

# Art & Pop Culture

## Drawing Outside the Lines

SAMANTHA RAGLAND

YOUNG AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTISTS, ever-so-steeped in popular culture, are adding so many facets to their expressive works, they're liable to give any Asscher- or Princess-cut diamond a run for the money. You name it: video, performance, sound, prose, poetry, comics, music, consumer products and product packaging. All grist for their game. These artists don't even see spider-web-thin lines between one medium, subject, or tool and the next. It all is what it is. Art.

So, contemporary artists are more than just artists. They also are bridge builders whose work is not always easy but is fruitful for more than just themselves. For instance, what does sound look like to you? What does it feel like? Could you take your latest favorite single to class for an hour of "show and tell" and actually *show* it? Jennie C. Jones's latest exhibit, *Electric*, July 8–August 13, 2010, at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. in New York City, asks these questions, and she has no idea how the viewer/listener will answer. She can only hope.

"Sound is difficult in the art world," Jones explained on the first of July as she took a break from preparing to install the show. "I hope that the sound can function in a way that is a little bit more than just a soundtrack, that it can have a weight and hold the space." And of all the sounds for Jones to give weight to, she chose silence. In her new audio work, "Slowly, In a Silent Way Caged," Jones stretches Miles Davis' *In a Silent Way* to the length of John Cages' *4'33"* (or *four minutes thirty-three seconds* of silence), giving her audience what she interprets to be "two radically different concepts of silence existing in a visual realm."

Starting out as a painter, Jones now blends the subjects of art

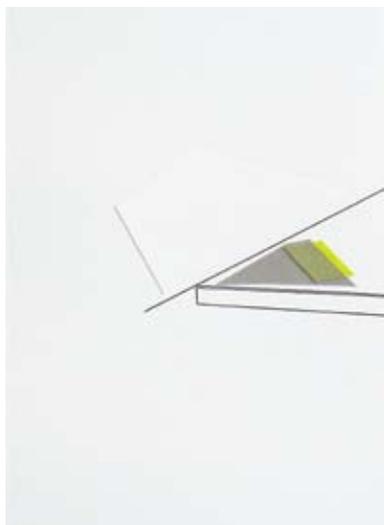
history and black history through audio, sculpture and drawing. "I came to the place of making more interdisciplinary art because I was trying to bridge my cultural experience and what influenced me as a kid with what I learned getting a BFA and a MFA. [I was] seeing all these missing pages in the conversation, and I think there is no way to address all of that inside one medium."

By working outside the box, the respective boxes — graphic designer, painter, videographer, singer — are broken down. An entire school of art is coalescing among young people who were formally educated and will always reflect that training, but who are now grappling with blending that educational experience with their individual and cultural experiences, said Jones. By building bridges and blurring boundaries, these "artists who are thinking more conceptually or reworking history or playing with technology or looking at sci-fi, can all be in this conversation." But trying to bring this dialogue into what can be a very academic-specific and market-driven gallery system is sometimes the difficult part. Jones feels more than honored to be showing at Sikkema Jenkins which represents Kara Walker and Mark Bradford, because, she said, she's been a bit rogue.

"Sound is not as packageable as a giant, gorgeous painting," she said. "A museum doesn't know how to contend with some work in that way, so it's harder."

The point is not to give up and stop creating or expressing. In being versed in more than one medium, subject and/or technique, young artists are connecting vernacular and formal idioms.

Jones remembers well her first day of orientation at the Art Institute of Chicago because she received one of the gems that keeps her creating.



Jennie C. Jones  
*Song Containers #5*, 2010  
Collage and ink on paper  
15 x 10" (38.1 x 25.4 cm).  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Sikkema Jenkins & Co.,  
New York.



Kenya (Robinson)  
*Commemorative  
Headdress of Her  
Journey Beyond Heaven*,  
2010, mixed mediums



Kenya (Robinson)  
*Flawless Beyond Any Stretch  
 Of The Imagination  
 (SUPERSTAY)*, 2010  
 magazines, spray paint,  
 nylon thread, plastic beads  
 11/ 28 x 1.5/ 4. x 15.5 / 39 cm

The professor said, “There are those of you who are here to be artists and those of you who are here just to be art students. And if you have a choice between being an artist or something else, you really shouldn’t be here.” Jones added: “Because you really have no choice. If that’s your gift and that’s your vision, then you can’t do anything else.”

