



Jamea Richmond-Edwards

# 7 MILE GIRLS

ON THE COVER

*Two Sisters and the Horned Serpent*

Ink, acrylic, colored pencil, mixed media collage, glitter,  
and fabric on canvas, 96 x 72 inches (diptych), 2019

# Introduction

In her youth, Jamea Richmond-Edwards observed the fashion styles of Detroit's inner-city during the late 1980s and early '90s. Popular and idolized were Coogi sweaters, red gators, and real and knock-off designer bags from Gucci and Louis Vuitton. She understood the correlation between the fashion industry around the black female experience and their complex relationship with luxury clothing. The title *7 Mile Girls* refers to the street in Detroit where Richmond-Edwards was raised and where she encountered many of the female subjects depicted in her paintings.

The artifice of dressing became the driving narrative of her work and her form of black aesthetic and expression. She was particularly interested in how her work confronted social disparities and the inequitable practices and tone-deaf decisions continually made by the fashion houses of H&M, Adidas, Gucci, and Prada. In opposition to the market focus of these brands, her imagery is inspired by the styles of black designers who have made a positive impact on the fashion perspective, particularly Dapper Dan for Gucci, and the work of Duro Olowu, alongside influences of artists coming out of AfriCOBRA and the Black Arts Movement.

Across her multi-layered collages, the artist expresses the intersections of black style, capitalism, fashion, and personal identity. Inhabiting ambiguously abstracted spaces, the female subjects captivate the viewer with their agency as conveyors of black culture.

**Mary Salvante**

Curator, Rowan University Art Gallery Director

**Jamea Richmond-Edwards**

**7 Mile Girls**

Presented by Rowan University Art Gallery

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# 7 Mile Girls

Colette Gaiter

Jamea Richmond-Edwards' work answers her question: "What does black culture taste like, smell like, or look like?" The sensory saturation in her works embodies complex Black American expression in various forms of music, writing, and imagery. She describes her current work as "maximalist." As all experimental work does, her collage paintings break the rules, requiring improvisational discipline and process. Every addition of a new pattern or texture, brushstroke, mark, spray-painted line, or carefully articulated grey/brown face demanded a decision regarding composition, juxtaposition, and contrast.

The protagonists of all the stories in these portraits include at least one "7 Mile Girl" – the young women the artist grew up with in Detroit in the 1990s. 7 Mile is a major street that runs East and West through the city and is one of the main thoroughfares in Jamea Richmond-Edwards' black neighborhood. Her 7 Mile girls defy mediated images of Detroit decay, which concentrated on the devastating loss of manufacturing jobs, especially in the auto industry. As their parents and elders lost jobs, abandoned homes, and figured out how to weather the economic storms, young people channeled creativity based on personal grooming and clothes. From their thick braids to meticulously sculpted and painted nails and sometimes alligator shoes, they exuded hopefulness by

wearing brightly colored clothing that contrasted with the metaphorical grayness of their city. According to Richmond-Edwards, she and her friends were obsessed with style and self-expression through what they wore, determined not to wear their circumstances. Creativity in dress also spawned ingenuity in how they acquired some of their more expensive garments and shoes. Richmond-Edwards explains "boosting culture" as involving shoplifting and larger-scale acquisitions of desired brands through unauthorized means. Some of the apparel was cheap knockoffs of expensive designer brands that carried the look but not the price tag. As shown in one of the gallery pieces, sometimes the girls made or adapted their own garments.

Jamea Richmond-Edwards' resplendent collage paintings dress her beloved 7 Mile girlfriends in artworks that honor each of them individually, granting them more status than they hoped to get from their designer clothing. It is obvious to compare her work to the texture and color of Ebony G. Patterson's (whose work was also shown at the Rowan Gallery in 2018), or the attention to young black girls by Deborah Roberts or Amy Sherald's (who painted the official portrait of Michelle Obama) grey-skinned black people. All of these artists concentrate on the black figure, inviting audiences for their work to look at black people in a way that encourages contemplation.



