

KORI NEWKIRK

With a style once labeled “ghetto-fabulous conceptualism,” the LA-based artist examines issues of identity and material allegory

By DeWitt Cheng

Los Angeles artist Kori Newkirk, young, gifted and black (to appropriate a phrase from Aretha Franklin), is known for conceptual art that invokes the issue of race in America, but without falling into what the art world has labeled, since the late 1940s, in its Cold War reaction against the leftist art of the Depression, ‘propaganda.’ He is, in that sense, ‘post-black,’ as other contemporary artists dealing less than insistently with social subject matter have been similarly labeled ‘post-feminist’ or ‘post-gay.’ His recent show at Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco offered an opportunity to examine his new work and talk with the artist. But first, a little historical context is in order.

The political art that lay dormant during the Cold War, cast into oblivion by the success of Abstract Expressionism and America’s postwar celebration of heroic individualism, returned in the 1980s, with a difference. The political-economic leftist internationalism of the Depression was replaced by a concern with affirming the existential worth of minority groups within mainstream American culture, in what came to be called “identity-politics art.” Adrian Piper’s 1986 “consciousness-raising” piece, *My Calling Card*, may be taken as paradigmatic, sardonically informing whites who had assumed the highly educated, light-skinned artist to be one of them:

Dear Friend,

I am black. I am sure you did not realize this when you made/laughed at/agreed with that racist remark... I regret any discomfort my presence is causing you, just as I am sure you regret the discomfort your racism is causing me.

Sincerely...

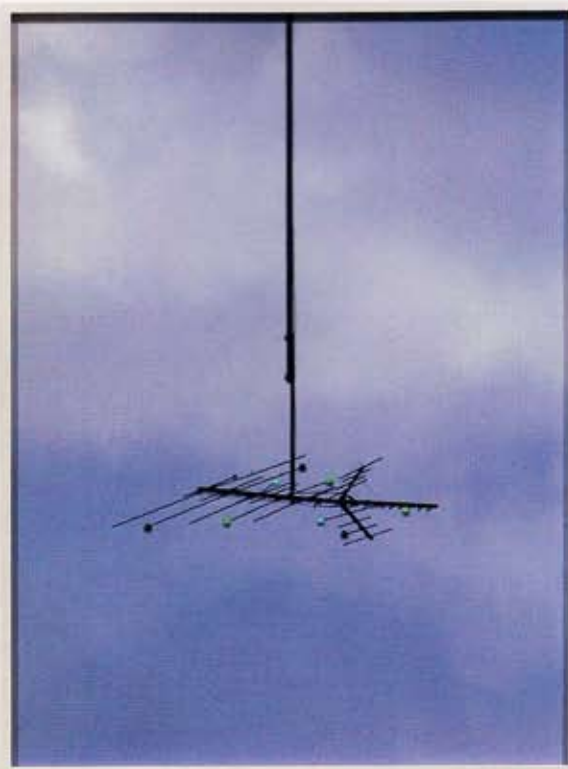
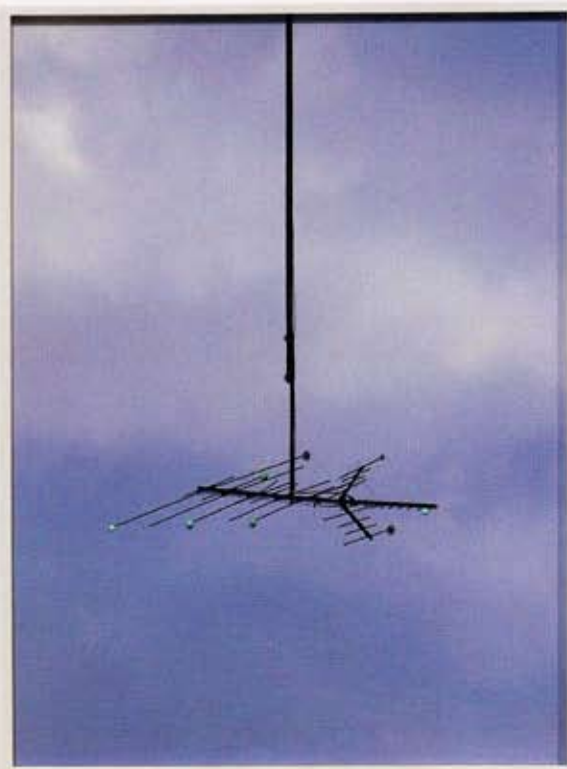
If afflicting the comfortable was one strategy, so was comforting the afflicted—by elevating minority cultures to mainstream status. The work of David Hammons appropriated, for inclusion into high art and museum culture, a variety of lowdown materials from working-class daily life, as enumerated with perverse relish by one art historian: “hair from barbershop floors, plastic milk crates, barbecued ribs, fried chicken wings, greasy paper bags, grease, rusted bottle caps, used wine bottles—each bearing the memory of a black person’s lips.” These new political artists opted for the latest contemporary art styles, just as their Depression predecessors had—employing installation, video, photography and performance rather than a mixture of Expressionism, Cubism and Surrealism, and replacing traditional illusionism with conceptualist intellectualism.

