

FACES & PLACES

CATCHING UP WITH SOME FAR-FLUNG HOMETOWN CELEBRITIES



HAIR, ART & CULTURE

ARTIST KENYA ROBINSON
POSES AT SHARON'S HOUSE
OF BEAUTY IN GAINESVILLE.

KENYA ROBINSON TRANSFORMS THE FAMILIAR INTO THE THOUGHT- PROVOKING

BY AMRITHA ALLADI

KENYA ROBINSON HAS TRIED out tresses of all lengths and styles — dreads, Afro, braids, twists...once she even shaved her head completely.

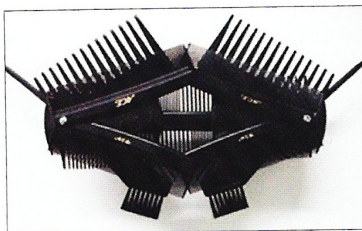
When the Brooklyn-based artist and fashion design consultant received a sample box of hair accessories from Goody, her imagination ran wild.

Inside the box, the Gainesville native found combs, hair pieces, ribbons, beads and braids. The result, "Hairpolitic: The Pursuit of Nappiness," is an art series fashioned out of combs, curlers and other hair products that offers a tribute to African-American hair through the ages. Featured in Brooklyn's Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts, the exhibit celebrates black hair in a socio-political context. Because the combs are screwed together, the piece is meant to be manipulated by curators and visitors alike, to reflect women's ever-changing hair styles.

Robinson has always been drawn to the creative arts. Before she graduated from Gainesville High School in 1995, she created and headed her school's literary magazine.

"You don't realize how that prepares the road for you to be an artist because that's what an artist does," she says, "they're creative. They think about everything in terms of creation and how they can interpret whatever it is they read, see, or do into a visual, literary, or audio

DOUG FINGER



ROBINSON'S ARTWORK FROM
"HAIRPOLITIC: THE PURSUIT OF
HAPPINESS"

The Gainesville native's resilience was rewarded when Goody Products agreed to sponsor her forthcoming installation.

representation of that experience."

Robinson calls herself a "professional muse," and through "Hairpolitic," hopes to give people something to think about, rather than telling them what to think.

The meticulous nature of maintaining hair had always fascinated her. Growing up, Robinson, now 31, particularly noticed the attention given to altering the hair of black women.

"You are compelled at a very young age to alter that image, that it is wrong or ugly in its natural state."

Living in Brooklyn opened her eyes to the measures African-American women will take to transform their hair.

"I saw that on one side of the street, on one block, there were 15 hair-related stores in the neighborhood, [yet] I couldn't get a fresh orange in the same neighborhood."

But by no means does she wish to promote one hairstyle over another. She says she would never call herself a militant naturalist, and that she, too, has had her hair straightened and relaxed.

"I wanted to start a dialogue [with black women] that would perhaps call into question their own choices — or lack of choices — about what they consider beautiful and appropriate."

The artistic arena in her hometown of Gainesville has influenced her as well. Robinson has fond memories of watching independent films at the Hippodrome State Theatre and Dance Alive's "The Nutcracker" at the Phillips Center every year. It's the small town feel she misses about Gainesville, and she says that's what keeps her coming back. She visits yearly to spend time with her parents, Rob and Rita Whitfield, and her grandparents, Delia and Horace McKnight.

"The level of interaction with all kinds of people and cultures rivals my experience in New York," Robinson says. "It's deceptive to think there's nothing going on here."

But being in Brooklyn has also had its benefits. Aside from specializing in apparel

production and design and studying at Los Angeles Trade Tech before moving to New York, Robinson has no formal training in the arts. It was encouragement from her peers in New York that drove her to seriously pursue funding for installation exhibits based on the ideas scribbled in her childhood journals.

"The grant process is generally designed to keep out the people who are not serious," she says. "It's almost like you have to climb up a mountain and ask a leprechaun a favor."

Robinson's resilience was rewarded when the public relations people at Goody Products recognized the novelty of her idea for Hairpolitic, after having initially shooed her away from the grant pool, and agreed to sponsor her forthcoming installation, "Hairpolitic: Pomade in America," for which she is still securing sponsorships. This second installation will address not just African-American hair, but American hair in general. Through the display of combs that have been melted and collages depicting the human body, she hopes her audience identifies commonalities, rather than differences, among all people.

Her next endeavor, "The John Henry Project," is an idea she had thought of while attending the University of Florida, after having accidentally registered for a graduate level class in African-American anthropology. The name comes from an African-American myth about a slave who dies after winning a race against a steel hammer, a machine developed in the mid-19th century to complete railroad work. Henry proves to be stronger and more efficient than the machine itself, and Robinson felt the story reflects the information she has collected on the evolution of the criminal justice system, which she says has startling parallels to the Jim Crow era. The class introduced her to the development of the penal system in America and it has inspired her to build an exhibit of prison jumpsuits fashioned to mirror uniforms from penitentiaries around the U.S. She plans to house the exhibit in phased-out factories, pointing out similarities between the fast-growing prison industry and corporations.

"I just want people to ask questions," she says. 