

Black, Holly. "The Hairstylist-cum-Sculptor Using Braids as her Medium." AnOther, November 10, 2017 (cover).

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Photography by Delphine Diallo, courtesy of the artist

Introducing Joanne Petit-Frère, the hairstylist behind Solange's orbital crown and many other spectacular creations

Who? Joanne Petit-Frère takes sculpture into new realms with her incredibly complex hair designs, which call upon influences as diverse as maths, nature, engineering, chemistry, garment construction, Old World architecture and Africa and the Americas. Her work was recently at the centre of a media controversy after the architectural braided crown she created for Solange was airbrushed out of the *Evening Standard* magazine's cover story. The publication apologised after the singer posted the image on social media and referenced her own song, *Don't Touch My Hair*.

Petit-Frère has always worked with hair as a creative form, but is quick to note that her "background is in fashion foremostly,

art secondly". While attending the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York she joined a collective with friends from Cooper Union, which allowed her to develop more experimental art-led processes. Her investigations into hair sculpture were born out of the desire to "editorialise" the large, ornate jewellery she was creating, but it soon became the main focus of her practice. At present, she is artist in residence at Ancestral Strands, a braid boutique in Brooklyn, and is working as a producer at the 'arts incubator' Brooklyn Temple of Epistemology.

What? The intense, collaborative methods that culminate in Petit-Frère's designs transcend the role of a normal hairstylist; they require a dialogue that calls on the intimate relationship forged in the salon, as well as incorporating elements of performance and high art, especially when working with concepts for other creatives. She is weaving history, emotion, resistance and spirituality into her works: "every story that I hear and share is part of the engagement that is entrusted during the ritual of hair building, crown building, idea building," she explains. "My work can be very technically involved and also has facets of an experimental nature. This intrinsically becomes part of the dialogue, as the collaboration with these artists involves discussion of function, performance, comfort levels, timing et cetera. I am also not delivering your standard Afro or bowl-cut hair do, which is why I have a hard time with the label as hairstylist. I do more than this and respectably, have different protocols."

These conceptual outcomes were more than evident in her work with Solange, who is known for her own multi-dimensional oeuvre that spans music, art and performance that investigates issues of black, female identity and ancient spirituality. Petit-Frère points to a conversation she had with fellow hair and beauty entrepreneur Sakeenah Nzingha Kinard recently, who explained the overarching cultural significance of the head in reference to this stunning, spherical piece. "In various cultures, the middle of the head is seen as sacred space that is covered or ordained, whether by a yarmulke or a veil. In almost every spiritual tradition it is referred to as the portal to the soul and the most sacred part of the body. The Yoruba term 'Ori' describes the divine self. This orbital crown is literally a depiction of Ori Apon (the Higher Self) and Ori Inu (the Inner Self) coming into alignment. It is a natural law that once you are in alignment with your higher self, you can achieve healthy balance of thought and evolve spiritually. This braided natural style depicts the sacred geometrical sphere of Ori in three dimensions. It just speaks to how crown culture is a lifestyle!"

Why? Petit-Frère breaks new ground with her creations, going far beyond the standard aesthetic considerations of styling and pushing boundaries surrounding the politicisation of black hair, especially in the context of the United States' history. Her latest enterprise, titled *Jo Goes West* is a self-described "metaphor in a multitude of ways. It is a movement, an archival approach inspired by my own inquiry; of the historical facts in connection to the art of my practice in utilising hair and braids."

She was inspired to embark on this project, which explores the origins of multiple hairstyles, while on a road trip to California. "I started to develop ideas, reading a lot about Western philosophy, world literature and learning more about West Caribbean politics. I re-watched *Fievel Goes West* and read Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* – my favourite; Lorraine Hansberry's *To Be Young Gifted and Black*, and was stunned by Elizabeth Abbott's first inside account of Haiti." She is hoping that this research will become a publication or develop an even bigger showcase that encompasses her sculptures and archive material. "My goal is to engage with those even outside of hair; shedding light on an artist who is tryna stay woke and chill, while changing the world for the alternative better."