JOYCE TSAI

Shelter after the Storm: The Work of Tameka J. Norris

With the exception of her *Post-Katrina Painting* series, the practice for which Tameka J. Norris established her reputation encompasses performance, film, and video, all of which challenge the perimeters of traditional media. But it was with painting that Norris began her practice at UCLA and later at Yale, pursued in part because the medium promised infrastructure and resources lacking in other fields. Declaring herself a painter gave her access to her own studio, a room of her own. As a BFA student at UCLA between 2007 and 2010, the painting studio served as literal and metaphorical shelter; she watched her own family in Louisiana and Mississippi grapple with Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath from afar.

In the studio, Norris developed her *Post-Katrina Paintings* on bedsheets (see *Post-Katrina 7*), a support adopted by artists like Max Beckmann in the face of catastrophe. She projected photographs of her family's homes on the surface and followed the outlines and planes with her brush, investing the surface with the myriad meanings that the process unlocked. The horizontal, warm intimacy of the bed, the sense of bodily contact is made upright, the sense of continuity broken when rendered into Painting with a capital P. The distance between the events her family experienced and her own was made all the more powerful through the associations and history of the medium.

The following selection focuses on Norris's engagement with Katrina, first as a student through *Post-Katrina Self-Portraits* and more recently as a recipient of the National Endowment for the Arts Grant for *Somewhere is Here: Sumter County*. In both, she situates her body in landscapes impacted by disaster but in decidedly different ways. Her early work features self-portraits printed half her size on gator board and cut out, then sited in the rubble along the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The tension between her glamorous cutout presence and the ruin of her surroundings is jarring. These works underscore how remote the experience of Katrina was for most, seen and felt at a distance. Her body in these images mimics fashion photos generated as part of a shoot she commissioned. The absurdity of her clothes is captured in *A Portrait about Identity*, where the dress itself overwhelms the wearer.

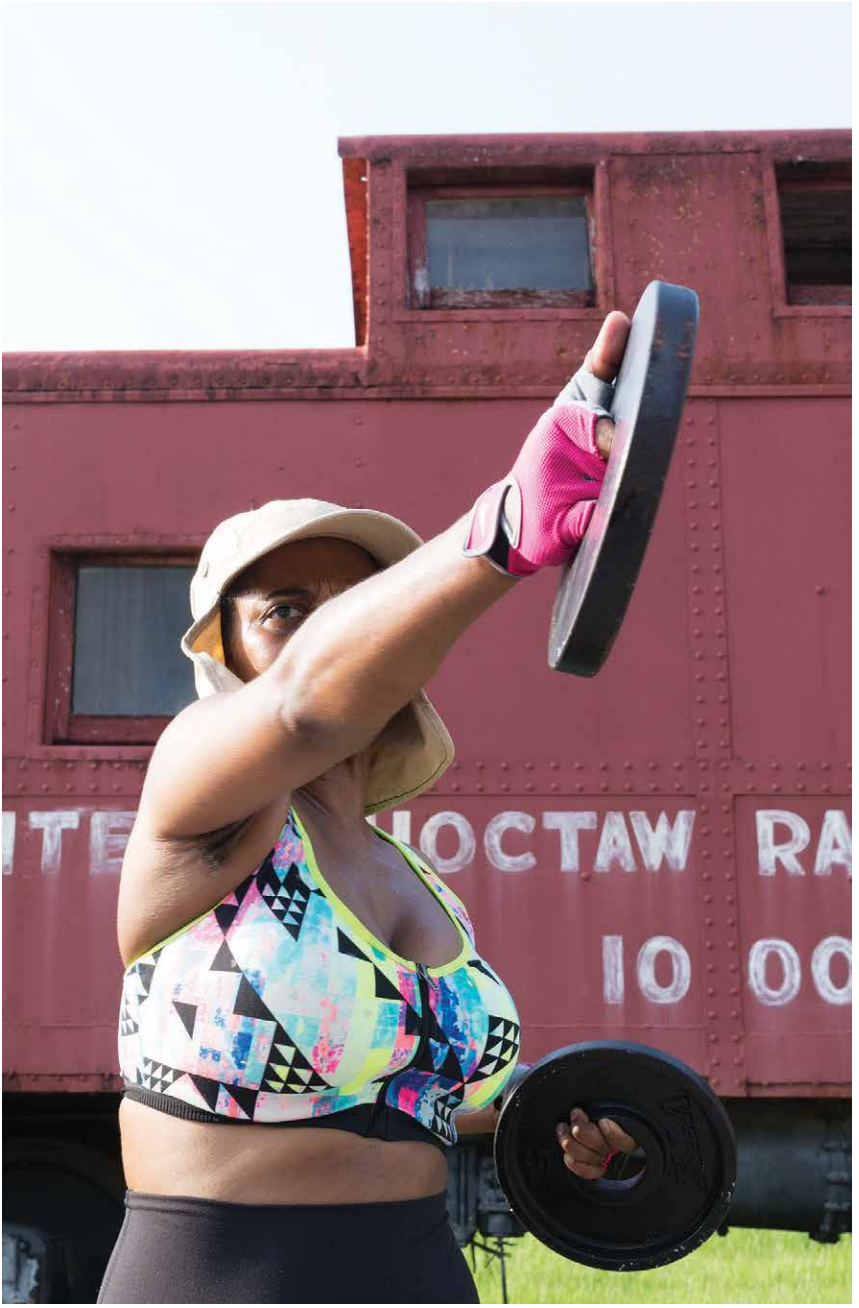
Somewhere is Here: Sumter County revisits the scene and concept of the *Post-Katrina Self-Portraits* but does so from the perspective of a vested participant. This work was made following her own investment in another flood-ravaged area, this time as a home buyer in Wellington Heights, Cedar Rapids, still recovering from the devastating floods of 2008. *Somewhere is Here* took place over the course of a year, allowing for intensive research and modes of activism, community building, and journalism as part of its enterprise. Norris staged a series of performances, filmed and presented here as stills. In these works, she ritualizes the literal expenditure of sweat equity in order to intervene upon the landscape of the Gulf Coast. Instead of high fashion, Norris transforms materials that might otherwise be seen as mere detritus or the utilitarian shield of the disaster worker into garments that hold out the promise of rebirth.

