



iona rozeal brown  
**MATRIX/152**

March 4-June 13, 2004

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art  
Hartford, Connecticut

# iona rozeal brown

## MATRIX/152



Open a newspaper or turn on the television these days and you're sure to find evidence of the latest trend in hip-hop culture—whether it's the latest music video from Jay-Z, a fresh new track by Missy Elliot, or a celebrity-endorsed pair of Reebok trainers. From its origins as a vibrant street culture of the early 1970s, articulating the energy and angst of black and Latino teens, hip-hop has morphed into a multibillion-dollar industry, dominating not only the music charts but also popular fashion, television, and advertising.

While some lament this shift, seeing the creative edginess of hip-hop's roots being supplanted by shallow materialism, there is no denying that the commercial success of hip-hop music has fostered its position within the global community as the dominant form of youth culture from Los Angeles to Paris and Tokyo.

For emerging artist Iona Rozeal Brown, the global influence of hip-hop has been a source of curiosity and inspiration since the late 1990s. During this period Brown came across an article by Joe Wood in *Transitions* magazine called "The Yellow Negro."<sup>1</sup> The article described Wood's experiences as a traveler in Japan and his encounter with the *ganguro*, a subculture of Japanese youth who emulate the style of black American hip-hop celebrities. While intrigued by Wood's account of these teens, Brown was particularly struck by the extreme lengths *ganguro* would go to achieve the appearance of African American blackness, including "perming" their straight hair into Afros and darkening their skin at tanning salons. Determined to explore this phenomenon and learn more about how Japanese cultures perceive blackness, Brown traveled to Japan in 2001.

Brown's experiences in the East, while extremely positive, left her with unresolved questions about the Japanese fascination with black people and culture. In order to work through these questions, brown embarked on a provocative series of paintings that would explore the *ganguro* and their unique form of cultural appropriation. For the past



two years Brown has pursued this subject, producing an extensive body of paintings under the title, *a<sup>2</sup> blackface*. MATRIX 152 brings together a selection of recent and new works from this critically acclaimed series and examines the stylistic and conceptual sources that inform Brown's "afro-asiatic allegory" ("a<sup>3</sup>").

At first glance, Brown's vibrant paintings appear more like traditional Japanese paintings than contemporary artworks; however, upon closer inspection one quickly recognizes that Brown's pictures are anything but traditional. Employing the *ukiyo-e* style of 17th-century Japanese wood-block prints, Brown evokes the *ganguro* through the guise of geishas and kabuki actors, whose signature white faces are instead painted black to represent the dark-skinned *ganguro*.<sup>2</sup> In yet another subversive twist, each figure is adorned with the unmistakable trappings of 21st-century hip-hop culture — flashy gold jewelry, elaborately painted acrylic fingernails, Afros and baggy clothes. Thus, the historic entertainers of imperial Edo are transformed into kimono-clad MCs and gun-toting gangsta rappers. While visually striking, this unexpected combination of periods and styles is not merely an aesthetic tool, but also functions as a conceptual device raising questions about how hip-hop (and black culture in general) is translated and transported internationally.

Despite the apparent disparity of Brown's chosen sources, the art of *ukiyo-e* and contemporary hip-hop culture share many parallels. The term *ukiyo-e*, literally meaning "pictures of the floating world," originates from the Buddhist word *ukiyo* ("floating world"), which refers to the difficult and transient nature of life on earth. During the late 17th and 18th centuries, the term began to take on more positive connotations as increasingly pragmatic civilians determined to enjoy life in the present rather than waiting for an immortal afterlife (as was the practice in Buddhism). Thus, the "floating world" came to describe a way of life characterized by style and luxury. *Ukiyo-e* images reflect this attitude, showing men and women celebrating the material pleasures of the urban teahouses, theaters and brothels of the Edo period. This emphasis on materiality is easily equated with the "bling bling" obsession in mainstream hip-hop culture, and Brown's images reflect both the glamour of the "floating world" and the high fashion of hip-hop.

