

Interview

Between Terry R. Myers and Ditte Ejlerskov

Terry R. Myers: I can imagine a complicated list of reasons behind the use of weaving in the making of some of your paintings. Do you have such a list for yourself, and, if so, what are the most important reasons for you?

Ditte Ejlerskov: Just a few years back my work was centered on a decision to involve myself entirely in 'the contemporary'; I chose fashion as my motor and Rihanna as my protagonist. After a while I found myself absorbed somewhat in modernist painting as my format. I followed Rihanna's profoundly documented life and then translated the patterns and designs of the clothes she was wearing into paintings. It became a lot about fashion. Perhaps the weaving comes from there. I wanted to convert her wardrobe into painting. It was a relief to surrender myself into being charmed and absorbed by her contemporaneity especially because in the beginning I had felt sorry for both Rihanna and shallow modernist painting in general.

The work with these canvases marked a new beginning in my practice and brought me back to an authentic experience of painting being both painful and surprising. I titled the exhibition of this body of work "We Found Love in a Hopeless Place" after one of Rihanna's radio hits but also because I truly found love in a hopeless place. The hopeless place was the superstar's wardrobe – and modernist painting. This portrait of a contemporaneity' and the portrait of the cult surrounding Rihanna both became central features in the project. However, the context of the works emerged through the encounter with the spectator. How does one receive such smooth contemporary-looking images?

The works were in fact manipulating images taken from a calculating media culture! And the main question for me when working with the paintings was: "Can people in general allow themselves to be flattered and manipulated so directly when looking at art?" I myself was truly flattered and manipulated by the cult of the contemporary and radically changed my opinion about Rihanna, modernistic painting and fashion all together. After the Rihanna works I wanted to dive deeper into the decoration and mechanisms of fashion and the weaving became a part of that.

TRM: Tell me more about the actual practice and function of the weaving.

DE: I wanted to get closer to the fabrics I guess. The more I worked with it, the more I became interested in seeing how two canvases would merge together and create a new tactile property. I became interested in the craftsmanship and the different textures and patterns the weaving would form. It still surprises me how one painting can disappear completely. At the moment I am cutting up the huge Anaconda-inspired painting I showed you. I wonder if that too will disappear in the pattern of the weaving. I am weaving it into a text painting.

As to the possible list. There are, of course, practical aspects to mention too: I lived and worked at Cité des Art in Paris in a tiny studio last year, and for me to paint, eat and sleep (with my sweet boy friend Johan) in one square meter was not really an option. So I took some canvases I had rolled up from my studio in Sweden and began cutting and testing weaving techniques whilst I was there. When I came back I could begin planning new weaves more deliberately, having already experienced what worked and what didn't. However a weave as large as the Anaconda-weave will take on its own life. None of my previous rules will apply to it. And I am not looking forward that!

TRM: In 1993, I organized a group exhibition inspired by Annie Lennox that included works by, for example, Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Lari Pittman. In my text I quoted the music critic Timothy White: "... no matter how exotic Lennox's stage pose has become, her vocals have never felt performed. Rather, they've been potent for their gut vulnerability. It's this curious combination of visual artifice and complete emotional authenticity [emphasis mine] that has made Lennox a singularly compelling artist." I'm curious how such a claim that resonated for me in relation to contemporary art of the early 1990s (particularly in terms of a re-politicization of the "decorative") strikes you in relation to Nicki Minaj, your work, and (if you want to

answer) contemporary art today?

DE: I don't really know much about contemporary art in this contemporaneity! I am a lot more interested in contemporary culture in general and its ties to theory, philosophy and the past rather than in contemporary art as such.

For years I have seen my work as a test of the idea that pop culture not only alters the present and contemporary culture but also predicts the future by contributing to its shape. Well, hopefully my work can be understood as "a re-politicization of the 'decorative'." In my case 'the decorative' can perhaps be read as the pleasing mainstream media I work with. I think pop music— in its lyrics, imagery and everything else surrounding it— challenges expectations and is an important historical oral communication form—a never-ending dialogue where no one has the last word.

