



Kori Newkirk

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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

Ease on Down Newkirk Road

One of the wonders of the human condition is our ability to imagine, fantasize or invent alternate realities. The American creative tradition has taken this impulse to heart more than most. It is there in Phillis Wheatley's memories of the African shores of her youth, in Jay Gatsby's failed machinations for Daisy's illusive heart, at the funeral to end all funerals that closes Douglas Sirk's version of *Imitation of Life*, and on the yellow brick road that takes Dorothy far from home in mind and body. We seem to ask, what is on the other side of the page, the frame, the screen, the wall? What stories are hidden there? How can we step outside our sometimes disappointing, often simply quotidian lives into some other, unexpected reality?

These questions echo and reverberate in the work of Kori Newkirk. His work sets the stage

for flights of fancy and films of the imagination. However, like that of Dorothy (more like Diana Ross in *The Wiz* than Judy Garland in *The Wizard of Oz*), Newkirk's expeditional possibilities are part delight, part cautionary tale, part humor and part quiet moments of subversion. Although he grew up in a small college town in central New York, he is now a star player in a constellation of Los Angeles-based artists, including Edward Ruscha, Catherine Opie and Doug Aitken, that look at and recast that vast, magical, catastrophe-bound, man-made tourist mecca that Norman Klein calls "the most photographed, least remembered city."¹ What makes his work different and so compelling is the exquisite union between subject and materials – plastic pony beads, artificial hair, hair pomade – that gives his paintings and installations narrative possibilities that are both open-ended and

irresistible. His gaze directed at Los Angeles mines the interstitial spaces between self and identity, race, civilization and the unpredictability of paradise. The tales between the lines keep us looking, and looking some more.

In the most straightforward terms, *Jubilee* (1999) is a painting of the fires that whipped across Los Angeles and our collective racialized consciousness during the 1992 Rodney King uprisings. Like most of us, the artist himself never saw this leaping wall of flame in person as he didn't live in Los Angeles at the time. Yet, all his paintings depict simple yet evocative scenes in which he can imagine himself inserted. He calls this his "black viewpoint."² At 8 feet by 8 feet, *Jubilee*, which features a heart-stopping mix of piquant reds, oranges and golds set against a gentle blue suggests an affinity with the color-field world of Clyfford Still and Barnett Newman. Our field of vision is consumed by the painting and our imaginations set free. While it certainly suggests disillusion and dystopia for some, it could just as easily evoke magnificent sunsets, tropical vegetation or a mountain covered with fall leaves for others. Each potential narrative trajectory leads to very different destinations, varied emotions and multiple endings. As we gaze at the work, each of us becomes the star in our own mini-film, and each choice we make on our storyboard reveals our many versions of self and fantasy.

In fact, Newkirk often makes up mini-dramas for each of his paintings. For instance, in *Stutter* (2002), he shows the façade of a generic Los Angeles apartment building, harkening back to Edward Ruscha's classic artist book *Some Los Angeles Apartments*, a time capsule of the city from 1965. Newkirk updates Ruscha's cityscape in full color, with that special smog-mediated light so special to Los Angeles. Setting up the scene, Newkirk says of this dwelling, "It looks like a black family could live there. Not too fancy, but not too run down either ... somewhere in the middle. Very late 70s/early 80s time frame. Mother might still have a small afro, 3 kids, not enough bedrooms. Happy most of the time, but still a struggle, too. Brown/rust colored carpet. An old used car ..."³ Thus, another mini-film set is waiting for protagonists to fill the frame. While our many haunts are depicted, Newkirk never includes



Salon 6:12, 2000, plastic pony beads, synthetic hair, aluminum, 83" x 73", collection Dean Valentine and Amy Adelson, Los Angeles, CA

actual people in his paintings. That absence is generously left to be filled by viewers inventive insertion of fantasy selves. Likewise, the beads and hair that form the paintings suggest a certain human affinity.

Never hemming us into a particular system of thought or interpretation about his work, Newkirk similarly refuses to limit himself in his approach to materials. After working with unusual painting materials such as antifreeze and glycerin soap during his undergraduate studies, he later began incorporating various cultural signifiers of beauty and camouflage most often associated with African Americans. Many of his paintings are made with the plastic pony beads made famous by Los Angeles-raised star tennis players Serena and Venus Williams. Each shimmering strand of each painting is strung on braided artificial hair. Artists such as Lorna Simpson have ventured into the undeniably political territory of black hair and glamour as well, but unlike her often direct engagement in that dialogue, Newkirk's work tends to reference but not foreground the political underpinnings at play.

