

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

Snapshots: Brief Takes on Rising Talents.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1h23m89k>

Journal

International Review of African American Art, 19(2)

ISSN

1045-0920

Author

Cooks, BR

Publication Date

2003-04-01

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

SNAPSHOTS

BRIEF TAKES ON RISING TALENTS

By Bridget R. Cooks

GARY EUGENE JEFFERSON: BROAD BRUSH

Gary Eugene Jefferson's love for the art and culture of the Italian Renaissance took him across the world and back again. But then, says Jefferson, "my almost single-minded love for the stylings of Italian Renaissance dogma was placed on its ear upon my first viewing of film footage of Jackson Pollock pouring and splashing paint over flat canvases. It is a technique that I now employ on every single canvas as I try to reconcile this new found freedom with my more traditional concerns."

Originally from Los Angeles, Jefferson has traveled throughout the U.S. and Europe painting mural-sized still life, figurative and abstract compositions. He acknowledges debt to a wide, eclectic range of visual artists including Johannes Vermeer, Charles White, Michelangelo, Frida Kahlo and John Riddle. To create his own unique style, Jefferson combines his artistic influences with conventional painting iconography and imagery from African American culture.

In *For the Countless Spirits Whose Dreams Remain On the Ocean Floor*, Malcolm X and Harriet Tubman stand as enslaved survivors of the violence of the Middle Passage. Cloud-like bands of blue and white hang heavy in the distant horizon. A slave ship tosses in waves crashing at their feet. Thick multicolored strokes and splashes of paint surround them. Through this frenetic storm at sea, they stand tall. On the right side of the painting a ghost-like pope spins a globe while a wealthy European merchant stands nearby. Together they devise plans for world domination. Displaced by their empirical vision of labor and genocide, a Native American woman falls backwards towards the viewer to her watery grave. Jefferson's painting addresses the question of how many leaders, visionaries and warriors were lost in the Atlantic slave trade.

Jefferson's expressionist strokes depict the strain of a love triangle in *Three's a Crowd*. Using a limited palette of black, white, gold and red, Jefferson presents an awkward spiral of fragmented intertwined bodies. At the base of the painting, a man looks down sorrowfully as he holds a woman into the air above. Elevated, she clings to another man's torso staring lustfully at his body. Caught in her tight embrace, this man struggles to be free. His arms are raised, his back is arched, and his head is thrown back in an uncomfortable contortion. He looks impatiently at his watch as if time is running out for the desperate situation he is in. What will be the final solution? Surrounding this impossible trio is an

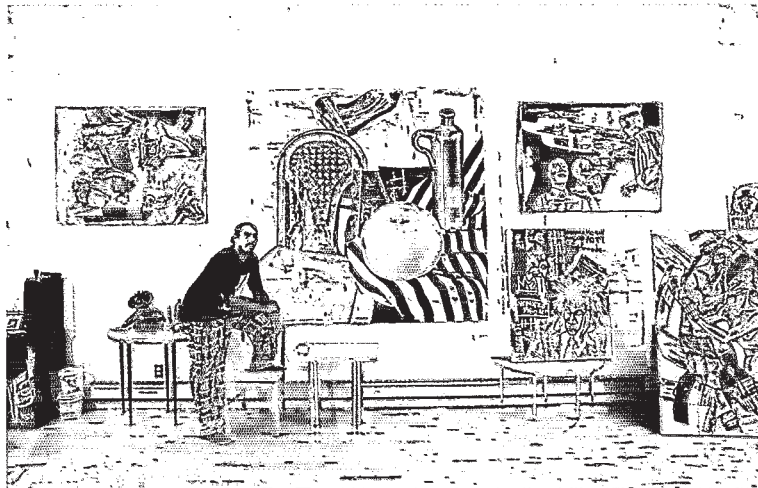
abstract composition of quick brushstrokes and splattered paint. This technique creates a visual chaos reflective of the crumbling relationship it counters.

In *Shields Not Forgotten*, a collage of photographs hang nailed to the torso of Martin Luther King, Jr. The stories and memories of notable figures such as Marcus Garvey and Miles Davis along side of the images of everyday people in these photographs are mortally connected with King and his legacy. Blood drips from each nail creating an open wound. Despite this agony, reminiscent of the martyrdom of St. Sebastian, King looks upward bravely into the future of what lies ahead. Broad brushstrokes in red, yellow, black and orange energize the scene by creating a sense of passion and confusion. To the left of King is a black ghostly figure with strong sculptural facial features. His head is angled forward with a downcast a look of sadness frozen on its face. His arm seemingly detached from the body hangs at his side. His hand gently lifts in a cupped position to encourage and protect King. On the right side of the painting, a man's head is tilted backwards, his eyes covered in a stroke of yellow paint. His mouth is opened widely perhaps to express awe or to vocalize his own story. Above his head are a group of Native American men who stand watching the scene below. They stand almost outside of the painting mostly surrounded by white paint that gives a sense of distance from the colorful scene that unfolds. Jefferson uses multiple layers and painting styles in his composition to parallel the interconnected cultural and spiritual worlds of memory.

