

# Studio

The Studio Museum in Harlem Magazine Summer/Fall 2013



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**Studio Magazine**

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# Studio

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# Fellow to Fellow: Jamillah James & Monique Long

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**In April 2013, the Studio Museum's 2012–13 Curatorial Fellow Jamillah James sat down with Monique Long, the 2013–14 Curatorial Fellow, to discuss their shared experiences and provide insight into their respective interests as emerging curators.**

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**Jamillah James:** Tell us about your background.

**Monique Long:** I'm from Philadelphia. I don't know how that has shaped my interest, but Philly has one of the best modern art museums in the country [the Philadelphia Museum of Art], and I grew up going there. I stared at academic paintings. They have great contemporary art as well, and a great costume collection. I went to Columbia University and I think the first fashion exhibition I saw was at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, where I spent some of my youth. The exhibition focused on Jacqueline Kennedy. The clothes themselves weren't sartorially spectacular, but they told a story. I found it interesting that you could talk about history in a museum setting using clothes. It was kind of an epiphany. I studied American Studies so I could contextualize the art I was interested in within history, particularly the history of fashion, which is a niche within academia. I wrote my thesis arguing the premise that by reading clothes as texts, one could create narratives around historical moments.

**JJ:** What are the differences between the art scenes in Philly and New York?

**ML:** As someone who developed as a thinker about art here, and not in Philly, it's a hard question to answer. I think people generally think that New York is the place where things happen, but in art, music and fashion, there's always influence from Philadelphia that comes up in surprising ways.

**JJ:** Before you came to the Studio Museum, which other institutions did you work with?

**ML:** Columbia had a special arrangement with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where I worked in the Thomas J. Watson Library as a page. After I finished school, I got a curatorial internship at the Guggenheim. After that, I worked at the Museum of Arts and Design as the Art Table mentee. The mentorship is structured so you get to work with someone in the field that you're interested in, and you work intensively on a project over the course of a summer.



Monique Long, 2013–14 Curatorial Fellow  
and Jamillah James, 2012–13 Curatorial Fellow  
**Photo:** Liz Gwinn

I was fortunate enough to work with Lowery Stokes-Sims (former Director and Chief Curator of the Studio Museum) on the *Global Africa Project*.

**JJ:** How did you find out about the fellowship at Studio Museum?

**ML:** I had been working independently after Art Table, and had made some significant connections. The application came to me in an email. I was in the middle of a time-consuming project, so I just cranked it out. I love Harlem and its community, and I thought the fellowship would be a great opportunity to give back in some way.

When was the first time you came to the Studio Museum?

**JJ:** It was in 2006, on the occasion of *Frequency*. My twenty-five-year-old mind was effectively blown. At that time I decided to reinvest my energies toward working as a curator rather than as a critic or writer of theory. It was many years before I was able to come

back, since I was living in Chicago at the time. Fast-forward to 2010, when I was on a curatorial fellowship at the Queens Museum after a few years of working independently as a curator in Baltimore. Tom Finklepearl [Director of Queens Museum] suggested I schedule a time to meet with Thelma Golden about any sort of writing opportunities at the Studio Museum because I expressed an interest in getting some more writing under my belt. She suggested that I contribute to *Studio*, which is how my formal relationship with the institution began.

**ML:** What was the first exhibition you curated?

**JJ:** The first exhibition I ever did was in 2004, a sound art show called *Imaginary Landscape* at an alternative space I co-directed in Chicago. It coalesced my interests in music—which at the time, I was playing in a band and organizing live shows in my living room—and the art world. Sound is somewhat underrepresented in institutional spaces. There are places, particularly here in New York, that are dedicated to presenting sound as an experiential medium, such as Roulette, Diapason Sound Art and ISSUE Project Room. Jennie C. Jones had that remarkable 2011 show, *Absorb/ Diffuse* at The Kitchen that was both visual and aural; Christian Marclay had his retrospective at the Whitney that incorporated a number of performances; and the Studio Museum hosted *American Cypher: Mendi and Keith Obadike* this spring, as well as the series *StudioSound* for a couple of years. But all these are a bit anomalous. Exhibition-making is problem-solving, and with that first show, I wanted to address what I saw as an issue. I still think that way about my practice.

