

KILLER CROSSOVER

Singer, songwriter and producer Amanda Warner, otherwise known as MNDR, has collaborated with musicians from Killer Mike to Kylie Minogue. Jacqueline Kiyomi Gordon is an experimental sound artist with work in SFMOMA's current "Soundtracks" exhibition. The two longtime friends reflect on the journey from Bay Area warehouses to their latest collaboration: Gordon's first pop song.

BY JANELLE ZARA PORTRAIT BY KATRINA DICKSON

AMANDA WARNER (MNDR): I THINK we met in Oakland. The only way I can describe the Bay Area is that you can just not participate in mainstream anything. I didn't know Miley Cyrus had a song called 'Party in the U.S.A.' until last year, and when I left to move to New York, I didn't even have shoes. We were part of an all-women multimedia performance art group where I was the most boring one—a musician. There was one woman who made robots.

Jacqueline Kiyomi Gordon: I did circuit-bend instruments and sound installations, and it was all pretty noisy. I've been living in Los Angeles for the last year, and I've been wanting to do something with pop for a while. I went to Hong Kong for a site visit in preparation for a solo exhibition called 'Catchy,' and decided that I wanted to do something in this pop language that we're all familiar with, but in the way I work with noise. Like if I'm recording an engine with a shotgun microphone, I'll go in and find these nooks and crannies. It's all the same base frequencies, the rhythm of the engine is the same, but I can pull all these different things from it. We all know what an engine sounds like, but what else is in there? With pop music, it was the emotional stuff I wanted to play with—how can we hear all the different sides of it? When I came back, Amanda was the first person I contacted. I needed to work with someone who could formulate a beat, and I was just so stoked that you had time.

MNDR: I moved from New York to L.A. four years ago, and I just signed a new record deal. When you said you wanted to deconstruct a pop song, I was really excited. I haven't done experimental music since my last performance with you guys. Eight years ago, I just woke up one day and thought, what if I just did the opposite of what I was doing? Pop is the opposite

philosophy. Experimental music is about the experience. It asks a lot of questions of its audience. It functions in layers. There's no relief. There's no tension release. Pop, meanwhile, is about the clarity of a message. A well-written pop song, you listen to once, understand it and leave it.

JKG: I'm a fan of pop music, but I don't know their structure or notes or chords. I know frequencies. I know filters. That's my realm. The moment we first started, you asked me, 'What do you want?' and I was super vague. One of my directions was, 'Happy!' and my main reference was Terry Riley.

MNDR: I know who Terry Riley is. I didn't come in like I only listen to Bieber. But the challenge was understanding each other. When you produce, you talk about the timbre or the cadence of the voice. It was for her like me speaking about painting. I have no technical terms. So I tried to jump into Jacquie's brain, and we did a lot of reference listening. I asked, 'Do you want a pop song like a Katy Perry sort of thing? What pop song has really spoken to you lately?' We said we both really like Kelela.

JKG: That and Janet Jackson's 'Empty.' So you brought these harmony palettes and catchy hooks, and a few other friends did some sounds and compositions. I took them all apart, over and over and over again. It evolved so that the vocal part is eight channels, and there's the whole beat and music side of it, which is another nine channels. In the gallery, they're spread over two floors by a multi-channel, hyper-directional sound system.

MNDR: We committed to a few grounding aspects: this bpm, this key, these hooks that repeat. Depending on where you are in the gallery, you're going to have a different experience of sound. I haven't been able to think this way in a long time. It was such a treat.

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Jacqueline Kiyomi Gordon and MNDR at Gordon's Highland Park studio.