

M3: MCs, Mics & Metaphors

Exhibition: July 23-August 29, 2009

Opening Reception: July 23, 2009 Gallery at Flashpoint, Washington, DC

Curator's Statement by Tewodross Melchishua

I got a question, its serious as cancer
Who can keep the average dancer
Hyper as a heart attack
nobody smiling
Cuz your expressing the rhyme that I'm styling
(Rakim, "I Ain't No Joke")

M3: MC's, Mics & Metaphors (M3) explores the creative power of the lyricism and poetry of hip-hop music through visual imagery. The exhibition gathers a group of emerging artists from around the country, each responding to the theme of the MC (Emcee, or Master of Ceremonies) or simply a favorite hip-hop verse or song. These visual artists are working in a variety of media, including photography, mixed media, painting, fashion, design, video and animation.

I created the concept for this show, after years of listening to hip-hop music, and specifically the immense creativity of the MC, in his or her use of words, similes, metaphors and symbols. I began to see what MCs were saying in their rhymes, and asked myself, "What if the lyrics and language of hip-hop were represented through visual art and design? My original idea was to have a solo show, but then I decided this would more interesting to invite other visual artists to be apart of this exhibition, and to have a group show in which all of us could explore this theme through a visual and improvisational, freestyle, art session, just like a real, live hip-hop performance (music imitates life, art imitates music). Furthermore, I am still amazed at how detailed, descriptive and "visual" hip-hop music is and always has been. Of particular interest is how hip-hop has socially and consciously shaped me as a person, and visually as an artist, filmmaker and educator. Hip-hop music, like its predecessors, jazz, the blues, soul and reggae, has a unique ability to provide meaning, self-expression and inspiration for many.

M3 draws from this same inspiration and creates a visual cipher or circle. Each image exhibited speaks to one another, similar to a circle of MC's freestyling and responding to one another in an actual cipher. The featured artists include Derrick (Benetez) Bryant, Damani K. Diop (Reality), Dissident Display (Adrian Loving & Ayo Okunseinde), Jabari Hall-Smith, Jeff Henriquez, Ann (Sole Sister) Johnson, Hasaan Kirkland, Jati Lindsay, Jeff McCauley, Tewodross Melchishua, Ribqah, Darian Robbins, Kamaria Selam (Crystal Graham), Marcel Taylor, upfromsumdirt (Ron Davis), and Carmen Webber, Sistahs of Harlem (SOH).

In the beginning there was the word, and it was dope

From the dawn of humankind, metaphors, myth and symbols have been used to explain the forces of the unknown -- creation, nature, and spirit. Metaphors have become necessary tools for expression and communication. These can be found in the music and lyrics of the great Blues musicians, or in the African and Caribbean folktales taught to children. They can also be found in the sermons delivered by reverends at an African American churches on Sunday mornings, and in the inspiring speeches of historical figures such as Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, or even those of President Barack Obama. Especially here in America, we as a people are particularly immersed in a visual culture and language replete with symbolism and metaphors.

The “first” visual artists of hip-hop were scribes and artisans throwing up signs and symbols in ancient Kemit (Egypt) and other parts of the world. These early pioneers inspired the taggers, bombers and graffiti artists who followed. They created the provided the some of the foundation for the visual aesthetics of hip-hop, and sought to provide the imagery of the b-boys and b-girls worldwide. Hip-hop has influenced contemporary society through language, art, design, fashion, and business and of course through music. Graffiti art's incorporation of image, typography, comic books, pop culture and color inspired many in the New York arts scene, especially during the 1980's, including Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring. Perhaps some of the greatest MC's came upon the music scene during the '80s and '90s, often referred to as hip-hop's “golden era.” Many of these MCs are reflected in the exhibition, as *M3* takes us back to the original essence of hip-hop and particularly the phenomenon of the rapper. The exhibition reflects not only the MC as the central theme, but also their rhymes, verses and songs. The featured artists focus on the classic hip-hop and MCs from this period, as well as more recent and underground MCs.

Hey, rudeboy, no one can test dis' champion sound

During the late 1960-70's, in the dancehalls of Jamaica, the MC was responsible for assisting the deejay by hosting the party or gathering. The MC would, chant, toast, and talk during, and in between the spinning of records. He would help the crowd “escape” the stress of life, racism, poverty and brutality of life, if just for a moment. The Jamaican MC (and deejay) was skilled in pleasing the crowd, and he would involve the audience through a rhythmic “call and response.”

We fast-forward about to the late 70's and early 80's, and this sound and style, mixed with African American jazz, soul and funk, would eventually come forward from Jamaica to the Bronx, NY, hip-hop would forever influence art, language, music, business, and culture both in the US and globally. Afrika Bambaataa, founder of the Universal Zulu Nation, states that there are five not four elements of hip-hop: Deejay(ing), Graffiti (bombing), MC (-ing), B-Boy (-ing, dance) and most importantly, forever forgotten element of *knowledge*.

The visual cipher: the artists and mcs

Derrick (Benetez) Bryant creates a tribute to the hip-hop group, Little Brother, in his painting, *The Origins of Hip Hop*, which is comprised of MCs Phonte and the Rapper Big Pooh. The artwork also features original member, the DJ and producer, 9th Wonder. Like jazz musicians, he creates lively, lyrical and improvisational canvases full of color and movement.

Nigerian Gangsta, the work of **Ayo Okunseinde and Adrian Loving of Dissident Display** engages audiences through the use of a visual call and response, in their “Afro-hop” mesh of Jay-Z and Fela Kuti.

