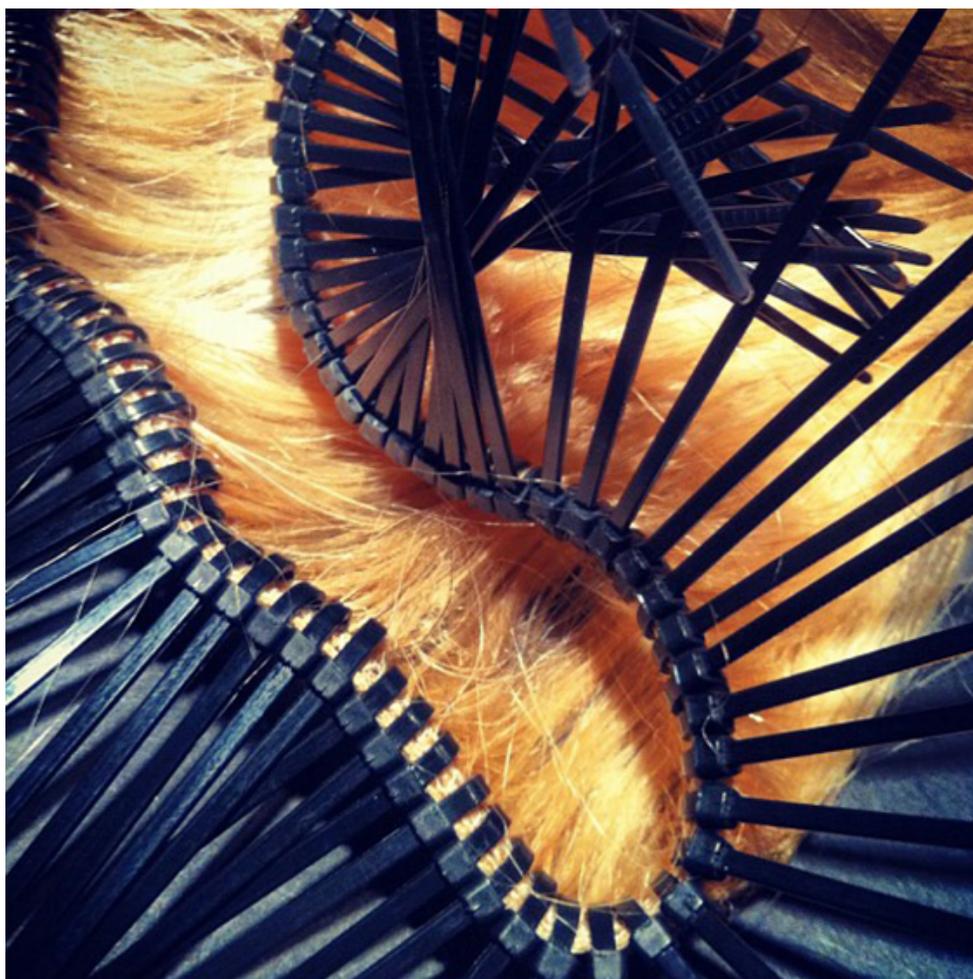


Kenya (Robinson) by Lee Ann Norman

Kenya (Robinson) reflects on the end of her MFA program and becoming a professional artist.



Urchin, 2013, human hair, plastic cable ties, monofilament. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Kenya (Robinson) is currently wrapping up her MFA in Sculpture at the Yale School of Art after several years as a working artist. An astute observer of culture, (Robinson) explores a range of issues from race to perceptions

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about gender, privilege, and consumerism. Her newest work places rogue installations within store displays and merchandise to emphasize the act of shopping, beginning with a Walmart in New Haven. All kinds of people encounter art every day, she explains, making this a good moment to think about the American national character and its shifting nature. (Robinson) took a break from searching for fabric, materials, and other supplies for her thesis exhibition to meet with me in midtown Manhattan to discuss how graduate school has influenced the direction of her career and creative practice.

Lee Ann Norman You're in New Haven now, but where are you from originally?

