

# Defining art, value and race in creative space

## Performance examines black artists' experience

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The dynamic creation "Buy My Soul and Call It Art" engaged the Durham arts community in an essential conversation about the experiences of black artists through a series of performances the weekends of Jan. 26 and Feb. 2.

Monét Noelle Marshall, of east Durham, is the creator of this project, which she refers to as a "performance art experience." Held at the Living Arts Collective in northern Durham, the show featured a cast of 22 self-identified black and non-black artists from the Durham community and was comprised of a series of live exhibits driven by audience participation.

The immersive performance allowed the audience to explore the roles of race, gender, class, money and emotional labor not only in the context of the arts community, but in broader society. The inspiration for the piece is an accumulation of Marshall's experience as an artist and her work in racial equity.

The performance flowed as a seamless cycle with new audiences cycling through periodically. Upon check-in, each audience member was asked how much black art is worth to them and allotted a stack of play money to reflect the response which would be used to "tip" the artists throughout the performance.

A guide led the audience to the first exhibit featuring an energetic and optimistic black artist dancing in a clear box. The audience was encouraged to tip the dancer. Moments later, it became clear that he would never touch the money as white philanthropists on the other side of the box sorted through the money, complaining about the lack of funds to support their foundations. It set the stage for the



Ken Rumble, left, plays the role of a white auctioneer as A.yoni Jeffries performs as a black artist at an auction. A.yoni became involved in the project after working with Marshall at tech hub Black Space, while Rumble learned of the project from his wife. (Photo by Derrick Beasley)

series of other challenges the audience would soon face.

The performance required the audience members to bring their own experiences and to think creatively when processing and responding to the scenes. The audience was challenged to decide

between conforming to society's standards or rejecting the seemingly inescapable situation and responding in a new way.

The cast members ranged from people that Marshall had known or worked with for years to others who were friends of friends she had never met.

"When I put the cast together, I knew I would need black cast members and white cast members," said Marshall. "And I wanted to be intentional about who I brought together."

The third scene was an auction, drawing parallels between the slave market and the arts market. Ken Rumble, 44, a writer and poet from Durham's Lakewood neighborhood, performed as a white auctioneer. Anna Yoni Jeffries,

or A.yoni, 23, a singer-songwriter from Durham's West End neighborhood, played the role of a black female artist.

Dressed in only a black leotard, A.yoni stood exposed on a podium, a photograph of herself blocking her face. The audience was transformed into auction bidders as Rumble began to yell out starting bids. The audience was then left to ponder if the auction was for the photograph on face value or the artist herself, representing a deeper system at play. Rumble and A.yoni said that the scene sparked a lot of resistance: in about half of the performances, no bids were placed.

The pair developed a trusting relationship through the development of their scene and the cast quickly became another family, a new community.

"Without even really thinking about it or talking about it, we just became very conscientious stewards of each other's emotional space," said Rumble.

A major theme of the work was the intersectionality of money, power and race.

"Capitalism tells us that there is a price tag on every single thing, but that is actually a lie," said Marshall. "There are some things that are priceless. Our souls are priceless. Our art is priceless."

### A TRILOGY

"Buy My Soul and Call It Art" is the first part of a larger trilogy. The second performance, "Buy My Body and Call it a Ticket," will run on the weekends of June 8 and June 16, and the final performance, "Buy My Art and Call it Holy," will run in December.