***Mother Warrior***

Ink, acrylic, colored pencil, fabric, glitter, rhinestones, and mixed media collage on canvas,  
72 x 48 inches, 2018



**Shirt with Lace Heart**

Acrylic, spray paint, glitter, ink, and cut paper collage on canvas, 72 x 128 inches (diptych), 2018

After exclusion from popular media (except derogatory or subservient images), until the mid-1960s, representations of black people command attention now because of their historical absence. Kehinde Wiley’s work, which was one of Richmond-Edwards’ early inspirations, caught her attention on the cover of an art magazine that showed one of his early re-imagined historical paintings. For her, replacing a white man on a horse in a classical portrait with a contemporary black man condensed Western art history and its erasure of black bodies.

Richmond-Edwards’ monochromatic faces are formally more grey than brown, like Amy Serald’s, and are also specifically black in their rendering of features. The implication is that blackness is far more than skin color. Within their compositions, the faces provide a focal point to begin looking at the riotous color that surrounds them. The girls pose the way pre-photography artist portrait subjects did,

maintained their benign expressions for long periods over several sittings. Quietly commanding at the top of the adorned bodies, the girls want to be taken seriously and contemplated—not scrolled through quickly like Instagram selfies. Richmond-Edwards says that when she had a smaller studio, she had to turn the paintings around to avoid their stares and that one of her sons said, “I don’t know Mom, those girls, they follow you!”

All the girls wear long braids—“Dookie” braids, as worn by Janet Jackson in the 1993 John Singleton film *Poetic Justice*. The film and the hairstyle were popular when Richmond-Edwards was a young teenager. Instead of overtly addressing the history of race in the U.S., Richmond-Edwards describes herself as creating work that expands historical memory by including neglected parts of Black American experiences. The crack epidemic helped decimate her hometown of Detroit just as it destroyed some of the characters in *Poetic Justice*.



**Girl with Red Cape**

Ink, acrylic, mixed media, colored pencil, fabric, glitter, and rhinestone on canvas, 72 x 48 inches, 2019

The braids allude to both. Richmond-Edwards' monochromatic braids and faces seem subdued in comparison to the ecstatic color surrounding them, but they are just as meticulous in execution.

Richmond-Edwards describes this collage, *Mother Warrior*, as an example of "extreme maximalism." In addition to the usual materials, it contains glitter and rhinestones, as well as several water-colored papers and paper covered with handwriting. It seems that several layers of material could be excavated underneath the surface. The high-necked long-sleeved smock dress, with a pleated skirt and modest silhouette, fits like paper doll clothes, its two-dimensional flatness filled out by skirt pleats made of folded paper. The signature long sharp painted nails are there, finishing a demure hand gesture that looks like a dancer or fashion model's pose. As in most of her collages, the figure is flanked by leaf-like

shapes that could be wings, supporting and uplifting the girl who, although confident, is a vulnerable person in the current societal order. The forms are also placed where fringe might be on an outer garment. Extending the halo that often appears around the heads of her girls, the figure has a painted turquoise aura. Richmond-Edwards' fearlessness in applying layers of pattern texture and color invites analysis of her reasons and methods. For example, Andrew Jackson's image from the \$20 bill appears in the top right section, reminding us that Harriet Tubman's face was promised as the first woman to appear on paper currency in the United States in the year 2020.

Different from the other paintings in the show because of its horizontal orientation, multiple characters, and active story space, *Shirt with Lace Heart* shows girls creating their own clothes,



***Three Orbs and Serpent***

Ink, acrylic, mixed media, colored pencil, fabric, glitter, and rhinestone on canvas, 67 x 134 inches (diptych), 2019





***Archetype of a 5 Star***

Acrylic, spray paint, glitter, ink, and cut paper collage on canvas, 60 x 48 inches, 2018



***Girl Standing with Green Alligator Bag Next to Mannequin***

Acrylic, spray paint, glitter, ink, tulle, and cut paper collage on canvas, 67 x 54 inches, 2018

complete with designer labels displaying “JRE,” Jamea Richmond-Edwards’ initials. This is a workshop of creation and experimentation, extrapolating her own process in “draping” the figures in her collages with fabric, just as she would on a dress form.