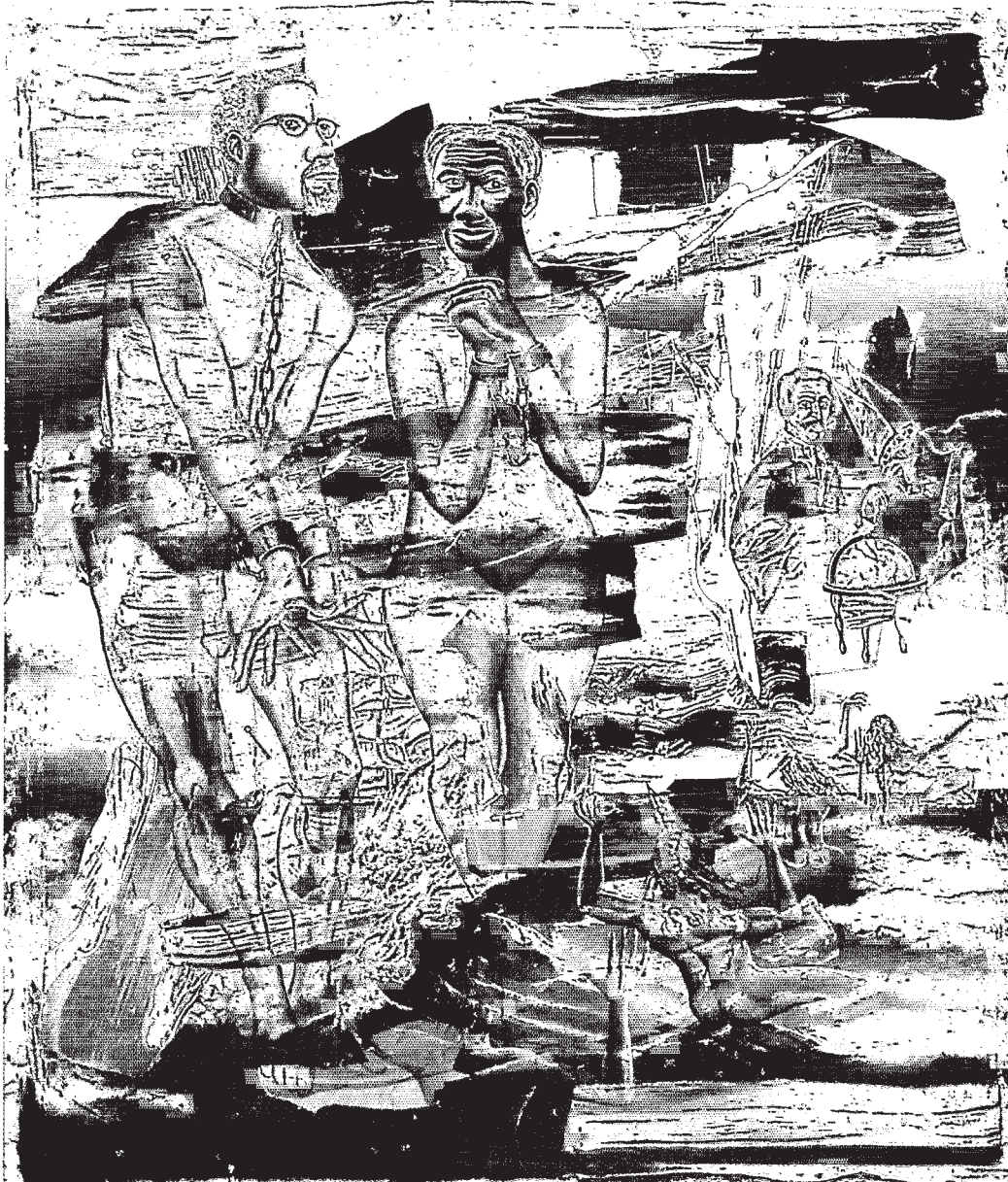
Jefferson earned his B.A. from California State University, Northridge, and subsequently studied at the Accademia di Belli Arti di Firenze in Italy. Among his many exhibition venues are The Studio Museum of Harlem; Galleria Centrale, Florence, Italy; Kransnapolsky, Copenhagen, Denmark; Joan Andrum Gallery, Los Angeles; and M. Hanks Gallery, Santa Monica. He lives and works in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and is planning a new body of work that will reflect the southwestern landscape and traditions of Native Americans.