I see how the fields of theory, philosophy and history interpenetrate present mainstream production and I want to lift these links and show my viewers that pop amounts to more than just accidental phenomena. For instance, when Beyoncé skates into the future on the backs of alligators in the promotional material for her first solo album, she injects hope into her listeners (as her album was released just after the Hurricane Katrina disaster). Minaj does something similar.

Even though I understand you were using his words to say something else, in trying to answer your question in relation to the quote by Timothy White: I think there is an authenticity to Minaj that is far from Lennox's emotional vulnerability. Minaj is angry and calculative while at the same time having fun. In fact, she is 'cakewalking'!

TRM: How do you see her Cakewalking?

DE: A part of my research for this body of work has focused on the unraveling of her lyrics, since oftentimes her references are totally overlooked or misunderstood. I use them in different ways through paintings and engravings on the framing of some of the found historical images I showed you. In the song "Boss Ass Bitch," she raps this in a speedy delivery: "Pussy this, pussy that, pussy caking, Pussy 'bout to get a standing ovation." What is she talking about one might ask? Caking is slang for flirting, right? So in Minaj's lyrical logic, the 'pussy' is sweet on someone—flirting with someone. But music and culture critics, historians and linguists have overlooked, as far as I know, her use of 'caking' as a reference to 'cakewalking:' a surprisingly easy task. A piece of cake!

TRM: The actual physical 'cakewalk' was created under slavery in the United States, invented and performed by the ancestors of African slaves, right?

DE: Yes, it was a comical march imitating European ballroom dancing where black 'cakewalkers' made fun of the prestigious white power class of that era. Although it was exaggerated and humorous, 'cakewalkers' were always sober and precise in a social situation that created an opportunity for challenge and development. In general I am interested in Minaj's viable historic references to this dance's perceptions and possibilities as a means for political revolution.

My objective is that this rapper (often laughed at when dressing up in blonde wigs and white-Barbie accessories!) might be 'cakewalking' in front of our eyes. As I understand it when reading about it, two kinds of laughing were attested to these 19th century 'cakewalk' events: first; the slaves' laughter which was a liberating, self-reflexive laughter but also a stupefying of the ruling class; and secondly the masters' laughter, which was a racist laughter due to an interpretation of the performance as a failure to copy the original dance. So my question is, "Is Minaj laughed at because we think she fails to choose flattering makeup or haircuts?" And historically, did the white establishment not understand that they were being mocked?

TRM: They must have.

DE: Yeah. Probably. Who knows? But did the white Americans laugh simply because they thought blacks were terrible dancers? Do people laugh at Minaj now for the same reason? Also, while African-Americans— through 'cakewalking'—mocked the idea of the white supremacy, did white Americans during that era use

this African-American performance to distance themselves from European culture? If so, was it a win/win for both parties?

TRM: Perhaps it was.

DE: Minaj ends the song in question with, “Pussy ‘bout to get a standing ovation.” In stating this, I believe she contextualizes herself—and she is asking for applause for her mockery. I’ll give her that applause anytime. However, it appears that no one understands her messages. My work in general aims to analyze how Minaj has mastered complex historical survival methods and subjects and delivered them to the fast, surface-minded territory of pop. She is a hero!

DE: Now that I have read your text about Annie Lennox for the show “Legend in my living room” I found certain references you made in terms of performance, sexuality, race and ‘decoration’ quite interesting in relation to my Nicki Minaj focus. Just as Annie Lennox was worthwhile but perhaps largely overlooked (or devalued) back then as you say, in context of the contemporary culture of the 1980’s and 1990’s, I see how Minaj is completely overlooked now. Not on the pop charts and tabloids of course, but in intellectual discourses.

TRM: How so?

DE: You wrote that Lennox somewhat avoided labeling and that this might be the reason for the lack of theoretical thinking about her persona at that time. In my view Minaj does the opposite. She forces the gaze on her into a particular box. She forces it so that when we (her audience) realize what we have done (gazed upon her with a white Eurocentric male gaze) we feel really shitty. She makes us feel uncomfortable in general. She is too much.

In my work I want to pull out and highlight this dramatic ‘performance’ she is practicing— where she emphasizes and even contributes to the exploitation and view that the black female body is always and again lustful, accessible and almost a device for the white male gaze. I don’t think people see this in her work. She is always so easily categorized and always pre-judged. Nobody expects anything clever from her.

