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Hey, It's Bunmi!

— Art



August 25, 2020

Anthony Bunmi Akinbola is a multidisciplinary artist who makes use of the readymade to explore the cultural rituals, connections, and conflicts in the fashioning of identity. Employing objects such as Durags, Torino Brushes, and Palm Oil, Akinbola attempts to question what makes an object "Black," and in turn, what makes him Black.

As a Nigerian American, Akinbola aims to mitigate the separation between Africa and Black America, his works acting as metaphors for what a first generation existence might look like. The Jean-Michel Basquiat to my Glenn O'Brien (socially speaking), Anthony resides in his Brooklyn studio exploring color, texture, and recalling how to live independent of

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to Sade.

Interview by Sebastian Jean

Photos by Matteo Mobilio

We sat down and spoke about ideas for the future and where he sees his work in the conversation of art and global cultures.



How do you define “culture”? Tell me about the cultural impact you see your work having on those who experience and interact with it.

I think the current global culture is a globalized American culture. When you look at apps, brands, celebrities, music, film, etc, the most popular ones tend to be American. China also plays a big role in the production of that “American Culture,” and in turn, both have a codependency when it comes to maintaining this beast called

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me, because with the advent of Black Culture, there is this demonization of these same things being idolized. I think about the ownership and value of tropes like Jordans, Popeyes, Hot Cheetos, Fashion Nova, Colt 45's, a lot of these things aren't respected in the same way I see my blackness, yet they hold a social currency in this contemporary culture. I remember seeing a white guy walk out of a Popeyes near my old studio in downtown Brooklyn. Based on his accent and how he looked, I could tell he was a tourist from somewhere in Europe. I remember thinking, "what the hell is he doing eating Popeyes," assuming that maybe Nathan's next door or McDonald's would be the more appropriate establishments for a european tourist in America to eat at. I am still trying to figure out why, you know, why or where that feeling comes from, that feeling of ownership. This notion of black culture being subjected to capitalist structure is a theme I'm continuing to explore.



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If you had to localize it, where do you think the root of this understanding lies?

I think it's a symptom of trauma, it's a symptom of, "they're always taking our shit." Take Rock and Roll for example. It's the fear of having these "products" that have an intrinsic cultural value off their proximity to black people, stolen and co-opted by white people in a way where they monetize.

Do those moments of immediate recognition and frustration regarding that ownership as it relates to "the other" make you upset, or is it just something that you realize and then later disregard as maybe being irrational or misguided?

It's interesting, because for me, Popeye's is terrible for you. It will literally kill you. And it's like, "Is that the thing that I want to champion?" I believe there is a cultural significance and value that Popeye's holds, but I don't think that those things are necessarily worth holding onto. I don't want a fast food franchise that's not even black owned to validate my blackness or my black experience. This plays into ideas we grew up with, where if you're eating vegan or vegetarian, it's some white shit. Even now that I'm making this art, I'm like, "okay, okay, Durags are obviously black," but how? And that shit makes me sound crazy, but when I really think about it, they're actually American, you know? And so, if the Durag is black and we don't see them in other regions of the world where there are black people, then



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We met in (2015) when you were working on your very first art piece, *Target Practice*. In that piece, you placed the heads of men of color on our college campus onto shooting targets and included audio where they spoke about their Black experience in America. How has your work and approach developed since then?

I'm expressing some of the same sentiments as I did with the piece *Target Practice*, but now, as I've developed my visual language, there has become a more subversive way for me to write palatably. There are a lot of white people that see the work, and I know they don't look at it in the same way a black person would, which is fine because that's specifically why I use the Durags. However, I find myself having to explain to them why I'm using the material. And while it does defeat the purpose, I believe there is a silver lining in being able to educate non-blacks on what a Durag is, so they can understand there's a function and history beyond the crass perception of them "being

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because Durags are usually seen like this and you've made them look like art, and now they're "okay" or "this makes sense." I have Black people talking about their moms, and the hot comb, and matching their shoes, and the nigga they used to work with and "Oh, I actually have this Durag" or "Oh shit, silkies." It's like a portal, I feel like black people can walk into my work.

I love that. How do you feel about the lineage of the Durag? Black people have always worn durags, but from what I can remember, when I got my first durag in '02/'03, there have been so many developments in color, texture, and overall style. Back then, silkies weren't even a thing and it's just become this super item. Durags are even more "fashion" now.

I think a big part of that is consideration, that evolution also relates to my practice in a very immediate way. When you look at the paintings, you'll see the seam is on the outside and then the Made in China tag is also on the outside, exposed. Durags aren't usually worn with the seam on the inside, because it'll leave that line on your head. So to see that tags are now being sewn the way they'd sew a t-shirt, where you have the tag hidden, but the seam is still on the outside, shows this consideration of culture. It is nice to see all the new brands, colors and textures. I remember when Durags were just black and maybe you would see a white one once in a while. Now you got violet and turquoise and orange and burgundy. I like walking outside and seeing all the different color Durags I can spot in a day, it's inspiring.



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How has this development in Durags and their cultural status influenced you as an artist? The pieces have ripened so much since you first started working with them as a medium.

I don't usually create a series of work, well at least I wasn't doing it before. I like to make things and move on to the next. All of the works I made prior were all so different from one another. One might be a sculpture, the other might be a video, maybe I'd make a painting or try to figure out a performance somewhere. I still work in that way, but over the past couple years I've felt motivated to continue exploring these Durag paintings and it's kinda hard to stop. Especially when you go to the beauty supply store and they got new colors and patterns you are just seeing for the first time. It's like going to Blick and seeing new

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powerful effect, the legitimacy of how museums, galleries, and other art spaces acquired Black art throughout history continues to be scrutinized. As an artist and a Black man, how do you navigate a desire to be a part of the “art world,” in addition to being aware of the methods in which these art institutions came to be in possession of the Black art in their collections?

I enjoy being around the “Art World” but only for certain moments and from a distance. That environment is fickle and if you don't guard yourself, you can really get caught up. There is a long history of artists being exploited, especially now with this whole “Black Art” boom, it's hard to really feel like people are genuine in their motives. I've been much better at vetting people before I give them my time. To be honest, I prefer showing my work in an institutional setting if it's physical objects, and if it's something else, I like just putting it out in the world on my own. I believe it becomes less susceptible to art world politics that way, because if I am going to be a part of those politics, I want it to be on my terms.



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...solo show that was supposed to happen in April. What can we look forward to as the world opens back up, and what are you looking to explore in your work and approach following these pending exhibits?

Yeah, the title of the show was LOCAL IMPORT, that's really the last thing I remember doing before the lockdown. I am glad people were able to see it before everything closed. I'm currently working on two solo exhibitions I have coming up early 2021, one at the John Kohler Art Center and the other at False Flag Gallery, which also happens to be my NYC debut. Both shows will run at the same time. I feel like I've just been mining more and more information and trying to make sense of it through the work, hopefully I can continue to concentrate these ideas in a way that I feel might be digestible to my audience. I don't really know what that looks like at this time, but it's definitely just the evolved version of themes and ideas I've already been playing with over the past couple of years.

