

THE INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ART





# Summer— Fall 2010

*Usable Pasts: 2009–10  
Artists in Residence:  
Mequitta Ahuja, Lauren  
Kelley, Valerie Piraino,  
The Studio Museum  
in Harlem, July 15 to  
October 24, 2010.*

**CHERYLYN “LIV” WRIGHT**

THE STUDIO MUSEUM'S AIR PROGRAM is the on-ramp to the larger art world for artists of color. One of my memorable Open Studio experiences triggered the question that lies at the heart of this forum discussion — artistic freedom vs. social responsibility. At the 2008 Open Studio event, I walked into resident artist Tanea Richardson's studio and saw a huge expanse of fisherman's net hanging from the ceiling. Flung into the net was a bulging, overstuffed pillow (7 ft. diameter) that forced the net to curve in on itself. Richardson, who holds both an MFA and a Bachelor's in mathematics from Yale, explained: "In my work, I'm very interested in the intersection of the two dimensional and the three dimensional."

Having come of age during the Black Arts movement, I was challenged by the question her art poses. While her inquiry seemed to spring from a transracial part of her identity, Richardson is unequivocally a black art maker and her inner "mathematician" is part of her personal narrative, too. Such are the places from which philosopher Charles Johnson is encouraging black artists to launch new narratives with new vocabularies and grammars.

Personal narrative, or "autobiography," figured significantly for me during my visit to the 2010 Open Studio event. This year, the three artists in-residence seemed to use autobiographical content to comment on the social domain. The title of the



Lauren Kelley, Mequitta Ahuja and  
Valerie Piraino, 2009–2010 SMH  
Artists in Residence



Lauren Kelley  
Still from *Big Gurl* video



Mequitta Ahuja  
*Half Moon*, 2010  
Oil on canvas  
64 × 50"  
Courtesy of the artist





Mequitta Ahuja  
*Generator*, 2010  
84 x 80"  
Courtesy the artist

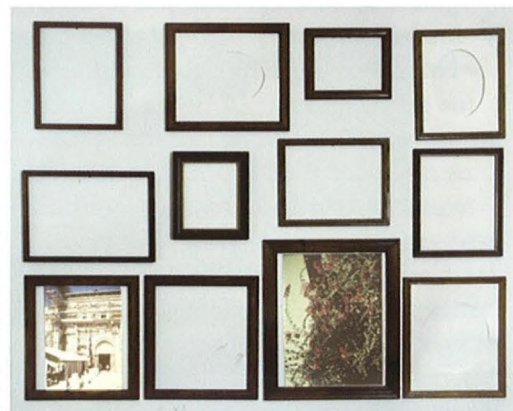


Lauren Kelley  
*Upside (set detail)*, 2010  
Courtesy the artist



Valerie Piraino studio

Valerie Piraino  
*Simone (Her Life's Telling)*, 2010  
Porcelain clay inscribed with shorthand, handwritten text on mat board and wood frames  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy the artist



group show at the end of their residence, *Usable Pasts*, affirms that autobiographical inquiry can be a gateway to both personal insight and social change.

Valerie Piraino, an installation artist of Rwandan parentage, lives with the question: "What beyond the media narratives can I discover about my country, my culture and my self? As part of her study for the MFA degree at Columbia University, Piraino created a photo journal of her travel to Rwanda. Though never exhibited, the photographs inspired a more symbolic and abstract project. She worked extensively with salt during the residency program, for example, exploring the material possibilities of the commonplace substance that is — at once — commodity, seasoning and symbol.

For the *Usable Pasts* show, Piraino turned her attention to her archive of family photographs, letters and files. During the Open Studio event, I saw photographic slides her grandfather sent home from his travels. The artist had projected the images onto her studio wall and placed empty frames around them to create a visual dialogue between the past and present. At her work station were porcelain discs on which she was inscribing symbols selected from her grandmother's shorthand manual. These elements of autobiography, from Piraino's remote past, drew me into a deep encounter with both the personal and the cultural.

A native of Houston, Texas, Lauren Kelley first painted, then sculpted, and now

builds elaborate dioramas as sets for her photographs, sculptures and stop-motion animation videos. Her installation for the group show is in two parts. The first part is a diorama that re-interprets mid-twentieth century, middle-class Houston suburbs with their split-level houses, large swimming pools and over-sized consumerism. Working with Barbie-doll-like Claymation figures, Kelley depicts bikini-clad suburbanites sipping cool drinks and crowing about their dream houses.

The second part of the installation flips the script. It's a video based on a cable TV show that ponders what the world would look like if black women were the standard for all we appreciate as feminine beauty and feminine experience. Kelley populates the video with Claymation characters similar



to those seen in the suburban diorama. The artist's work becomes a form of performance art as she animates the poses of her figures and engages the viewer in stories of material and emotional excess.

Mequitta Ahuja calls her work "automythographies" and situates herself within the mythologies of various cultures in her process of self-invention and self-representation. Her commanding large-scale landscapes and abstract works are inhabited by fantastical figures, warriors and goddesses who seem to conjure magical powers. But it was her large (8' x 8' and larger) and extremely painterly self-portraits that inspired this viewer. Their boldness, audacity and unyielding presence monumentalize the feminine and dominate the room.

Leaving the Open Studio event, I thought about the importance of "place"

and autobiography in the works produced by the 2009–2010 AIR artists and about my own ideas about Rwanda, the American suburb and the land of myth. I thought, too, about how far these places might seem from the locale at which one engages the "responsibility" horn of the artistic freedom/social responsibility dilemma.

Autobiography can be as ennobling a narrative as any. Indeed, it has the potential of functioning as a fractal, or microcosm, of larger narratives. When autobiography becomes a portal through which the viewer can access greater empathy and understanding for the "other," then we begin to approach something that has the potential for great social consequence.

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#### APPLY

To apply for the SMH's 2010–2011 Artist in Residence Program:  
[www.studiomuseum.org/learn/artist-in-residence/apply](http://www.studiomuseum.org/learn/artist-in-residence/apply)

#### SEE

Zwelethu Mthethwa, *Inner Views*  
 July 15–October 24, 2010, The Studio Museum in Harlem  
 Three series by South African photographer (b. 1960).



James Brantley, *City Life*, 24 x 18", acrylic on canvas. Courtesy Sande Wester Gallery.

*Tranquility*, a solo exhibition of the paintings of James Brantley, is on view, August 3–October 24, 2010, at the Delaware Center for Contemporary Arts, Wilmington. Brantley is a Philadelphia-based painter of landscapes that lie halfway between the urban scene and dreams. The paintings have been called "poetic meditations upon the meaning of metropolitan."