TRM: Why do you think that is?

DE: I guess people just see her as overtly sexualized. Cartoonish. Foolish.

TRM: Yes.

DE: This over-load and the foolishness is something I have tried to carry with me as I work into the studio - especially with my recent weavings. They have a lot of anti-aesthetic information in them. They are overly decorated and the colors are not in harmony. Just like a Minaj outfit! This aesthetic was something I had longed for - coming from a very different process and a show in Copenhagen called “Bow Down Bitches” in which I largely showed minimalistic paintings. It is a show I am still very proud of; large canvases with renderings of thick solid monochromatic oil color. It was more Beyoncé-classy and Beyoncé-perfect actually. Now however, I need chaos and foolishness again. I even made a painting of my own ass!

But there is a serious undertone hidden in the candy. This labeling where Minaj contributes to the exploitation of her body is part of her mission, I believe. She forces us to gaze at her black body – like a performance ambush! This way, if you want, you can argue that Minaj now does what Lennox did in the videos, putting on a ‘highly coded ornamentation’; a drag queen look to illustrate the caricatured role of women (the housewife for example as described in your text).

Even more illustrative perhaps, I think it is interesting to compare Minaj (and Beyoncé) to American performance artist Adrian Piper who, in the seventies, dressed up as a persona she called “Mythic Being”— a character who strode the streets of New York in a mustache, an Afro wig and mirrored sunglasses with a cigar in the corner of her mouth. These performances engaged with popular representations of race, gender, sexuality and class. As do Minaj and Beyoncé, Piper challenged the viewer to accept personal responsibility for xenophobia, discrimination and the conditions that allowed them to persist. Her work

forced the viewer to reconsider assumptions about the social construction of identity. Both Beyoncé and Minaj in this case are most often depicted as extremely seductive, draped in all kinds of 'ornamentation' to further illustrate the caricature of their sexualized role. In return, we are complicit in making a fetish of their black bodies.

I hope my Nicki-works transmit that notion, because I think these women ask us to reevaluate our understanding of the tradition of the gaze at the black woman's body.

TRM: I see how Beyoncé is literally spelling out her newfound feminism. She is quoting theorists and performing in front of a large sign saying "FEMINIST" for example. Do you have examples of Minaj doing the same?

DE: No not like that. But in "Lookin' Ass Nigga" from last year, Minaj is deliberately explaining this demand for a reevaluation of our understanding of the gaze, I think. Yet again, nobody listened. They just saw a sexy woman in a desert rapping something that sounded provocative. Watching the video, I too became the male gaze—lingered and enjoyed her black body. But what I understood after a while was that she was trying to subvert the male gaze. The video for the song depicts Minaj alone in a desert with a pair of male eyes staring at her body; she stares right back.

With her lyrics, she destroys the arguments men use when they attempt to get near her and exploit her. After aggressively delivering a line of arguments, eventually, the male eyes divert and wince in shock. By the end of the video, Minaj shoots the 'Looking Ass Nigga' with two large guns. I think the principal message of this single is that Minaj is tired of the assumption that she is constantly so 'sexed up' in preparation to accept all flirtation. Still she is very sexy in video. She does not surrender her sexuality.

Perhaps, in light of hip-hop's tradition, where men rap about the rape and abuse of women, Minaj cannot be soft talking and politically correct when she is criticizing the stereotyped role of the abusive man. If so and in this case, I agree with her understanding that softness is unsuitable when trying to solve the problem of inequality and misogyny. The people who need to change, I will argue, would never listen if a social worker or feminist theorist asked them to stop being offensive towards women.

TRM: But they might listen to a rapper.

DE: Yes, a rapper who speaks their language and who is simultaneously sexy. Haha. In the video she is in fact so sexualized that I suspect that she is cartooning the objectified woman and thereby decomposing men's expectations of the woman's body. But, who knows.

Through Jacques Lacan's thinking, it might be possible to hypothesize if Minaj—in this video and others—has lost a degree of autonomy upon realizing that she is an observed object. In my work I am trying to understand what she is doing with this realization. Has her understanding of 'self' changed? Minaj may not spend her entire spare time plotting this game, but I truly believe she through her acts and aesthetics paves the way for a reshaping of standards.