Hair pomade is a highly evocative and sensuous material that Newkirk began using in his artwork in 1996. It carries a rich and varied cultural history. For instance, it was used by Malcolm Little to keep his conk hairstyle looking glorious before he was politically radicalized and reinvented himself as the natural-haired Malcolm X. The same stuff gave snake-hips Elvis his glossy black locks and flirty wisps over his eyes. Pomade has a distinct scent and comes in various consistencies and colors that the artist sometimes customizes with pigments. It's a fantastic material from which to make large wall paintings that sets a grand proscenium for the narrative sequences of our many possible selves.

Often working site specifically, Newkirk has used hair pomade to create images as varied and culturally resonant as basketball nets, snowflakes and city skylines or distinct topographies, as well as a typographical treatment of the names of firstborn sons from popular black TV families of the 1970s, including James Evans Jr. from *Good Times* and Lionel Jefferson from *The Jeffersons*. One of his most impressive pomade installations was part of the *Freestyle* exhibition at the Santa Monica

Museum of Art in 2001. For *All Over (The Remix)*, 2001, the artist used black hair pomade to cover a large wall with two hovering "ghetto birds," L.A. slang for the ubiquitous police surveillance helicopters that dot the sky. Inspired by a section near the end of Paul Beatty's heartbreaking and satirical novel *The White Boy Shuffle* (1997), this quiet yet slightly ominous piece acknowledges the sometimes banal absurdity of contemporary life in Los Angeles, especially if you're a person of color but not funds. After all, the greatest menace to society isn't always the one you expect. Choppers also evoke Hollywood action heroes like Rambo and James Bond and the fantasy world of comic books. Or is he daring us to be all we can be in the U.S. Army?

Most suggestively, the pomade pieces also form all-enveloping aromatic sculptures. As one takes in the large installations that glisten beautifully when lit, one is also surrounded by the distinct,

pungent, yet slightly sweet smell of hair pomade. If unfamiliar, it may make a person's nose wrinkle in an effort to escape. If familiar, which is often the case for African American audiences, it may bring back memories of Saturday morning hair rituals – hot combs on the stove, burning hair, laughter, family stories or admonishments to stop being "tender-headed." This smell is an art material that is as much a part of the installation as the image. Newkirk thus opens up an unexpected sensual realm in the gallery space and makes it a necessary element in the experience of his work. The aroma jumps off the wall, transforming a flat wall painting into a three-dimensional encounter with unpredictable ends.

Newkirk's conceptually rigorous practice also includes more traditional sculpture, such as *Legacy* (1999), a circle of nine black wooden Afro pics that stand 6 feet 2 inches tall. Each comb is topped off with a round top that recalls



Still Nothing, 2001, plastic pony beads, synthetic hair, aluminum, 67" x 40", collection Chip Tom and Michael Rabkin, Encino, CA



Crybaby, 2001, plastic pony beads, synthetic hair, aluminum, 60" x 84", collection Eileen Harris Norton, Santa Monica, CA

a head or a raised fist. The Afro and Afro pic are powerful symbols of the Black Power movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s that called for political and psychological revolution among black people. This sculpture seems to form a ring of sentinels guarding the pool of light within the circle. What revolutionary or not-so-revolutionary realities are they protecting? Dramatically lit, the sculpture creates a wonderful play of shadows against the gallery walls, seeming to multiply the guards standing shoulder to shoulder along the periphery of the room. Or perhaps the pics form a playpen or a prison? They may even form a majestic crown, and are they a sly reference to Jean-Michel Basquiat? Whatever the answer, something is amiss – the circle is not complete. One of the teeth from one comb is broken. Is this a site of struggle, escape, a moment of defiance against the occasional



Legacy, 1999, wood, metal, hardware, 74" x 100" dia., collection Eileen and Peter Norton, Santa Monica, CA

tyranny of thought that permeates even revolutions? The artist does not answer, only asks.

By highlighting the narrative avenues of possibility in his work, I do not mean to ignore Newkirk's equally satisfying game of peek-a-boo with notions of beauty and luminosity. Just as his materials are commonly used instruments in beauty rituals, he translates those objects into beautiful art works that draw us in only to disarm us. Once we're in his zone, he gently takes us down his yellow brick road to reveal all the stories that are already in us, simply waiting for a stage.

—Olukemi Ilesanmi, curatorial assistant
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN

¹ Norman M. Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London: Verso, 1997), 250

² E-mail interview with artist, April 2002

³ E-mail interview with artist, April 2002

Cover: *Jubilee*, 1999, plastic pony beads, synthetic hair, aluminum, 96" x 96", collection Dean Valentine and Amy Adelson, Los Angeles, CA

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