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iona rozeal brown's recent work looks at Japan's appropriation of hip hop

by Philip Auslander

Identity theft isn't necessarily a crime. As popular culture becomes less local and more global, marking off pieces of cultural territory as belonging to particular groups becomes increasingly difficult. Ten years ago, it made sense to describe hip hop style as a New York City-centered expression of Afro-diasporic consciousness and "black urban renewal."¹ Now, however, we must speak of a hip hop inter-nation as young people everywhere have taken up the music and its associated styles—sometimes as the lingua franca of the disenfranchised, sometimes merely as fashion or fad.

Such borrowings inevitably refer back to their origins: to be recognized as a rapper, for instance, one has to move, talk and gesture like a rapper, which, since the performers who established the genre's conventions were largely African-American, means like an urban American black person. Whether or not imitation is the sincerest form of flattery is open to discussion, but other forms of replication, such as parody, mockery, caricature and travesty, clearly are not flattering. It's pointless to insist that only certain people have the right to express themselves by certain means—we don't live in that world anymore, if we ever did. However, it is reasonable to examine how people use the cultures they borrow, not in the spirit of censorship or censoriousness but in the spirit of dialogue.

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iona rozeal brown,
a3 blackface #59, 2003,
acrylic on paper, 50 by 38 inches
(courtesy the artist).

iona rozeal brown's exhibition "a3...black on both sides" examines a particular Japanese appropriation of hip hop. brown, who is a practicing hip hop DJ as well as a painter, was born in Washington, D.C. and currently lives and works in Chillum, Maryland. She originally studied kinesiology at the University of

Maryland, but returned to school to study art, receiving her BFA from the San Francisco Art Institute and her MFA from Yale University. In 2002 and 2003, she exhibited acrylic paintings on paper under the title "a3...black on both sides" in Los Angeles, New York and Miami.

While traveling in Asia, brown was struck by the enthusiasm she saw there for African-American culture (and herself as an African-American) but disturbed by the tenor of that enthusiasm:

there was the time in Itaewon...while walking down the street, some random man approached me, and, with his hand held high, ready to give me a pound, he loudly asked, " WHAAAATSAAAP?!" or the store that I visited named "Lauryn: ladies street wear" (after, but not by, Lauryn Hill) where there sat two black Barbies with their hair cornrowed, and braided...and posters reading "BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL"

In Japan, brown encountered the phenomenon of ganguro, Japanese teen-agers (primarily, but not exclusively, girls) with extreme, store-bought tans who wear pale makeup around their eyes and mouths and have adopted the trappings of hip hop culture. The outpouring of work brown made in response to the unsettling historical and cultural resonances of this subcultural practice examines interactions among African, Asian and American identities by deliriously juxtaposing visual signs drawn from all three. Geishas with darkened faces coifed in Afro puffs or wearing Erykah Badu headdresses disport themselves in compositions reminiscent of Ukiyo-e prints.

brown's perspective on this clash of cultures is arguably one-sided: she uses the way one particularly strange group of Japanese youth has appropriated hip hop to represent a larger cultural encounter between East and West without acknowledging that hip hop has sometimes been insensitive in its appropriation of Asian culture.² But art is not obligated to be fair and balanced and brown's work is ultimately contemplative, not polemical; her images derive energy from the cultural paradoxes and contradictions they contain.

Many of brown's juxtapositions of cultural signifiers create a sense of historical drift as the imagery and material culture of twenty-first century hip hop overlay figures and compositions derived from the floating world of nineteenth century Japanese prints. This world now contains DJ turntables, records, headphones and television sets with which the figures are perfectly comfortable: one set of headphones bears the logo of a major Japanese electronics manufacturer. In a3 #8 (2002), a traditionally garbed Japanese woman looks on as two smaller figures (perhaps her children) watch a hip hop video on television, dramatizing this sense of history in motion. What the children have gleaned from the video is suggested in the dark tan or makeup that one child has on her face and feet, her hair tangled in dreads and her robe patterned with marijuana leaves. A smaller figure gazes raptly at the television screen. She has no darkened skin, but her hair is done in cornrows and she conspicuously wears name brand sneakers. The complicity of the older figure in the children's assimilation of blackness is evident from the fact that she, too, has darkened skin and that her traditional Japanese hairstyle is made up of braids (in this painting, as in all the works entitled a3 blackface, a line around the figure's face distinguishes her tan or dark makeup from her skin tone).