*Girl with Red Cape* stands out by containing what appears to be a landscape constructed of terrain suggested by earth and vegetation-colored papers arranged the way shapes on the ground look from airplane windows. The bottom third and her “halo” indicates water. The “feather-wings” flanking her upper arms are more transparent and ethereal than those in other pieces. Moon-like orbs, as opposed to flat colorfully surfaced ones in other pieces, help complete the more natural scene. In this less high-spirited collage, larger pieces of paper in the background allow viewers to appreciate their textures and metallic details.

The diptych *Two Sisters and the Horned Serpent* uses symmetry and pattern in a way that is different from most of the other works in the show. The two girls are not identical in features or dress but show a mirroring. Richmond-Edwards draws inspiration and images from various intersections of cultures and histories—some that are part of her own racial and ethnic story and others that she admires aesthetically, like Japanese paper. The orbs sometimes represent as dimensional planets or moons, with variegated water-colored surfaces. Others are flat spheres delineated by paint, shadowed edges, and contrasting patterns. Ruffled pants bottoms, wings, or fins on the girls’ arms and their hand positions make it easy to imagine them as mermaids able to easily navigate away from the serpent if needed.

Straddling the top of the right side of the diptych *Three Orbs and Serpent*, another serpent surrounds the girl as if for protection. Serpents appear in two of the more recent works in the exhibition, along with two girls instead of one. A horned serpent is a

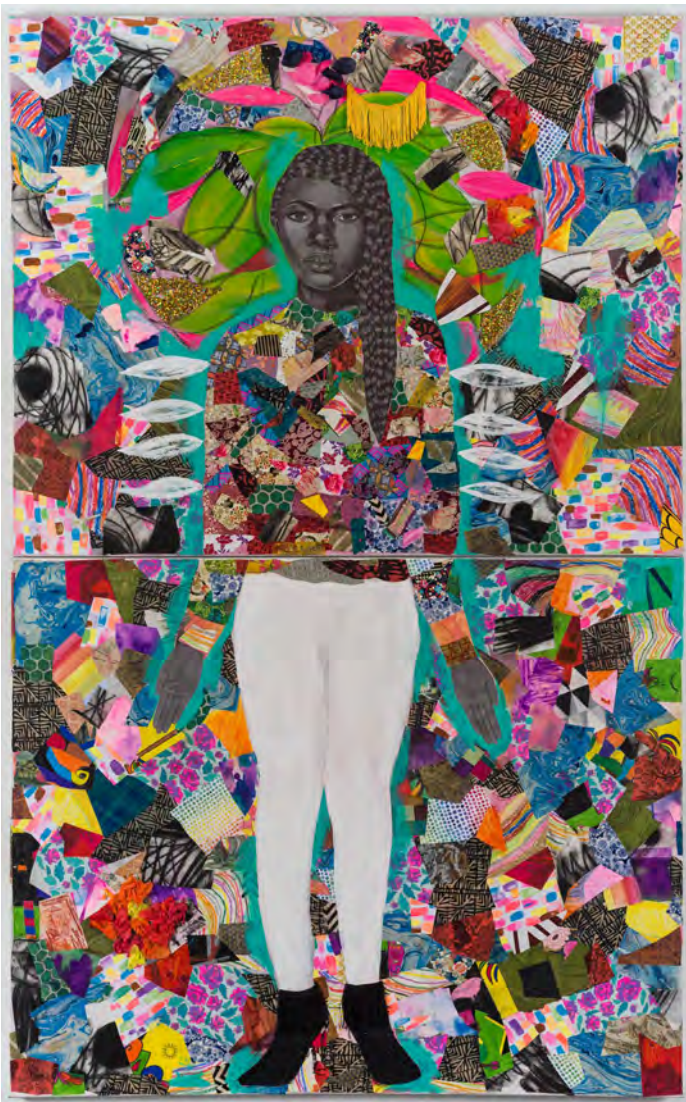


**Scrap Dress**

Ink, colored pencil, glitter, fabric, and mixed media collage on canvas, 72 x 48 inches, 2019

familiar character in North American indigenous folklore and references her own ancestry. Flat collaged orbs and bright pink triangles attached to the serpent almost like mythical wings draw attention to the girl on the right as the one on the left seems to watch the reaction. Crayon marks outline halos or bursts around the heads and add form and texture elsewhere on the bodies and clothing.