Not only as an artist but as a fan and a consumer of her material, I feel it is my task to unfold her work. She is often labeled as an anti-feminist trapped in a sexist patriarchal system, but I wonder if her female fan base—through the rapper's aggression—is in fact more equipped than others to demand justice? Exemplified by "Lookin' Ass Nigga," she appears to see reversion as the only solution to the problems and she uses persistence and repetition as her method. These are methods I have taken with me into the studio these past months for what is now the 'house-of-cards'-installation.

DE: In your text from the show you quoted Lennox saying that "If I make a statement about my own experience and it ends up being symbolic of other women, that's coincidental. It may have a place in the grander scheme of things, but I don't want to start being a spokesperson. That's too much of a responsibility."

TRM: Yes.

DE: I am quite sure Minaj is trying to be a spokesperson for black woman in America and that she is in fact deliberately reforming the past's slave narratives in her work. Since the slave experience is a defining

component in American history, it proves to be a significant trope in African American music as well. I think she (as well as Beyoncé in particular) pushes for a revision of the past's perception of the black body and the slave experience. Both are, through their lyrics and visuals, creating alternative histories based on subjective, fantastic and often non-realistic representations of the black woman and slavery. In this way they negotiate history and reform future views on history, right? I hope that I, in this body of work, will highlight and historically contextualize for the viewer (or fan of Minaj) how the rapper challenges these traditional conceptions of history, identity and aesthetic form. I hope to be able to make accessible her political agency, which harks back to pictures of stereotyped black women both during and following colonial history, and unfold how she re-invests in and re-forms the genre.

While she is super-labeled and extremely stereotyped, it is my opinion that she is at the same time mocking, cakewalking and under the surface rejecting mainstream media's traditional historiography and representation of black women.

To my ears many writers and academics have a sound in their arguments that make us – the third wavers - hear our mothers. Annie Lennox is one of those voices, sadly. I believe this is exactly where second and third wave feminism intersect. A very proper and very white middle class of second-wavers form the base of arguments addressing and victimizing younger performers—demanding from them a level of respectability so as to not let themselves be objectified. Lennox does that on Facebook and in open letters to her young colleagues. Through my work I seek to understand this demand placed upon women pop-stars (African Americans in particular this time) to perform the role of 'the survivor.'

TRM: You see a gap between the academic feminist theory you read and contemporary mainstream pop, right?

DE: Yes. There is a large gap and a substantial lack of recognition between second wave feminism (or academic feminism in general perhaps) and the feministic efforts of contemporary mainstream pop stars. I am convinced that creating a bridge between these two spheres will further progress the fight for equality. This would perhaps unite all feminists too! Wouldn't that be great! True sisterhood!

In order to convey a deeper understanding of feminist methods *outside* of academia, my work goes through cross-historical explorations but is always rooted in the contemporary mainstream and not in feminist theory. In short, my overall project at the moment is to investigate the relationship between the gendered body and the public's quest for the black woman who 'overcomes' and 'survives'.

TRM: So Minaj is a feminist in your eyes.

DE: Yes. She possesses a concealed and outlandish but deliberately practical model for the implementation of feminism. By unlocking how Minaj is processing and deconstructing the ways in which black women have historically had their sexuality displayed, I hope to be able to expand the public's limited comprehension of her. By developing a new understanding of how she works with the traumatic history of America and by searching for new shifts in pop cultural views on gender and sexuality, my goal is to challenge academic feminism and through my art practice create a new approach to this survivor narrative—one that she is constantly asked to play out (by other feminists).

Minaj represents a branch of feminism that has never been really accepted by academic feminism: 'the go-getter feminism'. She also appeals to a transnational 'survivor-inspired' womanhood that is unfixed to a black experience—even though she has roots within the African American context. I am especially interested in discovering how Scandinavian pop consumers experience this relationship since the specific history does not directly belong to us.

Fundamentally I guess my work is asking: Are the key revolutionary feminist acts that we have yearned for (which would dismantle society's patriarchal structures) in fact hidden within today's blazing pop culture? Furthermore, how can we access these tools and implement them in politics so as to bridge the gap between academia and pop? This has become the main focus, my main project and the inspiration for this new body of work.