Kenya (Robinson) I'm from Gainesville, Florida. This is hugely important to my identity, almost as important to my identity as creativity. I've long been an artist, but it's a fairly recent addition to my professional life. In the past, I imagined artists as people with a particular set of skills—painting, carving, drawing—I didn't recognize that we each create in the context of our personalized experience. Sometimes it includes that level of specific training and sometimes it doesn't.

But, Gainesville is a small, quirky college town, so it has this amazing dichotomy—being provincial in that way—very southern—

LAN —What school is there?

KR The University of Florida. When I was there, it was 38,000 students, and it's continuing to grow. Because of that, we have international students, many professional schools, scientists, a lot of medical researchers. . . you have this element of culture that exists there neck-in-neck with that southern fried, Bible Belt thing. You can go downtown and hear some pretty good jazz, but in that same space, there will be a van rolling around with an anti-Muslim sentiment written on the side—that's the town where that preacher was trying to burn the Qu'ran—

LAN Oh! That's right!



Welcome to Walmart #2371, 2013, Store #2371 - Wallingford, Connecticut, hydrogen peroxide, crushed velvet, double ended zippers. Photo courtesy of the artist.

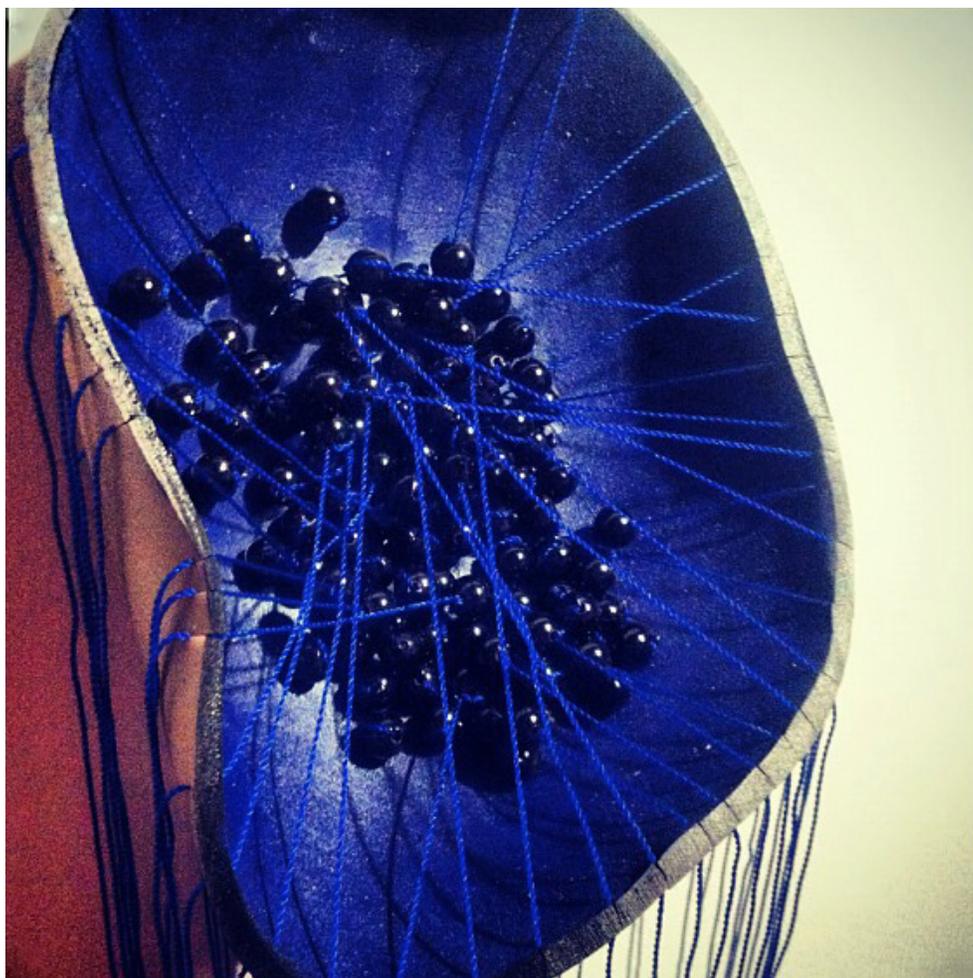
KR So a sense of 'right' and 'left' has always been a part of my experience. We have a state theater that is accessible. We have a symphony, a dance company all in little ol' Gainesville—and we're not far from a lot of places. In five hours, you can be in Miami, and in two you can be in Orlando. If you're headed north, you can be in Atlanta in about 5 hours—New Orleans is a reasonable trip too—so that was very much a part of what inspired me.