KIRA LYNN HARRIS: ON LOCATION

In her multimedia projects, Kira Lynn Harris exploits simple materials to show the intangible beauty of light. Her installation projects and subsequent photographs of them show viewers what they may have seen before but probably have not paused to look at. The compositions reveal the



Gary Eugene Jefferson
in his studio, 2000.



Gary Eugene Jefferson
*For the Countless Spirits Whose Dreams
Remain on the Ocean's Floor*
80 x 72"
acrylic on canvas



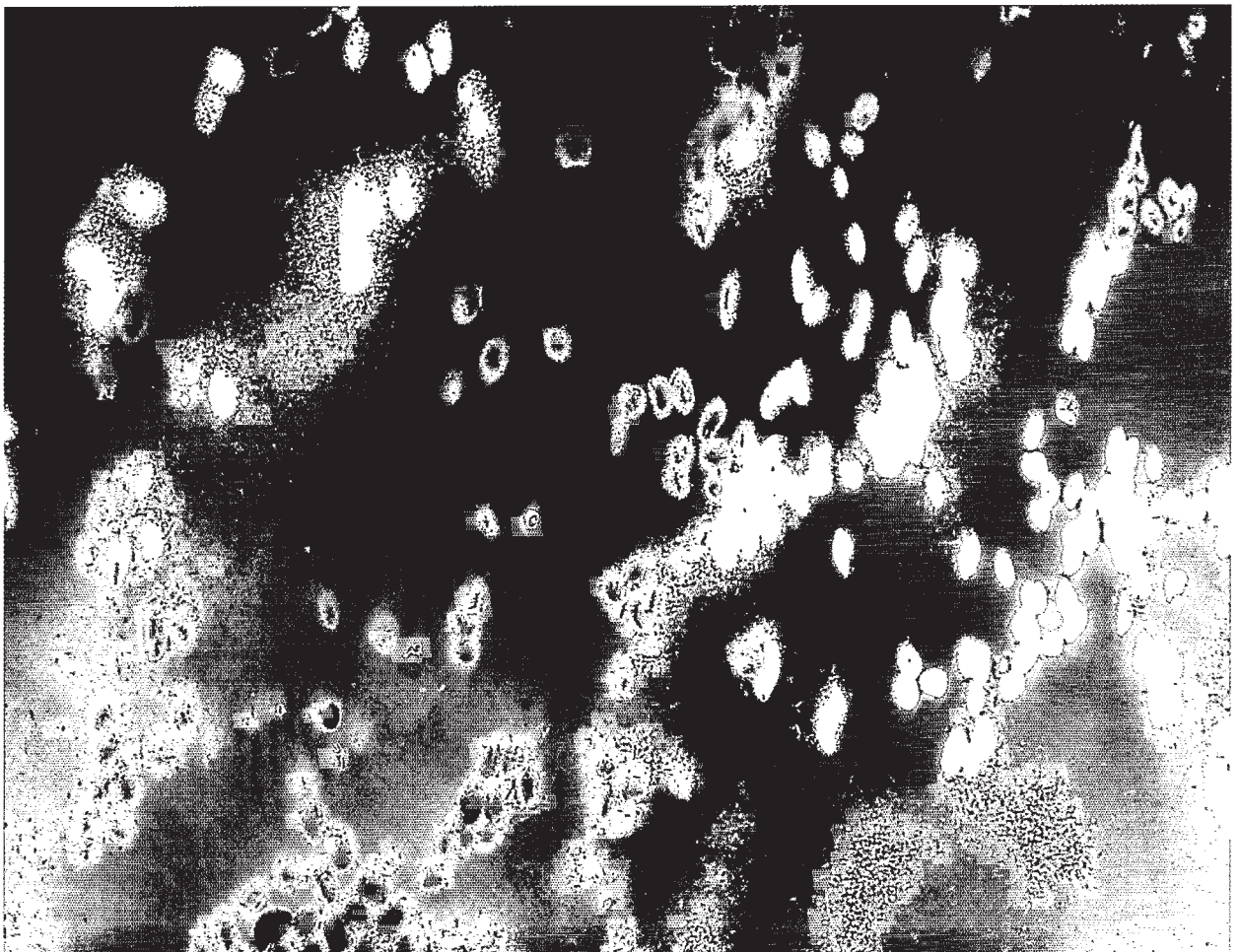
Gary Eugene Jefferson
Three's A Crowd
 2002
 acrylic on burlap
 56 x 40"