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Anthony Akinbola's Durag Paintings Subvert Power Dynamics in Museum Spaces

His new style is creating community and sparking reflection on items that have held many meanings throughout history.

TH By Taylor Hosking

April 10, 2019, 6:26pm   





ARTIST ANTHONY AKINBOLA'S "002 MARCUS GARVEY STUDY"

“This is the heyday of the durag,” says 27-year-old Nigerian-American artist Anthony Akinbola. After using hundreds of durags for what he thought would be a one-off piece at the Queens Museum last year, the New York-based artist developed his own style of art that uses the infinite colors and textures of durags to mimic the strokes of a paintbrush. It’s a timely endeavor, considering that the private household item for protecting Black hair, once associated with “hood” streetwear, is now being reclaimed in high-fashion arenas by Black artists like Solange Knowles at the Met Gala.

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Akinbola says he was first drawn to the durag for the way it symbolizes Black pride, and that “through using it [he] was able to unlock it” as an artistic medium with many possibilities. He criss-crosses colorful durag strings the way an

abstract painter might dart lines across a canvas. Sometimes his pieces form a clear image, like the interpretation of the American flag with the pan-African colors red, green, and black, titled “002 Marcus Garvey Study.” And other times, the abstract collage of colors or mashup of the same color focuses the attention back on the items themselves, and what it means to turn them into art at all.

“I like that if you know you know,” he says, reflecting on the in-crowd dynamic he believes his art creates. He finds that dynamic especially important in the art world, explaining, “For Black artists there’s a struggle of trying to actively keep your culture knowing that people are trying to buy that.”

Durags can hold many different personal meanings for whoever has used them. But for Akinbola, they’re an item that has helped him reflect on navigating his Blackness growing up in Columbia, Missouri, where he said he felt ashamed to wear a durag, “because if you’re Black in Missouri you either get to be the hood nigga, the African nigga, or the oreo. There’s no real in between.” And as a first generation Nigerian-American who spent part of his childhood living in Lagos, the durag is a very Black American item that reminds him of assimilating into American culture. But as he continues to show his art—he’s had exhibits in the Queens Museum and Belgium’s Verbeke Foundation, among others—he finds viewers surprise him with their own personal stories that they see reflected in his work.

Fashion

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While the durag can jog different memories for different people, the broader cultural history of it is still unmissable: it's an intimate household item for Black Americans that was once used to negatively stereotype them. I caught up with Akinbola to find out more about his experience challenging stereotypes in the art world, and what he's learned about the possibilities of the durag along the way.



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VICE: What first got you into creating art with durags?

Akinbola: I'm coming from a space where I don't have any traditional art training —I was a communications major at SUNY Purchase. When I first started getting into a lot of those white art spaces, there was an elitism that I felt. I felt excluded. I couldn't necessarily identify with the work because also I didn't have any art history background or schooling around that. So when I think about the materials I use I like to switch that by working with items like the Jesus piece,

durags, or cassava. Working with these things that are specific to a certain racial and class identity kind of repositions that power.

People like Blackness—but if it's too Black, or if it seems too intimidating, then they don't want it anymore. And I feel like with these durag pieces, I'm trying to subvert that or camouflage that by trying to have some pieces in spaces where a person wearing a durag would never go, or the person that's buying the piece could be intimidated by someone wearing a durag.

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When I started I was thinking about the symbolism of it [...] but it's also just an object that has the potential to create a lot of interesting compositions. There's a ton of different colors and different hues, depending on where you buy them from, and what company's making it. Originally I was just trying to use that material to connect. But through using it, I was able to unlock it and continue working with it.



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What do you think of the durag's growing popularity in the mainstream?

You have people that like durags, but only in certain situations. And it's like, at what point does an object that may look elegant on [a Dev Hynes](#) or Solange seem intimidating on a seventeen-year-old in Far Rockaway or uptown Manhattan? They're still probably looking nice, but they don't have that celebrity appeal. There was an early 2000s mainstream durag culture that was also pretty big. There was actually a [big photo](#) of Jay-Z on the red carpet with a durag [at the 1999 MTV Music Video Awards] and that was supposed to be a big statement. And now I think an aspect of its growing popularity is that Black culture is the predominant culture and the general public is trying to adopt it. I feel like in this investigation of how time changed the perception, the durag is taking on a new identity that's changing everyday, which is something I'd like to investigate more.

I'm sure there's more to know because even between the time I started working on the durag pieces and now, I'm seeing things I've never seen. They're creating more of them and I get more colors, more graphics. It feels like this is the heyday of the durag.

To me, what's different about today compared to other popular times for durag culture is that there seems to be more attention paid to its elegance and softness, which could relate to our interest in seeing a softer side of masculinity. But that was something that struck me looking at your pieces too, that the colors can be so bright and vibrant. It reminds me of the newer ways I see people wearing durags right now.

[Music](#)

watch dev hynes and a\$ap rocky ride through the desert in silky durags

NICOLE DEMARCO

10.05.18

That's true. It's interesting though, I had a studio visit with a friend and I hadn't really had conversations with many women using durags, but she said it made her think of her sister. And I was like, 'Oh shit, this is an object that can be genderless.' She's always used it and had a relationship with the durag. But now there's an awareness of a different side, a more vulnerable side to the durag.

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But when I think about this work I'm also thinking about contemporary African painting being a first-generation American of Nigerian descent. For me as a Nigerian, wearing a durag gives me more Black American identity than not. People who are first-generation wearing durags to assimilate in American culture are grappling with that too. So it's also this story of being first-generation in America. And then there's how the durag is seen in African culture too.

Two Generations of Black Activists Discuss the Past and Future of Social Justice



disdain—I feel like on both sides—between Black Americans using a term like 'African booty scratcher' and Africans using a derogatory term like 'akata.' The durag would be associated with a negative word like akata. It's not always positive, and it's this thing that's somewhat exclusive to Black America, but there's a general power in it, in owning that you're Black. People like [rapper] Skepta are inspiring to me because he has a British and Nigerian identity co-existing authentically.

So you want to blur the lines between what's African and what's African American in the art world?

Right, in the conversation about Black art the categories are either indigenous / tribal / “primitive” art as they call it, or contemporary African art, and then you have African American art. The art world really separates those spaces. But I feel like in my practice I'm really trying to bring all of that together. I don't necessarily want people to box it in as something that's only Black American. I

like positioning it in a contemporary African art realm because I consider myself African. While everyone will bring what they want to it, I'm constantly grappling with questions about my own identity doing this work because it raises questions about whether the art is African if an African person is making it.

You mentioned you're inspired by contemporary African paintings, which are you inspired by?

There are a number of African artists who work with recycled art, I think of [Ghanaian sculptor] El Anatsui and how he reclaims bottle caps and transforms them into these large, beautiful tapestries. It's something that's very mundane—in the day-to-day life, there's a utility to these objects, but you've been able to transform it into something that can communicate internationally where people may not know they're bottle caps or what significance that holds. And I think in the same way I'm reclaiming these durags and it's this assemblage/collage process with the durags.

