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Leda Cempellin

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Sonya Clark

Hair As Collective Identity

interview by **Leda Cempellin***

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at South Dakota State University

"Writer Type" 2016. 1930's typewriter and artist's hair,
photo credit Taylor Dabney, courtesy of the artist

Last October, I saw your solo show at the Taubman Museum of Art in Roanoke, Virginia. Hair and combs are part of your installations. How did your interest towards hair originate and become a central feature in your work? I grew up in Washington, DC. My grandmother, a tailor by training, used to stay with us every once in a while. Across the street from my parents' house was the home of the Ambassador of Benin in West Africa. He had a family of fourteen and many of the girls in his family would comb my hair and my sister's, so we would live with these fantastic sculptural hairstyles. From a very young age I was introduced to textiles as an art form from my grandmother and to hairdressing as an art form from the Ambassador's family across the street. Later in life, when I went to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I had a teacher by the name of Anne Wilson in the fiber department; she was making artwork stitching with hair, and that made me think of hair as a textile. Shortly thereafter, I started making my own pieces using hair.

The Hair Craft Project presents a sequence of photos each portraying a different stylist, and below each of them a canvas with thread arranged by the stylist. In each photo the hairstylist is facing us and next to her, we have a good view of your hairstyle. Your face is not visible, as you are seen from the back. Can you expand more on this idea? If my face were visible, it would have been the focus and my body would not have served as a canvas. Instead, I needed the face of the hairdressers to stand in as their signatures: I was allowing them to use my body as a canvas to assert their place as artists, using very traditional art forms. These artists are drawing from the tradition of African hairstyling, but in the contemporary practice specifically located in Richmond, where I live. Then, I gave them an actual canvas and silk thread. My body became a canvas, and then there were the physical canvases for them to use as well. The project makes the assertion that hairdressing is a textile art. The project allowed me to collaborate with other artists and expand my practice through the lens of relational aesthetics.

How does your own identity play in your work? The reason I focus on hair as medium is that it culturally tends to separate us into racial categorizations. Our hair separates us, but it is also the carrier of our DNA, which holds us together, because we are, as humans, practically the same. I like to use hair because it speaks of a very specific identity, but also about a collective identity. In the Hair Craft Project is something very unique about each one of the hairdressers' vision and talent. Though they each used the same materials (my head, the canvas and silk thread), their own language as artists came through.

Besides being an artist, you are also the Chair of the Craft and Material Studies Department at Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts in Richmond, and formerly an endowed faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Has your teaching contributed to shape your thinking about art? In my studio environment I am always working with at least one alumna from my department, who is my studio manager, and at least one current student. In the studio we share, challenge and critique ideas towards making the artwork better. This is the



same reason why I like being in an educational environment: it's like a laboratory, where our collective contributions sharpens the ideas and tests them.

At the Taubman I read that you refer to the hairdresser's "ability to map a head with a comb". Then I see a carpet made of combs, and the combs forming a drawing in the wall. Which territory are we talking about? With *Tendrils* I am using combs connected to one another, so they become one long line. They are fine tooth combs, intended for straight-haired people. But what I am actually drawing with those combs is the curl of my own hair, as if I have plucked one hair from my head. I use the line of combs to illustrate a strand of my hair. In one sense it is a Hegelian kind of construct, to take two things that may be in opposition with each other, the straight hair on one side, the curly hair in another, and synthesize them. The underlying notion is that even though we are separated into many races, when it comes down to it, all of us come from the continent of Africa. We spend so much time separating ourselves, building some groups up, and dehumanizing other groups, when in fact we are all one group of people. But we have a lot of work to get back to that original notion. So much damage has already been done historically and the historical discrimination is very much in our present.

I like *Toothless* very much. It seems almost a metaphor of an aging mouth losing its teeth... Is there something else there that I have not seen? This is one of the older pieces in the show: if a fine-tooth comb was to pass through my hair and then it lost its teeth, it would be as if to say my hair won the battle, instead of the comb winning the battle. The comb has to do with issues of racial justice, it stands for hegemonic structures within the USA. In one sense, it is related to pieces like *Writer Type*, which is really about who has the voice in a situation. In the *Writer Type*, the hair balls that I put in place of the keys are about a voice that is not being heard. Or, it can be understood in another way: the typewriter is turned into a machine that can speak for itself. It is both those things simultaneously, a muted voice or an asserted voice. It lands right in that place in between that can be read either of those ways or in multiple other ways.

The artist's website: <http://sonyaclark.com/>
Text edited for space limits and clarity purposes.