A conversation with Leslie King-Hammond

BY MEREDITH TROMBLE

As a young woman, Dr. Leslie King-Hammond was discouraged from pursuing a career in art by family and friends who thought art was not a viable profession for an African American. She says, "Maybe that's why I became what I am today. Because I got tired of everybody telling me what I could not do."

Today she is dean of the graduate school at the Maryland Institute of College of Art, where she was instrumental in increasing the enrollment of students of color to 25 percent of the student body. While serving as dean, she has continued to teach, write and curate. Her publications include *Celebrations: Myth and Ritual in African American Art*, *Art as a Verb* and *Black Printmakers and the WPA*.

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She was in San Francisco as the keynote speaker at *Expanding American Art History to Reflect Multiethnic Diversity*.

Artweek *What changes in the presentation of art history would you like to see come out of this conference?*

Leslie King-Hammond We need to get into the language and definitions that come from the authentic groups. It's incumbent on us, the so-called minority, the ethnic faction, to determine the correct path of action towards the resolution of how we're going to coexist.

In the art field there is no language to describe what African Americans do. There is nothing for us but the stereotypical language and terms that come with admiration of what we are in the imagination of mainstream dominant society. I still have colleagues who think it's cool to have intellectual discussions about the word 'primitive.' That's just a step above savage. But they think that's an intellectual notion that should be discussed and I should have to defend it. It's ignorance. You must be very careful when you hear an authoritative voice, speaking with force and conviction and wise-sounding words, to investigate it for its substance. It's usually just a cover for ignorance and the fear that they have about talking about issues they know nothing about.

AW *In a catalog essay for a show of quilts by African American women, the author [Eli Leon] identified improvisation as a trademark of African American visual style. Would that be an example of the kind of language you would like to see used?*

LK African Americans have a distinctive language. Our survival in this country has been predicated on codified systems of communication. This codified system has a long lexicon of words, and verbs and splitting of verbs, and intonations. It's like the subtleties and nuances of Asian languages. If you make the accent the wrong way, you've said the wrong word. This subtle, sophisticated, complex system already exists. We must determine the language we feel is appropriate to go out into a so-called mainstream populace to articulate our position, our criteria, and our aesthetic beliefs.

AW *You spoke yesterday about mainstream institutions co-opting multiculturalism.*

LK In the fierce intensity and passion of our need to establish ourselves within this society as full players, we have given away an extraordinary amount of information to institutions who are looking for a new base so that they can still be viable in their own community. They have seen us as a new group that can be homogenized for the benefit of corporate private sector monies to sponsor their programs.

AW *Homogenized?*

LK All people of color get lumped. "They're disenfranchised, they're underrepresented, OK, we will fund them." But they're not dealing with the specifics of what each of those groups might require, or with what those cultural references might mean as they come into the communities to which these funding sources open the doors. All of us who are marginal are now becoming mainstream. They're trying to bring us into the center. And we're resistant about coming into the center because the center is not a place we really want to be, or have to be.

AW *By bringing you to the center, do you mean the offer of one-time opportunities like curating a show or being a visiting professor?*

LK Perfect example. Black history month. I have a friend, the visual artist Joyce Scott, who calls it black hysterical month. I'm so sick of being discovered for one month of the year. They try to kill you off, invite you to nine thousand lectures every moment of the day, and then when March hits, it's over. I live and breathe all twelve months of the year.

Leslie King-Hammond. (Photo: P. Castellanos.)

AW *Thinking back to the institutions, it seems that what constitutes a success for multiculturalism has been redefined as a number of times. What is your vision of a success for a multicultural outreach program?*

LK Raising the level of expectations. I'm the project director for the Ford/Philip Morris scholarships for artists of color. Since 1985 we've had 140 people come through this project. This is a tremendous success if you believe that the primary objective of the scholarship has been to find and encourage students of color to come back to school and get their MFA degrees. The next phase would be to aid and abet these individuals to establish themselves as viable parts of the community.

AW *You're currently working on a major publication,* We Wear the Mask: the Ethos and Spirituality in African American Art, 1750 to Present. *How will this history reflect the ideas we've been discussing?*

LK I'm going to take our language and put it down on paper and put a few images with it. You will have to learn how to deal with my split verbs. Because there is no other way to describe certain kinds of images and experiences. There is no other way to explain certain modalities of black style and black aesthetics.