But I didn't understand that you could be a professional artist, and that you could create this kind of evolving lifestyle.

LAN I grew up a half an hour from the University of Illinois—so very similar: a college town, with lots of smart, international people. And I studied music as an undergraduate, but still, I remember my high school calculus teacher saying, Are you sure you want to do that? Why don't you double major in math? You're good at that. What kind of job are you going to have when you're done?

KR Mmmhmm . . . they always tell black people that. (*laughter*)

It's the truth. This emphasis on practicality, I think, is misguided. The most practical thing you can do with your life is something that you're passionate about. If you're passionate about your work, the practical will fall into place. But more often than not, people find themselves stuck in a sensible existence that they don't feel so great about. It affects the way they feel about themselves. Their hustle level gets turned down a little bit . . . Even at Yale, I've been encouraged to pursue commercial printmaking or something like that—arts education—as opposed to focusing on a studio practice.



Jelly-Don't-Jiggle-Like-That, 2013, latex, nylon crochet thread, plastic beads, acrylic paint. Photo courtesy of the artist.

LAN But what about your family? How did your parents feel about your artistic pursuits, or is your family artistic and creative?

KR I come from a family of very big personalities. My mother was a great beauty and a bibliophile—extremely bright and well read. My dad was in the military for many years, then taught school, self-published a book, and is a gardening guru. I

always thought that was an interesting mixture of interests. I have an uncle who is an economist, and another who is the legal council for Florida A&M University. It's very much working class values applied to professional life. My dad is one of seven children and pretty much all of them have a college degree—masters degree, PhD—but there's a down home quality to how they think about their accomplishments. I have a cousin named Duchess who is a pastor's wife, praise minister, entrepreneur—she's very dynamic. I have a younger cousin who is a sophomore in college and she's the lead singer and guitarist in a band called *Naked Jane* . . . another cousin who's a Harvard graduate and a tenure track professor at **UNC** Chapel Hill.

I've got a lot of cousins!

That's the type of folks I'm in dialogue with kinda . . . but mostly I've just done the things I've wanted to do on my own. My family is supportive, but they don't really know what's going on. I remember when I was effectively homeless (i.e. squatting in my studio), I wrote my family and was like, Please just call me, I'm depressed, blah blah blah, and I'm sure I asked for some money. Then, months later my uncle calls me from Hawaii and he says, Why don't you just stop with this hobby? And it became clear in that moment: *It's not a hobby . . . I was built for this*. I feel an overwhelming sense of responsibility that my art practice, this conduit for my voice is specific and significant and I would be remiss if I dismissed it.

LAN And you were in New York at that time, right?

KR Yeah, after school—I'd been in New York for 8 or 9 years working in the fashion industry. The Great Recession was beginning to make itself known. Being laid off coincided with consistent encouragement to think about graduate school. I hadn't really considered it primarily because of the cost—not the costs, but the *perceived* costs. As I started doing things (residencies and stuff), I thought, I don't need no stinkin' grad school, but I'm so glad that the planets aligned and I was able to apply.

LAN Was there a moment, or something that happened that made you think that okay, I should apply, let's do this?

