

Artinfo

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22 Questions for Multimedia Sculptor Nari Ward

By Chloe Wyma

Name: Nari Ward
Age: 48
Occupation: Visual artist
City/Neighborhood: Harlem, N.Y.

What project are you working on now?

“Casings”: Works using the language and form of the NYC Police Department stop-and-frisk report.

While creating work for your latest show at Lehmann Maupin, “Liberty and Orders,” you were also working towards becoming a U.S. citizen. How did the naturalization process influence your artwork?

It made me more sensitive to the role of ordinary citizens and more aware of the malleability of our democracy.

The centerpiece of your new show is an installation called “T.P. Reign Bow,” a tactical police tower wrapped in a blue tarp and adorned with used pant zippers and hair. You’ve spoken to Modern Painters about this piece in the context of the Occupy movement. How might the installation reflect our current political climate?

I considered the Tactical Platform as a symbol of authority and control; the archetypal tower of power. I wanted to know if I adopted the form and introduced a more problematic role for its interpretation what other possibilities could it frame for the viewer. The Occupy movement is one possible reference for the work, however it could frame any number of questions, or anxiety regarding control, resistance, and complacency.

Much of the work in this show reflects your continued interest in the politics of authority and surveillance. “Castings” and “Homeland Sweet Homeland” put a human face on impersonal legalese, particularly the NYPD’s stop-and-frisk procedures and the Miranda Rights. What draws you to these subjects?

Although my work seems very politically charged, it actually starts from a very personal spiritual place. I like to think of the works as a meditation or prayer, which addresses my angst, frustration, or anger. The challenge is how to mold the emotional, political, and material form in a manner, which tells a uniquely poetic story for each viewer to interpret.

You voraciously reclaim found materials, such as neon signs, church pews, TVs, a boat, and Anselm Kiefer’s scrap wood, in your work. Where do you find all this stuff (particularly Kiefer’s wood)?

I actually got the Kiefer wood from MassMoCA (Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art) which had leftover materials from one of his installations there. I was invited to do a new work and when I saw the abundance of these magnificent hemlock planks I knew I had to find a way to incorporate them into my work.

Do you have tips for dumpster-divers?

No, I do not consider myself an expert in anything associated with inspiration; everyone has his or her own path.

What's the last show that you saw?

A solo show of a former student of mine, Yuh-Shioh Wong, at Thomas Erben Gallery.

What's the last show that surprised you? Why?

I enjoyed the "Ungovernables" exhibition at the New Museum. Why? Because there were so many artist I have never hear about and was able to discover these other voices.

What's your favorite place to see art?

The Studio Museum in Harlem and the Brooklyn Museum.

What's the most indispensable item in your office?

A human skeleton that is next to my desk.

Where are you finding ideas for your work these days?

Books and life.

Do you collect anything?

I am currently collecting hundreds of pants pockets.

What's the last artwork you purchased?

A paper replica of a 357 magnum, complete with carrying case.

What's the weirdest thing you ever saw happen in a museum or gallery?

I am more likely to be surprised by things I see on the street more than in a gallery or museum.

What's your art-world pet peeve?

I dislike it when galleries place red dots on work or description lists to indicate a sale. I find that tasteless and distracting.

What's your favorite post-gallery watering hole or restaurant?

I don't have one.

Do you have a gallery/museum-going routine?

No.

Know any good jokes?

One of my frustrations is that I can never remember jokes I like; they just refuse to stick.

What's the last great book you read?

"The Art History of Love," by Robert Farris Thompson.

What work of art do you wish you owned?

Walter De Maria's "Earth Room."

What would you do to get it?

Trade several works of art.

What international art destination do you most want to visit?

Africa.