Kori Newkirk - Artist in Residence
Introduction and Interview March 23, 2018
PODCAST SCRIPT

[Introductory Music]

Artist Kori Newkirk was born in 1970 in The Bronx, New York City. He received his BFA in 1993 from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and went on to earn his MFA from UC Irvine in 1997. The originality of his work has been recognized in numerous group and solo shows across the country and internationally. We were very lucky to host Kori on the 31st anniversary of the Artist in Residence Program at Pasadena City College in March of 2018. His donated work of art, called “Pathmark (2018), a small bicycle wheel and tire, with the spokes jammed with colorful, miscellaneous, iridescent compact discs, now hangs in the rotunda of the Shatford Library.

For the exhibition catalog accompanying our Artist in Residence 2018, exhibition in the Art Gallery, Director of the art galleries, Mahara T. Sinclaire wrote about Newkirk:

“Kori Newkirk creates artworks often inspired from objects and scenes found in his local environs of downtown Los Angeles. Newkirk harnesses these objects and ideas in thought-provoking works that comment on our society. By using unpredictable materials such as pony beads, pomade and hair extensions, [he] astounds us by articulating complex ideas about our cultural memory. Newkirk’s provocative works, inflected and informed by his African-American heritage, poignantly remind us of our complex humanity.”

I had the pleasure of speaking with Kori at the end of his residency at Pasadena City College.

SH: Hi, this is Sandy Haynes. I’m sitting here with Kori Newkirk who is the 2018 Artist in Residence at Pasadena City College. And Kori has said that he would be happy to talk with us a bit about his work, about his career. And I’m also going to ask him also about the work of art that he has gifted to Pasadena City College, that will join other works in the Shatford Library. Welcome Kori!

KN: Thank you.

SH: So, I have a few questions.

KN: Great.

SH: And, I did hear you the other night when you gave your lecture. And you are extremely articulate. I’m setting everyone up here! [laughter]

KN: Awesome.

SH: So I would just love to hear you respond to some of these questions.
KN: I’ll do my best.

SH: Excellent. So, you began as a painter who was dissatisfied with that traditional medium. What was your process for breaking away from paint and painting? (In a nutshell.)

KN: My process for breaking away, well, I just, I guess, gave myself permission not to pick up a paintbrush. But gave myself the option to still make paintings, but without sort of picking up that tool. So, I think there was something about the chatter that I was hearing about certain programs concerning people and things that were going on around that time—and this is the early ‘90s about the notion of the history of the world being on the end of that paintbrush. And before you were even able to make a mark on say, a canvas, the weight of the world history of art is on the end of that paintbrush and then that was really cycling. And I had a little, not quite as extreme feelings on that. But, I was listening to those things and I just did not want to participate in that. That did not seem interesting. It didn’t seem beneficial. It wasn’t going to be helpful to me. So, I just realized that I still wanted to make things that looked like paintings. I just didn’t want to pick up a paintbrush, so I just figured out a way to capture things that I really enjoyed about the painting process and what a painting can be, and tried to do those things without actually pushing paint around. So, for example, I would use a lot of glycerin soap that would be sliced up or lit from behind, and I used those popsicles (sticks) that come in the plastic bags, that would be stapled all over board, so I could still talk about the light or the color and form without having to pick up a paint brush. And I think at that time, I was definitely more of a abstract minimalist painter, as well, but then that also ended and I completely changed direction. Very soon, not too long after that decision to become a painter who doesn’t paint. So the next step was to totally change what I was making art about.

SH: Thank you. I do notice in the works where you turn to alternative ways of painting, there still seem to be strokes; there’s stroking.

KN: There, There… I guess in a way it never left me. I tried to deny it I guess deny the painting part of my history, but it really has never left, and then, even the things that I think I tend to be most known for—those beaded curtains—People talk about them like paintings. I consider them sculpture. But, I think that is for my own mental health, even though people consider them paintings and sometimes-- Perhaps they are a hybrid of a lot of different things.

SH: Interesting. Thank you. Kori, you’ve lived on both the East and West coasts. You grew up in New York, but you came to school in California. Why do you think you selected LA?

KN: Oh, that’s a good one! Well, I did definitely work my way West. Right. Born and raised in New York state, so there is a little bit of New York City, a little bit of the middle of the state—sort of country mouse/city mouse situation. Worked my way to Chicago for my undergrad. Finished in Chicago and then eventually came out to California to finish my schooling. I don’t know what it was about Los Angeles. I think I had a lot of friends from Chicago who had preceded me in coming out here for mostly their graduate work, and it just seemed interesting. There was no other place in California that I was
interested in. San Francisco was not even on my radar. San Diego was not on my radar. Los Angeles just seemed to be okay, and I came out to visit and was hooked. Immediately. I think it’s because it was a cold February in New York.

**SH:** [laughter]

**KN:** And there was a storm every week for fourteen weeks. Similar to what’s going on now. And, I came out here in February and people were in tank tops, and there’s flowers growing, and so green. The weather just seemed right. I thought, Oh, I could do this.

**SH:** But visually, there must have been a lot of fodder for what you were thinking about in terms of your art here.

**KN:** A little bit. I think I could make work anywhere. You know those places I have lived—I have lived in some other foreign countries for a while, and a few other states, and I didn’t really spend too much time looking at the environment, so much. I really spent most of my first visit on a college campus. And I think just the energy and smells of that campus. The strange smells of eucalyptus in the sun that I had never experienced before. And the beautiful dry heat of Southern California versus the humidity, were important reasons for me to come. And you know, it just felt right, and I was able to listen to myself and my gut at that time that something was telling me that this might be the place. And even more important. I know I did not want to go to New York City to compete with every other sort of recent MFA at that time, for a studio that was my dining room table, because all of my money would go towards my rent, as I battled to try to join something like the art world, or break in, and that option I had already done a little of that and that option did not seem feasible or exciting or anything that I wanted to do. This let me try something new. It was nice and inexpensive out here (At that time.)

