

Black Art Incubator Aims to Invert Art-World Normal

BY MALLIKA RAO

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"We still have a running group text," Drew (far left) says of her co-founders.

King Texas

Kim Drew has been photographed in all shades of lipstick. Chalk-white, indigo – like she's just had a Slurpee. When she walked into the Black Art Incubator on a recent Thursday, it was with red lips and a navy dress fit for a tennis court. At her chest hung a white pipe fragment, bought in Miami. "I wish I could remember the artist who made it," she fretted when I admired the necklace.

She looked punk and prep, red-white-and-blue speared with a pipe. It's a tension that shapes Drew's work. She runs social media for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, but she's credited with starting a slow-burn revolution via Tumblr, arguably the lowest-fi gallery there is. Her high-traffic account Black Contemporary Art – a simple visual catalog of work by black artists – operates on the premise that black artists have been left out of art history. She slots them in without bitterness. "It's either that people are recorded, or they're not," she tells me matter-of-factly.

That same current of low-key, savvy correction undergirds the Black Art Incubator, Drew's new project, birthed with three other black women also in their twenties. Billed as a "social sculpture," the incubator takes blackness – and all that racial identifier suggests about what a person might know or feel – as a given. To see the space as a critique, Drew says, is reductive. The project isn't so much oppositional as an inversion of what we tend to expect. "Most art institutions are rooted in whiteness, but it's implied, it's this normalized thing," she says. With the project, "we're normalizing being rooted in blackness without beating people over the head with it."

Drew and her co-founders – Jessica Bell Brown, an art historian, and Jessica Lynne and Taylor Renee Aldridge, both art writers – took a year to build the space and its offerings. "We still have a running group text," Drew notes wryly. "It's very internet. Very 2016."

In practice, it wends a little 1960s. The incubator lives through August 19 at Recess, a residency space on the Lower East Side. The feel is of a secret clubhouse, convivial with an insider edge. You get the sense that while anyone is welcome, Berkeley coffeehouse-style, there's more fun to be had if you're part of the group. At quieter times, those anxieties recede; the space charms. A bench hugs the front window. Plants flare against white walls. Ginger cookies, mint tea, and a soulful Spotify playlist are all on tap.

During structured hours, there are sessions: Talks fall into two genres ("art and money" or "archive"), while "office hours" and "open crits" mimic MFA programming – but with the expectation that "you know who Richard Wright is," as the legendary East Village artist Sur Rodney (Sur), who recently gave a talk, puts it to me via phone. The incubator interests him for how it overturns expectations of knowledge, eschewing the usual canon in favor of one not often taught in schools. "There's a certain standard, a bibliography of material that we've all had to study," he says, citing *Moby Dick* and Charles Dickens. On top of playing that game, people of color "have to do all this other research to understand where they fit in."

Joshua Moton, a cellist who performed at an open crit last month, has experienced this firsthand. He explains the bodily discomfort his training in the European classical tradition gave him. In college, he found jazz. "Coltrane, Ayler, Silva, Davis," he says. "I was able to heal," to find "parts of the cello that I never really thought were there." While crits are known as stress-bombs in academia, Moton says his – led by Adrienne Edwards, the dynamic curator-at-large of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, clad in metallic pants – felt like a "safe space."

Therapeutic spaces face similar accusations as art schools over what their members tend to assume about their peers, whether to do with money, access, or personal history, and the incubator also addresses those issues. Moton, for one, returned the next day for a meditation hour. Here, too, he felt a difference. He drew a contrast for me, mentioning a yoga class he recently attended in which an Australian woman near him went on about "wage slaves," throwing off his balance. "What does it mean to have a black space?" he asked. "When you can be a black person and breathe and not feel off."

To Darby English, an art historian at the University of Chicago and a consulting curator at MoMA tasked with strengthening its holdings of work by black artists, the incubator offers a "creative solution to a seemingly intractable problem": how to feel at ease in the world. "They've asserted that with a sense of urgency at a time when black subjectivity is very under attack," he tells me.

And while the MFA echoes and starry lineup can feel, by turns, a little sweet or "establishment," last Thursday evening, community, again, was the focus. Drew studiously took notes from the sidelines as a Brooklyn-based librarian named Jhani Miller gave a talk about "performing life" – basically, struggling to be authentic in an age of overexposure. Miller spoke with ease, about growing up with a single mother and managing a name that's "not John Smith." She joked, "My name is not a name that you would use on a template for a résumé."

After begging her mom to enroll her in tap classes, she wound up falling for pole dancing, which posed a quandary. "Do I want my potential employer to Google my name and see me twerking in a handstand?" she asked the group. "Depends on the position." (The pun was intended.) Miller ended her talk explaining that she'd reactivated her Facebook page: a gesture of self-love. A cynic might mock this digitized "coming out" narrative as too millennial, too trivial. But as with much about the incubator, it held big questions that those present debated with care.

"I don't think performance is necessarily a bad thing," a woman in the audience, a photographer, proposed. "Whether it's a day-to-day performance or something like all of July, when something tragic in our community is happening, you have to go into work and perform, like nothing is happening." It struck me how neatly the comment attested to the space's mission: with its nod to a shared racial identity and also to pragmatism, to playing the game. Drew, pen on a yellow legal pad, nodded.

Black Art Incubator

Recess

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Through August 19