



Arts & Entertainment

# At the Nasher, Jer'Lisa Devezin Reimagines the Black Body

The New Orleans-raised, Dallas-based artist talks about the reclamation of space for Black bodies and the rejection of White beauty standards through Black hair.

By Taylor Crumpton | June 17, 2021 | 11:08 am



Courtesy of Kevin Todora



Jer'Lisa Devezin embodies the tenets of Afrofuturism. Rooted in the simplistic yet powerful belief that Black people exist in the future, the ideology uses technology to reimagine and reconstruct Black futures.

In essence, the nation's first piece of technology was the Black body. For generations, Black bodies were experimented, harvested, and used to build up the material wealth of the union. What does it mean for a Southern Black Queer women to reclaim that technology? What does it mean for that reclamation to stand in conflict with societal standards of beauty? Most

importantly, what does it mean for a Black patron to see an ode to Black hair and beauty at the Nasher Sculpture Center?

“Beaucoup Shive / Madam C.J. Walker ain’t got nothin’ on me” is the latest exhibition to be featured as part of the Nasher Public series, the sculpture center’s initiative with local artists that is open to the public. The sculpture, composed of synthetic and human hair, resides outside of the Nasher’s foyer, where the gift shop once was. The exhibit closes on June 20 preceded by a public performance by Jer’Lisa Devezin at noon on Juneteenth.

Devezin’s sculpture contains a multitude of experiences for patrons who grew up in the communal spaces of Black barber shops and hair salons. The sculpture’s performance element features audio recordings of *Baps*, Barber Shop, and *School Daze*, alongside the smells of burnt hair and oil sheen. Each aspect works in unison to reconstruct a trip to a neighborhood Black hair salon or barber shop.

In Texas, race-based hair discrimination is not against the law; a bill to make it illegal in schools and workplaces died in committee as the Legislative session ended last month. As such, “Beaucoup Shive / Madam C.J. Walker ain’t got nothin’ on me” carries a cultural, societal, and political weight.

In her work, in “Refusing to Reconcile, Part 2,” Professor Amaryah Share says, “to be black and to be made black is to take seriously the work of refusal, which is an antagonism, a thorn in the side of the sovereignty of whiteness.” The Black lesbian feminist theologian describes “blackness as a radical refusal of the movement of reconciliation, and thus of whiteness.”

Devezin’s public sculpture is a refusal of whiteness, and a reclamation of Blackness. It’s an acquisition of space in a city where Black history is intentionally forgotten. It’s a reminder of the Black bodies that were paved over for Central Expressway and the freedmen’s towns that were demolished across the city and left without so much as a historical marker.

Jer’Lisa Devezin spoke about her sculpture’s origins, Black hair, and Afrofuturism with FrontRow. (Portions have been edited for length and clarity.)

**In pop culture, so much Black art has been centered around hair. I understand why, hair walks into the room before we do. Historically, hair has always been used as an expression of self. I was very intrigued to read about why you decided to use hair to take up space in a predominantly White arts institution in Dallas. Since 2017, I’ve been trying to figure out how to work with hair. At one point, I had little studies of it in my studio. I really started to work with the body, specifically the Black female body, from 2017 until now. I was working in the figurative, traditional way. Thinking about all of that from 2017 until now, I wanted to make something that was representational of Black culture—not just Black women, but Black people in general, even though it centers more around Black women. I collected hair from barber shops, as well. They’re also included in that regard. I wanted to take up space, and not just be a body, or a naked body, for it to be a figurative thing.**

It's just to think about the body in another way, that you know we discard. To think about all those things, for [hair] to come off of Black bodies. And, yes to be inside this white institution where you don't normally see things like this, where you can walk up the street and see it.

I did all that to take up with space and make this big ball of hair that would be put together with all the strands of hair you would find out in the street. I added sound from nostalgic Black movies. The clips represent Black hair joy and Black trauma. It's all those layers of conversations. To have those conversations amongst ourselves about, what is good hair? What is bad hair? What does it look like for a Black body to take up space in a way where it's representational?

I was looking at your previous work, specifically the "Kiss My Ass" casting. I loved the description you wrote for it. Those previous works, tend to be very physical. In "Kiss My Ass," you see the ass. In "Stud and Fem," you see the genitalia. For this sculpture to be hair, I liked the evolution to a fluid representation of the Black body. Because so many artists focus on the ass, where sometimes I feel hair is overlooked in representation of the Black body. I'm always thinking about the body. I went from doing performances nude to not wanting to show my body because, once again, why do we always have to objectify our body when we're talking about being objectified? I didn't want to do that with this work.

I got a note on my work a while ago. It was, 'how do I know this sculpture is a Black person?' And it really stuck with me because you know, I shouldn't have to stand by this work and say it's Black. So [hair] was another way. Like you said, again, hair is often overlooked when it comes to conversations surrounding our bodies. Just the representation of it, like you know whose hair that is. So for that to be the absence, [it is] the residue of an absent Black body and to give it another life.

I think it's important, especially when we're talking about Black work, because I just see a lot of pain. Just thinking in another light of, okay how I can represent Black culture in this way?

You're speaking to someone who is an Octavia Butler stan. I have Joan Morgan in my bookcase. When I heard you talk about Black feminism, Afrofuturism, and reclamation of the Black female body, I thought about hair in relation to the Black female body. Even the absence of hair, because in our spiritual traditions, hair carries as a mysticism to it. What was the process of you obtaining hair for the sculpture? It was a lot. It was weird. Because I'm sitting here thinking, how am I going to get this hair? Because I know how we are. When I cut my locs off for the first time, I felt like I lost everything. I cut off my hair and it's a whole new thing. Then, when I grew it back, I still kept that hair. I know so many people that have their hair that they cut off and do spiritual stuff with it.

So, coming into this, I knew I had to be super intentional with this work. Even down to collecting the hair. That's why I accepted weave, but people that gave me their real hair, I said, 'listen, this is what I'm doing. I'm not doing anything weird with it.' When I did my artist talk at the Nasher, I let

people know, ‘yo, the hair I’m sweeping back into the sculpture, the hair that’s on the ground that people can step on, is not human hair.’ It didn’t feel right.

I really tried my best to be very intentional, because I know how spiritual we are with our hair. To make a sculpture by hand, where people can be in arm’s reach of it, I really tried to do my best in this iteration.

I’m watching it, because I stood in the room, mask on, glasses on, people didn’t even know I was the artist. I’ve watched Black people stand on the outskirts of the sculpture, they get close and lean in. I’ve watched White people walk in and step in the hair. Within two seconds, the guards say, ‘you’re stepping on the work.’ It’s that sense of entitlement. It’s like, how close can I get to this thing?

In one regard, the hair on the ground works. In another iteration, I’m going to put a motion sensor in there to just yell at you.

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