felt the need to occupy this same space as a position of resistance or in opposition to the new gentrifying Wild Wild West of New Orleans.

CT: And now you're in Berlin. What called you there?

TN: I really felt the need to remove myself from the United States in order to see myself as a more neutral or abstract body, if that's even possible. I am hoping that dividing my time, living and working between the US and Europe, will challenge me not to depend on the common tropes of much contemporary black art, including some of my own previous works.

The calling for Berlin came out of a very tumultuous two and a half years, an experience of constantly feeling like a monument if you will, constantly representing something. When I left my house and walked into my neighborhood [the Upper Ninth Ward] it was always complicated. I was constantly finding myself being so critical of the lack of basic resources, like proper and affordable grocery stores, for the poor and working classes. I was also frequently uncomfortable with the service and interactions I had or saw other folks of color have at the many new pop-up galleries, eateries, and boutiques. When I opened up my mouth, it was sort of like, *How dare I have insight, education, and ability to criticize?* Those interactions became difficult, disappointing, clumsy, confrontational and complicated. Initially, as an artist, it was very interesting for research purposes, but personally and on a daily basis it became quite heavy to constantly have these interactions, which felt equivalent to being put in a time machine and taken back 100 years.

I found that my relationships with the local community in New Orleans and the transplant communities were equally challenging, in very different ways. When I first moved to New Orleans, I was invited to be a member of Good Children Gallery and to be on the board of May Gallery, and it was difficult realizing that quite possibly, I was by default a splash of diversity, whether they understood that or not. I was the first member of color to participate in one of these artist-run collectives that had been very tightly run since Prospect.1 (which was the impetus for their conception) by UNO, Loyola, and Tulane students and professors. By my also having a national and international presence, it was easier to validate why they would invite me and not a more local (black) artist in the city, who might be more resistant to the artistic climate change in the city or questioning of the mission of these collective spaces. Who knows if these artists of color have chosen not to participate in these collectives, or if they just weren't invited, right? I think it's both. There's an understanding that these artists represent a different community from the artist-run, supposedly more academic spaces on St. Claude Avenue.

So now I'm in Berlin, and I'm thinking about what it means to be part of an artistic community that isn't so racially divided or tense in the same way as New Orleans, although I realize Berlin has its own issues, and I'm hoping it's going to provide an opportunity to think about myself and my work outside of the agendas of race and class as it relates to the United States. I'm still very much concerned with these issues, but I need a little distance to be able to function as a spiritually and emotionally balanced artist and human. Berlin is also an opportunity to operate outside of a very insular artistic community. I didn't really have a career in New Orleans. I was an artist making work in New Orleans. The biennial [*Prospect.3: Notes for Now*] was my big moment in New Orleans.

CT: What possibilities do you see for these spaces and artistic communities to overlap? I think the ideal is that we'll all be able to move between and appreciate these different communities outside of a hierarchy.

TN: Yes, that's the ideal. Sharecropping and segregation were once ideals too.

CT: Before moving here, one thing you told me that really stuck with me was that New Orleans—and the American South generally—needs people to help build an arts infrastructure. You emphasized, quite movingly, the importance of our returns to the South so that we can find a balance between the local and the internationally informed. How has the infrastructure changed and involved since you arrived back in New Orleans?

TN: I have no memory of a real artistic infrastructure existing in New Orleans as a child. From my recollection, it was not academic or institutionalized, but rather magical, inspirational, soulful, authentic, and aesthetically "Southern." There is a huge gap between my lack of access to art and art institutions as a child and my recent Ivy League education and international travels. As an artist, I am now utilizing my time, resources, and debatable privilege to fill in this gap.

CT: What tools do you think are needed in building a new and effective infrastructure in the South?

TN: In my heart I believe this can only be done by people who aren't afraid to lose friends, lose their jobs, lose sleep, and even lose money. It will take true pioneers whose ultimate goal is to speak truth to power and by any means necessary. Folks who don't get tired fast and are strong spirited. Honestly, I really just don't know. I believe there are many people (of all colors) in New Orleans who really want what's best for the city and community. But there is a stronger force for the city to contend with (gentrifiers, transplants, yuppies, hipsters, crust-punks). The thirst is just so rampant at the moment in New Orleans for outsiders to utilize and exploit the land and its people. The biggest challenge is that most of the people who belong to one of these categories don't understand or don't want to understand their contribution to the disproportionate and biased rebuilt of infrastructure in New Orleans.

CT: Did you feel loaded with extra responsibilities working as an artist outside of a traditional art capital (New York, Paris, etc.)?

TN: I really felt honored to be working outside of a traditional art capital, especially one my family has long ties to. I definitely felt burdened with extra responsibilities while being in the South though. My work and journey as a person and artist is certainly affected by my growing up partly in the South. Not only was I confronting these issues in my studio but actually in the real world each time I went to the grocery store or the bank or walked through my neighborhood. I believe there are assumed social classes of all people living in New Orleans by the gentrifying community and local community alike. These assumptions cause social and geographic segregation most of the time. I found the need to “engage the community” as much as possible. This is a sexy phrase thrown around a lot in the art world, but it seems the definition of “community” is vague and sometimes biased when it comes to dispersing funds and providing access to resources. I found myself interrogating those around me and myself, which I believe is healthy and necessary.

CT: A large component of The Meka Jean Project, your contribution to Prospect.3: Notes for Now, was your collaboration with youth and students in the production of the film. How has your role as a teacher, particularly at two HBCUs, informed your work?

