

Curious Artist

Featured Artist - Kareem Black - Interview



Mix one part armchair philosopher with one part self-proclaimed asshole, blend an eye for everything art with an uncanny longing for the familial things in life and you've got yourself a quasi-realistic representation of Kareem Black – an industry-savvy photographer that amounts to much more than the sum of his parts. It is likely that, were we to put the aforementioned observation into a developing tray for Black, he'd muse that we're all a bit more than what can be seen on the surface. Just because he's deep like that. And we wouldn't want him any other way.

As a seasoned player in a city known for its avant-garde creatives and struggling dreamers, Black has made a living – a nice one – balancing precariously upon the thin rope between lucrative commercial projects and personal artistic conquests. Scattered among the iconic names that have dotted his career span it is easy for the casual observer to envision the experiences behind his pictures. A quiet moment with Michael Stipe, a friendship cultivated with Venus Williams, a not-so-steamy shower scene with Kim Gordon, and a journey to Sri Lanka, all manifestations of someone who lives to not merely experience, but to truly discover.

Even with his face hidden beneath a black cloth, an eye keenly focused on his subject de jour, the man behind the lens never seems to lose sight of the things that really matter to him - things like creating and living in a reality that is distinctly his own.

So you were raised in Philly. What's up with Philadelphia pride?

There's definitely a strong Philly pride thing. Everyone kind of overlooks Philly because I think it has that "second born, second best" kind of thing going on with New York because it's like an hour and a half outside of New York. I think people from Philly kind of feel like they have to scream louder and say, "Hey, we're dope too! We have this great stuff going on."

Philly pride is intense. I mean, there are people there that don't even want to go to New York, they're mad when their friends move there...but there are a lot of good things going on there, things that people don't even know about.



So now that you live in Manhattan, do you feel like a big sell out?

No, absolutely not. New York is where I get my work done. It's my home now. I consider myself a New Yorker, but I have a fantasy of moving back to Philadelphia and having kids and a family – big front yard, big back yard – the three-story house, the kind of thing that you can't really find in New York.

I'm definitely always Philly at heart. But right now, at this stage in my life, this is where my industry is. I think New York is a natural progression from Philadelphia. But the end of the story, it's me moving back to Philly and having a life.

I read that you are really looking forward to that whole domestication thing.

I want some grandkids. Maybe get back into painting because I used to paint. That's what it's all about, right? That's how I want to spend my golden years.



What do you plan to do when you retire and you're not knee-deep in crazy artistry?

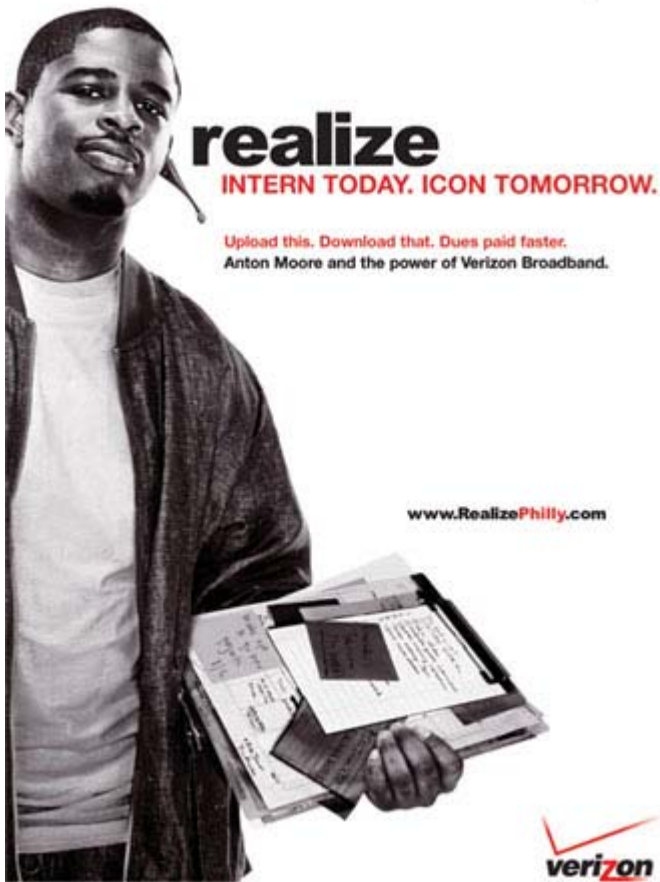
I think I'll always be knee-deep in crazy artistry. Right now I'm actually at my boy's house and he's getting ready to teach me Final Cut Pro. I think the next stage for me might be directing a little bit, so I'm trying to learn everything I can about that.

