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## 'You Are the One': Life and Art at RedLine Milwaukee

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## A&E: VISUALART



**VISUALART** REVIEW

# 'You Are The One'

## Life and art at RedLine Milwaukee

BY CURTIS L. CARTER

**E**xploring the connections between art and everyday life has been a concern of artists since Marcel Duchamp at the beginning of the 20th century and Andy Warhol in mid-century. But neither of these artists envisioned how far the challenge to the separation of life from art might be carried.

Visitors to RedLine Milwaukee (422 N. Fourth St.) before June 29 may see firsthand how items of clothing such as T-shirts, jeans, hats and other items gathered from everyday life might be transformed into art. With the support of a National Endowment for the Arts grant, Houston-based artist Nathaniel Donnett collaborated with Milwaukee children, teens and elderly citizens in a venture involving multi-media art experiments. The project is a part of RedLine Milwaukee's artists residency program. As part of the creation process, Donnett interviewed participants, asking them to reflect on their personal experiences of alienation and marginalization. Among the questions that emerged was the role of media in creating or reinforcing racial stereotypes.

Donnett's exhibition, "You Are The One," has a department store theme. Display cases, shopping bags, mannequins and clothing racks full of hanging T-shirts become symbols that help us explore the community environment. One sculpture portrays a male teenage mannequin wearing sagging jeans. Given the importance of clothes and shopping for personal identity in contemporary cultures, the theme seems most fitting.

Drawings, printmaking, collage, sculpture, video, paintings and photographs of the neighborhood—some by Donnett and others by participants—forge a link between the artists and the community. The materials employed, including a

prom dress made by a participant's great-grandmother, were collected from local sources as a part of the creative process. The exhibition was developed on site during the artist's three-week residency.

Tribal African sculptures appear throughout the exhibition, used perhaps to tag the cultural heritage of the artist and broaden the cultural references. Exercising a whimsical twist, Donnett reverses conventional gallery presentation style by placing African sculptures on the tops of display cases instead of securely inside. Clothing normally accessible to customers on racks or tables is sequestered within the plastic display cases where art normally resides.

How did Donnett become an artist? Actually, he grew up practicing drums and enjoying hip-hop dancing on the streets of Houston before studying art in college. He came to the visual arts almost by accident when he was kicked out of music class and sent to art class over a disagreement with the band director. His first loves of music and dance still remain a part of his performance art. Donnett's interest in community-based arts as reflected in works shown in galleries in New York and Chicago brought him to the attention of RedLine, which subsequently invited him to Milwaukee.

RedLine Milwaukee makes studio space accessible to artists and hosts classes for painting, sculpture, printing, photography and experimentation with the latest media arts. It is arguably one of the Milwaukee arts community's best-kept secrets. Artists Lori Bauman and Steve Zande founded RedLine in 2009 to provide professional career development support to artists and to offer educational and community outreach with a focus on the arts and social issues. Donnett's residency serves these aims very well.



Nathaniel Donnett, 'You Are The One'