Self-taught artist Kenya (Robinson) — who has made the parentheses a part of her name — seems to be living proof of what Jones heard that day. (Robinson) was going to be a lawyer. Then she thought she’d be a fashion designer. Eventually she found herself being who she always was: an artist. As a child, she was convinced that the word either meant you were a painter or a sculptor. She knows differently now. “An artist makes tangible representations of ideas, consistently,” she said as she sat in front of the Brooklyn Museum on a Saturday afternoon in June, phone



Kenya (Robinson)  
*Blonde Anemone*  
 (detail), mixed mediums

to ear, children’s giggles and playful screams soundtracking the conversation. At age nine, (Robinson) was told by her dad that money is not what runs the world, but ideas. “Ideas run the world,” she repeated thoughtfully and with quiet conviction.

(Robinson) has found a place for the mass marketed urban fiction/hood tales in her performance installations. The 32-year-old Brooklyn-based artist is known for her hair comb sculptures, but she wants most to open a platform for dialogue and to bring more “people of color into the conversation” about contemporary art. In May 2010 this interest spurred her decision to stage a sit-in for Marina Abramovic’s performance piece, *The Artist Is Present*, at the Museum of Modern Art. She called it a “racialized intervention,” and believes it was necessary.

Abramovic’s piece allowed museum visitors to sit with her for as long as they would like. Headshots were taken and put on flicker. Some people just stared back at the artist, some sat down and obviously thought about what they should do next, some wept. (Robinson) wondered where were all the brown and yellow and black faces? “That’s why the sit-in was so obvious to me. The art community is very diverse,” (Robinson) said, and she felt that people of color should be represented at this major, highly-publicized art event. “The sit-in was a success because it was a failure. Even though I didn’t get what I wanted visually [meaning a mobilization and representation of how truly colorful New York City is], I ultimately did get what I wanted: A space for dialogue.”

Abramovic’s performance art intersects American popular culture at the point of the “reality show” — the ubiquitous TV format hatched in the mid-1990s. During the past 15 years, with the explosion of reality shows, cable-produced programming, the

Web, iTunes, mobile devices, APPs, and the like, the scope of pop culture has just become so large, so much a part of everyday life, that it's all consuming. It is "the building blocks of our collective consciousness," said (Robinson).

On the pop culture tip, she expressed her fascination with fashion magazines. The imaginatively-staged photographs of models wearing fantastic constructions on their bodies and feet in these glossy publications look a lot like the "fine art" of installation artists and photographers. These magazines are on the blurred boundary between contemporary pop culture and fine art.

In her mixed media work, *The Allotter*, (Robinson) brings a two-dimensional runway model out from the pages into a multi-dimensional representation of how fashion forward our culture has become. She is elegant, she is magical. Donning a veil of black lace, the model is mysterious. (Robinson) handles this old school medium like the wind handles the sea. In some pieces, the pages are grouped and then tossed and curved around one another. Freeze frame the movement of water, where it crests and falls — this is what her magazine manipulations resemble.

Beyond the actual pages is the content. "The magazines are like spell books," she said. Within them, a reader can find incantations for just about everything. "Whether it's the attractive powers of 'The Little Black Dress', aromatic love potions (perfumes), or tools for creating a flawless face (Maybelline), I think these messages communicate the same intention of protection, enhancement, and/or manifestation that you might find in voodoo or wiccan practices." Her spell books project is not only an attempt to re-fashion the fashions, but to open up the doors, the eyes, the ears for conversation.