Identity

**These Artists
Want Black
People to
Sleep**

SARAH BURKE

01.07.19



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Marcus Leslie Singleton in conversat with Tschabalala Self

The two artists talk about inspirations, success and hopes for the future.

This story was originally published in Justsmile Issue 1 FW20.



Photography Don Brodie

Marcus Leslie Singleton's paintings use color and space to make the events of contemporary political life atemporal; to investigate the enduring emotional, intellectual, and experiential conditions that lie beneath the stories of our lives. Though occasionally offering recognizable scenes of political life — painting images of police brutality, for example — Singleton deals equally in the everyday. Much of his works show friends in conversation, people alone in their homes on their phones, together sharing a meal, at play, or laying in bed.

Beyond any minimal content, though, Singleton is interested in the emotional and energetic resonances that his expressionistic use of color and shape can create. He elicits an affective response from the viewer, and prioritizes the imagining that art makes possible: he aims to step from the familiar Black monolith and define Blackness from an unknowing, atemporal space, as blank canvas. Aiming to 'widen the peripheral of what this time means to us and our spirits,' in his own words, the artist sets out to begin conversations and inquisitions not only for his audience, but within himself. He speaks with artist, Tschabalala Self for Justsmile.

‘As artists our work is protest in itself in a way; we live as a protest.’

Tschabalala Self: Can you tell us a little bit about where you’re from?

Marcus Leslie Singleton: Yeah, I was born in Seattle, Washington - born and raised there. I moved to New York in 2013, when I was 23, to pursue painting and just living in a different place. I was thinking about moving to like LA, but I thought that would be so cliché and also so close to home, and I wanted to go somewhere completely different. New York seemed like an interesting place, and a challenging place. I like challenges; so I thought I’d just give it a shot. I ended up loving it.

TS: So when you first moved to New York, what was your first introduction into the arts community?

MLS: That’s a good question. My move to New York was really

propelled by the fact that there was such a strong arts culture here. I was interested in street art, so when I moved here that's what I was doing. I was spray painting poetry, and then I started to make work that was more insular-inside. When I started doing that, I started to check out galleries.

Mike Kelley was one of the first shows I remember going to. I remember during the first couple weeks when I came to New York, I went to the Mike Kelly show at Skarstedt. And it was so good. It wasn't what I was expecting. I was expecting paintings, but that show was all these notebook drawings of his and he was drawing really hilarious, tongue in cheek jokes.

TS: Who are some of the other artists that you admire, or who you look up to?

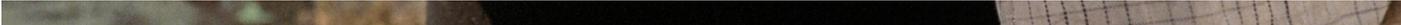
MLS: Well, let's just get this out of the way: of course, you. I've told you this but I saw your show at the Hammer Museum in LA—that was cool. I used to look at a lot of photography, a lot of African photographers and African American photographers like Kwesi Abbensetts, who I still am in touch with. He's cool. And Jamel Shabazz, I was looking at his work a lot. Micaiah Carter. As far as painting goes, I was looking at a lot of John Rivas, Curtis Santiago, Emma Kohlmann, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and Chris Ofili's work.

TS: Oh, yeah. Last night I was looking at his most recent show, and also looking up my favorite show I ever saw in person – his show at the New Museum.

MLS: I missed that. I was so sad I was out of town.

TS: It was good! I'm always impressed with how he was able to move from more assemblage paintings, to oil painting.





MLS: Do you ever think about changing medium, maybe trying to do watercolor or something like that?

TS: When I first started painting, I was doing oil paintings like in school. I imagine maybe when I'm much, much older, I'll return to oil paintings.

MLS: That'd be cool. I'd be excited to see your oil paintings. Chris Ofili is a big one; he's a big, big influence on my work. Then there's this artist that's actually from Seattle, and I grew up with him. His name is Eric Salisbury, he's a family friend. Him and my mom used to make pottery together; she would make the pottery, and he would paint his motifs on it.

TS: Your mom was into ceramics?

MLS: Yeah. She was a creative person too. She was one who said I should take my painting seriously, because she liked it. She would make these ceramics, jars and bowls and plates, and he would paint on them. One time she made these plates, they were really

nice; black. I painted on them – she was like ‘what happened to my plate?’ I painted on them with this acrylic paint. I was definitely not supposed to paint on those. But I was like, ‘Eric paints on all these plates all the time!’

TS: Are there any other creative people in your family? Other than you and your mother?

MLS: My dad actually was a painter. He gave up; he doesn’t paint anymore. He did photography. He painted and he played music – and he still plays music but he stopped painting in the 80s. He was working in figuration.

He would paint Bruce Lee, he would paint Muhammad Ali. So, I grew up in a pretty creative household, but when I was a kid, I wanted to go to the NBA.

TS: Ok, so I feel like we’ve got a sense of what brought you to New York, and your first experiences in New York. What has this year, 2020, been like for you in the city?

MLS: One major thing that I’ve noticed during 2020, especially in New York City, is how many people have moved away from the city,

or have taken a break from the city. A lot of my friends, and a lot of people that I know, have just left and went to other cities to live. Especially people with families that aren't from New York, I think they felt like it would be better to be close to their families during the pandemic. And I felt the same way. But I also feel like New York is home. My whole thing was in New York. So even though my family's not here, it would have never crossed my mind to leave. During lockdown, that was crazy; you remember that two week lockdown where you could only go to the grocery store? The curfew was very surreal. And you're forced to really self-analyze. That was another major thing: the self reflection aspect of it. Also I had a lot of time to work, so I was able to open a show at Journal Gallery on October 8 and a show at Steve Turner on the 17th.

There are also politics to consider this year. I remember going to about four protests, and I don't normally protest. I think they matter, but as artists our work is protest in itself in a way; we live as a protest.

TS: So the show at Steve Turner, what are you addressing in that?

MLS: That show has to do with African American history, and it deals with spirituality, religion, and technology in a way: how technology has been a tool for better and for worse. There's environmentalism - it touches on a lot.



TS: Are there any particular books you're reading at the moment? Are there any particular films, podcasts or albums that've made a particular impact on you during the summer months?

MLS: I've been listening to a lot of music; I always listen to music. There's this rapper, MIKE, that I like: he's a native Brooklyn rapper and his music is his experimental hip hop, and I love it. It sounds cool, sonically, but also I think of the lyrics as paintings. They're kind of portraits, almost.

I've been rewatching *The Matrix*. I am a little freaked out by it, because I feel like this [the movie] was low key calling on AI and all that. The film talks about how we invented AI, and then they took over humanity a century later, you know?

TS: Yeah. Could it be this idea of human beings as a source or a resource?

MLS: Yeah, exactly. Like a cow: a cow makes milk for humans, and humans make...something for AI, perhaps?

Then there's this book I've been reading. It's called *The Future of Black Radicalism*. It features quotes from Cedric J. Robinson, and it's almost like a compilation book.

TS: You've acknowledged that it's been a challenging year, what has been keeping you going through these tough times, these unprecedented times?

