

# ART; For Japanese Girls, Black Is Beautiful

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

**HARTFORD**— IONA ROZEAL BROWN is obsessed with hip-hop. When she is not home spinning discs, out haunting music stores or cruising clubs, she makes paintings about fashion-conscious Japanese teenagers who want to look cool, black and American, much like their hip-hop idols. Known as the ganguro, these teenagers dress in funky clothes, dye and weave their hair into cornrows and darken their skin at tanning salons or with makeup.

Ganguro, literally "black face," has its roots in the mid-1990's, starting with a desire among Japanese girls to emulate the popular, sun-tanned Okinawan singer Amuro Namie and the black British fashion model Naomi Campbell. Thanks to the rising popularity of hip-hop in Japan, their idolization has since expanded to include Lil' Kim, Run-DMC, Mary J. Blige, the Big Tymers and others.

Ms. Brown, 37, first learned about the ganguro while studying painting at the San Francisco Art Institute in the late 1990's. Later she traveled in Japan, where she met members of the ganguro tribe and was shocked to discover the depth of their fascination with black youth culture. The experience left her with many unresolved questions and inspired a new body of work.

"Sure, I'd seen white youth in the U.S. hang out with black youth, adapt the pimp stroll or gait, the slang and go the whole nine yards," Ms. Brown said while installing 15 of her paintings about the ganguro at the Wadsworth Atheneum here. "But the Japanese youth were trying to be as black as they could. This was something different and new."

Ms. Brown has mixed feelings about the ganguro phenomenon. "Being African-American, I'm flattered that our music and style is so influential," she said. "But I have to say that I find the ganguro obsession with blackness pretty weird, and a little offensive. My paintings come out of trying to make sense of this appropriation."

Ms. Brown's paintings do a little cultural sampling of their own. She takes 17th- and 18th-century Japanese ukiyo-e woodblock prints of geishas, bathhouse girls, samurai and Kabuki theater actors and gives them a radical makeover. The results are zany hybrids, from kimono-clad M.C.'s and gun-wielding gangsta rappers to sassy courtesans with darkened faces, dreadlocks and long painted nails. She calls them "Afro Asiatic allegories."

In today's art jungle, the hybrid is a fairly familiar animal. So what makes these paintings different? For one thing, the unexpected combination of period Japanese imagery and hip-hop attitude is more than just a catchy aesthetic tool. Ms. Brown sees parallels between the art of ukiyo-e and hip-hop: their storytelling quality, broad popular appeal and celebration of material pleasures. "There are also parallels," she said, "between the glamorous, fashionable clothes and decadent excess portrayed in ukiyo-e, and the high fashion, celebration of material success and love of bling-bling that you get in hip-hop."

And then there's the titillation. Most of the artists associated with the ukiyo-e movement made pornographic prints, known in Japanese as shun-ga, or spring pictures. Similarly, hip-hop artists use bawdy imagery to sell their albums, and in some cases even dabble in pornographic movies.

Images of women are dominant in Ms. Brown's paintings and prints. This is no surprise, for they are the main devotees of the ganguro style, and prominent subjects in ukiyo-e. In "Untitled I (Female)" (2003), a silkscreen, Ms. Brown depicts a hip-hop diva coyly exposing her dark skin. She wears a revealing robe, like the geishas in ukiyo-e, her posture intended to arouse. But unlike geishas, she has peroxide-tipped dreadlocks into which the artist has painted both an Afro comb and a traditional Japanese hairpin.

Sometimes the cute fashion accessories border on product placement. Lopsided Kangol caps warm more than one frizzy crown in her paintings, and pastel Fubu T-shirts peep out from under kimonos, as does a pair of flashy Nike Air Force Ones. In addition, bottles of trendy club drinks like the blue-tinted, silky Hpnotiq are everywhere. Perhaps this speaks to the commercialization of hip-hop, but it is also a little generic.

Still, such paintings have struck a chord. Since graduating from the M.F.A. program at Yale in 2002, Ms. Brown, who lives and works in Chillum, Md., has been included in almost two dozen group exhibitions. She has dealers in New York, Washington and Los Angeles, and in February received a grant to travel back to Asia.

"At the base of it, I'm intrigued by the global influence of hip-hop," she said. "I want to return to Japan to look for ganguro, but also check out China and Korea, where I am told that hip-hop is big. The ganguro is just one idea, and I don't want to, you know, pimp it."

Iona Rozeal Brown

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford. Through June 13.

Photos: Iona Rozeal Brown's works are a cross-cultural hybrid: a black artist using a Japanese style to paint Japanese women who are obsessed with black culture. (Photos courtesy of Michael Steinberg Fine Art, New York)