



SAATCHI ART

Kendell Carter In Conversation With Sarah Pearl

By Saatchi Art · April 9, 2008 · Los Angeles ·

On a normal day, passers-by can peek into the ground floor windows of Monique Meloche Gallery and find a sparse, modest-sized space with a zealous sampling of contemporary art's most rapidly emerging names. Yet on this particular afternoon in Chicago, as Kendell Carter attended to last minute touch ups before his opening, the front room of the gallery experienced a spirited transformation. Against a backdrop of prim English wainscoting and crisp white walls broken by black stripes, Carter's exhibit, entitled *Common Ground*, delivers multiple paths of social and historical inquiry. Citing Robert Irwin's ideas as a potent stimulus for his direction as an artist, Carter weaves his personal sensibilities in and around these theories until brilliant colors and contexts explode and bleed together. A re-appropriation of urban material culture is central. Design and decoration merge as cultural yearnings enforce themselves through a skillfully fabricated environment.

Born in New Orleans, Carter now lives in Los Angeles. He received a BFA from Atlanta College of Art in 1994, studied environmental design at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, and received a MFA from California State University, Long Beach, CA in 2006. Kendell Carter had his first solo show at the UCLA Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in 2006/07 and received critical acclaim in publications such as *Art In America*, *Sculpture Magazine*, *LA Weekly* and the *Los Angeles Times*. Recent exhibitions include solo shows at Mark Moore Gallery, Los Angeles and Finesilver Gallery, Houston, and the group show "Blacks in and out of the Box" at The California African American Museum, LA.

We spoke for an hour while well-wishers occasionally dropped by to congratulate him on his new show.

Sarah Pearl: It looks like you used pencil, spray paint, watercolor, and acrylics in some of your works on paper. I also recognize some of these female images from magazines. How would you describe *Common Ground* 1-4?

Kendell Carter: *Common Ground* 1-4 are essentially a conversation on our taste, our beauty standards—where they come from, where they lie, and whether they are fluid. Dave Hickey talks a lot about 'liquidity,' and I happen to think that's a very valid way to progress with contemporary art making. Some would call it post modernism or duplicity, but I think there's something to be said for liquidity. For me that's where the work positions itself, in the world of semantics, language, multiple meanings. The way these drawings start is with transparency—there is not much of it. I then build beyond this with pigments in these segregated zones. From there I do this boundary crossing and then I try to create some sort of balance, balance between the figurative drawings, texture, and message in the composition. The root of these pieces is aesthetic but also very social. Ultimately I'm trying to depict or achieve a cultural balance. The images address strength, power, and influence—these opposite forces working with and around each other to redefine tradition.

SP: Do you think identity is a result of power or the opposite? How do they inform each other?

KC: It depends on the context. The same issues of identity that we have here in the states are very different from, say, the issues in Britain. Segregation, race relations do not have the same sort of tainted history that they do here. My objective is not to play the race card but racially motivated assumptions will always exist. Power and identity are

ever shifting variables, and luckily because of genres such as hip-hop, barriers can more easily blend. It's this idea of the continual 'mash-up.'

SP: You grew up in New Orleans. Do you feel like that has affected your world view as an artist?

KC: The approach to aesthetics in New Orleans is absolutely key to the way I approach making work today. The idea of gumbo for instance, the way you put all of these disparate ingredients together in one pot and mix them up to create something new.

SP: I feel like there is a particularly vital relationship between art and the rich craft culture of the city. Is that embedded in your work?

KC: My work has a design-based sensibility, but I would also say that some of it has a craft sensibility and that's intentional. Women are essential to my approach. I'm questioning this tongue-in-cheek notion of 'women's work.' What is that exactly, and what does it mean for a man to be doing it? I'm interested in the slippage of meaning and roles. I like to think of my work as having a visual culture approach rather than a strictly art historical approach.

SP: Do you think crossing and intersecting disciplines is becoming a necessity for artists and designers?

KC: I don't think that there is a terribly wide expanse between installation and interior architecture. The regimented art historical approach boxes us in. That's why I use hip-hop as a model. It's a culture of sampling. There's a hybrid of energies involved in it. Hip-hop is a model I use to execute ideas because it's one of the few multi-racial, multi-generational contingencies that we have—it just makes sense to use it.

SP: How do you hope people will respond to your environments?

KC: Well, again context. The commercial gallery is very different from the public art institution. There are signifiers in my work that people are familiar with. The utilitarian designs, the nods to popular culture create this bridge of identification that is based on having a previous experience with an aspect of the installation, so initially there are visceral responses. That being said, the rules of an institution don't necessarily exist in the same way for a private, commercial gallery so it's a little tricky. The idea is to initiate a dialogue, and second, you try to create an environment that is so welcoming that it breaks down that behavioral expectation that tells us to remain an observer. I try to make it pretty irresistible.

SP: Speaking of the irresistible, at what point did you find the need to expand into 3-dimensional work?

KC: I was initially a photography major at the Atlanta College of Art, though I had studied painting. But these were the days when everyone was beginning to question the validity of painting. At the same time I began to take my first sculpture class and the immediacy struck a cord. I was fascinated by the permanence of the object involved. That's where it started. I also started to investigate African heritage and cultural myths. The whole notion that few of these cultures have a word for art because everything created in their society serves a specific function became a platform for exploration in my own thinking. I thought 'How can I address necessity?' From there hip-hop merged because at the time, in the late 80's through rappers such as Guru, this recognizable phenomenon of the black urban dweller who needs to relax because he's always on edge arose. This resulted in my first functional piece which I called Loungin—a chaise lounge made of recycled materials—utilizing Krylon spray cans as the back.

SP: And the evolution from making objects to creating environments?

KC: My tastes changed when my world view became more sophisticated. Design slowly worked its way into the picture. It wasn't until graduate school where I became interested in Robert Irwin's idea of 'total installation' that I began to approach it. I knew I wanted to figure out how to create shifts in perception. How casual culture informs high culture and vice versa and trying to find the middle ground, trying pull back away from this separatist grand narrative and making it an inclusive narrative based on a common energy, a mutual understanding within a shared experience.

SP: In this political climate, what do you think the role of an artist should entail?

KC: I think it's pretty clear that I care. Everyone doesn't have to, but I think it's essential to avoid just pandering to aestheticism. Theory can be and should be balanced with social relevance. I come from the south, born a son of civil unrest, where you're surrounded by activism. I think there is a lot of fertile ground, where juxtapositions within our culture are beneficial. As an artist, I can't do much more than interpret what my experiences have allowed me to learn.

Kendell Carter
Until April 19
Monique Meloche Gallery
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