

UM alumna artist uses hair to explore the politics of difference

Lauren Reinhart / Montana Kaimin
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University of Montana alumna and visiting artist Lisa Jarrett with her fresh print on Oct. 4
Chris Lodman / Montana Kaimin

Much of University of Montana alumna Lisa Jarrett's printmaking is shaped by her emotional connection with her hair. Growing up in predominately white Portland, Oregon, as a Black woman, Jarrett realized the lack of Black representation in media, art and hair products at the grocery store.

"I love making artwork with and about black hair," Jarrett said. "That can look like a lot of things."

Between Oct. 2 and Oct. 6, Jarrett shared her knowledge of printmaking with UM students as part of MATRIX Press' visiting artist program. Jarrett attended UM for graduate school in 2006 and now works as an associate professor of community context and arts at Portland State University's School of Art and Design, where she teaches classes in art and social practice. She has had multiple showcases revolving around Black hair and hair products.

This ranges from strands of braided hair, natural hair, picks, silk bonnets and more. Growing up, Jarrett said she and her sister were often the only Black kids in their schools or neighborhood, and the way they tended their hair was very different from those around them.

Jarrett likes to celebrate her race and identity and hopes to help others feel more confident with their hair.

"A lot of those ideas started when I was in grad school," Jarrett said.

Jarrett is the co-founder and director of Dr Martin Luther King Jr School Museum of Contemporary Art and the Harriet Tubman Middle School Center for Expanded Curatorial Practice. Both are located in Portland, Oregon. She also has multiple exhibits, including “Migration Studies, Beauty Supply,” which shows the connection between lost histories and homelands and beauty suppliers.

Some of her works have also been participatory. “Imagining Home: 100 Exercises in Empathy” is an exhibit in which Jarrett invited select participants to create an imaginary homeland from the same wad of her hair. The three-dimensional drawings were then photocopied to create the two-dimensional maps presented in the exhibition.

Jarrett hopes students can gain experience from MATRIX press, not just from their interactions with her.

Founded by James Bailey, MATRIX has been involved in the UM art scene since 1998. This program brings in national and international printmakers to help future artists learn about a different art style in the printmaking medium. Artists will usually visit for a week to take students through the in-depth process of printmaking. All works are featured in the Missoula Art Museum.

“We bring in national artists to work with students, who gain professional experience,” Bailey said.

Jarrett thinks MATRIX offers students a great chance to get hands-on experience.

“It is an opportunity for UM students to work with professional artists in their own studio,” Jarrett said. “I hope they gain some new perspective on what art can be.”

MATRIX Press brings in visiting artists to help promote artistic enrichment among students according to Jarrett. Over the course of a week, Jarrett worked with Bailey and students on five groups of work that feature genres in a blend of hair products and actual hair.

“I am making five additions. I am printmaking in five different ways,” Jarrett said. “You can explore a different way to use a silk screen. There are a variety of ways within one medium [to explore].”

Silkscreen printmaking is the art of pushing ink through a mesh screen made of silk onto fabric or paper. It is commonly used to get a design onto clothing products. Historically, silkscreen printmaking has been a tedious, complex process — until the 20th century. Jarrett saw it as an opportunity for her and UM students to learn.

“People are hungry to know more,” Jarrett said.

For more information, you can follow MATRIX Press @montana.matrix.press on Instagram.

For more information regarding the Missoula Art Museum specifically, follow them @missoulaartmuseum on Instagram.

To see more of Jarrett’s work, visit lisajarrett.com