Gary Eugene Jefferson
Shields Not Forgotten
 2002
 acrylic on canvas
 46 x 36"



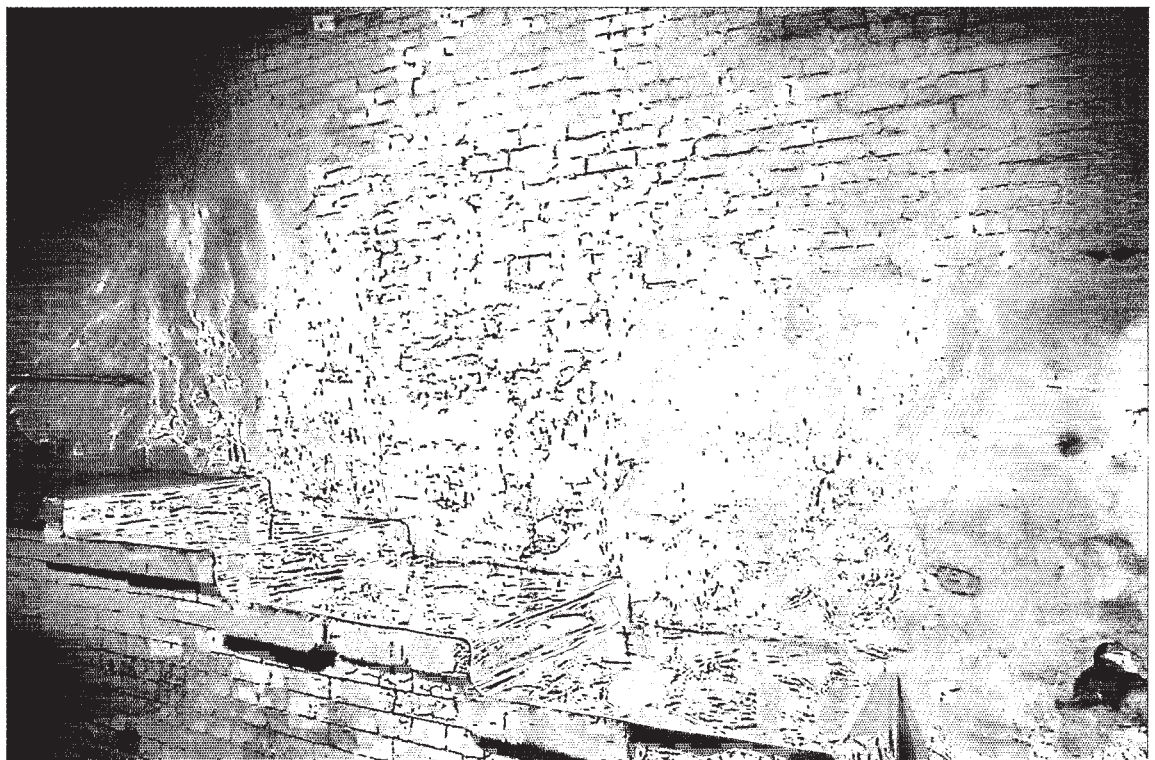
Kira Lynn Harris



Kira Lynn Harris, *Interstices* (detail)
1998-2000, spray paint on mylar



Kira Lynn Harris
Glitter (point of departure)
 2002
 Digital C-Print
 15 x 15"



Kira Lynn Harris
96° in the Shade
 2000
 mixed mediums
 installation
 dimensions variable

magnificence of the everyday by capturing the speed of the fleeting moment. They create a place for viewers that is temporal and unlocatable but familiar in its abstraction.

In *Interstices*, Harris paints organic clusters of shapes onto a shimmering sheet of Mylar. The abstract image immediately appears ambiguous in origin. The blinding silver shapes shine in high contrast to the matte of the dark paint around it. The mirrorlike surface mimics the play of light on water. *Interstices* seems to capture the quiet stillness of a naturally occurring phenomenon. The beauty of the piece stands on its own. Additional information on how she created the work adds another layer for interpretation. Harris used black-eyed peas to create the small rounded shapes and spray painted over them to record their positions on the Mylar. Her creative and unconventional use of natural and artificial materials creates new unexpected forms of beauty. In explaining her work to a Pomona College Museum of Art interviewer, Harris said of *Interstices*, "I literally cast a composition. In this formally simple installation, I was able to collapse several interests: randomness, mapping, abstraction, folklore and the cultural implications of foods, as well as a lifelong love of science and science fiction. The speculative and the imaginary are the point here — there is no message to be 'gotten'."