Post Katrina 7, 2009. Oil paint, found fabric, and bedsheets, 90 x 50 in.

Post Katrina Self-Portrait Series, #1, Gulfport, MS, 2005–2015. Digital print.

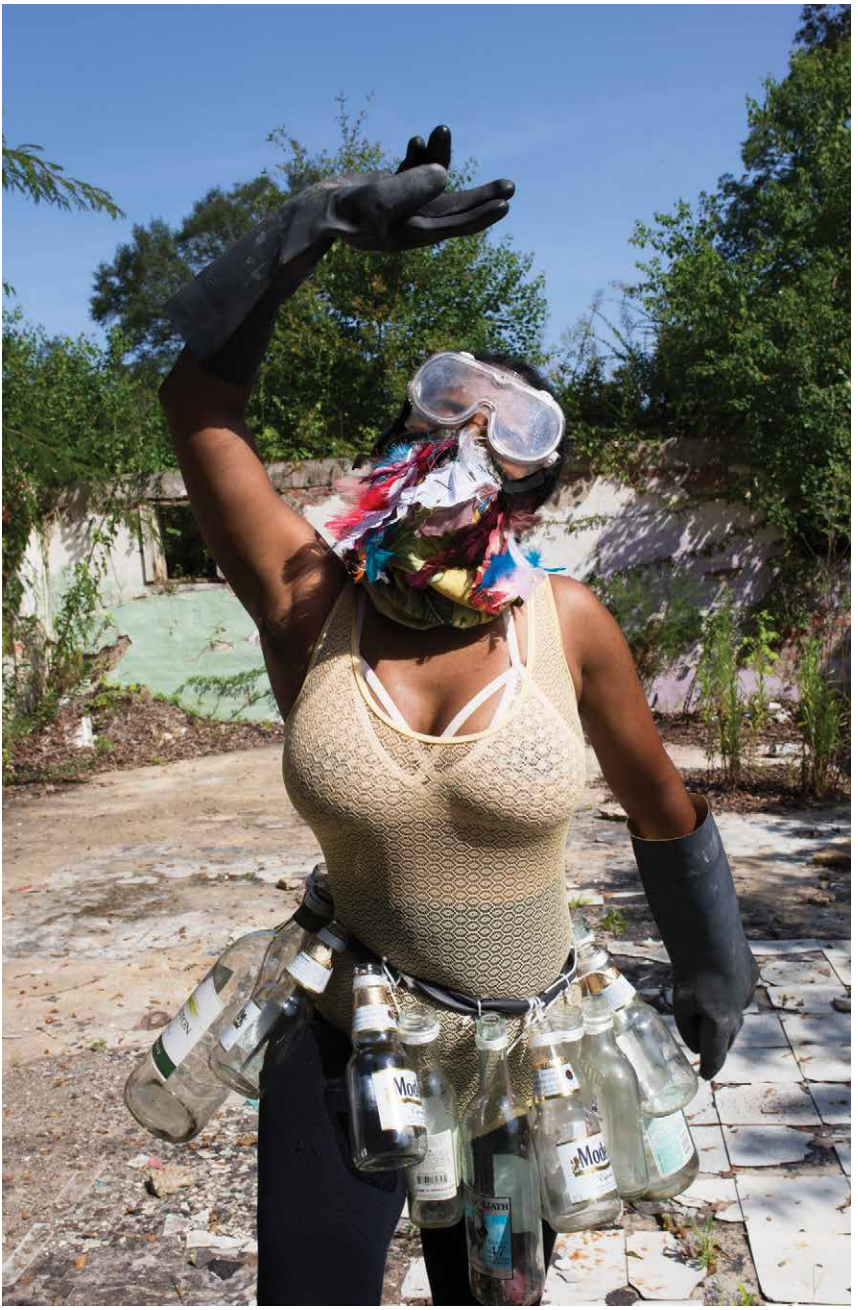
Post Katrina Self-Portrait Series, #2, Gulfport, MS, 2005–2015. Digital print.

Somewhere is Here: Sumter County, AL, #2, 2018. Film still.



Somewhere is Here: Sumter County, AL, #3, 2018. Film still.

Somewhere is Here: Sumter County, AL, #4, 2018. Film still.



Somewhere is Here: Sumter County, AL, #5, 2018. Film still.

A Portrait About Identity, 2009. Digital print.