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### **Brown is Beautiful** by Charlie Finch



[Iona Rozeal Brown](#)  
[a3 blackface #48](#)  
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Long ago, Roger Baldwin, founder of the American Civil Liberties Union, was asked on ABC television who were the greatest people he had ever met.

"You wouldn't know them," he growled.

Facing a long convalescence after a dicey Christmas visit to the hospital, our thoughts naturally turned to our spiritual betters for guidance, and one person popped up, Iona Rozeal Brown.

We've only met her once, at a dinner last fall at Le Zinc in Tribeca that was organized by Brown's collectors and her dealer Caren Golden, preparatory to Iona's dazzling retrospective, which opens this month at the Art Museum of Spelman College in Atlanta. As Iona is only in her 30s, every collector, us included, lent back her work for the show, which will subsequently tour the USA.

Iona arrived for the dinner in a track suit. She is a robust woman, demure in manners, bold in speech, totally arresting.

Frequently, she got up from the table to join those of us smoking in the street.

"What brand do you smoke?" we asked.

"Oh, I don't smoke, Charlie, I just like to keep them company."

We learned that Iona grew up an only child; that her parents, distinguished teachers in the District of Columbia, had both passed on; that she lived with her German shepherd alone in the wilds of Maryland.

Her distinctive Nipponese take on the icons of African American life emerged when Brown read about a hip-hop cult in Tokyo that mimics black culture from Malcolm X to NWA.





[a3 Blackface #22](#)  
[2002](#)



[Untitled I \(female\)](#)  
[2003](#)



[Untitled II \(male\)](#)  
[2003](#)

Being Iona, a world traveler, she journeyed to Japan for a look.

"I discovered that they knew nothing of the history, only the images," she told us, whereupon she educated her interlocutors like a 21st-century Dubois -- and wound up executing a revolutionary style in painting: Shinto Hip-hop.

Being outside the narrow art-world loop, Iona felt fairly isolated at the Yale arts school, a condition that has enviably never bothered her.

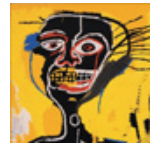
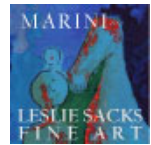
"Kehinde Wiley was my friend and mentor," she said, and, as with Kehinde and every other artist of color, Iona's arrival in Chelsea was strictly underground.

But, as we discovered a few years ago, Iona's work is bewitching and desirable. In terms of drawing, color and complexity in the picture plane, one thinks of Degas. She is a true master of the eye and hand.

Material rewards are trickling down: Iona had the best piece in "Black Belt" at the Studio Museum in Harlem, dealer Michael Steinberg is overseeing her first print editions, everything Brown makes finds a buyer, and the Spelman show will reveal her to be a powerful light to her generation.

But will the Chelsea establishment notice?

**CHARLIE FINCH** is co-author of *Most Art Sucks: Five Years of Coagula* (Smart Art Press).



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