

Meka Jean:

Schooling Us All with *Ivy League Ratchet*

By Rebecca Goyette

The Beat Goes On (<http://www.sva.edu/events/events-exhibitions/the-beat-goes-on>), is an exhibition curated by visual artist Derrick Adams, featuring work by Elia Alba, Kevin Beasley, Paul D. Miller, a.k.a. D.J. Spooky, and Tameka Norris, a.k.a. Meka Jean. For *The Beat Goes On*, the SVA Chelsea Gallery has been transformed into four individual listening rooms, each presenting a solo show by one of the featured artists. Including photography, sculpture, installation, performance and video works, each room is inspired by music and the history of recorded sound.



Installation View
Photo by Stan Narten

August 20th, a late Saturday afternoon, I sank into a plush zebra print beanbag chair in the midst of Tameka Norris's multimedia installation for the first in a series of live music events at *The Beat Goes On*.

Tameka Norris, a.k.a Meka Jean, took the mic, introducing herself and her new album *Ivy League Ratchet*. Just coming off an MFA from Yale, Tameka Norris has stories. Standing in front of a giant photographic wallpaper of herself in the laundromat, clad in her Yale hooded sweatshirt, there's a funky institutional critique at play. The laundromat, an institution where all are equalized by the sudsy task at hand, is humorously mundane and diametrically opposed to our assumptions of the highly competitive Yale MFA Program.

Tameka Norris revealed that previous to her time at Yale, she had been a rapper, had rapped with the best, lots of famous ones we have all heard on the radio, it was a beguiling origin story to her presentation. And then out came the deeper Meka Jean, "You would not believe how many dicks I had to suck to get anywhere in the rap game. I am very glad to be standing here today, after all that I have been through and seen, you would never know when you look at me now." She put herself through engineering school, affording herself the technical skills to produce her own albums, beholden to no one. She kept going with her educational curiosity and ended up earning an MFA from Yale. So Meka Jean's institutional critique comes from a very honest, visceral place. I imagine the institutional racism of the Ivy League, combined with Norris's real life experiences, could cut to the core. However, Tameka Norris created just the right outlet in her persona, Meka Jean, to share her precarious experience of being 'othered' while also young, talented and fabulous.

Meka Jean took the mic and performed her album, *Ivy League Ratchet*, peppering the space between songs with personal anecdotes and inserting herself into the audience, bringing her message literally into our laps. She started with "4th Wave":

A SoundCloud player interface for the track "4th Wave (?)" by Meka Jean. The player shows a red play button icon, the artist name "Meka Jean", and the track title "4th Wave (?)". Below the title is a waveform visualization of the audio. In the top right corner, there is a "SOUNDCLOUD" logo and a "Share" button. In the bottom right corner, the track duration "3:26" is displayed. A "Cookie policy" link is visible in the bottom left corner. The number "847" is shown in the bottom right corner, likely representing the number of plays or likes.

"First waves hate me

and seconds wanna date me

I'm not a third have you heard

don't even know why you hate me

try and subjugate me."

As a fourth wave feminist, Norris embraces many of the fourth wave's ideals with blithe irreverence and realness. She is unabashedly sexual and outspoken, unafraid of her own anger, deploying technology and social media strategically for the advancement of her personal vision and social justice. Meka Jean reminds us in "Fourth Wave" that the history of art world feminism was and arguably still is predominantly white. She calls attention to the fact that many feminist artists shunned, and still do shun, the use of sexuality, fearing that erotic pleasure could somehow weaken the seriousness of feminism.

A SoundCloud player interface for the track "EZ Duz IT" by Meka Jean. The player shows a red play button icon, the artist name "Meka Jean", and the track title "EZ Duz IT". Below the title is a waveform visualization of the audio. In the top right corner, there is a "SOUNDCLOUD" logo and a "Share" button. In the bottom right corner, the track duration "4:09" is displayed. A "Cookie policy" link is visible in the bottom left corner. The number "678" is shown in the bottom right corner, likely representing the number of plays or likes.

Meka Jean's beat went on to "Easy Does it," a song about her MFA nemesis, the white girl who no one would criticize for fear that she would cry.

Meka Jean lap danced me, caressed my cheeks as she crooned, "you tried to call me crazy, call my people lazy, then inundate me, imitate me, you're about as shady as a tree in the park, lip injections and a black boyfriend will only get you so far, bitch."

