

July 8, 2024
By Layla McMurtrie

LaKela Brown Explores Black identity in MOCAD homecoming show



From Scratch: Seeding Adornment is on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD) through Oct. 4.

Food and fashion are two of the most significant markers of culture.

LaKela Brown, an artist born and raised in Detroit and now residing in Brooklyn, New York, examines these subjects in her new show *From Scratch: Seeding Adornment*. Displayed at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD) through Oct. 4, it's Brown's first hometown show and first solo museum exhibition.

The show underscores Black cultural iconography through sculptural reliefs and consists of two galleries: an ethnobotany room and an adornment room.

Crops like collard greens, okra, and corn, plus cuisine such as pigs feet and chicken wings, are rendered into white plaster bouquet-like sculptures to honor foods that form the foundation of Black American culinary traditions. Accessories like rope chains, door-knocker earrings, pearls, Nefrititi pendants, and grills reminisce on '90s Black American fashion.

Brown describes the items in the show as "entry points into translating culture visually." These items are repeated again and again in unique ways, demonstrating the power of repetition.

"When I think about how I grew up, where I grew up, in the '80s and '90s in Detroit in a Black American family, these are objects that are important to me," Brown says. "I grew up watching people adorn themselves in very specific ways."

The journey all started with the door-knocker earring, what the artist calls "the main and sort of foundational object" that paved the path to creating the show.

"The door-knocker earring is an artifact that came along with this new cultural art form and it is, to me, like sort of representative of that new art form, which of course I'm talking about is hip-hop," Brown says. "This

object can indicate a person, a particular kind of person, who maybe grew up in a particular kind of area in a particular era and appreciates hip-hop and or R&B and is femme-identified and almost certainly Black or brown.”

Uniquely, just one piece in the show ties together both themes, displaying pearls as well as a skirt made of bananas in the adornment room, as an ode to the dancer and singer Josephine Baker. For Black families across the nation and even the world, food is just as indicative of culture as fashion. Brown’s first introductions to culinary tradition happened in Detroit, and the city has allowed her to showcase this in her work.

“Both of my grandfathers retired from the auto industry and we were able to live this kind of life that is not unique in Detroit,” she says. “Lots of people’s grandparents worked in the auto industry. I think that allowed the city to flourish at a time, and then people began to be able to think about more intellectual pursuits like art and stuff ... I was always into art and cared about it, but I think the sort of hustle of Detroit allowed people to have practices and influence people like me.”

She adds, “When I was little, I thought that my family invented collard greens and cornbread, and then I went out into my larger community. It’s one of the ways that I learned about culture.”

In the ethnobotany room, which examines how plants become culturally significant, one outlier is a cast of Brown’s grandmother’s hands.

“That’s there because she is our family’s cook and she very much formed my palate, like the first time I ever had collard greens she must have cooked them, but also she was a professional cook for almost 40 years,” Brown says. “Even though this is not a figurative show and not generally using body parts, her hands are in here because it just feels necessary to pay tribute to her.”

Through the show, Brown hopes to bring more representation and relatability to the fine art world, which she says is “not known for its inclusivity.”

“I went to art school and I was studying a very specific Western history, and as a little Black girl from Detroit, I had to figure out how and where I fit into that,” Brown says. “I think a lot of marginalized people end up sort of exploring that in their art because it’s not so reflected ... My sort of idea was that if I can make work that my grandmother could walk into a gallery, and especially a museum gallery, and see objects that she relates to, then she could feel welcome. She has a very specific relationship with these objects, especially the culinary plants, meat scraps, and things like that. So, that’s the main thing, is for people who relate to these objects to see themselves reflected in an institutional space. And I know other artists are working on that project as well because it seems like an obvious need.”

Having these galleries at MOCAD is truly a full-circle moment for Brown, as she was present during the museum’s inaugural exhibition while she was a student at the College for Creative Studies.

“I remember when MOCAD started and they were talking about the first show and Nari Ward was here working and he had some art students over to help them build a Japanese tea house. I was one of those students,” Brown says. “I was here for the beginning of MOCAD as a little art baby and it really feels like a homecoming to have the privilege to show here.”

Ahead of the exhibition opening, Brown worked with MOCAD for 10 days to set up the space, a collaborative experience she describes as “wonderful,” and “excellent.” Now, Brown hopes that when people visit her show, they feel just as welcome as she did.

“I hope people come, and I’m thinking specifically of my community, but I’m thinking of everybody, I’m hoping that we can drop some of the elitism,” Brown says. “I just really hope that people come in, they feel welcomed, and I hope they feel celebrated. I hope that they just feel comfortable and that they can spend some time with the work ... I put all my blood, sweat, and tears and my love in this work and I hope it comes through in a genuine way.”

From now through Oct. 4, the space will host public programs including an artist talk, an exclusive screening of the documentary film *Grown in Detroit*, and a seed preservation workshop organized in partnership with Keep Growing Detroit.

Dates for summer programming are not yet available, but updates and more information can be found at moca-detroit.org.