In her site-specific installation *96° in the Shade*, silver Mylar covers the stairs of an obsolete staircase in an abandoned spice factory turned gallery in Brooklyn. Harris' placement of the material created a brilliant reflection of white light onto the wall of the uninhabited building. These cool flames of light fractured on the rough brick wall provided an immediate feeling of visual renewal, life, and light into the space. The composition of the reflection continuously changed according to the light projected by track lights and a skylight above.

Glitter (Point of Departure) documents the speed of the passing moment. Harris' composition of light and color simulates the energy of city nightlife without the physical depictions of buildings and people that signify night in the city. With a blur of color against a black background, she shows how viewers often visually experience city lights from traffic signals, cars and neon signs. *Glitter* freezes the visual landscape as we see it with results that are inherently meditative and sensual as well as simultaneously public and private.

Kira Lynn Harris earned the M.F.A. from California Institute of the Arts. She was a participant in the 2001-2002 artist-in-residence program at the Studio Museum of Harlem. Her several grants and fellowships include the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council Residency, World Trade Center, New York in 2000 and study in the 1998-1999 Whitney Museum Independent Study Program in New York. Currently Harris teaches art at The Nightingale-Bamford School in New York and is part of the group show *Urban Aesthetics: California Artists 2003* at the California African American Museum in Los Angeles.

DORI LEMEH: ONE PART OF A WHOLE

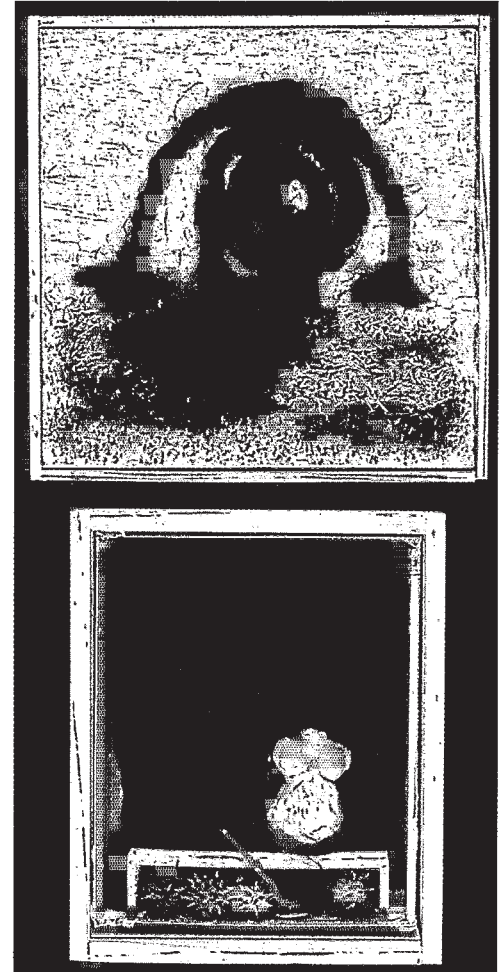
Dori Lemeh began her artistic career as a landscape painter. Today she works skillfully through a variety of media, mixing them at will to suit her needs. Through all of her work, Lemeh seeks to express the role of the individual person as a part of a larger cultural group. Among Lemeh's sources for inspiration are the duality of her Nigerian and American parentage, the influence of traditional African sculpture on modern art and feminism. Faced with the task of expressing this range of influences, Lemeh often uses multiple surfaces to reflect the multifaceted aspects of her identity.

In *Self Portrait: Do Not Touch*, Lemeh presents a vertical diptych in square and rectangular frames. Attached onto the bright yellow canvas in the square frame are two braids of hair, one coiled beneath the arc of the other. The ends of the braids are loose and fan onto sprinkled rows of herbal seeds and soil. In the rectangular frame below, a shallow cigar box creates a recessed three-dimensional composition. The background consists of 11 braids hanging vertically like a theater curtain. Resting in front of the braids are four sycamore tree seed pods under a miniature bench. A delicate "flesh" colored torso made of clay and eggshells sits on the bench. This self-portrait was provoked by Lemeh's experience of white Americans reaching out unrestrained to touch her thick trademark coiffure. Shocked by their disregard of her personal space, Lemeh addresses the strangers' fascination with racial difference in this work. The combination of elements does not present one directed interpretation. Instead, Lemeh depicts markers of race, femininity, beauty and healing through assemblage in a figurative and symbolic composition.