I loved that she zeroed in on me as a white woman during that song, challenging my privilege and at once enveloping me by her desire to connect. I thought back to the journey she had lived radically outside the box before grad school. She had real experiences that one can safely assume the Caucasian crier never had. Unbeknownst to Meka Jean, she was singing to me within the same gallery space I had staged my MFA Thesis show. I graduated SVA's MFA Program in 2009, an older student, with much of my own unusual life experience before entering its hallowed halls. I could relate in my own way to her frustrations with being 'othered' in grad school. One would think an MFA would stimulate creativity and expose a student to all kinds of diversity; cultural backgrounds, sexual orientations, ages and approaches. But any moneyed institution can breed normativity. And that normcore agenda can eat your soul if you let it and if you don't address it.

She continues to drive her point home in "Easy Does It":

"Have you seen my Facebook feed lately? That shit is ridiculous! Motherfuckin' dead bodies, black men laid out on the ground like fuckin', fuckin' dogs, on the fuckin' street or some shit, are you fuckin' playin' with me? Got white girls talkin' 'bout they're gonna rock their afros, their little crust punk, punk-ass dreadlocks."

Meka Jean's battle cry calls for white people to do something, to speak up for black lives, rather than simply benefitting from black cultural capital with no awareness or acknowledgement.

Meka Jean's message reverberates, as the Black Lives Matter movement's message finds clear, strong voices of solidarity emerging from the art world. To quote activist performers from "Black Woman Artists for Black Lives Matter," Simone Leigh's September 1st tour-de force event at the New Museum, "You better love us, or leave us alone. Love us, or leave us alone, you better love us this way, cause if you don't, then ok, we gon' be around anyway." Recontextualizing and adapting lyrics from Brand Nubian and Sly and the Family Stone, the message was clearly, poignantly and musically stated, it is up to all of us to end the war on black people, or step out of the way of progress.



"when enough is enough

and I'm so tired

and I'm so strong

I'm all alone

and I'm always wrong

and I'm never right

while the bills pile high

I'm still all alone

but I'm still alive

this is still my life.”

“Still (a)Life” lulls you in like a lullaby, sharing a struggle that is at once familiar to me as a woman and again specific to her as a black woman. It is not easy sharing anger, disappointment and pain authentically, and Meka Jean serves it straight up with no side order of ice in sight.

Meka Jean got me good; I was fully seduced/bitch-slapped/scrutinized and made a fan for life by her live performance.

Questions that I left with:

Where does my own white fragility show up?

How is it different for women to express anger?

How can I as a white woman be a better ally?

Who’s going to come take a listen and dance it out with me at upcoming events at SVA’s Chelsea Gallery’s “The Beat Goes On?”

Here’s one more tune from Meka Jean’s “Ivy League Ratchet” to get you in the mood:

A SoundCloud player interface for the track "Thought I Told U" by Meka Jean. The player shows a red play button icon, the artist name "Meka Jean", and the track title "Thought I Told U". Below the text is a waveform visualization of the audio. In the top right corner, there is a "Share" button and the SoundCloud logo. In the bottom right corner, the track duration "4:44" is displayed. In the bottom left corner, there is a "Cookie policy" link. The number "596" is visible in the bottom right corner, likely representing the number of plays or likes.

The Beat Goes On

can be viewed from August 20th through September 17th

at SVA Chelsea Gallery

601 West 26th Street, 15th Floor

New York, NY 10001

212-592-2145

Exhibition Events and Performances

Thursday, September 8, 6-8pm

Reception Performances (DJ set by Michael Paul Britto (Brittified) organized by Elia Alba)

Thursday, September 15, 7-9pm (RSVP required)

Kevin Beasley

Saturday, September 17, 4-6pm

Closing Performances (DJ set by April Hunt organized by Elia Alba)

Rebecca Goyette's video and multidisciplinary work reflects her complex view of sexuality, specifically the notion of fantasy from a feminist perspective. A penchant for the bizarre is apparent in her artistic practice, which involves embodying a broad range of characters in an ongoing series of psychosexual scenarios, acting as both director and protagonist. She works with an evolving ensemble cast who help facilitate scenarios that range from simulating nature to historic reenactment and outer space/time travel.

Goyette is represented by Freight + Volume Gallery. She has exhibited internationally with solo shows at Jersey City Museum, Jersey City, NJ and Galerie X, Istanbul, Turkey and group shows/performances at Whitney Museum of Art, Queens Museum of Art, Weisman Museum of Art, MN, Winkleman Gallery, NYC, Stux Gallery, NYC, Slag Gallery, NYC and Gallery Poulsen, Copenhagen, Denmark. Her work has been reviewed in The Village Voice, Vice Magazine, Hyperallergic, Art F City, the Huffington Post, NY Arts Magazine, among others. Goyette is also a lecturer at the Museum of Modern Art and has taught/lectured at Cooper Union, Montclair University, Eyebeam and The New School.