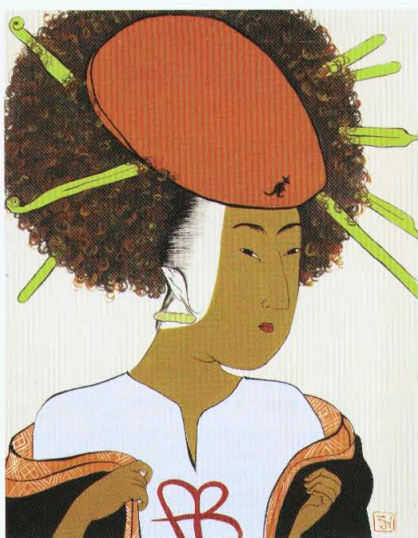
It is no coincidence that images of women frequently appear in Brown's work, as they are both the main purveyors of the *ganguro* style in Japan and prominent subjects in *ukiyo-e* prints. In *Untitled I (female)*, 2003, Brown depicts a hip-hop diva provocatively flaunting her dark skin. Like the female

courtesans often featured in *ukiyo-e*, she is dressed in an elegant and revealing robe. Her posture and reclining position are sexually suggestive but not overt, meant to tantalize the viewer. Despite the luxurious robes, this figure's crowning glory is her elaborate hairstyle of dreadlocks punctuated by Afro combs and traditional Japanese hairpins. Similarly, the perfectly coiffed figure in *a<sup>3</sup> blackface #37*, 2002 wears a tightly permed Afro adorned with long, slender hairpins like those worn by Japanese geishas.

Geishas are a favorite subject for Brown, who considers these erudite entertainers to be "some of the fiercest women around [...], well educated, well versed in the arts and dressed to the nines."<sup>3</sup> The poise and discreet mannerisms of the figure in *a<sup>3</sup> blackface #37*, 2002 suggest she is a modern adaptation of a traditional geisha. As such she is an exemplar of chic, dressed in fashionable clothing that reflects her position and persona. By including easily recognized brand name labels, Brown creates an analogy between the materiality of hip-hop culture and that of the "floating world." In both, constantly changing fashions and trends become an extension of one's identity, and expensive styles express the material wealth of their bearer. The red Kangol cap and FUBU t-shirt worn by the figure in *a<sup>3</sup> blackface #37* illustrate just two of the popular hip-hop brands that frequently appear in Brown's work. However, the commerciality of hip-hop is only one aspect of Brown's multifaceted work.

Visually and conceptually, Iona Brown's work is deeply invested in the

notion of cultural hybridity and exchange, particularly the Afro-Asian encounter, articulated in the *a<sup>3</sup> blackface* paintings. Brown attributes this focus in part to her own multicultural heritage of African and Cherokee descent and her early exposure to Asian culture.<sup>4</sup> As a child growing up in Washington, D.C., Brown's knowledge of Asian mores was cultivated through visits to the Kennedy Center where she first saw kabuki theater, and weekends spent watching kung fu movies with her father. These



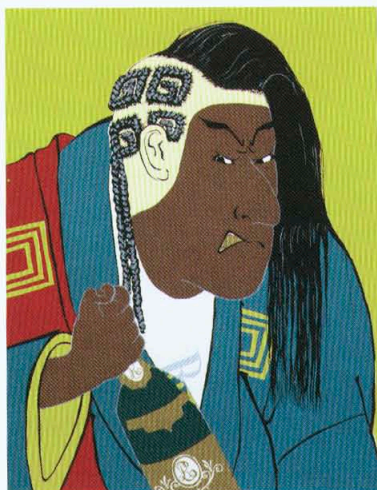


experiences have made Brown acutely aware of the dialogue between black and Asian cultures. This is not only evident in Brown's exploration of the *ganguro* phenomenon, but also in her subtle references to the influence of Eastern philosophy and style on black America.

One of the most obvious connections between black popular culture and Eastern traditions can be seen in the music group the Wu-Tang Clan. Inspired by kung fu movies, this popular group of MCs makes connections between black urban gang culture and the ethos of martial arts. Their name, "Wu-Tang," is derived from a school of sword fighting developed at the Shaolin Temple in northern China. Brown's incorporation of the "Wu" symbol into her work is one of many visual nods to hip-hop's appropriation of Eastern culture.

The distinctive moniker, "3rdi," that Brown uses to sign her works is yet another example of cultural interchange from Asian sources. Rendered in the style of Japanese woodblock stamps, this small inscription delineates the notion of cultural sampling central to Brown's subject matter and her artistic approach.<sup>5</sup> The subtlety and visual wit of this one conclusive gesture encapsulates Brown's ability to express complex thematic concerns and historical references with humor, insight and technical skill. Through the manipulation of color and line, Brown creates striking compositions that resonate with deeper meaning.

Joanna Marsh  
Acting Curator of Contemporary Art



1 Joe Wood, "The Yellow Negro,"  
*Transitions* 73 (1997), 40-66.

2 Andrea Barnwell's essay, "Guilty (Blackfaced) Pleasures," in the exhibition catalogue *iona rozeal brown: a'...black on both sides* (Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, 2004), addresses this aspect of Brown's work in more depth, contextualizing it within the history of black-face performance.