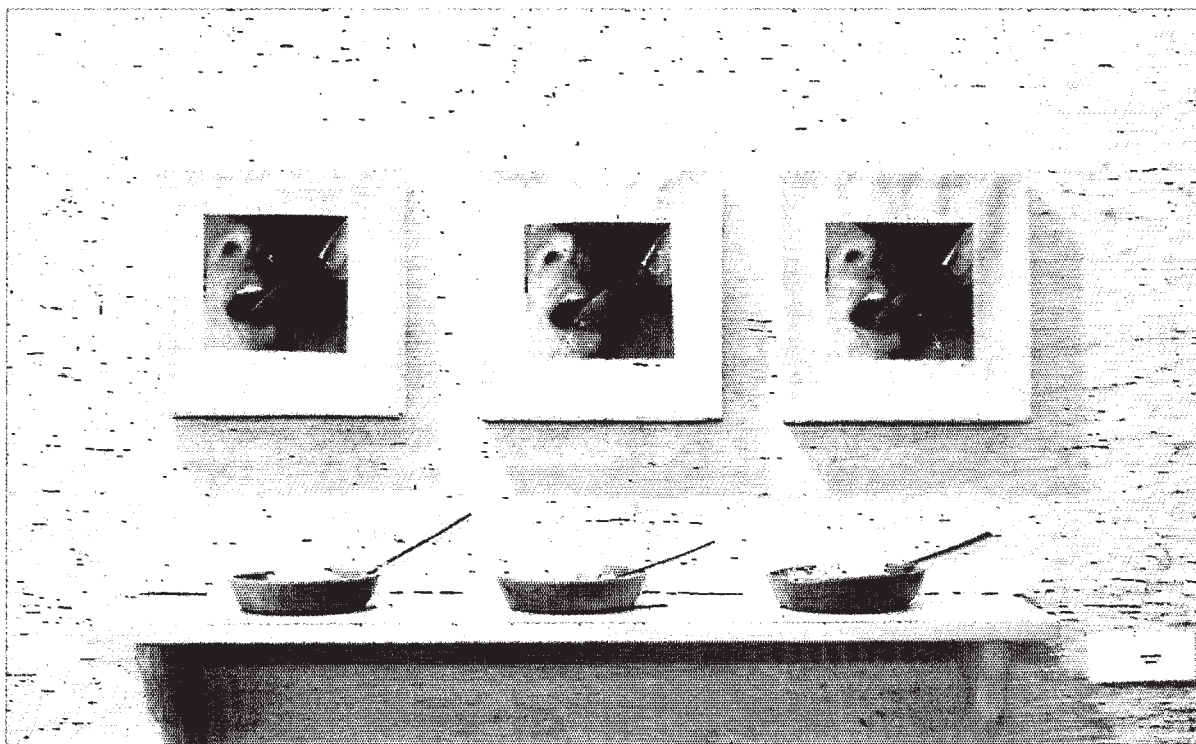
Lemeh's recent series *Betwixt and Between* takes a deeper look at the relationship between public and private identity. Lemeh describes the series as "an exploration of the relationship between body and consciousness, as well as, consciousness and spirit." In the triptych, *Betwixt and Between #4*, Lemeh presents a mixed media composition of fabric, photography and a found object. On the left side is a black-and-white mudcloth from Mali in West Africa. In the center is a black-and-white photograph of two hands reaching down through the frame with open palms. To the right, a doorknob and keyhole hang attached to remnant pieces of mudcloth beneath. The arrangement of images expresses a desire to break through barriers. The hands appear to be reaching for something unseen, yearning to accept what is offered. The doorknob and keyhole present a voyeuristic opportunity to see what is beyond the frame and a choice to enter into another place. The mudcloths provide both a cultural past and future for this exploration. Lemeh explains, "I investigate what is inscribed upon the body and hidden within the social taboos of history, visual culture, and voyeuristic tourism. *Betwixt and Between* is a constant struggle with the language of labels inscribed upon my flesh,