TRM: Recently the art critic Barry Schwabsky has discussed the ways in which painting itself has become

a “project” rather than an activity that takes place from painting to painting. Such projects don’t require that painting itself be expanded, deconstructed, or so on—take, for example, the ongoing project of Luc Tuymans, whose work, I imagine, has been important to you. How does your work relate to this notion?

DE: I always work through a system of rules or thematics, so in that way the different bodies of works that I have made are ‘projects’, I guess. However, when working in the studio the methods are completely empirical and practical. I will never force work into a framing I have chosen before hand as my ‘project’. Therefore painting for me is in fact an activity that takes place from painting to painting. Still I cannot deny that there might be an overall ‘project’ collecting the threads for daily painting too.

Let me give you an example. Based on the ideas revolving around Minaj, I wanted to sift through an additional toolbox to connect my interests with my artistic production. Inspired by Walter Benjamin’s 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” I pre-formulated a working mode that I call ‘repetitious painting’. His essay theorized revolutionary demands in the politics of art; he argued that in the absence of any traditional or ritualistic value, art in the age of mechanical reproduction would inherently be based on the practice of politics.

In today’s world brimming with images, the practice of painting is—in my opinion—the only effective way to make any image truly visible. I therefore devoted a long period of time to painting the same portrait of Minaj. Now it is the paintings that form the ‘house of cards’-installation, but that I hadn’t planned before hand. However, I first chose an image that did not hold my interest for long, but I knew the problem was rooted in my pictorial choice and not in my method. So in this case I defended the pre-formulated ‘project’ and gave up a lot of paintings temporarily.

After trial and error, I found the ‘right’ image to paint—one which provided me with new information every day (the one where Minaj is sort of holding and presenting her ass to the viewer). This image holds ideas of the rapper’s agency, as well as her sexuality, and plays with the stereotypical view of the black woman’s body. I liked it. I wasn’t bored.

TRM: So this is how you are fusing your ideas with your studio work and concretely tapping into Minaj’s reality?

DE: Yes, my objective is to assist the rapper in her mission of spelling out, enhancing, superimposing, and perhaps even discharging the loaded image of the black woman’s body (her ass, in this case). Through a new guardianship, via the act of painterly repetition, I re-used her method of challenging racial stereotypes. Furthermore, on a practical level, I am interested in exploring if and how selection and repetition of an image can stimulate concentration and even change the initial meaning of an image. I have always indulged in a multitude of images in my work, so this new way of approaching painting was an important step for me. Less stressful!

Even though the studio task may seem monotonous to others, I wake up every morning eager to resume studio work. I unleash new knowledge from it daily. By not searching for, nor working with other input, I am experiencing that it is possible to create a poetic alliance with the image. I embrace this position from a traditionalist defense of the unique ‘now-ness’ of a painting in process— the activity of working from ‘painting to painting’, if you prefer.

TRM: And how does Benjamin fit in to this?

DE: I am interested in Benjamin because he discusses authenticity as it applies to reproduction. But in contrast to his ideas, I move from the mediated picture towards painting and while my strengths do not lie in any magical uniqueness of painterly manifestation, this particular work is an attempt to confront the tension between changeability and a re-inscription of a theme into the medium of its dissipation: repetition.

So, when it is suggested that ‘painting projects’ don’t require that a painting be expanded, deconstructed, and so on, I am not sure that applies to me. For me, the ‘project’ is merely the frame. This frame itself can be expanded and deconstructed of course, and all fragments within this frame are open too.

For the particular process ‘repetitious painting’, the steps in my studio allowed and even welcomed

modifications, flaws, displacements and new rules. In this way I explored how subtle changes in posture or gesture can create radical shifts in the atmosphere of the painting.

TRM: How do you guarantee that there is variety in and between the paintings?

DE: I used classical painterly implementations to produce the different pictorial solutions: I paint upside-down, use a monochrome palette, invert colors, invert subject matter or gaze at the original Minaj picture through a mirror while painting. In doing this, details differ from painting to painting and my main anticipation here was to discover new components and sensitivities in Minaj's picture. As well as exploring elements of her imagery, I explored my own work. In doing so, I also experienced shifts of my own gaze on both the image and Minaj's body.

