

# REYES | FINN

## HYPERALLERGIC

ART

### A Meditation on Identity through Chickenheads and Chains

LaKela Brown's plaster-cast sculptures represent the common trappings and symbols of her 1990s hip hop-flavored upbringing.



Sarah Rose Sharp August 8, 2018



LaKela Brown, "Doorknocker Grill and Chicken Head Large Cosmopolitan" (2018), detail. All images by the author for Hyperallergic

**BIRMINGHAM, Mich.** — It's almost possible to consider *Material Relief*, the collection of plaster-cast works by Brooklyn-based artist LaKela Brown currently on display at Reyes Projects, as an exercise in abstract mark-making. The formal repetition of shapes cast into and out of stark white plaster is so evocative of ancient art forms, like cuneiform tablets or hieroglyphic wall carvings, that, from a small distance, they translate easily into an abstract visual language. But upon closer examination, it becomes clear that Brown, a Detroit native, has not chosen these shapes arbitrarily or plucked them from ancient history. They are the common trappings and symbols of a 1990s hip hop-flavored upbringing: door-knocker earrings, prosthetic teeth, and rope chain.

Not to put too fine a point on it, Brown has punctuated several of the works with clusters of relief castings of actual chicken heads — “chickenhead” being derisive hood slang for a dumb female, or one who likes to give head.

There is something powerful in encountering these former status-markers, now mostly seen as throw-back fashion, stripped of their initial use value or a sense of interpersonal communication, and presented in the form of bas-relief. A statement accompanying the work characterizes these pieces as memorials for wider concepts within American hip hop culture — aspirations of wealth, for example — but the original materials all came from the artist's personal archives. Brown has spent quite some time meditating on these themes, as far back as *Bamboo Earrings, At Least Two Pair*, presented at Detroit's CAVE Gallery in 2016. It is arguable that the desire to recast and literally re-contextualize the objects within the fine art space reveals a yearning on her part to find a place for these aesthetically cherished objects that confers a different status upon them: a place where a woman is perhaps allowed to wear the jewelry she wants, without it leading to intrusive implications about her sexuality.



*Material Relief*, installation view

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Brown constructs her aesthetic deliberately, as the space intuitively guides visitors along a progression that feels visually chronological. Closest to the front window, she presents compositions in careful grids and matching pairs, with the subtle, cast-relief presence of the hardware that affixes earring to ear forming a subconscious association with the pins that might mount butterflies for display or the presentation of artifacts in a museum. As one follows the work around the gallery, the clusters become less structured, the pairings less identifiable, and the lines between relief and bas-relief blur. If Brown has first created a formal visual language, she then begins to morph and improvise — mimicking the transition of the Queen’s English into conversational usage. Convex castings of earrings push through the cast-relief plane to disrupt the uniformity of concave works, arrangements become loose scatterings, until, finally, the slangy clusters of chickenheads and gold fronts emerge.

Along the back wall, which acts as the visual destination point of the long main gallery floor, flanked on two sides by street-facing windows, three small plaster works hang above a field of discarded, semi-finished shapes. These fallen pieces form a junk drawer of Brown’s imagery — perhaps little different than the jewelry box from whence their progenitors were unearthed. Here and there, we see a stray decapitated chicken head. In spite of all her careful efforts to neu-tralize and elevate these shapes, it seems that Brown can’t resist the paradoxical desire to also reveal them as cheap discards. Though the name of the exhibition is obviously a pun, one wonders if it is this chaotic scattering of everyday reality that comes as a relief, more so than the consid-ered formality of the works on the walls.