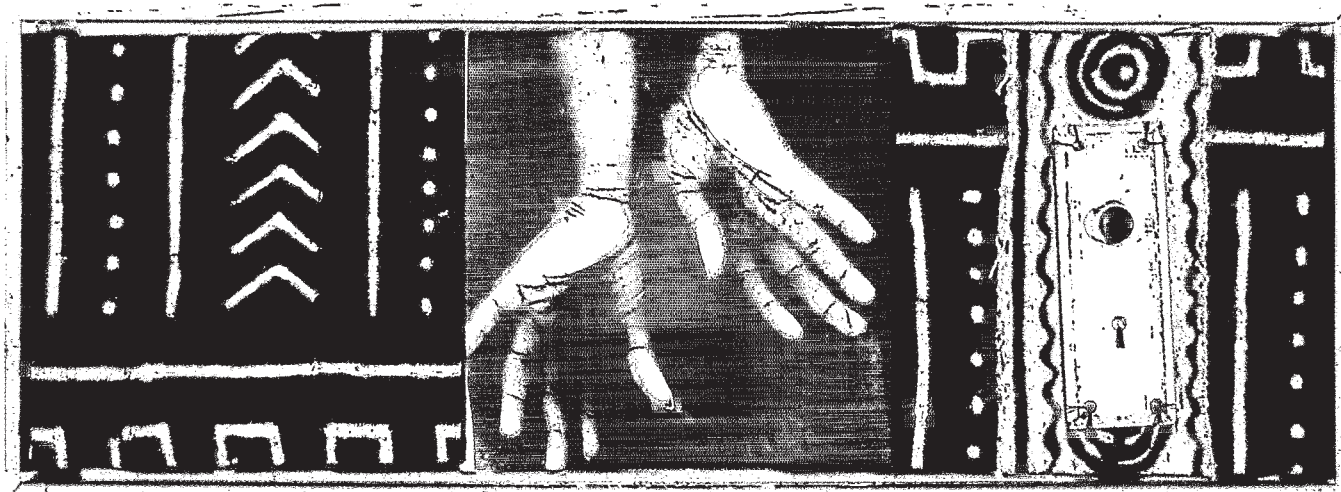
Dori Lemeh



Dori Lemeh
Self-Portrait: Do Not Touch
 1998
 mixed mediums on canvas and box



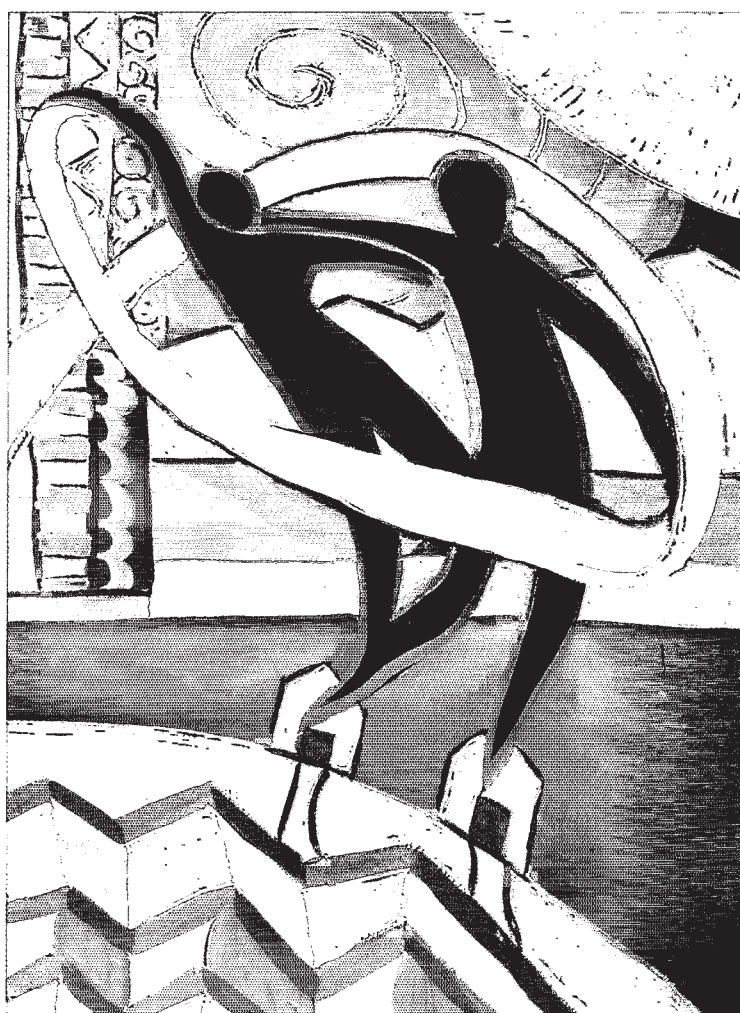
Dori Lemeh
Consume
 2002
 mixed mediums
 20 x 40"



Dori Lemeh
Betwixt and Between
 2002
 mixed mediums on canvas and mudcloth
 10 x 30"



Carol White



Carol White
We Are One
 gouache on paper
 2001
 8 1/2 x 11"



Carol White
Complete Opposition
 1991
 acrylic on canvas
 42 x 43 1/4"



Carol White
Generations
 2001
 gouache
 8 1/2 x 11"

which holds the physical body under watchful eyes of surveillance by family, friends and strangers." Lemeh expresses this struggle through this fragmented autobiographical composition that resists the simplicity of labels and easy explanation.