3 "Bitters of Style," *Trace Magazine*, no. 43

4 Iona Rozeal Brown, Artist's statement, 2002

5 The fragments of hip-hop fashion that appear on Brown's characters are pulled from music videos and magazines much in the same way that Asian youth adopt the look, walk, and talk of hip-hop.

*Untitled II (male)*, 2003. Color silk screen.

**iona rozeal brown/MATRIX 152**  
**March 4 - June 13, 2004**

iona rozeal brown  
Born in Washington, D.C., 1966  
Live and works in Chillum, Maryland

**Education**

2002–M.F.A. Painting, Yale University School of Art, New Haven, Connecticut

1999–Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Maine, B.F.A., painting  
San Francisco Art Institute,  
Valedictorian, Dean's Honor List

1996–Pratt Institute, Honor List,  
Brooklyn, New York

1995–Montgomery County Community College,  
Honor List, Takoma Park, Maryland

1991–B.S. Kinesiological Sciences, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland



*a<sup>1</sup> blackface #36, 2002. Acrylic on panel.*

**Selected Solo Exhibitions**

2004

*a<sup>1</sup>... black on both sides*, Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Atlanta, Georgia (catalogue)

2003

*a<sup>1</sup>... black on both sides*, solo installation at Scope Art Fair, Miami, Florida

2002

*a<sup>1</sup>... black on both sides*, Caren Golden Fine Art, New York City

*a<sup>1</sup>... black on both sides*, Sandroni Rey, Los Angeles, California

2000

*homecoming*, Pavillion Fine Arts, Takoma Park, Maryland

1999

*many faces*, Diego Rivera Gallery, San Francisco, California

1995

*iona 101*, Gallery Upstairs, Takoma Park, Maryland

*Soul Tapping*, St. Stephen and the Incarnation Episcopal Church, Washington, D.C.

**Selected Group Exhibitions**

2004

*iona rozeal brown & Stella Lai*, The Luggage Store, San Francisco, California

2003

*Pop Rocks*, curated by Daria Brit Shapiro and Caren Golden, Caren Golden Fine Art, New York City

*New Visions: Emerging Trends in African American Art*, Smithsonian Institution, Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture, Washington, D.C.

*BlackBelt*, Studio Museum in Harlem, New York City, traveling to Santa Monica Museum of Art, California (catalogue)

*Transcontinental*, New Image Art, Hollywood, California

*Census 03*, Corcoran College of Art and Design, Washington, D.C.

*OnLine*, curated by Charlie Finch, George Negroponte and Robert Storr, Feigen Contemporary, New York City

*Skin Deep*, Numark Gallery, Washington, D.C.

*Americas Remixed*, curated by Franklin Sirmans, Comune di Milano, Milan, Italy

*New Wave*, Kravets/Wehby gallery, curated by Franklin Sirmans, New York City

*International Paper*, UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, California (catalogue)

*Group Exhibition*, La Raza Galeria Posada, Sacramento, California

## 2002

*Mass Appeal: The Art Object and Hip Hop Culture*, curated by Franklin Sirmans

Traveling exhibition with venues at Gallery 101, Ottawa, Ontario; Arts Intercultural, Montreal, Quebec; The Khyber Centre for the Arts, Halifax, Nova Scotia; The Owens Art Gallery, Sackville, New Brunswick

*Champion*, curated by Sheldon LaPierre, Zinc Gallery, Stockholm, Sweden

*M.F.A. Thesis Exhibition*, Yale University School of Art, New Haven, Connecticut

## 2001

FFWD Contemporary Art Fair, Hotel Nash, Room curated by Franklin Sirmans, Miami Beach, Florida

## 1999

*Skowhegan Film Festival*, Skowhegan, Maine (video screening)

*B.F.A. Show 1999*, Diego Rivera Gallery, San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, California

*Radical Performance Fest*, Somart Gallery, San Francisco, California

*Zyzyva in Black and White*, Diego Rivera Gallery, curated by Naomie Kramer and Howard Junker, San Francisco, California, with publication in *The Journal of West Coast Writers and Artists*

## 1998

*Ultra Down*, The Luggage Store Gallery, San Francisco, California

*Afro Solo*, Z Space Studio, San Francisco, California

*Portraiture*, The Abstract Zone, Emeryville, California

*Bused*, Crucible Cell Gallery, San Francisco, California

*Annual Juried Luggage Show*, The Luggage Store Gallery, curated by Bill Berksen, San Francisco, California