MLS: My friends and family; I cannot stress how important community is. Just to have good people around you, it makes all

the difference. I can't imagine how it would be going through this pandemic- and the most tumultuous time in world history, maybe- without community. So friends and family definitely, and then just kind of still having a sense of communion; hanging out.

TS: It seems like you have had the opportunity this year to have a number of shows lined up and the shows have been well received. I heard through the grapevine that your most recent show sold out. So you've been having a lot of success, how are you dealing with success? And what exactly does success mean, for you?

MLS: Success is different for everybody. For me, it's being able to pay my bills, have enough money to live comfortably, and when I have kids for them to live comfortably, and have an apartment and maintain a studio, while making work. That's really important to me, because my practice is really important to me. So if people are receptive to that, then that really means a great deal to me. It's kind

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risks, and then sticking to it, even when the pressure is on, that's a good feeling.

I'm a pretty private person, so it's not like 'I sold a painting, I'm gonna go out and go to the strip club' or something. It's more like 'okay, thanks. Maybe I have more in my savings account now.'

TS: I just want to ask you one last question, to wrap things up. Tell me a little about what you hope for in the next year – what you hope it will look like for you personally, but also for the world.



MLS: Alright, I'll start with the world first, because it's been on my mind lately. I hope we find a way to actually love one another;

regardless of whether you're left or right, white or Black. I think this year has definitely shown us that when people come together, amazing things can happen. At the moment we have, unfortunately, a president who seems he dislikes that notion: He wants to divide and conquer, and he wants power. I want to be realistic here. I don't think it will happen next year. But what I hope is more people start to adopt a more worldwide lens of, 'we're not the only people that matter on this earth, and for us to keep on living and sustain, we have to kind of love our neighbors.' It might come later, but it's going to happen. I hope people realize that, and I hope people start to be more accepting and loving and patient with one another. Us as artists, we are already different on an atomic level; we think to problem solve, everything's already different. But I think, if you could do it, and I can do it, and other people can do it in their own way, then we all can become more loving towards one another. I think art plays a big part in that.

Then personally, I would love to do more residencies, and I would like to do more institution and museum shows. I'd also like to get to be a better painter; I need to fine tune. I want to introduce some type of other media- somehow use watercolor and oil together through cut and pasting-I would like to introduce a new element to my work.

TS: Can you send a copy of this to me? I'll save it for my archive.

MLS: Yeah. It's good talking to you, always good just catching up with you.

TS: Let's hang out in real life soon. MLS: We will. I'll see you.



whitewall

ART

SEARCH...



Installation view, Marcus Leslie Singleton's "Up Trying to Remember a Dream," at SPRING/BREAK 2020; courtesy of Sam Sachs Morgan.

ART

Marcus
Leslie
Singleton
Captures
Life's "In-
Between"
Moments

By Pearl Fontaine

April 3, 2020



In March, we visited the **SPRING/BREAK** art show, where we first met artist **Marcus Leslie Singleton**. His show "Up Trying to Remember a Dream," curated **Lizzie Renfrew Vogt**, caught our eye as a quiet oasis of familiarity situated amid the visual frenzy of the fair.

Fashioned after a bedroom, an intimate space was filled with natural light, potted plants, and a cushion-covered window seat. It created a homey *mise-en-scene* for the artist's paintings of the mundane "in-between" moments of everyday life—like the title work, which depicts a figure sitting at the edge of a bed, or *Expect Delays*, in which a girl waits at a bus stop. With flat, visible brush strokes and a saturated palette, Singleton's work may appear friendly and relatable at a first glance, but a certain evocative nostalgia ensures that you'll want to take a second, more thorough look.

A self-taught artist, Singleton left his home state of Washington to pursue his artistic career. His practice questions the process of identity building and black consciousness. Recently, *Whitewall*

caught up with the Brooklyn-based artist to discuss "Up Trying to Remember a Dream," and to see how he's doing during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Installation view, Marcus Leslie Singleton's "Up Trying to Remember a Dream," at SPRING/BREAK 2020; courtesy of Sam Sachs Morgan.

WHITEWALL: We recently saw your installation "Up Trying to Remember a Dream" at SPRING/BREAK. Can you tell us a bit about this presentation?

MARCUS LESLIE SINGLETON: The theme of the SPRING/BREAK 2020 was "in excess." The curator, Lizzie Renfrew Vogt, and I wanted to create a space to step away from that. We wanted to invite viewers to cross a threshold away from autopilot consumption towards a place of pause and reflection.

People really responded to the space, saying it felt like a sanctuary. The show was a mix of pieces that capture the way

we perform socially and ones that were about the solitary moments when we make sense of those interactions. We took the title of the show from that particular piece because it characterizes that liminal space between private and public life. It has elements of the romanticized and the real, between sleep and wake, when you're alone and sifting through memories and dreams.

WW: As a self-taught artist, how did your relationship with art begin, and how did your career unfold?

MLS: I started painting when I was 21. When I was a teenager, I played guitar in a punk rock band. It was cool, I loved it, but I was still searching for something. I didn't know what I was searching for.

I got into making clothes and textiles and enrolled in fashion school. It only took two months of that to know it wasn't for me. I couldn't communicate my thoughts through fashion. I dropped out and went to an art supply store and got a canvas just to try it out. The first painting I ever made was an oil painting. I found a way to communicate without barriers. Painting gave me a voice for my inner thoughts.

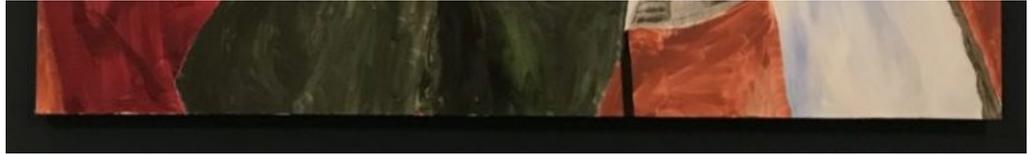
I was working in a shoe store in Seattle, making art in my free time. My mom encouraged me to keep it up. She thought I could do it. That helped me think, "Ok this could be something I could make a career out of." She used to make ceramics with this guy, Eric Salisbury—one of my first inspirations and mentors—and my Dad also used to paint.

When I moved to New York, before I started teaching, I was

working restaurant jobs. I got fired from every single one of them. I was trying to be a server; I'd always mess up people's orders and I was too slow. I wasn't good. One day my manager told me, "You're too artistic, you shouldn't be working at restaurants, you make too many mistakes, find a different job."

I still remember everything about that moment. I thought I could just move out here and start making art like it was the '80s. It took longer than I expected it to—like six years longer than I expected it to—and now things are beginning to pay off.





Marcus Leslie Singleton, "Your Friend is Not Your Therapist Unless They're a Therapist," 2020, courtesy of the artist.



WW: Your paintings often capture life's mundane "in-between" moments. Why are you drawn to these?

MLS: Those are real moments that everybody has. Everybody can realize those times whether it's brushing your teeth, or talking on the phone, or getting into an argument... normal things—things I've lived through, and that stuck with me. When I have memories like that, it's a good reason to make a painting.

WW: In your practice, you examine the process of identity building. What are some things you've learned through art regarding your personal identity?