I'm also doing the introduction for a book called *Gumbo Ya Ya*, a compilation of bio-bibliographies of contemporary African American women artists written in our style, very nontraditional. 'Gumbo ya ya' is a term that originates out of New Orleans, referring to African American women who come together, say at a family gathering, and they all talk at once. Gumbo ya ya means everyone talking at once.

Gumbo ya ya is the way that we communicate. And gumbo ya ya has everything to do with the improvisation in the quilts. How do you get all these disharmonious elements to become harmonious in one surface, when you have to pull together what appear to be disjointed, unconnected elements and make it into one functioning thought? Here you have the primary example of how America is going to have to end up. It's going to look like a very great wondrous improvisational quilt. An extraordinary design. But it's very frightening because it means no one person or no one element has singular control.

Some of us, in our various circles of color, speak in a circumlocutive manner. We don't speak directly to the point. We speak around it, using the circle, using the gumbo ya ya. In that format, you have a lot of information going back and forth. You go around the problem. While you are trying to figure out the moral objective of the story, you must also struggle with how to do it yourself. You will not be told the answer. That's how I teach. I won't tell you the problem, I won't tell you how to solve it. I remember one student telling me, years after he studied with me, "You teach people to see around the edges, to see all the things that we are conditioned not to see so it's not just looking at the center. Then you really get the sense of the whole." Our society is so structured by who's in the center, who's the leader, who's on top. We pay so little attention to all the other energy and things that are happening around us that we miss the point.

AW *Circumlocution sounds good, but in my own experience, it seems like things often get bogged down. The linear approach has certain advantages.*

LK I'm not saying throw out linearity. I'm just saying that for too long linearity has been the only voice, the only structure. Because it has been the only way, just like anything else it burns itself out. In order to find out how linearity can best work for us we have to give it a rest. Let a cyclic approach, let a rhythmic approach, let an unsyncopated approach come in and let's see what happens to the system. ▒

Meredith Tromble is a painter who also does art commentary for KQED-FM.

A conversation with Amalia Mesa-Bains

BY MEREDITH TROMBLE

In order to make her life as a Chicana artist, Amalia Mesa-Bains found that she had to create the art, start a place to hang it, devise a critical theory to explain it, and finally teach people about it. She pursued all these activities with an intelligence and passion that gained her the coveted recognition of a MacArthur Foundation fellowship in 1992. She is currently at work on a book about Chicana artists.

Artweek *In his remarks opening the conference, Carlos Villa asked artists to consider how they want to be validated. You recently received the validation of the MacArthur fellowship. How would you answer Villa's question?*

Amalia Mesa-Bains
It's about young people. Teaching is wonderful, because you see yourself in their faces. You remember when you were in school and nobody reached out to you, nobody understood. We have to identify young leadership, young people of color who are willing to become what we became. You reach a state in your life where you're surviving OK, you have the economics and you have some discourse. But satisfying yourself is not enough. You have to have somebody else there with you, and you have to have young people.

What the MacArthur has done for my community is almost as important to me as what it's going to do for me personally. People are so happy that the award came for work about our community. The MacArthur has been very validating of the way of life of the Latino and Chicano community of cultural workers.

AW *You described yourself as a 'metiche.' What does that mean?*
AM It's like a meddlesome person.

AW *It has a bad connotation?*
AM Yes, but that's the real Chicano thing to do, to take something that has a bad connotation and make it good. The word 'Chicano' had a negative connotation and we made it positive. The best sense of 'metiche' is to get involved, not to let things slip past you.

AW *Do you find that the time you devote to social issues conflicts with your artistic work? Or are they the same?*
AM They were the same for a long, long time. The things I study and write about also became the vocabulary and vernacular of my own work. Where I've felt a conflict was when I was sick—I have a pulmonary condition that has affected my heart. The time that I described in my talk today, storming the barricades, trying to gain legitimacy and equity, was a time of putting myself in front of people who detest the things I represent. On a personal level, they may find you charming and intelligent but on a deep psychological level they are extremely hostile. No amount of credentials could make these people believe that what I said was real because it questioned the very nature of their life work. We forced small incremental changes but at great, great cost to ourselves. I don't know a single person who does what I do who is not in some state of ill health because it is so taxing. And it took so long and it didn't really mean anything. No major institution did anything more than an occasional cosmetic touring exhibition. But there were major funding shifts toward dominant institutions that were willing to take on 'multicultural issues.' That's what we learned. We were much too sincere for our own good.