Also using traditional media in not-so-traditional ways is R. Jackson. Based in Homestead, Florida which is very south of Miami, Jackson has used technology to remix the old hard copy magazine into a very new, very interesting web copy, complete with glossy pages that flip in just a click. *DONU: the art of\_sci-*

*fi\_hip\_hop\_anime\_comics* is one of many steps Jackson is taking to push a new genre into the mainstream for both the sake of the art and the artists who create it. What makes the push especially exciting and timely is the recent release of Apple's iPad, which Jackson believes will have a tremendous effect on how artists are seen and experienced, especially those whose ideas are limitless and whose work is cross discipline and cross medium.

So why the creation of DONU? Well, "there's always been a visual element to hip hop," Jackson said, and it is not just about beat boys and emcees or graffiti. In the early 1980s, a fusion of the urban, hip hop aesthetic with comic book illustration and Japanese anime began, he explained. He coined the term DONU, with respect to the late music producer J Dilla, in hopes of creating a genre, and therefore a market, for this fusion. "Now that there's a term, now that *it* actually exists, it can be packaged and sold. Giving it a name allows it to be exploited, if you will," he said, adding "for lack of a better word," through a laugh.

After all, it is 2010. Jackson's market mentality is necessary for success in what *is*, after all, the art *market*. Although art for its own sake is still very much appreciated, the art-is-sacred mentality is becoming a choice. Back in the day, the only venue of commerce for artists was the pristine walls of a gallery. Today artists can show themselves online; their blogs are becoming just as important to their resume as their studio work and exhibitions. Social networking is more often done through the keys on a computer or cell phone than at restaurants and lofts with wine and cheese. And the change has allowed artists more opportunity to be seen and heard. Jackson is using these new tools as a bridge to more access for artists working outside of the mainstream.

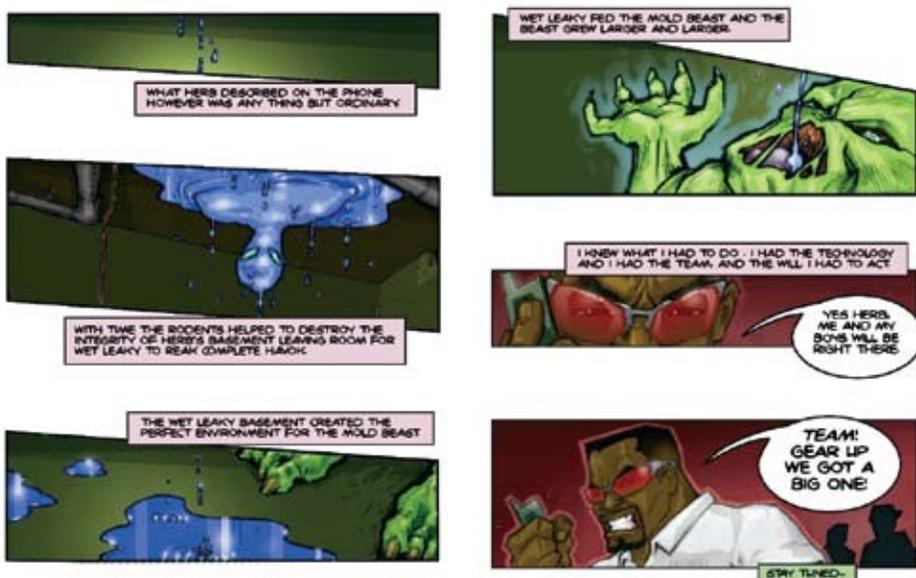
With DONU picking up speed and support in the mainstream, Jackson has little time to slow down. Along with working in carbon fiber media on limited edition sculptures based on his comic book characters, he is compiling *The Magnum Opus Project* as another way to further ignite the genre. *Magnum Opus* is a coffee table book

that spotlights creators who have been in the comic book industry for years, by day drawing familiar characters and by night working on their own "intellectual property."

As they appreciate the crackle of a jazz record on vinyl or the glister of blank CD jewels sprawled across a floor, or the appeal of popular print media, these artists are blurring lines and constructing new platforms for dialogue with old and new art audiences.

---

Samantha Ragland is a contributing writer to this journal. She received the MA in 2008 from the Goldring Arts Journalism Program at Syracuse University.



R. Jackson, DONU