The current of history also runs the other way in these works, particularly in the repeated figure of the female DJ-cum-geisha. This analogy is thought-provoking: like the first hip hop DJs, the original geishas were men. Traditionally a highly skilled musical entertainer (not a courtesan, as is often supposed) the geisha also is completely bound by tradition and objectified by her male audience. Brown depicts her DJ-ing geishas alone with their equipment: these works emphasize is not the female entertainer's relationship with her audience and the attendant risk of objectification but her relationship to the music and her craft as she listens through her headphones and studies her turntables. In that sphere, she has absolute control.



iona rozeal brown,
a3 blackface #21, 2002,
acrylic on paper, 33 by 25
inches
(private collection).



One of the central pleasures of brown's work lies in the seductive juxtapositions of colors, textures, and patterns from which she builds her compositions. *a3 blackface #23* (2002) plays the floral trim of a Japanese robe off against the star pattern running down the leg of baggy sweatpants, while striped sneakers and the figure's wrapped headdress add still more patterns and folds. Everywhere in these paintings kimonos drape over baggy sweats; the paisley swirl of a bandana stands out against a striped robe; athletic shoes jut unexpectedly from beneath folds of fabric. The figures display a catalog of hairstyles, including Afros, dreads, Afro puffs, cornrows, and mutant combinations of all these with Japanese styles, all rendered with detailed attention to color and texture.

brown describes the *ganguro* appropriation of hip hop by saying "it's surface," while, for her, true engagement with hip hop as a lifestyle goes "beyond and deeper than surface." For all of brown's understandable concern that the global circulation of hip hop culture deracinates and reduces it to its outer signs, I see something other than a straightforward commentary on this phenomenon in her *a3* work. (Her more recent work, which features worm-like characters that devour fashionable commodities, seems to satirize more clearly the reduction of culture to consumer goods.) The figures in her paintings are constructed of surfaces: they are defined by the folds and layers of fabric that engulf and embrace them.

The resulting riot of patterns and textures suggests a radical heterodoxy. In *a3 blackface #20* (2002), the checkerboard pattern of a huge platform shoe rests directly on the draped pink surface of a kimono around which wraps a sash displaying a green camouflage pattern. Beneath the kimono, the figure wears fringed jeans with rolled-up cuffs; the mottled surface of her Afro puffs contrasts with both the linearity of the fringe and fractal fuzziness of her furry collar. She is in blackface but is applying makeup over it. Layer upon layer upon layer; surface upon surface upon surface; culture upon culture upon culture. For me, the figure's cultural identity need not be resolved. It is not the thing under all the layers—it resides in the fact of the layering and is as disturbing and pleasurable as the playful proliferation of surfaces in the paintings. A desire to protect something she loves clearly motivates brown, but she does not tell us what to think: she encapsulates an extraordinary cultural encounter in intellectually provocative and sensually satisfying images and lets us decide for ourselves.

NOTES

1. Tricia Rose, "A Style Nobody Can Deal With: Politics, Style and the Post-Industrial City in Hip Hop," in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music & Youth Culture*, ed. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (Routledge, 1994): 71-88.
2. See, for example, Tina Chadha, "Mix This," *The Village Voice* (July 2-8, 2003). Chadha describes Indian-Americans' concerns over hip hop artists' uses of South Asian music and culture in recordings and videos.

iona rozeal brown's "a3..black on both sides" is at Atlanta's Spelman College Museum of Fine Art through May 14, 2004. Another solo exhibition, "MATRIX 152," is at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford until June 13, 2004.

PHILIP AUSLANDER writes from Atlanta, where he teaches in the School of Literature, Communication, and Culture of the Georgia Institute of Technology.

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