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Gangsta Geisha

LOS ANGELES — Tokyo's "ganguros" may be yesterday's headline-making street tribe, but those young and mostly female disciples of hip-hop with their head-to-toe ghetto style — permed afros or platinum dyed hair, and orangey brown skin from fake bakes or slathered-on foundation — remain a curiosity, particularly among African-Americans.

"I could understand listening to the music and wearing the clothes. But coloring your skin to look black?" That, says artist Iona Brown, a D.C. native of African and Cherokee heritage, is "pretty daring." While hip-hop culture, like jazz before it, has been enthusiastically embraced among people of all races, skin color continues to matter.

The ganguros' fetishism inspired Brown's exploration of an "afro-asiatic allegory" in the culture at-large, and in her life. As a girl, her mother took her to see Kabuki and Buraku (puppet) theater and bought her Japanese and Chinese children's books. She spent Saturday afternoons watching back-to-back kung fu flicks with her dad at the local movie house.



Modern-day geishas: A painting by Iona Brown.
Photo By WWD Staff

The result is a series based on the Ukiyo-e style, the fine, bold line paintings dating back to 17th century Japan of courtesans, actors and literary and mythical figures. At first glance, Brown's paintings on large wood blocks at Sandroni.Rey in Venice, Calif., and on paper at Karen Goldman Fine Art in New York through Oct. 12 appear to mimic the classics. But these aren't your grandmother's geishas. A young, kimono-clad woman leisurely leans against a turntable, blowing out a delicate, curling line of smoke from the joint she holds in her right hand. Tiny logos of Echo and the Adidas trefoil are stamped on ceremonial garb, and a textile pattern is the iconic marijuana leaf dizzily repeated. Black face is painted over the white face signature to geisha and Kabuki drag, and the smooth, bulbous chignons that make up the traditional shimado 'do are actually shaped from afro wigs.

"With Geishas you have this whole illusion: the white face, the posturing, the mannerisms. They're completely divas. It was an easy translation to the women in hip-hop — and the men, for that matter," observes Brown, who earned her master's degree in fine arts in painting at Yale, and her undergrad at the San Francisco Art Institute.

Brown returned from Japan last summer, after she'd already started the series questioning her own focus. "I felt guilty. They take what they do very seriously and I didn't want it to seem like I was trivializing it." As for Japan's youth, recent summers already saw the rise of the "ganjiro," hip-hop fans who became obsessed with sunscreen after deciding tanning beds were harmful. On the street, it became about white versus black.

Now, the art world is taking her work seriously. The Venice show sold out before it opened Sept. 8, and her paintings in New York are nearly all claimed, too. Her collectors have been a mix of those buying them because of looks and others for what the surface reveals.

"I don't want this work just to be about a Japanese-African influence. It speaks to how we assume new identities through clothes and music. It's all drag."

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