I have a photo hanging in my studio where I myself have re-enacted Minaj's pose. It's a really sad photo. No fierceness at all! I really fall short. I took it with the Photo Booth app on my computer because I needed a better photo of Minaj's hands, which I couldn't really see in the original. Much later I felt it would make sense to accept the poor print as a piece in itself, even though it was made for a different purpose. I want to show my failure: I can never make up for my gaze of Minaj. Not even with my own ass on display. I like the sadness of that. The print looks like a sad excuse and an attempt to justify my actions. I enjoy problems like this.

In my fandom too I wonder if I can ever mirror myself in her. I clearly cannot represent her. Still, she is a large part of European culture, topping charts and filling tabloids. I used this print a lot as I painted her picture. Though really I was painting myself sometimes, you know. Still, the paintings read *as her ass*. Yes. Confusing, I know.

Not to mention, even if I had truly represented my own ass as many times as I have painted hers, I would still remain "the white person gazing at and using a black person as 'my project'." There is no way around it. It is politically incorrect. I've accepted that. The problem is the work. I cannot be afraid when the whole theme is so problematic and when Minaj herself dares to hint at the topic. Lets bring it out of its closet!

No doubt some people will claim it unwise of me to comment loosely on, for example, Baartman's extremely tragic and painful story. But I am out to draw a bigger picture of what Minaj is trying to do, and I cannot leave Baartman or Minaj's ass out of this equation. This is not something I enjoy really, but it is how the ideas developed.

TRM: Have you looked at other artists that have used repetition as a tool?

DE: Yes. Others have previously tested elements of this method so I am not claiming that I am inventing anything. Warhol used the anonymity inherent in mechanical painterly reproduction too. In my repetition, I aim however to dissolve sameness and make way for difference. Therefore, my approach corresponds more perhaps to the ways of the Swedish artist Cecilia Edefalk's repetitious painting series "Another Movement."¹

As I changed this mainstream photograph in detail through the act of painting, small shifts in tone and tiny variations in color and shape occurred. I also ordered a painting by Jianyin Liu at Amazing Custom Art (an affiliate of Paint It For Me Inc.) in China. I am looking forward to knowing what his eyes are seeing and how he interprets the image. He paints very photo-realistically. I hope the interrelated paintings will silently communicate with one another in the 'house of cards'-installation— and with the viewer as listener.

TRM: Given that you are actively incorporating photography, video, and installation (as well as a particular type of readymade with the provocative 1920s mosaic) into your work, do you see yourself as a painter or an artist who uses painting as a device? (I'm also thinking here about Howard Halle's claim, in a review of an Andreas Gursky exhibition, that "'Painting' is a philosophical enterprise that doesn't always involve paint. Above all, it's a way of organizing the world that represents neither truth nor fiction exclusively but rather a little of both.")

¹ Cecilia Edefalk's painting series "Another Movement" was shown at Sten Eriksson Gallery in Stockholm, Sweden in 1990.

DE: Normally I prefer painting and this time I am adding a few other methods as I have shown you. But who knows, perhaps I am going in that direction? Perhaps I don't need paint!? For this particular body of work I have used painting only when it made sense, and not as a standard solution. Painting worked for some ideas— but not all. The 1920's mosaic for example will just remain a ready-made, but it became an idea-starter for me and still functions as a 'work' I believe, whoever made it. It is a strange little picture of a dressed white woman who is standing gazing at a naked black woman who is seemingly performing somehow. It is titled "Two women on a beach."

Firstly, I thought this picture on some level summed up my relationship with Nicki Minaj, as well as it would problematize the entire idea of the show. I have kept it for a while and I am wondering how Minaj would respond to such an image. How does she feel the white middle-class gazes on her naked black skin? Does she really never feel exploited? Or is she just in it for the money?

Well, much like the black woman in the pictures, Minaj is strongly waving her hand, being in charge—facing the white woman who touches herself while gazing at the black body (?!). What is going on here? I mean here, in the picture, but in Minaj's world too.