The orbs that hover in the air space around her subjects represent different things to different people but appeal to a universal fascination with



mysterious fantasy. In the same way as the serpents, the orbs are subject to a viewer's repository of real-life experiences with unexplainable and magical discs hovering in the air. These orbs do not seem threatening, but levitate with good intentions, reminding viewers of the orb in the *Wizard of Oz* film that brought the "good witch" Glenda, who would help Dorothy find her way home. In these paintings, they could be circles of good energy protecting the young women.

Jamea Richmond-Edwards presents 7 Mile girls as individuals who form a collective of soon-to-be women from the same place, time, and shared experiences. Youthful vulnerability remains visible on their resolute faces. Determined to express creativity through their clothing despite circumstances and societal conditions beyond their control, the girls reflect Richmond-Edwards' own creative channeling. These extravagant works are about expression, not oppression. Her collages fill the gallery with an unrestrained and exuberant celebration of resilience and blackness.

***Ancestral Matrix and Black Alligator Boots***

Acrylic, spray paint, glitter, ink, and cut paper collage on canvas, 96 x 60 inches (diptych), 2018



***Seated Girl with Fringe Pants and Alligator Shoes***

Ink, acrylic, colored pencil, fabric, glitter, rhinestones, and mixed media collage on canvas,  
72 x 48 inches, 2019





## About the Artist

# Jamea Richmond-Edwards



### ARTIST STATEMENT

My paintings are influenced by the artwork and theoretical framework of AFRICOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists) and the fashion aesthetics of the Midwest during the 1990's. The subjects' faces and hands are drawn with ink and colored pencil and the densely patterned clothing is created using handmade papers, glitter and rhinestones, re-purposed paintings, textiles, and commercially printed decorative papers. The women in my paintings want to be seen in the most noble way and they live in ambiguously abstracted spaces that acts as its own coded language.

### ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Jamea Richmond-Edwards graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree from Jackson State University in 2004 where she studied painting and drawing. She went on to earn an MFA from Howard University in 2012. She offers a repertoire of portraits of women drawn using ink, graphite and mixed media collage. Richmond-Edward's work has garnered the attention of various art critics including the Washington Post and the Huffington Post's "Black Artists: 30 Contemporary Art Makers Under 40 You Should Know". Richmond-Edwards has exhibited her artwork nationally and internationally including the Delaware Art Museum, California African American Museum, Charles Wright Museum in Detroit, MI, Galerie Myrtis in Baltimore, Maryland, and the Kravets Wehby Gallery, New York. Her works are in the permanent collection of private collectors across the country including the Embassy of the United States in Dakar, Senegal. She currently resides in Maryland with her husband and three sons.



## About the Author

# Colette Gaiter



### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Colette Gaiter is a Professor of Visual Communication in the Department of Art & Design at the University of Delaware and a joint faculty member in Africana Studies. She writes extensively on former Black Panther artist Emory Douglas and his work—her most recent essay is published in *Art, Global Maoism and the Chinese Cultural Revolution*. Her chapter and new introduction are included in the second edition of his monograph *Black Panther: The Revolutionary Art of Emory Douglas*.

Referencing her many visits to the island to study art, design, and culture, Professor Colette Gaiter published the essay on Cuban artists in *The African Americas: A Collaborative Project on the African Diaspora in the Cultures of Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States*.