Amalia Mesa-Bains. (Photo: P. Castellanos.)

But that part is over now. I wouldn't do it again. I am engaged again with the same issues I started out with, about my community and creating grass roots structures—structures that are engaged in a reality that you can reach out and touch, instead of trying to change the Western world.

Chicano art has confounded the canon because it comes from a community that moves from undocumented status to higher education in one generation. Experiences that took several generations for other communities are collapsed into one lifetime. That layering produces work that is uncategorizable. And I think that's good. The idea that you can have contradiction and discomfort and tension within a work of art the way that people do within their minds is important.

AW *One of the concepts that you were struggling to change was the prevalent understanding of 'quality.' A famous quote of yours is that 'Quality is a euphemism for the familiar.'*
AM I said that at a talk to the National Council of the Association of American Museum Directors—lovely group—

AW *I wish I could put the ironic tone of your voice on the page ...*
AM Horrible experience. It makes me kind of chilly to think of it. I was trying to get them to see that they had mono-dimensional aesthetic experiences. They simply were not familiar with artworks from other areas. That was why they couldn't judge it. It wasn't that it wasn't judgeable. There are are levels of quality for almost anything that you look at. That was something I wanted to get at in the talk, too. Just because we had to fight for so long against the notion of quality in the Western dominated structure, that doesn't mean that we shouldn't have preferences and make judgments when we look at our own production.

AW *Can you articulate your personal standards of quality, for example the preferences that determine which artists you will include in your book?*
AM I look for a balance between sincerity and complexity. I like things that have a ceremonial nature, that imply an experience. It's important to be able to master your materials. I'm drawn to narrative work; as Chicanos we come from a strong storytelling background. And I look for a critical viewpoint. A work of art should help people learn something that would make their life somehow more understandable.

AW *What does the word 'sincerity' mean to you in this context?*
AM It's a very ancient concept. In the Tolteca language, they spoke of the artist having heart, meaning that they do things with conviction. Chicano art is based on respecting your family and your community. That doesn't mean you don't get to question or provoke or even satirize them every once in a while, but we love them. And I don't see a lot of love and passion in the work that I see in museums. I see a lot of people who think that love and passion are sort of corny, something that happens to people who just aren't intelligent enough to survive any other way. The early aesthetics studies were really about passion and illumination, about rendering the meaning of the soul. That's what people make art about. To trivialize that is to avoid the ultimate challenge, which is to be very real and believing person.

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AW *In defining a Chicano aesthetic you've used several terms that I'm not familiar with, such as 'rasquachismo.'*
AM *Rasquachismo* is a stance or pose, a way to survive and face the world. It's a kind of tattered finery. Your zoot suit may be a little shiny and torn but it doesn't matter because you have style. That is really Chicano, to put forward your body and person as a style ... very black also. *Rasquachismo* is doing that with bravado. Artists have appropriated the term to mean making things out of discards, like hubcaps or wine bottles.

When people talked about *rasquachismo* it seemed to me that it always referred to men. The cholo style in clothes, the car—*rasquachismo* seemed very male. I think women have it, too, but we do it differently. I developed the word 'domesticana' in response to the work of Patssi Valdez. Patssi's installations were made out of party discards. They looked like a party store that exploded. She used elements like lipsticks and mirrors, things that had a sad vanity. I saw something very domestic or feminine, but with an extremely uncomfortable, dark edge. I realized that *domesticana* was our subversive gesture, our way of loving and hating the very same thing. Devotion and irony co-exist. We put great stock in our upbringing and the ways our mothers fixed things, then we grow up and recognize that inherent in that is also a series of very serious restrictions. ▒


Amalia Mesa-Bains, detail of *Boarders*, 1990, mixed-media installation, 15' x 20' x 5'.

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