MLS: I've learned how I look at the world. I've learned how I respond to the world. Whether it's in a bank, or in an intimate setting with a lover, or in a club, or at a party, or in a store. To

coming from a lover, or in a club, or at a party, or in a store. To make great paintings you have to be vulnerable. You just have to put it out there.

WW: The current global circumstances caused by COVID-19 are making things pretty uncertain, especially for those in the art community. How are you doing amid the chaos?

MLS: The situation is terrible. Personally, I'm doing alright. I'm lucky because I can work from home or my studio. The solitude part doesn't bother me. I've always made art alone, so my practice hasn't changed, it's always been reclusive. But it does feel different when it's government-mandated alone time. Moving forward I'm going to just spend more time creating and less time worrying about trivial bull shit.

Last year I had to stay in my room for six months altogether because I ruptured my Achilles tendon, twice. So, I've been spending a lot of time inside recently, but it's granted me the ability to truly know myself better and it's reshaped my view and how I see the world.

WW: In a situation like this, where the entire planet is impacted, what would you say the role of the artist is?

MLS: The role of the artist is always to be an artist—keep making, keep creating. The need for beauty and love and assurance is always there, right now it's amplified. You have to maintain a sense of self even though things are wildly fucked up and unpredictable right now. You have to do it, because that's really what's going to help other people—if you do it

successfully, you'll make work that resonates. People respond to your truth.



Marcus Leslie Singleton, "Expect Delays" (left) and "Up Trying to Remember a Dream" (right), courtesy of the artist.

MARCUS LESLIE SINGLETON

SPRING/BREAK ART SHOW

ENGAGING ARTIST FELLOWS

Sean Desiree: Building Solidarity Through Woodworking



More Art

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Nov 19, 2020 · 6 min read

“To have something created by a non-binary person of color is something you don’t see very often. It’s about filling the space with what makes me feel spiritually and physically protected in a world that doesn’t do that.”





EA Fellow Sean Desiree in their wood-working studio. They use wood from found pallets, demolished buildings, and discarded scraps to create works informed by the language of geometry and guided by their commitment to highlighting stories of resistance. [Image via the artist's website.](#)

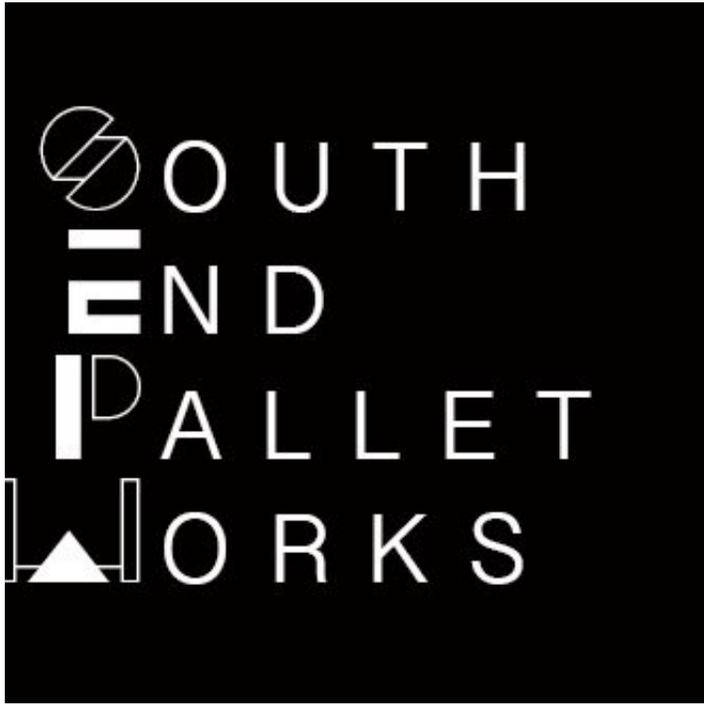
We last spoke to Engaging Artist Fellow **Sean Desiree** ([@seandesiireestudio](#)) in August, when New York City seemingly had rounded the corner of the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis, at least for the time being. As part of the 3d PPE Artist Network ([@3dppeartistnetwork](#)), Desiree spent a large portion of the spring and summer making personal protective equipment for activists, mutual aid volunteers, and elders. Along with EA cohort member Cody Herrmann ([@americanbabe](#)), Desiree worked to print, assemble, and distribute face shields for hundreds of workers in Queens. Both fellows took on creative leadership with outstanding fundraising and community outreach efforts, using small print stations to take action during this crisis. [Engaging Artists](#) (EA) is [More Art's](#) two-tiered Fellowship and Residency program for artists seeking to both develop and sustain their public art and socially-engaged practice. The program curriculum encompasses a professional development series, public art commission opportunities, mentorship, and peer networking. This year's cohort has remained committed to each other, their practices, and their communities despite the tremendous challenges of 2020.



Check out a conversation between Engaging Artists Artistic Coordinator Jules Rochielle and Sean Desiree on IGTV.

In their own practice, Desiree, a self-taught artist and furniture maker, uses wood from found pallets, demolished buildings, and discarded scraps to create works informed by the language of geometry and guided by their commitment to highlighting stories of resistance. A non-binary artist of color, they often focus on the

experiences of the LGBT community as well as those facing ongoing and historic systemic racism. Desiree more recently spoke with **Jules Rochielle** about their current work as well as the origin of their woodworking practice, one rooted in self-sufficiently but also community-building; their responses are excerpted below, lightly edited for length and clarity.



[South End Pallet Works](#) is Desiree's art and furniture studio.

Sean Desiree: The most direct way I could explain my creative practice is that I'm a multi-disciplinary artist and I do music and woodworking. All of my practices are generally rooted in my own survival and self-sufficiency — and that's how I began with making tables for the first time. I didn't have the

means to buy a table, and I was like, what can I do myself, that I can make on my own? I was quite motivated by watching YouTube videos of people making things out of pallets and other scrap wood.

Over time I started to think about incorporating more art into the project, thinking about what can I do with this blank space of a tabletop? I saw different people making these herringbone patterns or basic zigzags or whatever, and I was like, what can I do on this pallet that could, you know, potentially tell a story?

CROSSWINDS AT HUDSON



From Sean Desiree's series **LIFTED: Public Housing and Aerial Perspective**. Via the artist's website.

That led me to my first art series, *LIFTED: Public Housing and Aerial Perspective*, where I took aerial views of different public housing units specifically in Hudson, New York, where I was working at the time. And Hudson, New York, if you've never been there, there's this huge disparity between wealthy and poor. Specifically, there's a lot of wealthy artists that live there. Me starting to come into my identity as an artist, I'm always trying to connect with the community and figure out how can I use the means that I have to support other people also trying to live that dream of being an artist? I did the series on the different public and subsidized housing in Hudson, and at the end of it, I gave a portion from the profits of the sale of artwork to artists living in public housing, as a grant.

