

An interview with Grant Wood Fellow: Tameka Jenean Norris

By Madeline Smith, March 22, 2017

Being an artist is an essential part of the human condition. At least that's what Tameka Norris believes. As an artist who has been all around the world performing her work, Norris landed in Iowa City as a Grant Wood Fellow in Painting & Drawing for the 2016-17 academic year. As her fellowship is coming to an end she reflects on her year and about being inspired by the next generation of artists.

Tell me about yourself and the work that you do here at the University of Iowa.

TN: I am teaching graduate courses in the painting and drawing department as well as engaging with the local community at the University of Iowa. This past Black History Month, I did a project at the rec center in Iowa City where the students presented something called "The Living Museum" with an opportunity for the students to bring to life, figures from history. Also, I, AKA my alter ego Meka Jean, is performing in the Mission Creek Festival this year, opening for Mykki Blanco and Flint Eastwood. Which is sort of crazy because it's not me, it's my alter ego. I'm happy for my alter ego, but I'm sort of terrified thinking about how I'm going to embody this rap character, opening up for two artists that I sort of admire and really enjoy their work.

Iowa City High Dream Center students present "The Living Museum" on February 18, 2017.



Who is your alter ego? Tell me a little bit more about her.

TN: So Meka Jean is a hybrid of Tameka Jenean, my first and middle name. Thinking about when you're three years old, maybe before you have an awareness of who you are inside of your body. I remember being a little girl and wearing skirts around my chest and making weird outfits and sprawling out all

over the floor and being told, "Close your legs," as though this notion of gender and femininity and what is right and what is wrong comes into play. So I think of Meka Jean as someone before the awareness of who they are in their body in this world, and how they may be type casted within space. Meka Jean has no inhibitions. She lets it completely go. I strive in my real life to be more like her.

Meka Jean: Ivey League Ratchet 4
song EP



You're a Grant Wood Fellow, how does your experience at the University of Iowa influence some of the work that you've done here?

TN: Having the support of a university, having benefits that allow me to be a little bit at ease to just free up my mind to do research and think more freely, has been something that's been really critical in this process. I think my work has slowed down, because I can take more time with my day-to-day things—for instance, not necessarily getting in my car every time I need to go somewhere. I can actually walk to the café, or I can walk all the way to campus. And that process of walking through space and looking around and hearing the birds chirp and just immersing myself in being present has just changed my life, not just my work. It's offered me some time to slow down and not just what it means to produce work but the self-care that's necessary to keep thinking.

Before you became a Fellow did you know about Grant Wood and his work?

TN: Sure, I think anybody who's an artist that doesn't know *American Gothic* is sleeping under a rock. You have to know *American Gothic*, right? I have to admit, I didn't know a whole lot more beyond *American Gothic*. There were a few other

works that certainly I'd seen in museums and I'm certainly aware but I didn't really know the complexities of who he was.

Norris paints a mural in preparation for the Grant Wood Fellows' Exhibition at CSPA Hall.



Can you pinpoint a highlight from this year as a Fellow that really stood out to you?

TN: Well I guess I'd have to say watching the students' progress. I think one of the last critiques that we had, a midterm critique, I was almost moved to tears by a few of the students' progress. I saw them get it. I saw something click and it's such an exciting feeling. Watching one student think about how that really impacted her own consumption as a person, as a citizen in this world, as someone who's trying to be a maker and finding things in the world that's interesting to her. It was really remarkable to watch something shift for her when she just got it and now she's on fire and it's just been really inspiring to see how quickly these moves are being made. I think that's the highlight. Any time I go into someone's studio and I see that they've pushed something along in a way that was totally unpredictable to me and maybe even to them as well. Just watching that, it energizes me. It reminds me that I can still take chances and take risks in my studio.