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Brianna McCarthy, mixed media artist.

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Brianna McCarthy

The spark that is...

By Jovan Tobas
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The spark for Brianna McCarthy's first solo exhibition came, uninvited, in the mail.

"It was this pamphlet for skin lightening cream promising a beautiful new you, new hopes and new dreams for 2011," she recalls. "I thought, this is dangerous. To me it is offensive. It promotes this self-loathing that black women have."

McCarthy spent the next year coming to terms with the self-hate that swirls around the issues of skin shade and hair texture for many women. She wrote an academic paper. She scoured the Internet. She took note of the thousand ways in which young women betrayed their insecurity on social media.

"You find that there is this thing being pushed at you... this desirability for lighter skin. It's a certain kind of look or a certain level of blackness that is acceptable. You'd see a child with light skin and green eyes who is clearly black and young women would comment 'who

do I have to sleep with to get a child like that?' I knew it was there but I didn't understand how widespread it was. Once you develop sensitivity for it you see it everywhere and in everything," she says.

McCarthy had been making these mental notes all her life. There's a family story of a long-deceased matriarch who claimed that her blackness was the work of the devil. When at nine she first saw a book of illustrations by Erté she was at the same time floored by the gracefulness of his super stylised figures and disappointed that none of them looked like her. West Indian and African literature from secondary school through to university forced her to confront issues of identity head-on. She became the sort of person who eavesdropped sadly on a beautiful black schoolgirl pressing shades-too-light powder onto her skin and turning to ask her friend, 'I looking lighter, ent?'

She's always depicted women in her art. First daring women in avant garde fashion copied from her sister's (jewelry designer and model, Jeneile McCarthy) fashion magazines. Later on came a fascination with the faces of ethnic women.

"It started off as me needing to add a face to that contemporary art representation of black people," she says. "I felt there wasn't enough representation of the West Indian female." The exhibition "After Colour", however, is her first attempt at anchoring her work with a narrative. McCarthy isn't just paying lip service to the higher purpose of art: she really wants her pieces to fire a discussion about beauty standards and self love. And she's done it in a decidedly individual way.

"I wanted to redefine that old term 'coloured' to literally mean coloured. I am stripping the people in my pieces of racial markers. There's no hair texture or hair for that matter. Skin colour is done away with. I've used patterns and colours to present individuals and investigate who a person really is," she explains. In other segments of the exhibition she culls thoughts and words and images from everything from Facebook to the classifieds, to explore the value associated with various forms of beauty. McCarthy doesn't just paint or draw. In fact she describes what she does as "making things". Her work features everything from newsprint to fabric. ("I get bored easily," she says with a chuckle.)

She seems poised at the cusp of an unpredictable and challenging journey as a professional artist. Only recently, celebrated Trinidadian artist Wendell McShine invited her to contribute to a mural on

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the outer wall of the Coconut Growers Association building on the Eastern Main Road in Laventille. Painting a sprawling, stylised face on the ten foot high wall under the glare of the sun and curious commuters was a far cry from her usual process: sprawled on the floor in the quiet of her house.

Every now and then a school child sauntered by then stopped to stare and ask, "How you know how to make a face?"

It's because she's studied us for a long time.

"After Colour" comes off at the Medulla Art Gallery on 37 Fitt Street, Woodbrook from March 15 to 29. The opening reception on the 15 starts at 6.30 p.m. and there's an artist talk on the 28, also at 6.30 p.m.

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