A generation later, the political assertions of the 1980s have yielded, in this hybrid, pragmatic Age of Obama, to a kinder, gentler art of persuasion, epitomized in the work of multimedia conceptualist Kori Newkirk, a New Yorker who has lived in Los Angeles since art school but famously declines to consider himself ‘of it.’ In an interview, Newkirk reflected, “I don’t make work that is traditionally considered Los Angeles art. The only *noir* thing about my practice is me.” In 2001, the artist Glenn Ligon and the curator Thelma Golden labeled Newkirk’s work (along with that of others) as ‘post-black,’ provoking some controversy



“JET (PROTOTYPE 1)” (DETAIL), 2013
SAP, WATER, TEARS, SALIVA, SWEAT
APPROXIMATELY 68" X 134"; DIMENSIONS VARIABLE
PHOTO: COURTESY JESSICA SILVERMAN GALLERY





"RHYTHM AND WARMTH," 2013, C-PRINT, ACRYLIC
35½" x 27" EACH DIPTYCH EDITION OF 3 + 2AP

about whether these younger artists, born after the civil rights battles of the 1960s, were trivializing the gravity of the race issue; in fact, the older Hammons criticized this new art as "trendy, postmodern,—blandly international [work]—that has turned the [museum] into a 'boutique' or 'country club.'" Golden defended the new, cooler sensibility as embracing "the dichotomies of high and low, inside and outside, tradition and innovation," clearly operant in Newkirk's ironically labeled 'ghetto-fabulous conceptualism.'

If such intramural, intergenerational art turf battles are as old as the hills, Newkirk's post-black liberation has struck a chord with Gen Xers and Millennials, resulting in a meteoric career. His CV includes education at top art schools (SAIC in Chicago, an MFA from UC Irvine), gallery shows around the world, inclusion in major museum collections, a trip to the 2006 Whitney Biennial, and solo museum exhibitions at an improbably early stage of his career. His 2008 retrospective at the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Pasadena Museum of California Art spotlighted the artist's multifarious practice, with works in photography, video, neon, aluminum, glass, Fiberglass, artificial snow, glitter, jockstraps, found objects, pony beads, string, synthetic and real hair, hair pomade, fake snow, basketball hoops and other miscellanea, from 1997 to 2007.

Such success might lead some artists to jump on the career gravy train without hesitation, but Newkirk (who grew up in white upstate New York, "looking at trees and cows," and traces his Dutch family name to a 17th-century slaveholder in New Amsterdam) clearly has a strong independent streak and work ethic to match his ironic sense of humor. The ongoing gentrification of downtown Los Angeles, where his studio is located, prompted this admission: "I prefer to be around people who have to work—to look out my window and see people who are, like, pushing carts and struggling."

Even successful artists should keep pushing and struggling, of course, and Newkirk clearly knows this. At a certain point he realized that he was finished with the beaded curtains—possibly that made his name. Fashioned from multicolored plastic pony beads strung on braided synthetic hair extensions, materials appropriated from black beauty parlors, these works, inspired by the hairdo of tennis champion Venus Williams (and possibly works by Felix Gonzalez-Torres), are comical and yet forceful, asserting the banality of their source materials yet depicting ideal landscapes when seen from a distance; they are thus pictorial as well as sculptural, abstract as well as representational—and subversive irruptions of black culture into the pale pink realm of high art. In 2011, Newkirk told art writer Claudine Isé, "I really never expected to only make one type of thing; I don't think it's in my nature. Some things come and go... I never want[ed] to just be 'that bead boy'!... I work in service to the idea and not the medium." Nor are Newkirk's hair pomade wall drawings in evidence either at his recent show, a step back from the bipolar racial symbolism, the outré materials and overt theatricality of the past, away from polemical declamation (however witty or sardonic), to a more subdued, introspective investigation of materials and imagery.

