

New York Times March 30, 2012

In Nod to Past, MTV Revives 'Art Breaks'

By Melena Ryzik

In its never-ending quest to reach young viewers, MTV is going back to the past, and to a generation weaned on its early videos. The network announced Friday that it is reviving "Art Breaks," a pioneering 1985 series that broadcast TV spots created by a vanguard of downtown artists.

In its original incarnation, the series included work by Keith Haring, Doug Aitken, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Kenny Scharf and Richard Prince. The new "Art Breaks," to begin on April 2, will feature videos by emerging artists like Mickalene Thomas, Rashaad Newsome, Tala Madani, Jani Ruscica, and Mads Lynnerup. In a first, the artists, most of whom are in their 30s, were selected and commissioned through a partnership with MoMA PS1 and the arts organization Creative Time. The program will debut on MTV and MTV.com and have a dedicated Tumblr site at Artbreaks.MTV.com. Ms. Thomas's video, titled "Ain't I a Woman Portraits," will begin the series on Monday; a preview is above.

In a statement, Klaus Biesenbach, the director of MoMA PS1, praised the collaboration as a way for "a younger generation of artists to experiment beyond the walls of the museum and onto the screens of a broad, international audience." And Stephen Friedman, president of MTV, said the series was the kind of creative, boundary-pushing imagery that is part of the DNA of the network.

"Going back and seeing the stuff in '85, it was a big part of the inspiration of why we wanted to do it again and reinvent it for this audience," he said in an interview. "We hope that 27 years later, people will be talking about Rashaad or Tala Madani in the same way we're talking about Richard Prince and Basquiat."

In his MTV video, Basquiat, the graffiti artist who died in 1988, is shown sketching in a jump cut of cool friends; he seems decades ahead of his time. Mr. Prince, the wry appropriation artist, riffs on the tagline of another popular commercial of the era, for American Express: "Art and MTV – hey, don't stay home without them," he says.

Like the earlier "Art Breaks," the new videos are typically less than 30 seconds long, and will appear between commercials and programming. Mr. Newsome, a New Orleans-born artist based in New York, created a piece that continues his "Swag" series, which blends contemporary hip-hop and European heraldry, a natural fit for the channel. Ms. Madani, a painter originally from Tehran now living in Los Angeles, contributed a wordless animation. Ms. Thomas's video zooms in on a woman with an Afro and a vintage jumpsuit, against a lo-fi soundtrack of clapping. Shot on Super 8 film, it toggles between color and black-and-white, and has a distinctly retro vibe.

Ms. Thomas, who experimented with a Super 8 iPhone app before filming, said she was inspired by Andy Warhol's screen tests. (Warhol also had a show called "15 Minutes" that appeared on MTV in 1987.) "I wanted this old, grainy kind of timeless look to it," she said. "I like that rawness of film, of holding on to ideas and nostalgia

in a way. I just thought it was what my aesthetic is." She admitted to not being much of an MTV viewer or pop culture savant these days.

"I just learned recently who Nicki Minaj is," she said. "I thought wow, she's really cool and interesting."

But, she added, she was still eager to be affiliated with the network. "I think it's an exciting opportunity for me as an artist," she said. "Just to be able to say, I did a project with MTV — who wouldn't want to rub shoulders with me on that end?"

"Art Breaks" will continue throughout the year, with a new set of five artists announced this summer, Mr. Friedman said. For the network, it is another step in capturing the attention of slippery young viewers, and that has sometimes meant resurrecting programs decades old (like "Beavis and Butt-Head" and "120 Minutes").

"We've been through this process, for the last three years, of re-inventing MTV for the millennial generation," he said. "How do you re-invent this brand? What we know from our audience is the bar is raised in terms of a demand for visually interesting and surprising narrative and content."

The "Art Breaks" videos, several of which are entirely silent, may be different enough to stand out.

"What I love about them is the deep layered quality that will take multiple views to really begin to dissect," Mr. Friedman said. "What are they saying? What are the meanings and questions coming out of this art? You're not going to get a coherent or linear narrative out of them, and I think that will intrigue our audience. Or at least, that's what I'm hoping for."