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Anthony “Bunmi” Akinbola Uses Art as Social Commentary

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Artist Anthony “Bunmi” Akinbola creates art to understand the world around him, including gun violence, immigration, the use of palm oil and even durags.

Anthony “Bunmi” Akinbola would like to be known as an individual creator, and not for a specific body of work. This may well be the product of his artistic evolution. Akinbola’s earliest memories of creating art occurred alongside his family; his parents owned a store in his native Columbia, Missouri, while also operating a local arts nonprofit. The child of Nigerian immigrants, he remembers clearly sitting in the back of his mother’s store, rummaging through art supplies and monographs about Picasso—realizing that the shapes he knew so well could be reconfigured, expanded in order to create a visual commentary. In elementary school, he made 50 copies of his drawings and sold them around the neighborhood; the self-proclaimed MacGyver created foil figurines in his spare time, building toys from scratch using materials sourced from his garage. What he refers to as a “suburban kind of creation”—a response to boredom—has since transformed to an evolutionary, multidisciplinary career spanning media and themes. To this day, he infuses readymade and found objects into his work.

The Brooklyn-based artist considers his artmaking referential. He clearly remembers an early collage piece he completed atop a large American flag entitled *Target Practice* (2015), on which he’d stitched portraits he had taken of Black friends, each one revealing a different facial expression, their bodies replaced with silhouetted shooting targets. Akinbola had interviewed each person and taken their photos just a few years after he himself was a victim of gun violence. He wanted to explore his own perspective on gun violence, and this, he believes, was a means of growing into his Black American identity. Growing up with a reinforced African identity, it took time for the artist to feel accepted as an American rather than a child of immigrants; from that point, he began to incorporate nuances of

epistemic violence and critical race theory into his work, responding to his Blackness throughout, only later meandering into themes like commodification and color theory.

Material plays a vital role in Akinbola's artistry. He works with palm oil, shell casings, durags; every decision is significant and rooted in research. The artist, for instance, has spent the past four years exploring the use of palm oil beyond cooking, learning about the oil's production practices, which require extensive clearing and produce fire and smoke. In his work, the symbolism of palm oil touches on the calamity of the pandemic, a motif he said was "vague enough to be significant." As for the shell casings, these were items the artist came across in Belgium during a 2017-2019 residency at The Verbeke Foundation. He began to think of sound, the lingering ghosts of shell casings hitting their target, and so he crafted a device that would drop the casings off of probability, allowing them to drop creating sound in the space regardless of whether there was anyone in the space. "It's very similar to how these incidents happen outside in the actual streets, it's happening whether you are present for it or not," shared the artist. While conducting preliminary research, Akinbola examined the different types of bullets, their origin and the various sounds they made, the narrative changes that occurred over time playing into his work, largely in an effort to truly understand the material.

Mindfulness and intentionality are paramount. As Akinbola crafts his pieces, he strives to learn more about the world around him and allows his pieces to evolve naturally over time. Certain bodies of work, he admits, become different pieces entirely as they progress. For example his durag works—which initially dealt with accessibility and respectability, a response to the artist feeling othered while entering galleries—have morphed into two separate conversations around composition and color, the ready-made nature of mass production. Every work reflects a process of self-discovery, starting out quite literally before transitioning into a more theoretical take on color, texture, and the bending of fabric. The works have become more subversive as a result, a form of representational abstraction.

Each show is curated to the space in question. In Vienna, Akinbola's recent "Multilateral" exhibition at Galerie Krinzinger—where the artist was awarded a residency in 2020—is a response to living in Austria. The term multilateral itself is used often in international relations to describe the intersection of cultures, the joining of abstraction and representation among different bodies. The exhibition fuses work from across the artist's practice, including those from his renowned "CAMOUFLAGE" series, featuring the above-mentioned durags—visual statements of Black identity, global consumption, and cultural commodification. The exhibition also includes new works not yet presented to the public, leveraging palm oil and other materials to acknowledge the destruction brought about by COVID-19. Akinbola reiterates that he pulled elements from his experience to bring the show to life, acknowledging that there are times he simply cannot work with certain materials depending on the location. "I remember bringing durags to Belgium from America to work on some paintings, and I didn't end up even making the paintings. It just wasn't calling to be made at the time," he explains. The durags, he reiterates, began as a commentary on his experience living as a Black man in the United States, only later evolving into color theory while adapting the works in Vienna.

Akinbola appreciates that every work, and every series, features a unique starting point triggered by a specific location. He hopes that for every focus and for every material, work, or series, he can return after a decade, recontextualize his focus, and add new renewed depth to the meaning. "If it's a good work of art, you grow with it," the artist explains. And growth is certainly on Akinbola's radar. Lately, the artist showed his work at Hauser & Wirth in "The New Bend" exhibition, which featured 12 contemporary artists exploring the racial, class, and gender traditions of quilting and textile practice. He recently showed his work in Los Angeles, at an exhibition entitled "Black," held in February, curated to examine the emotional impact of the color black. Simultaneously, the multidisciplinary artist is writing a show with a friend as well as working on some audio-visual projects and creating and drafting programming for his family's art nonprofit. "My journey as an artist has a lot to do with how I am experiencing the world, my insecurities, my fears, my dreams, says Akinbola, it's a mindfulness for the banal, a regard for the everyday, a curiosity for the unknown and yet to be experienced."