



The Regal, the Real: St. Louis Artist Katherine Simóne Reynolds

Eileen G'Sell / May 22, 2018



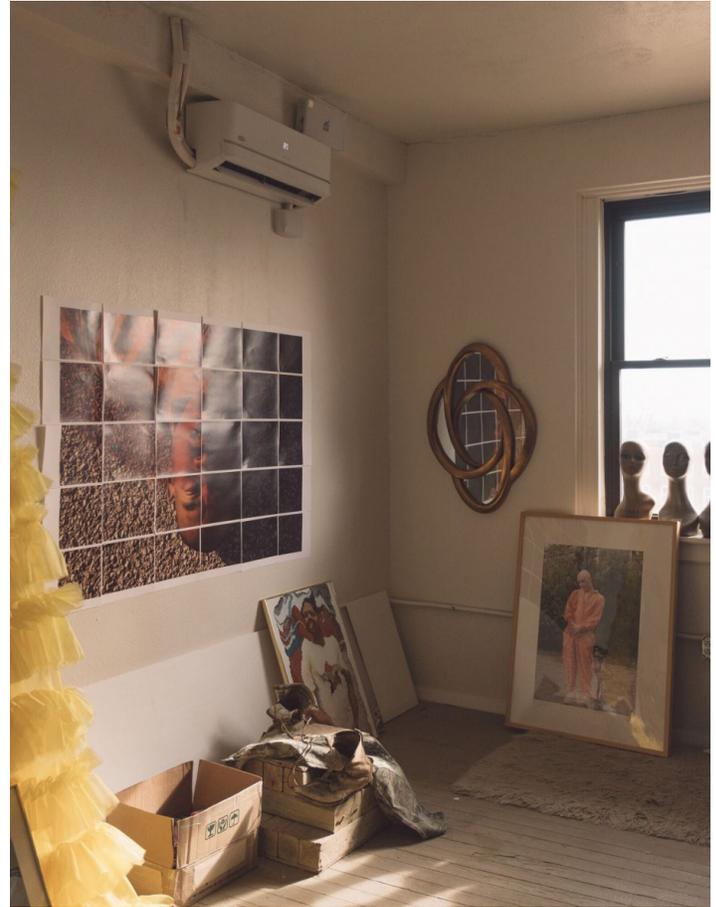
It's quiet in St. Louis' Cherokee Art District—the sky a flat gray, The Luminary gallery a haven from the February blahs.

Inside waits photographer, sculptor and performance artist Katherine (“Kat”) Simóne Reynolds, curator of the “Mane ’n Tail” exhibition on view through early March. Investigating “how beauty supply [stores] manipulate the way women of color feel about themselves, as well as the relationship between the purchasers of beauty and the people and spaces that supply it,” “Mane ’n Tail” visually moderates a conversation across race, class and creed, bringing together a triumphantly broad array of artists from across the nation.

Reynolds has been busy. With fifteen shows and artist talks in the last year alone, she has taken the

region by welcome storm since graduating from Webster University. But even when not feeling her best—turmeric-carrotting through a fever on this frigid afternoon—she exudes a focus and clarity that surpass her peripatetic 26 years. “Because I’m not from here, there’s still this dissonance with St. Louis,” she reflects. “I’ll never understand it fully, but I truly don’t think anyone really does.”

Born at an American military base in Germany, Reynolds spent much of her formative years in Illinois’ Metro East region, taking trips across the river to visit the Botanical Gardens in St. Louis or Seafood City with her grandparents. Her open demeanor betrays a life of constant adaptation—“For sure, for sure” a calm reply that bridges our exchange, less to express ready agreement than affirm understanding.



All photos by Attilio D'Agostino.

The artist's multidisciplinary output reveals similar empathy and discernment. In Reynolds' 2018 portrait "Manes n' Tales" (a riff of the title of the Luminary exhibition), a revisioned Rapunzel lounges in pink beauty supply slippers, her decadent blonde hair offset by a tattoo above her crossed left ankle. In her 2016 series "This is a Soft Space for my Hard Black Body," Reynolds herself bathes in a veritable sea of red velvet and flower petals. As she stares into the camera lens, long acrylic nails framing her right brow, the feel is both sovereign and sumptuous. "Kat's work is so self-aware that it generously embraces you with an evocative richness intricately woven into the pith and teeth of her message," says artist Heather Bennett. "The two are never separate but earnestly part of one another."

You're best known for photography but earned your BA in dance. How has that shaped your other disciplines?

A huge part of my background is performance, and integrating that into photography came quite easily—looking at it as a form of choreography rather than posing one's subject. That's something I didn't realize I was doing until last year, when I saw how I was interacting with my subjects and how much care went into just setting up. My photographs are more about documenting the process of working with someone through movement. For that reason I'm starting to move away from being classified as a photographer. As I see myself more as a documenter of choreography, or just as an artist.