Consume consists of three color photographs of a woman with red lips opened wide to eat from a spoon. On a shelf below the photographs are three wooden bowls full of gold letters. A spoon is placed in each bowl indicating that the shining letters are ready to be eaten. Through *Consume*, Lemeh critiques the overload of media texts and images that overwhelm American visual culture. She says, "*Consume* concerns my ability and inability to digest these contradictions existing in social, tribal and political histories, as well as countless belief systems, which continually enter my physical system. 'I am what I consume' is the imprint on my consciousness." The artist presents a visual counterpart to the adages, "You are what you eat" and "All that glitters is not gold." The mixed media composition offers a warning to viewers to beware of what they consume.

Dori Lemeh has exhibited nationally and internationally since 1986. Her recent participation in group shows include the Florence International Biennial on Contemporary Art (2003, 2001 and 1999) and the Soleil d'Afrique: Crossing Boundaries and Frontiers, 4th Biennial (2002). Lemeh also serves on the Committee for Women in the Arts for the College Art Association, curates art exhibitions and writes about contemporary art. She is coordinator of advising for the School of Visual Arts at Pennsylvania State University.

CAROL M. WHITE: GLOBAL WARMING

Carol M. White's work appeals to many viewers because of its narrative quality, rich soulful colors and use of global symbols. The experience of viewing White's work is similar to viewing a traditional Chinese scroll: one embarks on a journey. In the world of her compositions, each viewer has a choice of roads to follow, homes to enter, boats to ride and people to become. In *Complete Opposition*, the viewer discovers a quiet welcoming dwelling. Two small homes sit close to each other yet face opposite directions. Between them is a road that disappears in the distance over rolling hills between agricultural fields and polluting factories on one side and a tall green forest on the other. In the foreground, the road becomes a pier leading to a boat that floats in deep body of water. In the absence of figures, the viewer can imagine the lives that are led in this scene. The houses seem to take on an anthropomorphic quality of the people that live in them. They are close, yet live apart. They share a road, but have choices of which way to go. What road will they/you choose?

In 1999, White began a painting series in collaboration with Henry O. Sawyerr, an environmental scientist and poet from Nigeria. Sawyerr found natural affinities between White's narrative imagery and the expressions of his poetry.

Sharing similar experiences as a result of travel, they agreed on the impact that traveling had on feelings of isolation, the increase of curiosity about people of other cultures and the potential for cross-cultural communication. "For both of us," says White, "the end result was the creation of new works." In the collaboration, *Beyond Borders and Across Oceans: Two Continents*, White has responded visually to Sawyerr's work adding her perspective as an African American woman, artist and fellow traveler. White explains that through the project, she is "trying to explore why there are problems and little communication between African and African American people."

We Are One is the joyous, visual companion to Sawyerr's poem "Eve" (1989). Two figures emerge from separate houses but stand together. A circle of bright yellow, echoing the bright sun in the left corner, surrounds the couple. Behind them is a collagelike painting of designs and repeating patterns in bold colors.

In her more recent work, White addresses the emotions of a range of interpersonal relationships. "The works are void of faces and in many cases the figures lack the features that distinguish gender or race," she says. "Breaking down the form into simple shapes and using bold color eliminates the viewer's opportunity to shape stereotypes or opinions about these figures and simply communicates the existence of people without specific characteristics." In *Generations*, White addresses the relationship between the past and the present. The central figure stands with arms stretched out to the sides. This gesture holds back two people in the background while reaching toward three mummylike figures wrapped at the bottom of the painting. The central figure is caught between these other figures as it looks toward the ancestors for knowledge. It seeks to create a space to exist between the complexities of the spiritual and physical worlds.

Originally from Chicago, Carol White currently has two full-time pursuits: educator at the Indianapolis Museum of Art and artist. She earned a Masters in art education at Indiana University and has received numerous awards and honors including the Creative Renewal Fellowship from the Arts Council of Indianapolis/Lilly Endowment in 2001. In January 2003, a solo exhibition of her paintings was on view at the Birmingham Civil Rights Museum in Alabama. The 25 paintings and poems of *Beyond Borders* were exhibited at the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center in Indianapolis in 2002 and at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute in 2003. A book of the project is planned.