When I saw the still from a video of Cassie and Minaj however, I stopped asking such un-dimensional questions. This topic is not black and white (pun intended). Yes, history puts the naked black woman in front of clothed white folk who enjoy themselves. Ok. We know that. No point in repeating this. But times might finally be changing. In the pink video-still Nicki Minaj is "going down" on her colleague Cassie who holds up her arm – not as if she is dancing – but holding up her first. And roaring. I made a little painting of that video-still.

I cannot explain the connection, but the visual similarities of the images as well as the layers of social agency, racial stereotypes, power structures and playfulness keeps these two images somehow in sync, strangely. Whereas the white woman exists within the borders of the mosaic, the white woman is (or I am) very much outside of the frame on the latter. Still, I am directly approached by Minaj and Cassie. They perform for my gaze still, but not as subordinates, because, unlike other rap music videos, the black bodies of Minaj's videos are not props but equals. The rapper herself is as naked, sexy, and black as her dancers, like in "Anaconda" or "Beez in The Trap," or in this case as naked as her colleague, Cassie. She often wears the same outfit as the other women next to her. I am interested in these situations where Minaj subverts the male gaze, not by taking the place of a man, but by engaging in and enjoying, alongside the 'other' women, their own and each other's sexuality.

Normally in rap videos the black woman's sexuality is exploited for the satisfaction of a third party... Nelly's "Tip Drill" from 2003 is probably the best example. Black women's bodies have always been at the centre of sexual abuse, so for Minaj to illustrate an alternative is an important historical event and not only superficiality, I believe.

My white gaze is upon African-American women now and I am aware that I am "exotifying" and "othering" them...but I am nonetheless still gazing. Active "othering" and the moral problem associated with it is of course a concern in my work in general, but I wonder if it is in fact a persistent and poignant human experience too— this sensation of longing, I mean. I sort of test the mainstream "exotification" of Minaj (and women like her) to see if this "exotification" represents an unspoken (and truly embarrassing) yet restless conviction that something is missing from our lives—something that these women can perhaps provide?

Using my own gaze as a focus I try to know more about this longing by looking at the (European) consumerism of African-American pop and in this case of Minaj – since she, in particular, is asking for it. No one can argue against that! But to answer you: No I probably do not need to paint to do that. I could just collect old pictures and music videos, I suppose.

Still I really believe painting is a very useful device sometimes, as you write. Nevertheless, it's still 'a device,' a device for gazing. Hmmm. Scary. Although finding, contextualizing and freely appropriating material from different poles has been my approach for 'the Nicki-works', and finding a method for the communication of an idea is actually very much like searching for a device that can do the job.

TRM: Is it worth at all discussing the idea of 'atemporality' as it has been introduced (via William Gibson)

in the current "Forever Now" exhibition at MoMA? I'm not sure it is the right word, but I do think there is something going on in a lot of current work in terms of presenting histories (and all of their complexities) simultaneously.

DE: I don't know about placing myself into a group of artist working in a certain way— and I don't mind either. I think less about contemporary art and the boxing up of artists, but you might be right about the word 'atemporality' and the presenting of histories; since as a white middle class pop consumer, I find it essential to recall the suppressed histories that lie under the surface of the African-American pop-culture that I consume. I find it important because I want to unlock methods for the implementation of a feminist vision for myself as well as for anyone else listening. Perhaps contemporary art fans do not care about this. I don't know. But I truly want us to move on with equality and fix all the problems— fast as hell.

And while consuming this neoliberal commercialized sex-positive pop-culture, I want to question it so as to determine who is asking for it. Am I asking for it? Women are habitually held in contempt and treated as objects by both the media as well as in real life around the world. Is it then acceptable to indulge in this material as playful entertainment? That is what concerns me. Not art really.

In an attempt to answer your question however, I have observed the fictional narratives of my protagonists Minaj, Rihanna and Beyoncé over a longer period of time to see if a feminist political fiction stands. If so, what is this feminism's function and possible embodiment and implementation into action in real life?

I find it extremely necessary to take pop-feminism's fictional universe in earnest and treat it as an object of intellectual curiosity. Sometimes I use painting to dig deeper and sometimes I find other means, but my motivation stems from an urge to find out if it is possible to embody, reflect and comment on contemporary culture as *it currently occurs*, versus looking at it in retrospect as history. This very moment will be history too at some point but I find it interesting to try to examine it while it is in motion.

