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

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"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.

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.

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.

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.