KR I was a studio assistant for almost two years for Mike Cloud, a Yale alum. I did LMCC [Lower Manhattan Cultural Council Workspace Residency Program], and

most of my residency mates had been to graduate school, and there was just something about the way they spoke about their work. It wasn't just about confidence—they knew the vocabulary. Beyond the jargon (although they could get into that too), but the lexicon—how you might communicate about your work to create understanding—even if the project is super weird. I liked the camaraderie of the experience, and I wanted more of that. Plus, I was anxious to present my work on an international stage and I thought graduate school could help with that. I also wanted to take care of my mother, and I thought that teaching could provide financial stability. Then I had this unexpected lunch with Dawit Petros. It was very, *You're an artist, I'm an artist, let's have lunch and talk shop*. In the middle of this conversation, he asked me, "What do you want to do with your life?" The timing of the question startled me, but I understood that I wanted to continue doing what I was doing, which was exploring the world through a creative lens and sharing it with people. So he asked me if I'd ever thought about going to graduate school. I do enjoy the academic environment, I love being a student and I allowed myself to be honest in that moment. Even after that lunch, I still hemmed and hawed, and I only had enough money to apply to one school. And although I was nervous about putting all of my eggs in one basket, here I am; it ended up working out!



Untitled, 2013. Synthetic hair, plastic cable ties, monofilament. Photo courtesy of the artist.

LAN That idea of an art lexicon is interesting in your work. You look at pop culture references, and consumer culture a little bit, then examine the flip side of those things . . . have any of your ideas or your approach changed since you've been in an elite academic environment—the best graduate art school in the country? Was there culture shock? What happened when you got there? *(laughter)*

KR Oh my gosh! Everything that could happen. Within the first month of being here, my mother passed away. The grief of her passing is something that is just going to be part of my life now. I remember speaking to her doctor and the bells were chiming—they have a class every couple of years where you can learn how to play the carillon—and it was playing *Bad Romance*. It was this surreal moment, one that encapsulates my first year.

A part of my attraction to Yale, beyond the art program, is that it is a place of privilege. Particularly male, white, western privilege. As a black person living in

this country, that fascinates me. I wanted this environment to influence my thinking— everything that could be challenged was challenged: my gender, my sexual orientation, my race, class, and even my age. I feel like I've thought more deeply about those aspects of myself in ways I hadn't before.

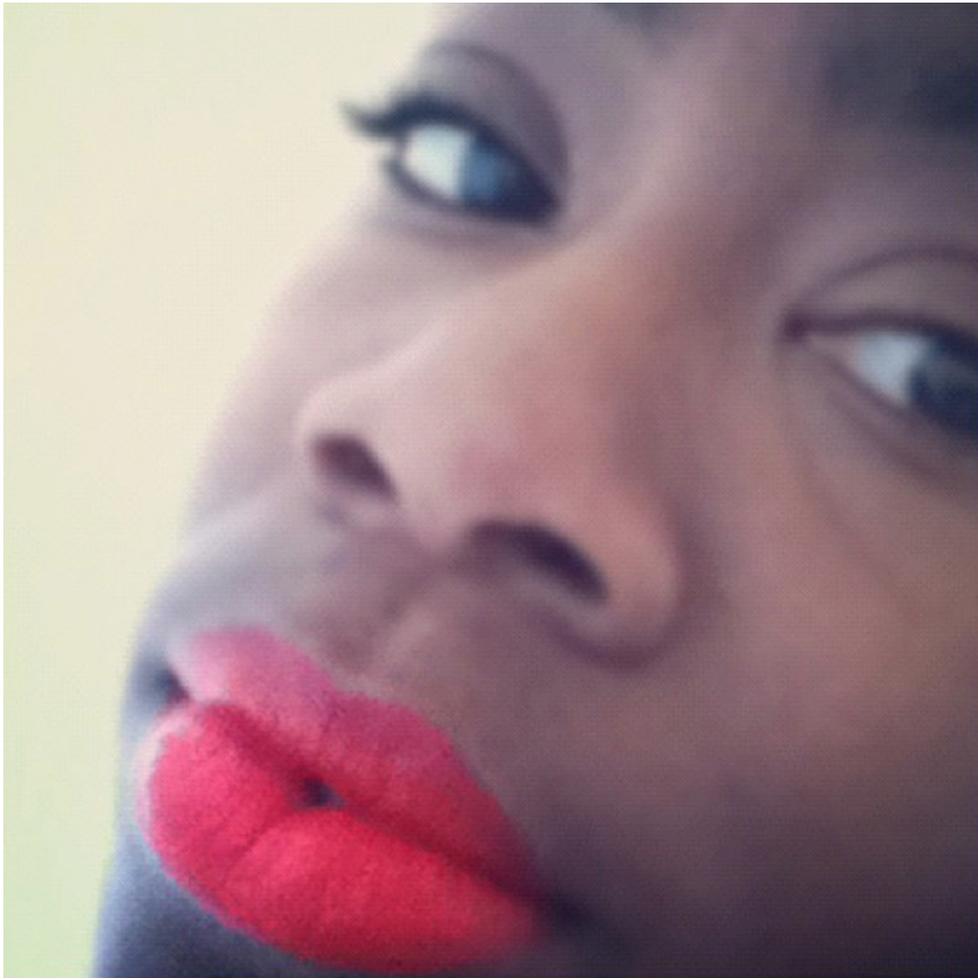
I realize that any graduate program is not teaching you to be an artist—you already are an artist. They're helping you to become a professional. And that's really key—to allow that professionalism to enhance my work in a positive way.