## Selected Bibliography

### 2004

Finch, Charlie. "Brown is Beautiful," *Artnet*, January 9, 2004

### 2003

Dawson, Jessica. "African-American Art, Forward and Backward," *Washington Post*, November 27, 2003

Smith, Roberta. "A Cornucopia of Cultural Exchange, Beginning with a Martial Arts Hero," *The New York Times*, November 26, 2003

Beith, Malcolm. "It's a Hip-Hop World: How a Movement Shaped and Absorbed Global Culture," *Newsweek International*, November 1, 2003

Secret, Mosi. "Africana Reviews Blackbelt," *Africana.com*, November 2003

Van Gelder, Lawrence. "Art and the Martial Arts," *Art Briefing*, *The New York Times*, October 14, 2003

Pollack, Barbara. "OnLine," *ARTnews*, September 2003

Dailey, Meghan. "Black Belt," *Artforum*, September 2003

Dixon, Glenn. "Stand Up and Be Counted," *Artnet*, September 2003

Frank, Peter. "Paperchase," *Art on Paper*, April 2003

Gopnik, Blake. "Art and Race, Making a Memorable Appearance," *The Washington Post - Arts Section*, April 6, 2003

Knight, Christopher. "Richly Drawn from Drawings," *Los Angeles Times*, March 9, 2003

Worman, Alex. "L.A. Confidential," *Artnet*, February 15, 2003

Bamberg, Matt. "Armand Hammer Museum has Thought-Provoking Work," *The Desert Sun*, February 2, 2003

"iona rozeal brown: self-portrait," *Tema Celeste*, January 2003

Mathis, Sommer. "Paper Trail," *The Daily Bruin*, January 31, 2003



## 2002

Smith, Roberta. "Roland Flexner/Iona Rozeal Brown." *The New York Times*, October 11, 2002

Jones, Rose Apodaca. "Gangsta Geisha." *Women's Wear Daily*, Sept. 16, 2002

Zita, Carmen. "Biters of Style." *Trace Magazine*, no. 43, 2002

### Works In The Exhibition

#### a<sup>3</sup> blackface #9, 2002

Acrylic on paper, 30 x 22 inches  
Collection of Charlotte Soehner

#### a<sup>3</sup> blackface #10, 2002

Acrylic on paper, 30 x 22 inches  
Courtesy of Terry and Jerry Lynn

#### a<sup>3</sup> blackface #35, 2002

Acrylic on panel, 24 x 16 inches  
Collection of the artist

#### a<sup>3</sup> blackface #36, 2002

Acrylic on panel, 24 x 16 inches  
Collection of the artist

#### a<sup>3</sup> blackface #37, 2002

Acrylic on panel, 24 x 16 inches  
Collection of the artist

#### a<sup>3</sup> blackface #67, 2004

Acrylic on paper, 50 x 38 inches  
Courtesy of Bennie F. and  
Kera Johnson

#### a<sup>3</sup> blackface #68, 2004

Acrylic on paper, 50 x 38 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

#### a<sup>3</sup> blackface #69, 2004

Acrylic on paper, 50 x 38 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

#### a<sup>3</sup> blackface #70, 2004

Acrylic on paper, 50 x 38 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

#### a<sup>3</sup> #10 (down-ass emperor Qianlong), 2003

Acrylic on handmade Korean  
rice paper, 84 x 58 3/4 inches  
Collection of Stanley and Mikki Weithorn

#### Untitled I (female), 2003

Color silkscreen, 27 1/4 x 34 3/4 inches  
Printed by Mueller Studios, NY  
Published by MS Editions, NY  
Courtesy of Michael Steinberg Fine Art,  
New York

#### Untitled II (male), 2003

Color silkscreen, 27 1/4 x 34 3/4 inches  
Printed by Mueller Studios, NY  
Published by MS Editions, NY  
Courtesy of Michael Steinberg Fine Art,  
New York

### MATRIX Lecture

Thursday, March 4, 2004

6:30 p.m.

iona rozeal brown will give an informal talk on her work  
in the MATRIX gallery

### Gallery Talk

Tuesday, March 23, 2004

Noon

"Cultural Sampling in the Work of iona rozeal brown"

Joanna Marsh, acting curator of contemporary art

MATRIX 152 has been made possible by members of the Matrix Coalition:

Janice and Mickey Cartin, Howard and Sandra Fromson, Robinson and Nancy Grover, Carol and Sol LeWitt, The Ritter Foundation, Robin and Philip Schonberger, and Walter Wick and Linda Cheverton Wick.