**ML:** What were the highlights of your fellowship?

**JJ:** The last year was great, especially working with the three curators of *Fore* from the very beginning, making the catalogue and brochure. It was amazing to work on an exhibition that would be a part of the legacy of black, emerging artist exhibitions for which the Museum is well noted. And, of course, working on *Brothers and Sisters* was really reflective of my change in interests since completing my undergraduate degree—a shift to focusing on post-war abstract painting and sculpture, which is radically different from where I was, say, seven years ago. I knew we had a number of works by Beauford Delaney in the collection, and wanted to somehow recontextualize his work in tandem with that of people working at the same time or contemporary artists working in a similar vein. I am interested in continuing to study his work beyond this exhibition. I think he made a number of important contributions. To have access to the Museum's collection, nearly 2,000 works, was an incredible experience, to see all the history. I love that we're an active, collecting institution

whose acquisitions will continue to historicize the contributions of black artists for many years to come.

What are some of the things you're interested in exploring this year leading up to your fellowship exhibition next spring?

**ML:** Fashion exhibitions are seeing an emergence for a mass audience, which is very exciting. I hope I can continue and build on my interest in fashion and history while I'm here. My thesis was entitled "Speaking Sartorially: Semiotics and African-American Clothing." It was a historical narrative about blacks in America, told through clothing choices since the antebellum period. I did a close reading of fugitive slave ads, which had very detailed descriptions of what they were wearing. The slaves took clothing other than rags when they escaped so they could potentially pass as free. I talked about the Harlem Renaissance, the emergence of a black middle class, the black nationalism movement and also hip-hop. I'm interested in the legacy of a people who were able to subvert through clothing choices.

**JJ:** It's important to bring diverse ideas and interests to the table. I wouldn't consider myself a specialist in African-American art or culture. I'm just a weirdo who likes a bunch of different things. I am still very much an Adrian Piper and William Pope.L fan, and also people such as Nayland Blake and Glenn Ligon are important to me, in terms of authoring LGBT art history. I have the flexibility to do my non-mission-specific work outside of my time here. I have a few projects coming up later this year, and I'm concentrating on writing and teaching as well.

**ML:** I don't know if it is specific to this line of work or just New York, but it seems like there's no distinguishing between life and work. It's fully integrated, but not in a negative way. Wouldn't you agree?

**JJ:** I think that's just the nature of living in New York. There's always a constant changeover with the museums and galleries here. Sometimes it's hard to keep up, but you have to. Periodically, I take breaks. Everyone went on a forced break with Hurricane Sandy to deal with the recovery, but I feel that now there is a lot of activity, which is very exciting.

**ML:** One of the payoffs of working as much as possible and being dynamic is making those connections that can lead to other opportunities. I feel lucky to be here, and to be able to put faces to the names of people whose work I know. I'm looking forward to looking back on the highlights of this experience—and it's all been a highlight thus far. I remember when I came to the Studio Museum, while I was an intern at the Guggenheim, and [former Associate Curator] Naomi Beckwith led a gallery tour. I remember her saying that I know you're getting a lot of theory in school, but in the real world, you have to be able to engage with the art, talk about the work and not project meaning or construct meaning in the laboratory of the classroom. That really stuck with me, and I couldn't wait to have more practical experience, which is why I'm so glad to be here.

**JJ:** Naomi was totally right. You can have a handle on all manners and directions of art history and theory, but you have to be able to talk the talk and walk the walk at the same time. It's crucial to have these kinds of opportunities to learn new or different research methodologies and put them into practice. Otherwise what's the point?