Damani K. Diop (Reality) weaves a colorful and textural mixed media tribute to X-Clan and KRS-ONE in *Verbs of Power*. Reality's use of color and texture is in harmony with the elements of hip-hop that the Zulu Nation speaks of, especially the element of knowledge.

Jabari Hall-Smith's (Caledon of BLACK LA) of Los Angeles, CA innovative use of animation and hip-hop is based on his own music, in his animated video, *Checkman (God Body) a.k.a. Wave The Penalty*, Hall-Smith draws upon influences ranging from comic book super-heroes, ancient African and Chinese spirituality, philosophy and wisdom, and figures such as Sun Ra and George Clinton.

Jeff Henriquez fuses portrait painting, graffiti and live painting, in his piece, *Hyper as a Heart Attack, Nobody Smiling*. Henriquez work brings the intense color to the canvas, as he honors Rakim, one of the most influential MCs in hip-hop history.

Ann (Sole Sister) Johnson, uses a unique style of mixed media art to entice the viewer, in her series *Sacred Artifacts*. Inspired by songs that praise and champion the classic origins and foundation of hip-hop, such as: *I Used to Love Her*, by Common, and *Rising Up* by the Roots, Sole Sister has created a series of paper casts depicting hip-hop in *Sacred Artifacts*. This technique creates an archaic approach that fabricates a visual excavation of historical hip-hop objects representing the word, the style and the art.

Hasaan Kirkland's work is comprised of colorful manifestations of hip-hop, and the poetry of Gil Scott-Heron. Kirkland also draws heavily upon the surrealism and even references the work of Francisco Goya. In his piece, *The Alchemist*, Kirkland explores the spirit, intellect and rhythm of hip-hop lyricism and symbolism.

Jati Lindsay, provides a black and white series of photographic images, that document live hip-hop events, local and national hip-hop artists that include: Q-Tip, Large Professor, Jean Grae and others. The *M3 1-5* series, demonstrates the experience of being there, and the viewer can almost feel the heat, sweat of each hip-hop performance and the intensity of each portrait.

Jeff McCauley blends the spirit of the blues, bebop, and jazz, in his painting, *Check the Rhyme: Low End Theory* responds to the infamous hip-hop group, A Tribe Called Quest. His paintings full of vibrant color will certainly make us all "Check The Rhyme."

Tewodross Melchishua's featured work is titled *Planet X Marks the Spot (Nommo Music for the Suckas, Part II)*, which is inspired by Guru (of the group Gangstarr, including DJ Premier). He illustrates the sci-fi and metaphysical side of hip-hop, as he merges digital art, painting and motion. His work takes the viewer "above the clouds," and on a journey that challenges what the viewer "knows" about the universe, earth, creation and even spirituality.

Ribqah's soulful painting focuses on the Godfather of hip-hop, Afrika Bambaataa. Ribqah delves deeply into the spiritual side of hip-hop and creation, and references to ancient African/Egyptian cultures. Her work, *The Amen Ra of Universal Hip Hop Culture: Afrika Bambaataa*, incorporates the use acrylic and pencil as she pays homage to the beginning of hip-hop and even civilization.

Darian Robbins works various media, including digital art, design and painting. His ode to the MC NAS, in his piece, *Got You Feeling Like Braille: It Ain't Hard To Tell*, creates a literal and symbolic interpretation of the MC's lyrics.

Kamaria Selam (Crystal Graham) draws upon her background in design, and creates a mixed media work based on Mos Def in her work, *Black on Both Sides*. She provides an exploration of lineage and cultural memory as it intersects with hip-hop.

At the core of hip-hop is the story, and **Marcel Taylor's** interprets one of perhaps one of the best storytellers in hip-hop, Slick Rick. His painting, *Slick Rick: The Ruler*, weaves the historic MC's control of words, and image, humor, and of course, his own unique style and swagger.

Upfromsumdirt (Ron Davis) uses digital imagery, mixed media, and more, and through his process of layering and juxtaposition of images, creates what he terms "abstrack africana." His work pays homage to Public Enemy in *Louder Than A Bomb*, and brings to mind the work of artists such as the great Romare Bearden.

Fashion designer **Carmen Webber, Sistahs of Harlem (SOH)**, integrates hip-hop, illustration, design, fashion, and her raw style of “deconstruction” in her jacket and tribute to “the smooth operator” Big Daddy Kane. As the only fashion designer in this exhibition, Webber’s work of texture, form and function explores the persona of one of the greatest MCs’ to ever touch the mic.

M3: Mcs, Mics and Metaphors will provide the viewer an approach to contextualizing hip-hop culture in a most unique way. It does so in that just as hip-hop music has been informed by the visual, historical, and even symbolic references from society and pop culture, the visual imagery of M3 been influenced by the music and words of hip-hop and b-boy culture. Music, words, and now art, reflect and relate directly to each other, as the artists from this exhibition will further push the hip-hop visual aesthetic. Finally, being part of, and curating a group hip-hop art exhibition, allows us as artists, to complete the visual circle of metaphors and symbols. I am reminded of the hip-hop classic, “Symphony,” produced by Marly Marl, featuring Master Ace, Craig G, Kool G Rap, and Big Daddy Kane:

I don’t care who’s first or who’s last, but I know yall just better rock this
at the drop off a dime, baby! I don’t know what yall gonna’ do with this,
but it got to be funky. It got to be funky if you gonna’ be on it. I don’t care
who’s start, I don’t care what yall do, but you got to be finished before the
music is through...
(Marley Marl, “The Symphony”)

Peace and blessings

Tewodross Melchishua
Curator/Artist
M3: MCs, Mics & Metaphors

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