

4 Black Women on Making the Art World More Inclusive

By Tahirah Hairston



Photo: King Texas

Kimberly Drew and Jessica Lynne were talking over drinks in Brooklyn when they came up with the idea for their residency at Recess: the [Black Art Incubator](#). Later, Taylor Aldridge and Jessica Bell Brown joined the project.

Over the past five years, all four women have been working for art-world inclusivity. Drew, who works as the social-media manager at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, has been posting archival artworks from black artists at her [Black Contemporary Art Tumblr](#) since 2011. (It now has over 200,000 followers.) Aldridge and Lynne started their site [Arts.Black](#) as a space for diverse voices in the very white world of art criticism, especially in coverage of black contemporary artists. And Bell Brown is an art historian who has published essays on rising artists like Wilmer Wilson and Eric Mack and curated a show at MoCaDA. She's currently getting her PhD in modern and contemporary art at Princeton.

Black Art Incubator is their first project as a team. For 35 days, the bare-bones, plant adorned space — which occupies Recess's Soho storefront — has been a meeting place for women and men of color who create art, review art, curate art or just frequent museums and galleries. They've held office hours with museum directors; open crit sessions with critics, curators, and editors; workshops about writing grants and making money; potlucks; and book swaps. Meanwhile, the Incubator's online component, [Analog](#), offers a space for black women to submit their affirmations and mantras.

The Cut spoke with the Black Art Incubator founders about black women in the art world, the importance of building community, and the power of self-care mantras.



Photo: Courtesy of Black Art Incubator

What black woman in the art world has a huge impact on you and your work?

Jessica Lynne: As an arts writer, bell hooks as a critic will remain invaluable to my shaping and understanding of criticism as a genre, and the position that I can take as a black woman working in this industry. Her book *Art on My Mind* continues to shape me and how I think about the work that I want to do as a critic, as a young black woman critic in particular. Encountering her work as a young, impressionable 17-year-old really, truly affected me and impacted me in ways that I think I'm still unraveling.

Taylor Aldridge: I was majoring in business at Howard before I actually decided to switch over to art history. The switch was prompted by this article that my mother shared, I think it was in *Ebony* magazine. She called me, like, there's this cute black lady who works in the arts and she's a curator and she's amazing and she's fly. I read the article and it was Thelma Golden. As soon as I saw that there was a black woman who was successful in the arts industry as an administrator, not just an artist, I thought to myself, *This is doable, this can be done*. I think it speaks to the importance of needing to see someone that looks like you within the industry that you want to work in.

Kimberly Drew: The first black woman that I really interacted with in the art world is actually my aunt. She's an artist and worked with the City of Newark as an art administrator. I grew up visiting her house and I would see flyers from Aljira Gallery, a black-owned gallery in Newark, but it didn't really register with me until I had started studying art history at Smith College. Thelma is also a point of inspiration. The first internship that I had was at the Studio Museum and I was working as an intern in Thelma's apartment.

Jessica Bell Brown: I'm thinking of three people because I'm going to be extra. I wrote my thesis about Kehinde Wiley, and he's like, "When you go to New York you should meet my friend Naomi Beckwith." And when I finally looked her up and contacted her — I think she was in a J.Crew campaign — I was like, *Oh my god, she's so fabulous*. Then I got to know some of her work, particularly "30 Seconds Off an Inch" that she's curated at Studio Museum, and I thought that she's probably one of the most brilliant curators of our generation. Then I would say, Rashida Bumbray is just the most generous thinker. I got to work with her at Creative Time when I was a fellow and she came in for a project and really looked out for me and made space for my ideas. And lastly, I would say Leslie Hewitt. I think all three of those women are thinking about blackness in a truly capacious, flexible, and rigorous way and offer these kind of distinct models for me as an art historian, and curator, and writer.

Zora Neale Hurston said, "Black women are the mules of the earth," which you've mentioned as part of the inspiration behind this project. With the Black Art Incubator, you guys are helping to nurture and educate other artists — why that focus?

Lynne: As I've been growing in this industry, I noticed there's so much angst around being a person of color and being able to take up space in the art world, angst that's very, very much justified. I'm understanding the Black Art Incubator as trying to remove or make space for alternative emotional relationships to this field, to the work that matters to so many people, to the work that has mattered to so many people for such a long time. Black folk have been dynamic cultural producers and it's important to acknowledge that, which I think is happening with the Incubator. It's also important to carve out space for new folks to have a stake in this world as well, and that doesn't always happen organically. This is certainly not an institutional critique, but I think it's a place where people can come and genuinely feel cared for and be taken seriously both as a practitioner but also as a being. This Incubator is doing a lot of that work, that care, that love, making those gestures extremely visible in ways that we don't often experience.

Drew: We are really trying to equip people with the tools to ask different questions of the art world. A lot of our programming is artist-centric, I think that that's largely because we are occupying what is traditionally an artist residency so we want to respect that difference. But, it's really so much more about feeding the discourse than feeding any particular individual.



Photo: Courtesy of Black Art Incubator

There's also a self-care element to your residency. On the website, you take submissions of affirmations from black women. And at Recess, you've held yoga and meditation sessions on Sundays.

Bell Brown: In the time in which we're living — with the Black Lives Matter movement — it's so important to remain centered and anchored and rooted. Our residency depends upon this collaboration and depends upon us giving, the giving of ourselves to each other, to our community, but you can't really give yourself unless you are centered and anchored.

Drew: There's this intensive awareness that comes about through some meditative practices that I do myself, and I think everybody has their own answer and relationship to those things. I think all of us working together have just been pushed into this moment of being intensely woke, and that requires a lot of self care, too.

Do you ladies all have your own self-care mantras?

Aldridge: Mine is *you are not your mistakes*. Specifically as black women, again being the mules of the world as Zora Neale Hurston stated, we're constantly very self-critical and really experiencing the harshest conditions that the world produces. It's just a daily reminder to myself that it's okay to make mistakes, it's okay to work through those mistakes, and you can persevere.

Lynne: I think about communicating gratitude and taking time to make sure that that's an explicit part of my day. Articulating these spaces of gratitude is something that really does undergird this entire project because so much of the work, particularly by us but also our facilitators, is invisible to the public. I just want to make sure I'm saying thank you to the folks who are a part of this process.

Bell Brown: Deepak Chopra has this beautiful line about making yourself immune to criticism but also making yourself immune to flattery. That means, to me, just being present and allowing things to come up and being unwavering and pushing forward.

(The Black Art Incubator at Recess runs through today.)