I'm a self-taught artist, so I'm constantly learning and evolving as I

go. Another skill that I picked up while I was expanding my skillset in woodworking is timber framing. There is this workshop that I co-facilitated in Soul Fire Farm in Grafton, New York which is where I learned how to actually build structures. For me, what inspired me to are my roots in having my practice be about survival and self-sufficiency. Being able to build your own structures, there is a lot of power in that. Especially as a non-binary person of color, I feel like I had control, I can provide for myself.

I'm starting to develop the series that I would like to do in the future called Shale Dust Keep All Of Me, which is going to be a project where I build smaller timber frame structures. The idea is to think, as a non-binary person of color, what is safety for me? What feels safe? Creating a space of my own. You know, a lot of buildings are mass-produced, by mostly cis, white men and it's all about capitalism and what's going to be the cheapest and most efficient. And so to have something created by a non-binary person of color is something you don't see very often. It's about filling the space with what makes me feel spiritually and physically protected in a world that doesn't do that. And so right now I'm just growing that idea of what the space would look like inside, and playing around with the lines of geometry and timber framing itself to create something that doesn't necessarily look like a generic timber frame structure.



A sneak preview of Desiree's current chair series. [Images via the artist's Instagram.](#)

The third thing that I'm doing with my woodworking practice also incorporates gender identity and the LGBTQ community. Right now I'm in the beginning stages of developing a series or a collection of chairs that is solely about what does nonbinary design look like? How does it feel? What does a chair designed by a non-binary person look like? And so I'm creating these thrones, which are typically associated with cis men as far as noting status, and kind of giving non-binary people a throne for us to also feel supported on, to feel uplifted, to feel like we have a place and deserve a place in the world.

I feel like it feels really good to have a direction and something I feel excited about. I want to keep developing the idea and also connecting with folks that can provide some sort of insight because a lot of times, I'm functioning on my own. What feels good to me? What instincts come to me? It was really nice to connect with people through More Art and also just people I'm

finding myself to give me that perspective that I need sometimes. And also, I feel like I'm doing a good job of trying to figure out how to create opportunities for myself within this new space that we're working in and think, how can I adapt? How can I also be supportive? Because woodworking is very much rooted in providing, having something tangible. That is another reason that I came to woodworking as my practice and why it's important to me. Because I could actually contribute something physical to someone or to a community.

Engaging Artists

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The B-Side: A Conversation With Sean Desiree of Bell's Roar

By Frankie Diemer

Updated May 8, 2018 10:54 p.m. CT

Published May 9, 2018 6:38 a.m. CT

The B-Side features collaborations between The Phoenix and WLUIW 88.7.

Music Director of WLUIW 88.7 FM, Frankie Deimer, chatted with Sean Desiree of Bell's Roar on activism through music, genre-bending and the Art Funds Art Tour, a project providing grants to other queer and trans people of color (QTPOC) artists.

The title of the project, Bell's Roar, is a reference to the feminist writer, bell hooks, and is used as a reference point throughout their music. For Desiree, music is woven with their identity as a non-binary person of color.

After the release of their debut full-length album, *We Carry Us*, and the first leg of The Art Funds Art Tour wrapping up, Deimer spoke with Desiree [regarding]

the inspiration for the project Bell's Roar and why it definitely isn't hip-hop music.

You've had a pretty eventful start to 2018, from your debut full-length, *We Carry Us*, to your tour, *The Art Funds Art Tour* — how did the first leg of it go?

The tour went really well, I definitely learned a lot from the whole process. It was my first time doing it and the first leg of the tour. I went from Albany, New York where I live, down to Atlanta and made stops along the way, like in Philly, Boston and Baltimore. In each city, I connected with local acts to play the show with me, so it was a really great way to make connections with different artists along the way — some of them I knew, some of them I didn't.

What was it like seeing the *Art Funds Art Tour* come to fruition?

I think everyone involved in the project was super down with the concept of it, which was to give away proceeds from each show to a local artist. There are so many artists out there in need of funds, including me, and that's how I came up with the idea. I wanted my shows to be more than just about people coming out to see me, but a way to support the community as well. I think it went really well and I have so many ideas to improve it. I really enjoy curating shows as well and having control over the whole experience.

What's an example of how a tour stop on the Art Funds Art Tour went?

I tried to organize with someone who was involved with local shows in the city. We were able to raise enough money before the show through local organizations for the grant. For example, we were able to give out a grant to Billie Dean Thomas who is kind of a hip-hop/indie/opera performing artist.

Can you tell me about your activism and how that's informed your project, Bell's Roar?

I grew up in New York City [and] probably around high school was when I really started to think more about [the] world and my place in it — and what I can contribute to it. I became involved with “Think Outside the System,” a queer, trans, people of color-led organization which involved thinking of a community without cops, focusing on more community involvement and looking out for each other, so that was really great to get a foundation.

Throughout college, I was involved in a lot more environmental issues. Now, I want to use my music as a way to directly supporting people. The Art Funds Art Tour is kind of the beginning of that process and figuring out how my music can be useful for that movement.

The name for your project Bell's Roar is a reference to the feminist writer and social activist, bell hooks. How much of your work is informed by hooks?

I feel like the actual lyrics and how I write are not so much directly linked to her, but [she] acts kind of as a reference point for things that I believe in, things that I try to touch upon when I'm writing. My music is very much linked to my identity as a non-binary face, or how I feel about the world — my joys, all that. So it's not solely inspired by her work but I find her work, and the work of others, to be very important.

What keeps you honest in your lyricism?

I really do care about that, and I try hard to be genuine because it's an opportunity to connect people and for people to get something from your music. Lyrics are definitely the hardest part for me. I find writing music easier.

The lyrics take a long time for me — I want them to mean something and to convey a message. I just try to remember that these are my lyrics and my songs and I don't really need to overthink it.

What genre would you classify your music in? Do you find people classifying you in a particular genre you don't agree with?

The only [time] I don't understand what people are listening to [is] when they're like, "hip hop" — it's not hip-hop at all, so I don't really know what they're talking about [she said laughing]. I think indie-rock makes sense; electronic, soul, and R&B makes sense too. So I think all of those together make up the sound.

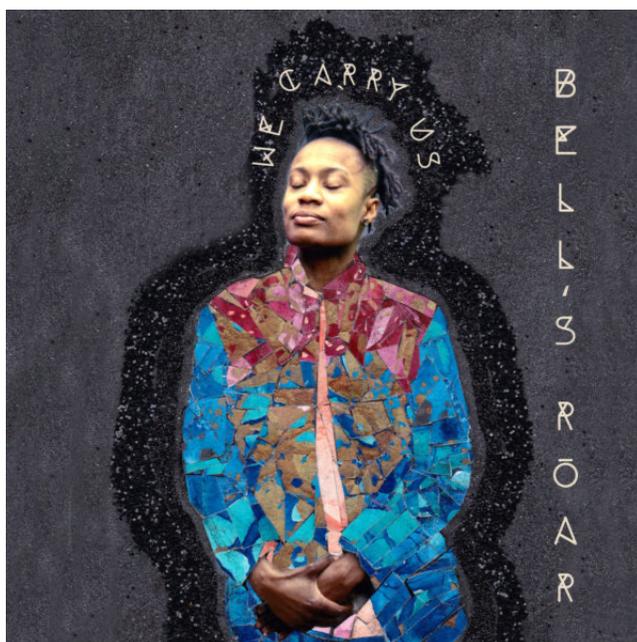
I think people are quick to throw music in one genre box but your sound is definitely a blended one.

