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Family Turmoil Was The Creative Spark For A Young Artist

Women drug addicts are transformed in her owl series

Marlisa Sanders

When Jamea Richmond was about seven years old she and her older brother and his best friend were walking home from school, and passed a "beautiful abandoned" church. But that day, they saw something no child should ever see. "I remember a prostitute giving a man 'favors' on the side of the building," Edwards recalls. The other children laughed and, trying to fit in, she laughed too. "It was maybe two years ago I registered what we were laughing at," says Edwards.



[\(Enlarge Image\)](#)

There were many times when Richmond thought that she might never escape the ghetto. But drawing from traumatic aspects of her experience was part of her escape and is distinguishing her as an artist.

Today, Jamea Richmond Edwards is recognized as an outstanding emerging artist who is represented by galleries and whose work is eagerly collected by private individuals and museums.

She's currently working on a series of drawings utilizing black ink on black paper in response to the murder of women drug addicts in Cleveland, OH. Edwards felt a strong connection to the 11 women who were murdered and their family members. Her own mother was a drug addict and her aunt was gruesomely murdered.



[\(Enlarge Image\)](#)

[Wings Not Meant to Fly](#)



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The troubled lives of these women is the basis of artwork which shows their potential.

In one way, her success is not surprising because of her family's history of achievement. Her mother's father was one of Detroit's most successful black entrepreneurs; he owned diamond and bread businesses. The cause of the downturn in the family's situation was her mother's early and continuing drug addiction. Edwards accompanied her mother on a long but ultimately successful road to recovery.

Mean Streets

Living across from a drug dealer... seeing women fight in the street over men... men beating women in their front yard and onlookers laughing... hitting the floor at the sound of gun shots... childhood friends being murdered. Such horrific scenes were the everyday normal while Edwards was growing up.

But it was also fun growing up there because it was such a lively neighborhood. As she grew older, however, Jamea realized just how much her environment affected her. She jokingly self-diagnoses herself with "post traumatic ghetto syndrome" and admits that the environment was very unhealthy.

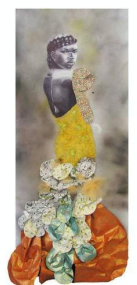
"I believe we lived in those neighborhoods because of comfort," explains Edwards. "We had family nearby, a drug store on every corner and everyone knew one another." It was like a large family -- a large family stricken by drugs, crime and poverty.

Edwards used her love of drawing to escape the turmoil of her environment. She began to draw at the age of three and soon knew she wanted to be an artist.



[\(Enlarge Image\)](#)

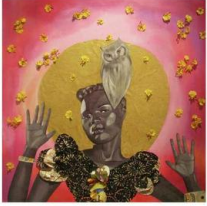
[Artist Jamea Richmond Edwards](#)



[\(Enlarge Image\)](#)

[It Could be A Sad Story](#)

At this time, the news out of Detroit was mostly bad. The city had one of the highest homicide rates and lowest high school graduation rates in the nation. But the auto industry still offered good jobs to some and her mother worked at Chrysler. Her stepfather also had a good job so the family was financially stable, and eventually they purchased a house closer to the safer Dearborn suburb.



(Enlarge Image)

Praise Me

When Jamea was 15, she went to a Renee Cox exhibition at Wayne State University. This was the first time she had seen work by an African American woman artist. Because some of Cox's self-portraits were full-frontal nudes, at that time she was known as one of the nation's most controversial African American artists. She used her own body, both nude and clothed to critique a society she often viewed as racist and sexist.

"I remember being so mesmerized by her piece *The Liberation of Lady J and U.B.*," Edwards remembers. "She was so beautiful and confident which sort of validated the ideas I had in mind about developing as an artist."

Jamea had heard that "artists only make money when they die," so she knew it wouldn't be easy. "But being the stubborn individual I am, that only encouraged me to work harder."

She studied art at Jackson State University in Mississippi. Being around students that didn't grow up like her made her realize just how extreme her background had been. Because the lives of her female relatives and neighbors were so troubled, she focuses on the female subject as a way to show their possibilities.

The Owl Series

Edwards' aunt was murdered six years ago. She didn't begin to openly mourn her aunt's passing until three years later when she began to create art work about her aunt's life. She's done the same to cope with her mother's issues and continues to create in this style of reversing tragedy to beauty.

She uses the same "models" in all of her works, which is why her subjects look alike. She's even been told that some her subjects look like her.

Some of her subjects wear an owl headdress. The owl imagery was inspired by the Medusa myth, which she studied in grad school. "Medusa's forces were symbolized by the female figure positioned in holy postures and gestures of empowerment," explains Edwards. Noticing that sometimes birds were nestled among the serpents that formed Medusa's hair, Edwards began putting birds in her own subjects' hair and exploring the archetype in relationship to the women's stories in her paintings.

As with Medusa who was typically seen as a dark, evil character, but was actually a goddess, Edwards says that she wants to banish her subjects' personal demons by connecting the women to their goddess origins.

This understanding of women's potential began when Jamea was seven years old and went with her mother and siblings to rehab meetings. Hearing the stories her mother and others in drug counseling shared helped Edwards learn about redemption at an early age.

"I truly admire my mother for her resilience," Edwards says now. "I have always looked up to her and one of the ways I knew I could honor her was by telling her story and the story of many others," Edwards explains.

For her current series inspired by the murders of women drug addicts from Cleveland, Edwards drew the 11 victims from profile pictures that were used in the media or from the actual jail mug shots. "The drawings represent the obscurity the women faced; it forces the viewer to come close to the surface due to the dark iridescent quality of the black ink on black paper," Edwards says. "What's unique about this series is that the images are almost impossible to photograph, you have to see the works in person to truly experience them."

Edwards' absentee father also battled drug addiction. His battle has not yet motivated her work but she says she's sure she will address it in the future.

Edwards received the MFA in painting from Howard University where she worked with some "amazing professors" including AfriCobra members Akili Anderson and James Phillips. She was so inspired by the history of AfriCobra (an artist collective founded in 1968 with a social and political mission) that she and a few friends formed their own collective. Other members of the "Delusions of Grandeur" (www.aredelusion.com) collective include Wesley Clark, Shaunt? Gates, Amber Robles-Gordon and Stan Squirewell. The group exhibited at the 39th Street Gallery in Brentwood, MD, Dec. 15, 2012- Feb. 23, 2013.



(Enlarge Image)

Ain't
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#2

"I'm really excited about this group because I realized I feel more comfortable challenging myself both conceptually and aesthetically," says Edwards.

All the turmoil in Jamea Richmond Edwards' early life has proven to be a catalyst for learning about human frailty and strength, and for empowering her artwork. Today she lives in suburban Maryland with her husband Geoffrey who has a background in art therapy and is currently studying Chinese medicine. They have two sons, Jeremiah, eight and Yikahlo, six.

Marlisa Sanders is an IRAAA editorial assistant.

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