As an artist herself she has exhibited work internationally and in galleries, museums and public institutions in the United States such as the Contemporary Arts Museum of Houston, Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. As a pioneer in new media art since 1982, she presented and exhibited work at SIGGRAPH, ISEA, and other new international new media venues. Her work remains interdisciplinary—from artist books to mixed media sculptural objects and textiles—usually including digital imagery. Putting her interest in socially engaged art into practice, she initiated two community projects in Wilmington, Delaware; Urban Garden Cinema in 2012 and the ongoing Beauty Shop Project.

Ms. Gaiter received her M.A. in Liberal Studies from Hamline University, St. Paul Minnesota, 1999, and her B.F.A. in Graphic Design from Carnegie-Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA, 1976.

# Exhibition Checklist

## ***Two Sisters and the Horned Serpent***

Ink, acrylic, colored pencil, mixed media collage, glitter, and fabric on canvas, 96 x 72 inches (diptych), 2019 (*Cover image*)

## ***Mother Warrior***

Ink, acrylic, colored pencil, fabric, glitter, rhinestones, and mixed media collage on canvas, 72 x 48 inches, 2018 (*page 5*)

## ***Shirt with Lace Heart***

Acrylic, spray paint, glitter, ink, and cut paper collage on canvas, 72 x 128 inches (diptych), 2018 (*page 6*)

## ***Girl with Red Cape***

Ink, acrylic, mixed media, colored pencil, fabric, glitter, and rhinestone on canvas, 72 x 48 inches, 2019 (*page 7*)

## ***Three Orbs and Serpent***

Ink, acrylic, mixed media, colored pencil, fabric, glitter, and rhinestone on canvas, 67 x 134 inches (diptych), 2019 (*page 8*)

## ***Archetype of a 5 Star***

Acrylic, spray paint, glitter, ink, and cut paper collage on canvas, 60 x 48 inches, 2018 (*page 9*)

## ***Girl Standing with Green Alligator Bag Next to Mannequin***

Acrylic, spray paint, glitter, ink, tulle, and cut paper collage on canvas, 67 x 54 inches, 2018 (*page 10*)

## ***Scrap Dress***

Ink, colored pencil, glitter, fabric, and mixed media collage on canvas, 72 x 48 inches, 2019 (*page 11*)

## ***Ancestral Matrix and Black Alligator Boots***

Acrylic, spray paint, glitter, ink, and cut paper collage on canvas, 96 x 60 inches (diptych), 2018 (*page 12*)

## ***Seated Girl with Fringe Pants and Alligator Shoes***

Ink, acrylic, colored pencil, fabric, glitter, rhinestones, and mixed media collage on canvas, 72 x 48 inches, 2019 (*page 13*)

# Rowan University Art Gallery

Where the University Meets the Community

Rowan University Art Gallery serves as a premier cultural destination for South Jersey, the Rowan community, and the surrounding region. We provide a platform for discourse on best practices in contemporary art by professional artists, curators, and scholars through the presentation of interdisciplinary art exhibitions, panel discussions, guest curatorial projects, and other public programming. We are committed to cultivating an inclusive environment that encourages a dialogue between exhibiting artists, students, faculty, the general public, and other cultural institutions. Our goal is to offer visitors an enriching cultural experience and function as a resource for contemporary art throughout the region.

## Acknowledgments

Rowan University Art Gallery is honored to be the venue for Jamea Richmond-Edward's first one-person exhibition in New Jersey and in the Philadelphia region. We are grateful to Jamea and Marc Wehby of the Kravets Wehby Gallery in New York City for their assistance with selecting the work and connecting us to the many collectors that contributed to the show including Bill and Christy Gautreaux Collection, Kansas City, Mo., Thomson Family Collection, NYC, and the Rubell Family Collection, Miami. Special thanks to Professor Colette Gaiter for her inspiring and thoughtful essay.

This exhibition is presented with the generous support of The Coby Foundation, and the Joseph Robert Foundation. We would like to extend a special thank you to the Rubell Family Collection/Contemporary Arts Foundation, Miami, and the Kravets Wehby Gallery, NYC.

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