**SH:** So, could you talk a bit about the work of art that you have gifted to our school that will be housed in the Shatford Library. I heard that you walked around the Library …

**KN:** A few times!

**SH:** …looking for an appropriate home, which I found very exciting because I don’t know of any previous artist in residence who said show me where the home is for my baby!

**KN:** Well, that’s great. You know I wanted to see what the prior visiting artists had given, so I just had a better understanding of what was being asked of me. And I saw that beautiful library as well and there are so many spaces where I could imagine making something, or putting something, that could live in that very particular space—understanding what happens in a library, particularly a college library, and what doesn’t happen there, and how I can best use what I do, or do what I do, in that situation and what I would probably want to look at. And so yes, I looked. I went though there quite a few times looking at spaces – thinking about the things I had in my studio, and just general ideas and what might be the best Kori Newkirk that I could give at this time for that situation.
SH: Well, I have to say. I love the piece.

KN: Thank you.

SH: It has a trope that you have gone back to, which is a circle.

KN: True

SH: It’s a smaller version of other pieces where you have used bicycle wheels. It, of course, as an art historian, reminds me of Duchamp.

KN: Right.

SH: Reusing a mundane object. But, would you like to tell us a little bit more about it? You made it specifically for the library.

KN: Yes, very recently.

SH: Describe it for us.

KN: Well, it is a bicycle wheel “slash” tire that at this time, it’s hung by a chain, some chain that I had. And in the spokes there are all of these compact discs. So, originally, the idea came to me from sighting, or just seeing a bicycle downtown. I live and work in downtown Los Angeles. I’ve been there for now twenty years. It’s the only place in the area that I’ve lived besides my grad school Irvine time. And I happened to see a gentleman with a bicycle with a lot of compact discs in the spokes. He was just riding around, hanging out, looking in dumpsters, and just seeing this bicycle sort of stopped me and made me start to really think about what I was looking at. I thought it was one of the most beautiful things I’ve seen. Luckily I was able to have a picture and that picture sat in my studio for about four years. I just quickly printed a version of it and just kept, continued to look at it. Then had an opportunity in 2016 to have a show in Los Angeles and realized that that picture was finally ready to inform a piece of work and a show and body of work. And then we come to this. So, here it is, a continuation of that, not necessarily that body of work, but of the influence of that photograph, or that moment of that bicycle and of this man in the environment that I live in, and how things, the vernacular works and how I respond to that. I think that would be the best word for that. It is the work of people who are not consciously trying to make art and are just sort of living at the moment, is a really big influence on me.

SH: How do you think our students will be informed by it? What was your hope?

KN: Well, I would love that … I imagine, I imagine that there is someone sitting in the library, studying something, reading something and looking at all the things in there and can be inspired to think in another direction and another way, either at what I am doing, or about what they’re doing. About their life just about the world that we live in. And so, that’s one of the reasons why I chose to make a very particular type of object that also fit in there. So that, you know you have a very diverse population here. And so
I wanted to also respond to that and add a little bit of another kind of diversity to the collection in the library.

SH: Excellent.

KN: That sounded really good, didn’t it?

SH: It did sound good!

KN and SH: [laughter]

SH: I’m very impressed.

KN: Yes, me too!
[laughter]

SH: Well Kori, thank you so much again for coming for the Artist in Residence week 2018!

KN: It was great.

SH: It has been a pleasure to listen to you speak on a number of occasions. Thank you for sharing today.

KN: Thank you.

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Shatford Library List of Resources about Kori Newkirk (2018)

Articles and Reviews

- **Critical Identity Politics**
  
  Identity politics in art, including the work of Kori Newkirk; from the art journal X-TRA.

- **Hip-Hop vs. High Art: Notes on Race as Spectacle**
  
  Discusses the exploration of hip-hop in the art of Newkirk and others; from Art Journal. Requires PCC login.

- **How Venus Williams, Ice Skating and Pita Bread Inspire Los Angeles Artist Kori Newkirk**
  
  *Los Angeles Times* interview with Newkirk on the occasion of a local exhibition in 2016. The artist reflects on his work and life.
• Kori Newkirk: Studio Museum in Harlem

Discussion of a survey of Newkirk's work at the Studio Museum Harlem in 2008; from Artforum International. Requires PCC login.

• Raising Consciousness Beyond the Beaded Curtains

Discussion of Newkirk's 2007 show at the Studio Museum in Harlem; from The New York Times.

Biographical Information

• Kori Newkirk

Biography, images of Newkirk's work, and listing of his shows. From the Artnet website.

Interviews and Lectures

• Interview - Artslant

Interview of Kori Newkirk in 2008, by Catherine Wagley.

• Interview - Chicago Contemporary Art Seminar

2015 interview of Kori Newkirk by Risa Recio.

• Interview - Interview Magazine

2008 interview with Kori Newkirk, from Interview Magazine.

• Interview - Issue Magazine

2015 interview with Kori Newkirk, from Issue Magazine.

• Spinning Art Out of the Everyday - Interview - Los Angeles Times

2016 interview of Kori Newkirk, by Carolina A. Miranda.

• Lecture - Geffen Contemporary

Audio of 2016 lecture by Kori Newkirk at the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA in Los Angeles.

• Lecture - Roski Talks

Video of 2017 lecture at the USC Roski School of Art and Design.