



Hey, It's Bunmi!



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 the concept of responsibility. In his spare time, Anthony enjoys cooking, weekend trips to Hudson, and biking through Brooklyn listening 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 capitalism. It's with that background that I then think of "culture" in its contemporary understanding, as being synonymous with "Blackness." More specifically, Blackness in America. In that same vein, if American culture has become the dominant culture and within that, Black American culture has become the most popular, then it's really just "Black Culture" that's the global culture. It becomes difficult for 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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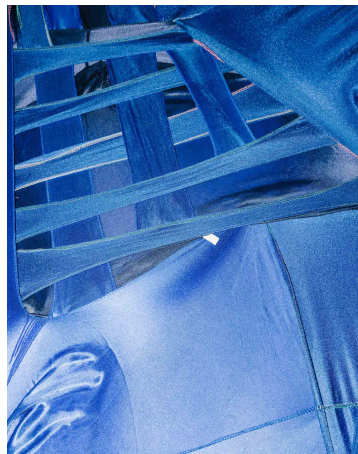


If you had to localize it, where do you think the root of this understanding lies?

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 I think it would be more justifiable to say that they're American, and Americans just happen to be black. I don't know if that's a controversial position to have as a black person but I also know the discourse on what makes something black or not is also very complex and ongoing and it's not something that's just black and white. Everyone experiences blackness differently.



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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 scary" (somebody really told me that once). It's important to understand the history of the object and how that relates to conversations around accessibility and respectability. It's funny because the Durag was originally created to make you look less threatening and now it's the flip. I want viewing my work to become a spiritual experience outside of the basic, "Okay we get what you're doing," 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 du-rags, 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.



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 paints you haven't used yet or a music producer using a new drum kit. It's exciting to be working with a medium that is constantly evolving and developing. I couldn't have made this work 10 years ago, the variety just wasn't there.

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With the Black Lives Matter movement in 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.



You had a show that opened just before COVID-19 hit, at the Museum of Art & Design, and then a 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.



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.

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 inxnite 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.

Akinbola says he was xrst 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 yag 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, reyecking on the in-crowd dynamic he believes his art creates. He xnds 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 reyeck 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 xrst 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 xnds viewers surprise him with their own personal stories that they see reyecked in his work.

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 xnd 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

How is the durag seen in African cultures?

For me watching Nollywood movies growing up, if somebody came on the screen who was supposed to be a Black American, they'd wear a durag. It was always an object associated with Black America but not in a great way. There's a form of 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.