Throughout my life it's always been something – first comics, then painting, then photography – and none of these things are like a job to me, they're all fun. So even when I do retire, I'm still going to be traveling. I'm still going to be taking pictures and I'll still be painting. This is just kind of what I do. This isn't a job for me. I don't know what I'd do without doing this stuff. It's always visual and creative.

I think that the difference will be me having time to have some kind of a family and not having to worry about reputation or competition and all the stuff that comes with being a professional. All that would be gone. I just wouldn't give as much of a fuck, hopefully.

Where do you see yourself going with your interest in directing?

I'm not exactly sure. Basically, what happened was Verizon did a commercial about me that's running on the East Coast right now and it's about me and my photography. It's about how Verizon Online DSL helps me out. Literally, it's a sixty-second promo of me.



How did that happen?

It's seriously the biggest coup ever. It really is and I'm really proud of it. When I went out to L.A. to film the commercial, I was glued to the director's side. It was fascinating for me because I understood a lot of what he was doing, but a lot of what he was doing I didn't understand until I saw the final cut of the commercial. I'm just trying to understand the whole film world right now.



It interesting that you chose to study the editing process first because they say part of what makes a good director is someone who can already see the edit.

Right. When people come up to me and they're asking me about film versus digital...I think there are so many different aspects that make a dope photographer. Why not learn Photoshop? Why not go into the dark room and develop your own shit? Even though it's not done as much anymore, I think it's a really important component. I think it's important to know the things that make the final picture. I may not be in this directorial world but I want to learn Final Cut Pro and learn why shit works.



Do you consider yourself someone who goes balls to wall when you get into something?

Absolutely. I knew that something was up when I was in L.A. filming the commercial because I hadn't felt an interest like that since the first time I saw an image come up in the developer in photography class. I'm soaking this stuff up like a sponge. I'm the same with anything that I'm interested in.

Of the magazines that you've done work for, what are a couple that you are most likely to read and why?

I've always liked Trace. From a photography point of view, they've always let me do whatever the fuck I want and they're always open to abstract ideas. They're really smart because the magazine is built on this concept of transculturalism, which is kind of trying to say that we're not categorized by race or age or class, we're categorized by who listen to or what kind of life we live. Like, I'm black. I've got friends that listen to more hip-hop than me, so does that make them more black than me? Or, it's based on, "I have these likes and these dislikes and that's what I am." That whole idea is really fascinating.

I also really like what The Royal is doing right now. It's based on design. Not just New York, but an entire world of visual sub-culture. I think that they look at things in a way that's really new and smart.



Didn't they do an issue on anti-Celebrity?

They did a young Hollywood issue. It had nothing to do with celebrity. It was kind of like the industry behind the celebrities. They interviewed me because I shoot celebrities, but it was very anti-Entertainment Weekly and Star magazine and all that type of thing.

Yeah, I'd say Trace. I'd say The Royal. I think there's a lot of fucking garbage out there, Man. We live in a celebrity culture and I think that a lot of magazines cater to that. In a weird way...it's like, I shoot for those kind of magazines. But I am fascinated by that culture. I'm fascinated by why people are fascinated by celebrity culture. In a weird way, I kind of like to fuck with that. You know, I have a commercial out and I put stickers up all over New York with my name on it. I don't know if I would actually purchase a magazine about that kind of stuff, but I would read it in the supermarket line.

I think that all of us have that kind of duality about us. Like, do we like this? I can make both arguments. I live in both worlds and I think that all of us do.

Your website says you hate “fabulous types”...

I wrote that a long time ago, but I definitely still feel that way. I think that, in New York, or anywhere, I think it’s all about who’s the coolest. You know, who does the coolest shit, who drives the coolest car, who gets into the clubs for free, and all of this. The people who make that what they’re all about. Those are the people that I was referring to.

It’s kind of like, at the risk of saying something that’s been said a million times before, “Who gives a shit?” I think that the fabulous types are people that are defined by “Oh, I just hung out with insert celebrity name here.” Fuck that shit. I’m not turned on by that. I think that people who are defined by other people’s actions or by what other people think of them...it doesn’t make sense to me.

Look, I love Star Trek. I’m a big nerd. I love chess. I play almost every day. I’m a photographer, I get to travel a lot and I’m overpaid and I do what I want. For example, I just turned down an invitation to a Playboy party or something where there was a bunch of naked girls. But there was a major Star Trek event going on that night and I had to watch it.