TRM: So the idea of presenting different histories simultaneously must apply to you somehow, right?

DE: Yes, you could say so, since I aim to force out the historical representations of the black woman whom I believe Minaj to be interested in us knowing about. Within this complex system of appropriation I believe Minaj's entire persona can be understood. In my work I link her acts to those of Josephine Baker, who in the 1920's strutted onto the Parisian stages with a comical yet sensual appeal. Like Baker, Minaj seizes the Eurocentric West; almost a hundred years ago, Baker wore as sexually suggestive outfits as Minaj does today.

Baker's humble beginnings made her success story fairytale-like; her animated and self-fetishizing way of performing a constructed African savage woman allowed her access into the white establishment. Minaj comes from a similar background; her implementation into the Western mainstream mimics Baker's agenda in many ways.

In the video for "Anaconda," Minaj even seems to reenact one of Baker's signature roles— that of the caricatured wild African woman. In the video, Minaj too channels comic book superhero Wonder Woman who belongs to the all-female jungle warrior tribe: the Amazons. Here Minaj portrays herself as a fierce, sexy and exotic warrior princess surrounded by strong women and jungle steam. In Anaconda, as in other videos and photos, the rapper portrays herself with her ass as her main accessory. The Anaconda-scenery is so similar to that of Josephine Baker's "La Revue Nègre" (1925) in Paris that I have made use of in several other related works. To illustrate an ongoing American "othering," "exoticization," and racism towards black people, I believe Minaj has embodied Baker in many ways.

TRM: How do you plan to use the old photographs of freak show attraction Sarah Baartman—"the Hottentot Venus"² you showed me before.

DE: As with my white gaze on black bodies, it is certainly a historical complexity when some of Minaj's

² Sarah "Saartjie" Baartman (born at some point before 1790 and died in 1815) was the most famous of at least two Khoikhoi women who were exhibited as freak show attractions in 19th-century Europe under the name Hottentot Venus. The Hottentot was the then-current name for the Khoi people, while "Venus" is a reference to the Roman goddess of love.

pictures seem to resample old photographs Sarah Baartman. I find that strange and intriguing and super politically incorrect of course, especially for me to highlight. I mean, it is not my body that is stereotyped. I represent the gaze here too. But there is a world of difference between Minaj and Baartman as well. The latter being completely without any power over her body, but the tragic and sad history of Baartman still applies to certain stereotyping of today, and Minaj tries to reclaim and discharge these images.

The pictures I bought on auction will be framed as found objects. In the framing of the glass I will engrave some of Minaj's lyrics... I still wonder if Minaj taps into issues of exploitation, colonialism, sexuality, race and class in order to discuss the desensitized theme—or simply just to stun us all. Like Baartman, Minaj was not born with an 'average' European body; so my initial question was "why does she emphasize and even contribute to the exploitation and view that the black female body is lustful, accessible and almost a device for the white male gaze?"

TRM: Did you find out then?

DE: Hmm. As I tested with 'repetitious painting' as my method, Minaj seems to reclaim certain images of womanhood. She reprocesses and challenges racial-stereotyping. She and I want to bring these images back into people's minds. We should stop overlooking them if we are to move on.

I am interested in knowing if Minaj's mission can be read as an attempt to discharge these images so that they can no longer be used as tools for the abuse of power—similar to how the offensive word 'nigga' has been reclaimed and converted into a friendly term amongst African-Americans. In my work, I have looked for answers to these dilemmas in Minaj's material and linked her to the historical material of the 'cakewalkers,' Josephine Baker, Princess Jezebel, the Venus Hottentot and black women's hip-hop feminism. Yet I am not sure I have an answer. Again, this is not at all black and white. It is a tangled issue.

TRM: Have you seen any clips of Katy Perry's half-time show from the most recent Super Bowl in the United States? If so do you have any thoughts on the triumphant return of Missy Elliott? There has been a lot of interesting conversation about it over here! (And, of course, I'd love to know what Nicky Minaj thought!)

DE: Oh I haven't yet! Tell me about the gossip!