The process really started to click for me with the series “Soften”—looking at Black male sensuality. And then moving more towards video work, looking at timing and spatial awareness, articulating exactly what I need of the subject for the shot to be clear and correct, to make something cohesive, physical and tangible. In the summer of 2016, I started doing a video series called “Structural Humor,” in St. Louis, branching out into public work—looking at gated communities, bus stops, basketball courts and closed schools while working with two artists, Vaughn Davis, Jr. and Todd Anthony Johnson. In each of these spaces, I filmed them laughing loudly, as a way of thinking about laughter as a literal form of humor. Watching them laugh became a kind of intervention into spaces that often have serious connotations of structural racism in this city.



All photos by Attilio D'Agostino.

Laughter can be a productive disruptive force—it's almost erotic in its presence.

Yes, it's a release. I'm a pretty emotional person, so whenever I do see issues that bother me in St. Louis—even though I'm not from here—I still think about humanity, Black people and socioeconomic divides, especially when you see these companies buying up these properties here but not actually doing the homework. A lot of fake care going around incentivizing Black communities to think that they're being valued when actually it's just gentrification.

One of my first series, “The Divide,” was about housing on both sides of the Delmar divide—Section 8 Housing on top of mansions, and thinking about the layering of these properties in the same zip code. These juxtapositions are something I work in, that feeling of angst, of emotional need. Not to help—because I'm not helping, I'm documenting—but to understand what's actually happening; to physicalize emotions and what's happening to people.

Do you feel like the process of documenting can, itself, bring a sort of resolve? Can it help to reckon with these tensions and contradictions?

That's a good question—it makes me think of the Arthur Jafa quote that says something like, ‘No matter who's behind the lens, it's a white gaze.’ And yet I'm a Black woman still taking photos generally of Black people, Black housing and so on, trying to understand. In terms of my process, I do share my work with others, but it is therapy for me—to understand my own Blackness, and my own role, because we all play a role in everything.

For me to walk through neighborhoods I don't live in, that none of my family members have lived in, to think that I will be accepted because I'm Black—that's not true. So, trying to understand my own narrative is why I've gone into spaces where I have felt uncomfortable, but still comfortable in community, where I need to take time to understand.

“Mane 'n Tail” is an exploration of Black beauty, but also the ecosystem of what else is at play at the beauty supply store. It's not just Black people—or even Black women, though we are the majority and keep the beauty industry in business. I'm learning a



lot about myself through the process of looking at something larger.

There seems to be a common misunderstanding that more overtly autobiographical art is closer to the artist, but that isn't always so.

Definitely. I find out more about what I do by talking to different people about it. For my series “No One Loves me, Like I love Me,” I didn't really know what I was doing, shooting this man in a rock quarry wearing a pink suit. All of the emotional content is from me, put onto another person. I can be a lot more vulnerable when working with someone else. I'm not necessarily trying to make others feel what I'm going through, because I don't think that's possible. But I do think there should be some sort of intimate relationship between artist and audience that is set through work.

This show was your conception from the beginning. Can you say more about the catalyst for “Mane 'n Tail?”

Ever since I was little, I've been passionate about the language that people use with each other. My mom is a speech-language pathologist, so whether it's verbal language or body language, questions of communication and respect are inherent in my work. A language barrier can lead to a lack of respect between both parties.

The whole concept of this show originated with me wanting to do a performance at a beauty supply store. But the owners don't necessarily trust Black women, or Black people generally.

There's a lack of trust between both parties that I wanted to bring together in one space. You have a lot of Black women going to these spaces spending a lot of money—or not a lot of money. So there's a socioeconomic divide in beauty, too. Who can afford Remy? Or Kanekalon? How can you manifest with your pocketbook what you want to look like?

With this show, I wanted to see the connectivity of these relationships. It goes back to me as a little girl watching “Sesame Street,” thinking, “I get it. Everyone can be together about one thing.” I've always wanted to explore the tensions in these relationships, because they're everywhere.

As an artist working in St. Louis, how do you feel the city has affected your practice or creative goals?

Since I've been so nomadic—moving practically every three years as a kid—it's hard for me to think of spaces as home. In some ways, I feel more like a “Midwestern artist” than a “St. Louis artist.” Artists from the Midwest have a history of being looked over, and because of that we're often seen as underdogs—with this fight and bitterness for the need to be seen. I still hear a lot of artists here say, “I just wish we had more press. I just wish people would see what we're doing.”

But being here has also influenced how I take risks as an artist, and with curating “Mane ’n Tail.” I’m allowed to do that in St. Louis because this is an incubator city, and that’s something I really love. But I think that there needs to be more risks being taken—for seeing weird shit, work that makes you uncomfortable. I think a lot of people here really want to engage with that.

I’m not an art critic, and I haven’t seen all there is within the St. Louis art scene—there are a lot of very talented artists here—but there still could be less black and white. I want to go to more shows and say, “Wow! You took a huge-ass risk with this.” Ultimately, I want to feel something new.