In May, during the weekend when the San Francisco art fairs were attracting the attention of art and entertainment journalists, I spoke with Newkirk about his new work, all from 2013. Enigmatic at first, they slowly reveal themselves to be logical, imaginative, and thematically open-ended: anti-propagandistic and non-polemical, they are completed by viewers, who will see them differently, based on their life experiences and temperaments. *Natter* is a wall installation of tin cans mounted side by side in a semicircular arc with their open sides facing outward, revealing interiors coated with colored glitter (including black), suggestive of the crystalline interiors of geodes; Newkirk, who likes to use everyday objects, repurposed his kitchen recyclables in this piece, which contains optical, astronomical and cerebral implications: the break in the arc at one o'clock on the dial suggests the pupillary aperture of an eye, or an observatory, while the flickering

CENTER FOR VISUAL
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september 21Opening Reception
July 12 6-8pmInterrupted
Process

Interrupted Process

features the work of 22 Colorado Art Education Association members exploring and challenging assumptions about teaching in the arts. These teachers, students and professors participated in an instructional art project with prompts from CVA and MSU Denver. Inspired by contemporary artists and 21st century thinking, these artists' work shifted, laying the groundwork for evolution in their pedagogy as well.



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THEORY LOVES
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features the work of an MSU Denver sponsored art education research group. 18 art educators will contribute work based on individual research questions, documentation, and reflection in response to pedagogical shifts, 21st century artists and thinkers. The exhibition demonstrates elements of process and evidence as related to work in education and in the arts.

EVENTS

JULY 11

6pm
Assessment Swapmeet:
Arnold Aprill Founder and
Lead Consultant Chicago Arts
Partnerships in Education

JULY 12

6-8pm
Opening Reception

JULY 19

8pm
Design & Thinking
film screening

Rhythm and Warmth is a diptych of two color photographs, identical and enlarged, of an old-fashioned television antenna, inverted, with some of its metal prongs adorned with colored balls—an exploration of doubling, reflection and multiplicity, along with a commentary on television's seductive, mind-parasite insidiousness.

interior light invokes "the inside of our heads—the synapses firing in this dark void," while the concentric ridges on some of the can bases suggest radiations and vibrations.

Jet (Prototype 1) is a rug-sized floor installation composed of thousands of transparent spheres which one takes for acrylic plastic, filled with water; they are actually SAP, super-absorbent polymer, a gel used in various industries to contain liquids, which Newkirk, who confesses to feeling occasionally "invisible—not as an artist, but as a human being, as a black man who lives in Los Angeles, who lives in the United States," has infused with his own tears, sweat and saliva; the rubbery organic spheres suggest egg yolks, frog or fish eggs, blood cells, and eyeballs. So the piece, which Newkirk concedes is "a sort of conceptual self-portrait, invisible, mostly water," conjoins nature and culture uncomfortably but memorably. *Rhythm and Warmth* is a diptych of two color photographs, identical and enlarged, of an old-fashioned television antenna, inverted, with some of its metal prongs adorned with colored balls—an exploration of doubling, reflection and multiplicity, along with a commentary on television's seductive, mind-parasite insidiousness. Newkirk sees the antenna's orthogonal branches as geometricized versions of the fault lines underlying Los Angeles and San Francisco, and ramose crack-branch patterns in nature; do the media networks seep into a fracture in our brains? (An earlier iteration of the photo piece, in sculpture, exploring "how television feeds us," contained, instead of colored balls, plastic spoons "filled with ash and another brown substance.")

Dow, which is not named after the chemical company or the stock market index—"I just like the sound of the word"—is a wall sculpture composed of two mismatched gloves that Newkirk found while bicycling to his studio, connected with a long cord, in the way that mothers sometimes tie their children's winter gloves together, looping the string up their coat sleeves; one finger of one of the gloves is adorned with pigeon feathers, also street-scavenged, which are arranged as in a badminton shuttlecock, suggesting flying and falling, an Icarian interpretation that Newkirk, with his empathy for the homeless, welcomes.

Finally, another odd object is transformed into art in *Lab*, a half of a paper towel bearing a black hand imprint, with the absorbent paper circles echoing the SAP spheres in *Jet (Prototype 1)*; a relic from a studio floor cleaning, it suggests some contemporary indexical version (ie, created unintentionally through process), conflating blackness and art-prole scut work, of the miraculous handkerchief of St. Veronica, the sweat-soaked *sudarium*, the *vera icon* magically depicting the face of the crucified. When I asked Newkirk about his religious beliefs, he laughingly confessed to a lapsed Catholicism. Whatever the current terminology, however, the animation of inert materials, its transubstantiation, has always been the central mystery and miracle of art.