

Karen Miranda Augustine: Ritualistic Pop Artist

by Desirée O | 17 September 2009

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Every other Thursday I profile a new incredible woman, each from a different walk of life. Different professions, causes, backgrounds, ethnicities, orientations, and anything/everything else!

So without further delay, let me introduce the wonderful Karen Miranda Augustine...

Ritualistic Pop Artist, Writer, and Videomaker **Karen Miranda Augustine** uses the influences of African beliefs systems, outsider expressionism and counter-culture to create pieces that speak “to the place where earthly conditions converge with the metaphysical.”

Her current solo exhibition **AMERICAN EMPRESS: Credit for the Empire’s Troubled Royalty** “explores adversity as a rite of passage...contemporary pop culture figures are transformed into a series of credit-card portraits that speak to far-reaching, everyday human concerns: the transcendence of loss, social stigma, mental illness, addiction and personal crisis.”

What drives you to do what you do?

The need to see a genuine reflection of my life experiences, which are all very underbelly and carry the sensibilities of Hanif Kureshi and Harmony Korine. Contrary to what some believe, I have no relation to Jean Augustine. I was raised in government housing by a single mother with grade ten education. I was a latchkey kid by age five due to financial circumstance and was raised in an environment where girls got pregnant by age eleven. You learn your neighbours’ life stories and learn first-hand the affects of long-term poverty in a non-academic sense, which sometimes gives little weight to one’s day-to-day lives. Class means everything to me and is something my graduate degree will never erase. These are the stories and perspectives that drive the content of my work. I understand the Amy Fishers and Tonya Hardings and Brett Butlers out there more than I understand middle-class Caribbean people. My need to show these perspectives is always at the heart of what I do.

How does being a woman empower / challenge you?

Hmmm. That’s like asking, “How long is this piece of string?”

What I find empowering is not fitting in. When I was younger, I used to catch a lot of flack for not fitting the “proper” cultural and sexual mold, but there are advantages to that. It makes you amorphous and allows you to make community wherever you find it, which I think is more genuine and accepting. And, as an artist, you are truly unlimited in your approach to subject matter. It can allow you to see the bigger picture rather than subdivisions. Creatively, it has always been apparent in the women I admired, who worked well outside the box: Lydia Lunch, Nina Hagen, Grace Jones, Wendy O. Williams. Not fitting in gives you no choice but to follow your own unique life path. It can be very lonely, but there’s a lot of strength in that. Besides, who wants to be sheep?

What advice would you give to young women who want to follow in your footsteps?

1. Learn from — and about — those who have come before you.
2. Watch the company you keep: we take on the habits of the six people we spend the most time with. Do you like what you see? Are their influences really serving you?
3. Do the grunt work and educate yourself on all aspects of what you do.
4. Treat your passion as a business.
5. Maintain amicable relations: you don’t know who people are, who they know, or who they are becoming. Years from now, it will always be easier to gain support if you have been someone with a positive and friendly disposition rather than someone who lacked respect.
6. Cherish your failures — they are your building blocks to your successes.

Name one person, place, or thing every young woman should know about?

Traditional African-based spiritual practices, from Ifa to Vodoun, Santeria to Macumba. With over 400 gods and goddesses, what you will find in African cosmology are very complicated and beautiful mythological figures that speak to, and embrace, every aspect of life, which, on a personal level, makes one feel embraced by the universe for every aspect of who s/he is. There are deities who are patrons to transsexuals, abused women, prostitutes, queers, market women... Philosophically, they provide very empowering ideas about sex and life. For instance, in Macumba the idea of “a virgin” is one who is “mentally untouched” (think “virgin forest,” untrammled by man) — she is a woman who knows herself and isn’t easily swayed by outside influence. A strong-willed woman who fearlessly walks her own path: now that makes “virginity” sound so much more relevant and kick ass.

What is the most important thing we can do in order to change the world?

Practice empathy (you never know what circumstances brought someone to the place s/he is at); and, acknowledge the similarities you have with others (they will always far outweigh whatever differences you perceive).

If you’re in Toronto this month, stop by the North York Central Library to check out Karen’s exhibition “AMERICAN EMPRESS: Credit for the Empire’s Troubled Royalty” and make sure to visit her site at <http://KarenMirandaAugustine.com>.