

# A MODEST ARSENAL OF GANGSTA TERMINOLOGY

Kendra: When we were discussing your 2011 exhibition at moniquemeloche, *Liberation Summer*, you said you were “seeking American-ness.”

**Kendell: Yes, I was trying to push toward discourse that evidences how we live our visual and aesthetic lives. We’re all participating in an integrated visual culture, and I want to push the dialogue about my work past that of a black artist making work about politics. I’m constantly testing cultural boundaries and norms, trying to determine what is normal or normative.**

Kendra: You grew up in New Orleans, went to school in Atlanta, moved to both Pasadena and Long Beach for school, and have stayed in the Los Angeles area since graduating with your MFA in 2006. How has your background in the American South affected your approach to art-making?

**Kendell: There’s absolute causality for my experiences and why I do what I do. As much as I like to talk about “we-ness,” my subjectivity has created the context and philosophy for my work. Growing up in New Orleans... it’s a very particular place insofar as the city itself is a bit of a paradox. In many ways, it is a place that believes in throwing a bunch of things together, as in**

## KENDELL CARTER AND KENDRA PAITZ IN CONVERSATION

**gumbo or jambalaya. All these disparate flavors come together to generate something new; however, it is also an environment that is fraught with corruption and things existing the way they always have. It is a city where people have accepted their traditional social and cultural roles.**

**Growing up in New Orleans was critical, but I left the city for all the reasons I just mentioned. It is an amazing place but I couldn’t live with the expectations of just accepting my role, so I moved to Atlanta seeking a place that would not be as burdened with social expectations. I lived there for eleven years, but I didn’t feel like the art environment was as critically oriented as I wanted it to be. I had to get out of the South so I could respond to my experiences there. I visited New York, San Francisco, and L.A. before deciding to move to L.A.**

Kendra: In terms of doing something about those experiences, I wanted to touch on the idea of activism, which you want to subtly utilize in your work. In a 2008 interview with Sarah Pearl, you mentioned that you “come from the south, born a son of civil unrest, where you’re surrounded by activism.”

**Kendell: There’s an activist culture that exists in a**

**place like Atlanta. Even though my work isn’t as blatantly oriented toward activism as work by other artists, that’s absolutely a component of why I do what I do. I think my work is more act-oriented, but not heavy-handed. I try to approach others through my work with the degree of humanity that I would expect from someone who wanted me to shift my perceptions. I’m not afraid to push a bit, but I’m not interested in doing so in a way that’s shocking.**

Kendra: At this time, your ultimate goal seems to be inclusivity, or pushing toward a sense of “we-ness.”

**Kendell: I wouldn’t say “inclusive” because it assumes a correct paradigm and place, but, yes, pushing toward a sense of “we-ness.” I’m interested in an organic approach to things, rather than fixed positions, and I see a direct correlation between evolving our humanity and evolving art with a capital “A.”**

Kendra: Robert Irwin has been particularly influential for you in terms of his ideas about shifting perception through the art environment. Who are some of the other artists who have influenced your thinking or visual vocabulary the most? Morris Louis’s *Unfurled* and *Stripe* works are obvious references for your paintings, as is Helen Frankenthaler’s use of the spill or stain.

**Kendell: Frankenthaler has been pivotal for me because of her subjectivity as a woman and the environment in which she had to create. I see a parallel between the women’s movement and an evolved humanity in terms**

**of race; the connection between the energy of those two things is thrilling, useful, and inspiring. Secondly, her hand interests me: her aesthetic and the things that felt right to her. I’m so intrigued by what feels right to someone who feels subjugated by culture. Ultimately, her aesthetic still appeals to me for the context in which she chose to work, the larger field, which is what I’ve done. Even though cultural socialization might expect me to fall into a particular box, I’ve made a conscious decision to avoid boxing myself in, and to look at art holistically rather than as a pre-funneled approach to aesthetics and experience.**

Kendra: I’ve read that she didn’t think of herself as a “lady painter.” It’s interesting to hear you talking about the subjectivity of a woman when considering your early installations that, among other things, explored the domestic space.

**Kendell: Early on, I made intentional moves to incorporate craft and design—what was traditionally thought of as “women’s work.” I was pointing to the construct and trying to get people to question—“does this exist as I think it exists, or am I reinforcing a false construct?”**

Kendra: And to briefly touch on Robert Irwin’s influence?

**Kendell: Irwin has had a huge influence on me because of his notion of art as experience. Experience evolves emotions. We tend to rationalize our way into and out of the constructs that we reinforce, and the best way to get perception moving around, or unfixed and loosened, is**