You’ve got to prioritize, Man.

Yeah, exactly, I mean, come on. I’ll make it up at karaoke. There’ll probably be naked girls there too. At least that’s what I figure.

Check out Kareem’s favorite karaoke spot here: www.karaokekilledthecat.com

Speaking of turning things down, is there any reason you would turn down a gig?

Oh, totally. Well first of all, as a preamble, I think that the further along that a person gets in their career, the more stuff they can turn down. When I first started out, I couldn’t turn anything down. But I’m very fortunate to be in a place where if something’s not right for me...I can guarantee that there’s a photographer that is right for it that will be so much more hyped about it and you’ll get a better product.

I like shooting stuff that’s interesting to me. For instance, I’m doing a shoot on Monday with Lil’ Wayne. The premise is about how no one knows that he goes to the University of Houston. He has a tutor go for him and he actually shows up to take the test. I thought that was hilarious. So the magazine wanted to have this super hot girl as his tutor in the photo. So I’m like, “Okay, rapper, hot girl, I got it. I’ve seen it. I’ve seen it done it in a million hip-hop magazines.” In the end we got them to do something kind of original and fun. I think it’s going to be very beautiful when it comes out.

I would totally turn down something that’s trite. I don’t like that. It’s boring. Why would you do anything that’s boring? I would turn down anything that I didn’t think was interesting. Is that arrogant?



What if you travel to Star Trek conventions and chess competitions as an asshole for hire? That way, when two chess players or trekkies get into a dispute, you can do the dirty work of whoever bids the highest.

I can't really do it on demand, though. The best performances come out if you've really...okay, for instance: There's this guy that completely ripped off a picture of mine. I shot the Verizon campaign and one of the pictures was a self-portrait I took of myself with the camera. This guy completely ripped off a picture of mine and put it on his promotional piece. He didn't even take the picture. He had his assistant take the picture and put it on his promotional pieces. So (laughs)...the situation was dealt with in a way that was beautiful, really, it was poetry. That was one of those times when I was inspired to be an asshole.

You can't just leave me hanging.

Well, here's the thing. It's a small industry and he sent out his promo pieces with the picture that he copied of me on it. What happened was poetic justice. All the clients ended up calling me and saying, "Hey, there's this guy copying your image." He brought down his house of cards himself. Also, Verizon ended up suing him. Actually, that's something I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy.

I like your series with the Video Girls. How did that idea manifest itself?

It centered on the fact that everyone sees these girls this one way. They are these girls that are these icons in popular culture and nobody really knows anything about them. I wanted them as everybody sees them, in their video girl clothes, but I didn't want it to be sexy. To me, that's so much more interesting than the whole, glossy, look-how-hot-this-girl-is photo. Again, I've seen Maxim and King and Stuff. I already know that. So, I wanted to take pictures of the girls, where they lived, because your environment says a lot about you. Let's not Photoshop, let's not make you more gorgeous – I already think you're pretty. Let's not sex it up. That's what the whole series was about.

I take pictures to see how things look because I want to look at the picture afterwards and break it down. You're living life and you're living through moments. [With photos] you're actually stopping these moments. You can analyze them and say, "Oh, I didn't notice that pimple." Or, "I didn't notice that thing on the wall."

That's the video girls project, but I think that's like a lot of the stuff I do. I don't really try and make my stuff prettier than it is. I want to take a picture, hang out with it and say, "This is something that actually happened."

You've said that time weighs heavily on you. That's such a small thing to say that captures a very universal human feeling. How did you figure out how that ideal could translate into your art?

It happens in many different ways – from the most produced professional shoot ever, to me taking out my little digital camera and going out partying with friends. Either way it's a record of my life. I think it helps you learn about your reality. You're living your life and then you have these little memories that can show you that, wow, that was dope. All these moments that pass could potentially disappear.

That's kind of what photography is about for me. It's taking this and saying, "Hey, this is a document of my reality." But in a broader sense it's a document of how we live, as a culture. Not just my photos, but everyone's photos.

I feel that there's more in every photo than what's going to be on the c.d. or magazine cover. I mean, look back at Michael Jackson videos where he was holding it down with the silver glove and the white tiger cub. People thought that was cool back then and that shit would never fly now. The guy's got his drippy jerry curl and everything. That's kind of how art translates the passage of time to me. It weighs heavily on me only because I think I'm more sensitive to the passage of time than most people.

Let's live life because it's going to be over before you know it, Man. We're all going to be old and ugly.

Okay, here's a totally random "big picture" question. In five words or less: Who cares?

I care.

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