TN: I brought on as many students and locals as possible because the project was about creating a conversation, a space, an opportunity, and an experience for young students, particularly of color, to see another artist of color in power, in control, and not working for *the man*. I paid these young people to be on set and treated them like professionals and peers. I believe in paying people because if you don't, it sets up an unequal and unethical dynamic. I needed their energy and input as much as they needed experience in their field of study. Otherwise, it's really Colonialism 101: *I'm coming here to show you what's best. Come and give me your time and your labor*. Our country was founded on that, and the disempowered (enslaved) built the United States of America. I needed my students! I needed to be taught what the young black college student was learning in an HBCU in contrast to my education. I needed to know the challenges and concerns of young black youth in the South.

But I also learned that many black students that grow up in the south have misconceptions about black academics that move on to Ivy League institutions. Some of the students I encountered were skeptical of my intentions because they thought I'd been whitewashed by my education. I had many honest and uncomfortable conversations with students about navigating academia. The fact that I showed up as their professor with big, natural, curly hair, jeans and Air Jordans was also an important gesture and lesson to my students about preserving authenticity, and even militancy, while thriving in rigorous, mostly white, institutional settings.

CT: In the '90s, you moved to L.A. to work in the booming hip-hop industry before deciding to pursue visual art in a serious way at UCLA and then at Yale. Your experiences outside and inside the art world inform much of your practice, particularly your videos (The Meka Jean Project, Too Good For You, Licker, etc.). How did that shift affect your practice? You're working on an album now, right?

TN: In the late '90s I moved to L.A. I started making music initially, and there was no strategy, no next move. I was sort of just in a scene, and I was happy to be in that scene, which is also a stereotype of being a woman of color in the world, being sort of complacent or a gold-digging video hoe or a basketball player's wife. Hip-hop culture, rap culture, and video culture place so much value on desirability, wanting and being wanted—I was just trying to get in where I fit in. I wasn't quite the academic type, but I could find a place shaking, popping, twerking and rapping my way through pop culture. I learned very quickly that there was a glass ceiling for a woman if your dad isn't Joe Jackson or Matthew Knowles, or if you don't have a Biggie Smalls to your Lil' Kim.

I'm making an album now and I feel like it's been about 15 years in the making. I'm trying to figure out what is my most authentic sound and method of execution and distribution. I am constantly fluctuating between rap and experimental music and am hovering over somewhere in the middle. This sometimes feels very inspiring and at other times seems like such an essentializing moment. Sometimes I fall flat and am unable to imagine myself in my body outside of its stereotype.

Coming out of rap and hip-hop culture and lyrics that were stereotypical, it's been really difficult to find my own voice as an artist and as a songwriter. I feel like Licker and the Meka Jean Project came out of this previous world and my attempts to challenge it a bit. What are my expectations? Should I care about having an audience? I'm hoping that Berlin is going to open up a creative space for me to write and perform songs that are more authentic and natural to me at this point in my life as an artist and musician. I grew up very interested in Grace Jones, Tina Turner, Josephine Baker, Nina Simone who all broke barriers as women of color, singers and performers. It wasn't until I was a bit older that I learned they chose to spend much of their time outside of the US (mostly in Europe) where they felt more accepted and at peace. So I have no doubt I'll get there! I'll find my voice along this journey.

CT: I'm also wondering about your experiences as a female artist of color in what is still a very whitewashed art world. How has this affected your work and its reception? Are you seeing any changes with regard to how the art world approaches race?

TN: The way I've had to deal with race is not always in the work but in my interactions with other people within the art world. When I needed to seek legal assistance regarding my film, I was asked, "Why are you causing problems? Why are you lawyering up?" If I were a white man, I might be an asshole, but there's nothing wrong with being an asshole. A white man would just be handling his business. Richard Prince, Jeff Koons, Richard Serra—they're probably all lawyered up, right? So what's wrong with my needing legal assistance and advice when it comes to my practice and my career that I've worked extremely hard to cultivate?

Throughout my entire art practice, I've functioned by rubbing up against something, against institutional settings like UCLA and Yale while working within them. Most of my work is about being in these spaces but not of them, in a way, or sometimes realizing I'm in them and of them. I think the biggest way I've had to deal with race is being at school and being looked at like, *Oh you're a product of affirmative action*. Do I believe in myself as a result of feeling like I was given something based on someone fulfilling a quota? I have to prove to myself in each and every moment that I deserve to be where I am.

I've felt this even in my interactions with curators and authority figures, gatekeepers if you will, in the art world. They should be more like collaborators—people working with artists—but it's like the artist is the hoe and the curator is the pimp, and we're sort of at their mercy (although the pimp and hoe relationship is a co-dependant one). I've gotten really disrespectful and uncomfortable text messages by a major figure in the art world (and whom I otherwise respect deeply) and have had inappropriate conversations with art dealers and collectors alike that I think was a result of categorization due to race as well as gender. I believe this occurs in part because these figures are celebrated to the point that they feel their reputations are untouchable. Also, I believe being in New Orleans made me a less respected artist as opposed to being in New York or LA. There is an idea that no one is looking, that the microphone is turned off and everything is off-record in smaller alternative art cities. There are many layers of how people interact with other folks in the art world depending on status, race, gender, and location. I believe as a woman and an early-career artist that I'm supposed to grin and bear it. So in short, *no!* I'm not exactly seeing changes in how the art world is addressing race. The backlash to my responses in this conversation may also be proof.

CT: What else do we have to look toward to?

TN: The album I've been working on is a sort of reinvention, and I'll be inviting and incorporating my alter-ego Meka Jean more often. I've been working on a book that I'm super-excited about as well. Being the product of a military family, I understand the advantage and necessity of reinvention, of being able to leave and to come back. I think it's important at this time in my career to leave and and return with a renewed spirit and energy.

All Images courtesy of the artist and Jane Lombard Gallery, NY.

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