LAN I understand. When I was in graduate school, I started to think, Why am I cranking through these 500 word reviews, why should I care about this? But in hindsight, I realize that this is part of the work. Maybe I get to choose what I want to write about; maybe I don't, but I understand that this is how it works, what an editor will do with my work, how I need to respond . . . that is really valuable.

How long have you been working as a professional artist?

KR Probably since 2008.

LAN That's a good chunk of time to figure out how you work, and what your work might mean or do in the world. And a lot people right now—maybe because the economy is so bad—just think, maybe I should go to graduate school, even though they might be right out of undergraduate, and haven't had a chance to fully understand their own work. It just feels safer to go back to this good, but ultimately artificial environment.



Self Portrait of Kenya (Robinson), 2013. Photo courtesy of the artist.

KR A big part of the lexicon—particularly in the context of black artists—feels highly standardized. I resist attempts to regulate the dialogue and even though I find a lot of peace in embracing an identity as a black artist . . .

LAN You don't feel the need to be "post" anything—

KR No, no. I'm totally fine with it. Basically, all black artists know all other black artists and critics through six degrees of separation, at least. I appreciate that "blackness" can be used as a beacon for creating dense connections, but I don't think we've taken full advantage.

When I first got to Yale, I felt a little dismissed because of my academic background—I don't have a BFA, or an art history degree or anything like that. Much of the critical conversation was about "adjectivising" the work by using the names of other artists, and I wouldn't know who they were talking about. I would

be Googling like: *Who dat?! But fortunately, I've had many supporters. Allison Weisberg [from Recess] said to me that there are going to be people in the program who know how to be in school; they know how to do that well. And I know how to operate in the world, and both perspectives are valid. I can't dismiss what they're doing, and I have to assert how I'm feeling. I've learned to do that more effectively and resist any kind of disregard of my point of view. Instead of commiserating with someone who did the program years ago, and who may have been "The Only," and probably felt that disregard more intensely than I have, I realized that you gotta give what you wanna get. If you want people to engage with you, you've got to reach out, almost to the point of being obnoxious. I've found that to be very effective. The action distracts you from pettiness, tames your ego and pulls you toward a fuller, less alienated experience. My insecurities lose out to: Hey, you know, I've got a case of beer and this new album, wanna come over to my house and listen to it, person that I never talk to . . . ?*

LAN (*laughter*) Right! Like, what's your name, again . . . ?

KR I've always been proactive, but now my actions are more refined, and current circumstances are not dissuading me from continuing on that path. I embrace the power of my own agency, that I can shift my perspective in any situation and make it feel better.

Lee Ann Norman is a culture maker and bridge builder whose interests lie in the ways others read the world, and how their reading(s) influence everything. She uses her formal education along with her street smarts, intuition, and wit to fuel a penchant for shaking things up in the world.

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