Yeah, I feel like it's hard to place me. It's also hard for me to find artists that sound similar to me.

After this leg of the tour, what's next for you?

I'd like to think about how to bring The Art Funds Art Tour to other cities around the U.S. I definitely want to make more music and I'd like to start producing music for other artists.

* * * *



Courtesy of Sean Desiree

Bell's Roar upcoming tour dates will be available soon. To further support and find out more about Bell's Roar and the Art Funds Art Tour, check out their debut album, We Carry Us, on Spotify or their website and visit Art Funds Art Tour to contribute to the organization.

*This interview was edited for clarity.



**Frankie
Diemer**



More from Frankie Diemer

- The B-Side: A Conversation With Sean Desiree of Bell's Roar
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A Black Queer Performance Night Arrives Upstate

The artist Tschabalala Self shares a dispatch from her new event in Hudson, N.Y.

By **Alice Newell-Hanson**

July 13, 2018

On a warm Friday night in June, the Half Moon, a snug retro-style bar in the town of Hudson, N.Y., was packed with revelers, their arms outstretched toward the low wood ceiling as they danced. At the microphone, in front of a scarlet lamé curtain, was the Brooklyn-based rapper Ms. Boogie, performing her new track “Morphin Time,” a minimal bass-heavy number about personal transformation, full of whip-sharp (and unprintable) lyrics. The occasion was the first edition of Free Range, a new performance night founded by the D.J. Michael Mosby and the artists Shanekia McIntosh and Tschabalala Self. It was the first of many showcases, they hope, and a much-needed platform for the Hudson Valley’s queer black creative community.

Hudson, some 100 miles north of Manhattan, has long been a refuge for artists seeking the kinds of low rents and spacious studios that are increasingly hard to find in New York City. But representation of the diverse voices within the town's growing art scene, though it has "rapidly expanded in the past two years or so," is still lacking, says McIntosh, "hence why we wanted to do Free Range." She continues: "Our mission is to really make room for the connective tissue of the black queer scene happening in New York City and the Hudson Valley. It also helps to make sure it's fun." Rounding out the evening was a performance by the Brooklyn-based musician Xhosa and sets by the D.J.s Young Wavy Fox and Fulathela (as Mosby is known professionally).

Free Range is an opportunity to "create a space for cross-pollination," says Self, whose large mixed-media works, which often depict black female figures, have appeared in numerous solo exhibitions and become favorites of the art dealer Jeffrey Deitch. Here, she shares her photographs of the event — as well as snapshots of her friends, as she encountered them on a weekend walk around Hudson.

Alice Newell-Hanson is the contributing digital editor of T Magazine.



Art

15 Artists Capture the Rich History of Black Style

Miss Rosen Sep 22, 2020 11:56am   



Anthony Olubunmi Akinbola
Untitled, 2020



Yelaine Rodriguez
Afro-Sagrada Familia (Mawon Zahir Ajam), 2020

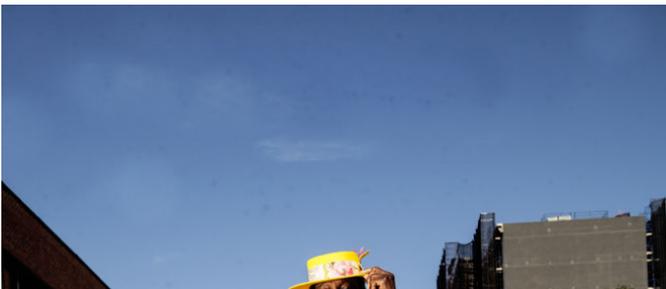
Long Gallery Harlem
Contact for price

Long Gallery Harlem
\$975

Style is an expression of self that weaves together our aesthetic sensibilities with the time, place, and culture in which we live. But for Black Americans, style has long been more than a means of self-expression: It's also been an essential way to survive systemic racism.

As Lewis Long, founder and owner of Long Gallery Harlem, told Artsy in a conversation, “Style, for Black people in America, began as a point of survival and liberty.”

Many Black Americans who escaped slavery created garments that typified the appearance of free men and women, giving them the ability to hide in plain sight as they built new lives from scratch. After the Civil War, style became a means to chart a new path in society at a time when segregation limited access and mobility. The Black church offered a safe space for the devout to show out every Sunday.



**Hollis King***Rawlston Charles, 2020*

Long Gallery Harlem

\$500

**Stephen Tayo***Ifeoma and Rebecca, 2019*

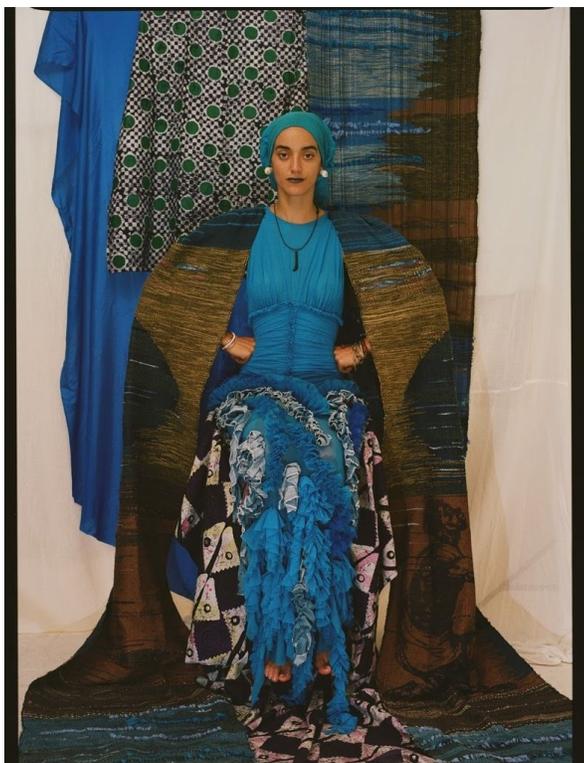
Long Gallery Harlem

\$2,000

“In spite of oppression in the broader society, Black people were leaders and were completely free to express themselves in a grand way,” Long said.

By 1920, Black American art, culture, and style reached new heights as the Harlem Renaissance brought a generation of artists and intellectuals to the world stage. In celebration of the Harlem Renaissance’s 100th anniversary, Long Gallery Harlem and Harlem-based curator Souleo have partnered with Nordstrom to create “Styling: Black Expression, Rebellion, and Joy Through Fashion,” a multi-venue exhibition that includes an installation at

Nordstrom's flagship New York store and an online viewing room with Artsy.



Yelaine Rodriguez

Afro-Sagrada Familia (Kaila), 2020

Long Gallery Harlem

\$975



Gregory Gray

Black is not a color, race is a construct: Homage to the Bantu People, 2020

Long Gallery Harlem

\$1,000

The seeds of the exhibition were planted this June, as the Black Lives Matter movement went global in the wake of the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Tony McDade, bringing about one of the largest civil rights protests in the history of the world.

