

► In the Studio

Emerging Writers Visit Contemporary Artists



Photo: Alexis Peskine

▲ Aisha Cousins, 30 Performance Artist Brooklyn, NY

by Khary Polk

Aisha Cousins and I sit on the floor of her Bedford-Stuyvesant studio, sharing brown rice tea and eating pink and green *mochi* from Midtown. Bags of synthetic hair,

children's pop beads and vintage baby doll dresses—components in her performance art pieces—are neatly arranged throughout the space. The pop beads look like candy, I say, and she encourages me to pop one in my mouth.

I bite down on colored plastic as Cousins tells me about her current work, *Diva Dutch*, a remarkable synthesis of hair-braiding and rope-jumping. “It’s a natural evolution of things that black girls in black urban areas across the country already do,” she says. She weaves synthetic hair into a single ten- to fifteen-foot braid, and then plaits it on the pigtailed of two women, creating a tangible conduit that also

functions as a fierce skipping rope. Cousins has performed *Diva Dutch* on the streets of Bed-Stuy (Brooklyn), Brixton (London) and Barbès-Rochechouart (Paris).

“I’ve become fascinated with the idea of how black culture would evolve if black folks had a separate territory, with an economy and culture shaped in response to our habits, our interests,” she says. I remind her that the beauty supply store where she purchases her “Sensationnel” brand hair is located on Fulton Street, one of the longest stretches of black-owned businesses in the country. “Not anymore,” she counters. Raised in Bed-Stuy, Cousins has seen the neighborhood change. “Black enclaves all over the country are disappearing and no one seems to be concerned about how this will affect the evolution of black, U.S. or international culture,” she says.



Photo: Deana Lawson

▲ Aaron Gilbert, 29 Painter New York, NY

by Robyn Hillman-Harrigan

Aaron Gilbert’s studio is hidden within a complex of corporate grandeur. One step inside 120 Broadway places the visitor in a maze of well-heeled security guards, prominent banking institutions and the headquarters of New York’s attorney general. After a complicated security clearance, an elevator leads up to Gilbert’s studio. It is one of the spot-lit, dusty, dry-walled subdivisions created for artists in residence at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. A trail of white dust follows Gilbert from the studio back to the elevator at the end of the day, leaving businessmen wondering where the weather-worn artists are drifting in from.

Gilbert is an anomaly in the Equitable Building—but his work also places him in a unique artistic location. As a husband, father and member of a mixed-race family, his realist paintings offer complex representations of ethnicity and class. Gilbert’s work references the tradition of estate portraiture, chronicling his personal confrontations with identity, through reverse gesture. He challenges the dynamics of the exoticized gaze, employing his family as a mirror that highlights universal power relations across racial and historical lines. Examining the cults of preservation and the individual, Gilbert pairs images down to their essential details. This is because, he says, “My work is based on the belief that metaphor can more fully convey truth than a simple reproduction of facts.”