“On the surface, art is futile against the forces that are trying to oppress us where we need policy changes, but I always go back and look at history and think about the civil rights movement and how art was always present during those times,” Souleo said. “There was James Brown singing ‘I’m Black and I’m proud,’ which helped to galvanize people and feed them the spiritual nourishment that they needed. People need affirmation that we’ve been here before and we’re going to get through it again as we fight for freedom and all the changes that need to happen. We are going to continue to enjoy our lives.”



Elan Cadiz



Stephen Tavo

Jodi Powell, 2020
Long Gallery Harlem
\$4,000

Eze, 2019
Long Gallery Harlem
\$2,000

“Styling” brings together works by 15 contemporary Black artists from across the African diaspora: Anthony Olubunmi Akinbola, Elan Cadiz, Willie Cole, EPPERSON, Felicia Megan Gordon, Gregory Gray, Hollis King, Beau McCall, Ruben Natal-San Miguel, Busayo Olupona, Yelaine Rodriguez, Dianne Smith, Stephen Tayo, Ricky TheJones of AfrolipglossOriginals, and Margaret Rose Vendryes.

To make the work of these artists more accessible to diverse audiences, “Styling” took shape as an in-store experience as well as an online viewing room. The exhibition features work in a wide array of media—including painting, photography, video, sculpture, fabric arts, and wearable art—and addresses themes of expression, rebellion, and joy while simultaneously creating economic opportunities for Black artists and institutions.



**Ruben Natal-San Miguel***LiLi & Miss Alex (Glamour pussies)*, 2020

Long Gallery Harlem

\$3,500

**Felicia Megan Gordon***Styling and Profiling*, 2012

Long Gallery Harlem

\$1,000

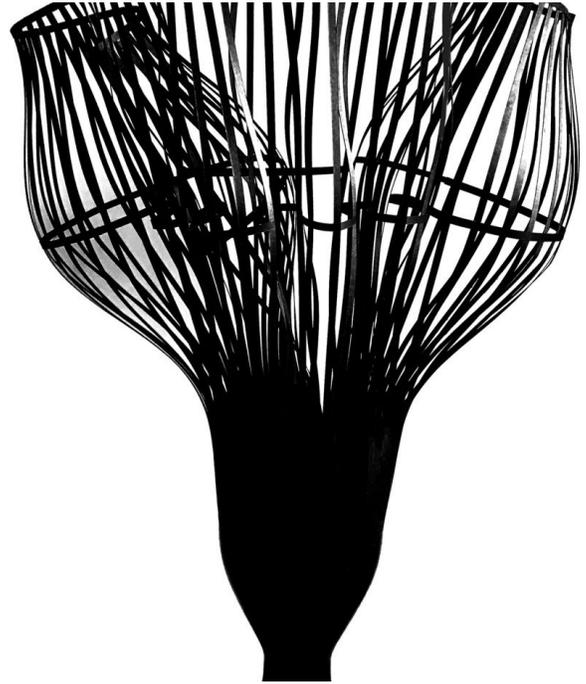
“Oftentimes the issues of social justice are related to economic justice,” Long said. He noted that the artists featured in the show were commissioned for their work, and that Nordstrom will contribute a portion of the sales to the Howard University Art Gallery to honor the work of writer, philosopher, and educator Alain Locke, who is considered the “dean” of the Harlem Renaissance.

In “Styling,” Harlem is the thread that connects the present to the past. “There’s a strong sense of community and pride in Harlem,” Long said. “There is a sense of legacy that’s not just the visual arts but covers every discipline. Going back to the 1890s, it was viewed as the vanguard. It is one of the most diverse, inclusive communities in the world.”

**Willie Cole***Mean Girl*, 2016

Long Gallery Harlem

\$10,000 - 15,000

**Gregory Gray***Black is not a color, race is a construct: All Hail Queen Lucy, Mother of Us All*, 2020

Long Gallery Harlem

\$1,000

With this in mind, the artists Souleo has brought together form an eclectic mix representing both the African diaspora and Harlem itself. “It was important to think about the history, go back to the African continent to those roots that have been with us prior to slavery,” Souleo said.

This approach can be seen in the works of Willie Cole, who created a mask made from modern shoes inspired by the Dan-Ngere tribe of West Africa, as well as the paintings of Margaret Rose Vendryes, whose portraits of icons including Diana Ross, Whitney Houston, and Billy Porter are shown wearing African masks as a nod to the

continuity of Black style that exists across time and place.



Margaret Rose Vendryes

Ekoi Whitney - Whitney Houston, 2010

Long Gallery Harlem

\$15,000 - 20,000



Margaret Rose Vendryes

Fang Supreme - Diana Ross, 2013

Long Gallery Harlem

Long Gallery Harlem

\$15,000 - 20,000

The show's theme of rebellion brings together the works of wearable artists including Harlem-based designer EPPERSON and Beau McCall, who have created gender-neutral garments that illustrate how Black style has long been used to challenge

oppression, gender, and sexuality. EPPERSON, who views his work as armor, underscores the inherent relationship between fashion, style, and art in Black culture, as does Ricky TheJones of AfrolipglossOriginals, who makes his debut as an artist in the exhibition with a series of afro wigs.

The wigs brilliantly illustrate the interplay of the themes within the subject of Black hair—a distinct feature that has long been the site of extraordinary creativity, political resistance, and rapturous exultation. The afro, which became popular in America during the “Black Is Beautiful” movement, took root when brothers Kwame Brathwaite and Elombe Brath staged “Naturally ’62,” a fashion and beauty event in Harlem in January 1962 that quickly became an international phenomenon. With the rise of the natural hair movement over the past decade, the afro is back in vogue, celebrating the revolutionary power of Blackness as an innate quality.



**Dianne Smith***Phenomenal Black Womanists*, 2020

Long Gallery Harlem

\$3,000

**Anthony Olubunmi Akinbola***Untitled*, 2020

Long Gallery Harlem

\$30,000 - 40,000

“Styling” also honors the oft-unheralded contributions of Black women in *Phenomenal Black Womanists* (2020), a video by Dianne Smith. Smith, a Bronx native of Belizean descent, pays homage to both famous and everyday Black women, including her mother Merva Goldson, who donned an afro when she worked as a showroom model in the 1970s. The video, which features personal photographs, video clips, and archival materials dating back to the Harlem Renaissance, includes images from the Black Fashion Museum in Harlem and Ebony Magazine Fashion Fair, both of which elevated the work of Black designers and images of Black women at a time when mainstream representation was virtually nonexistent.

Taken as a whole, “Styling” is an extraordinary foray into the spirit

of Black style, revealing the integral interplay between art, fashion, culture, and identity. Here, self-expression becomes a political act that demands to be seen, heard, and recognized as one of the greatest creative forces on earth.

Explore the Artsy Viewing Room for “Styling: Black Expression, Rebellion, and Joy.”

Miss Rosen

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Mika Maruyama Dec 23, 2020



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