

ArtReview

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## Dragon Hill X ArtReview Writers Residency: Tom Denman

By Tom Denman

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**The second Dragon Hill X ArtReview Writers Residency text discusses abstraction in the context of work by Anthony Akinbola, Patrick Alston and Ludovic Nkoth, the three artists on the Dragon Hill residency with the author**

Over the course of 2024, six art and culture writers [selected by ArtReview](#) have been joining groups of visual artists selected by London's Unit gallery on a residency at Dragon Hill in Mougins, near Nice. This historic home, designed and built in 1964 by Jacques Couëlle, is set in a private domain that has counted Pablo Picasso, Jean Cocteau, Yves Klein, Yves Saint Laurent and Leo Castelli among its residents. Some of the writers on this residency have written previously for *ArtReview*, others have not; some of the artists are represented by Unit, others not.

The second resident, London-based writer Tom Denman, lived at Dragon Hill in June and early July. He has written a text on abstract painting by Black artists, focusing on the work of Patrick Alston, Anthony Akinbola and Ludovic Nkoth, the three artists on the Dragon Hill residency during his time there.

We're in a garden overlooking the hills of Mouans-Sartoux, about ten kilometres north of Cannes – abstracted, as it were, from the 'real world' – and we're talking about abstraction. The key concern of the conversation, raised by the three artists I'm sharing this residency with, is the institutional and market demand on Black artists in the US to enact legibly Black tropes, with gatekeepers hellbent on promoting the racial content of artworks, often disingenuously, above

all else. Anthony Akinbola, for instance, cracks up at the assumption that the title of his fabric work *Jubilee* (2021) intentionally refers to the Emancipation Proclamation – an assumption made by the online voice description attending its inclusion in *By Way Of: Material and Motion in the Guggenheim Collection*, at the Guggenheim in New York. Yes, it's funny, as things are when authority is so off the mark, but there is something worryingly reductive about overriding the very subjectivity that inclusivity is meant to bring.

As a white critic (and in this context, even though I'm also Japanese, my responsibility as a white person comes to the fore), I feel implicated. I think about whether, when I'm seeking out the 'critique' in art, I'm not forcing it to assimilate to my idea of what makes it good. If abstraction – as Ad Reinhardt argued during the 1940s – puts the viewer inclined to interpretation in the position of creator, perhaps it's incumbent on the critic not to prevail on an artwork to fill a certain political bracket. And so I set myself the task of considering how the three artists here – Akinbola, Patrick Alston and Ludovic Nkoth – have utilised abstraction to joust with hegemonic pressure to be Black on a white viewer's terms.

Events occurring on a not-so-distant shore prompt me to read an excerpt from the Palestinian theorist Edward Said's *Reflections on Exile* (1984), in which he introduces the term 'contrapuntal' to define an awareness of existing in 'simultaneous dimensions'. I think something similar to counterpoint is at play in the work of the artists I'm conversing with. I've been talking to Akinbola about the road, the subject of his work-in-progress, a body of works – possibly paintings, though the project is still in embryo – abstracting the phenomenology of driving. The artist's commitment to the road's marks and materiality poses a conceptual challenge, for me at least, not to veer into signification (of a Black man driving in the US). Is it possible for the works to be *just* about the road, and *not just* about the road, at once, with the work's point of conflict being the gravitational tug between the two dimensions? I think about some of Akinbola's developed work along similar lines. Much of it starts off with the politically charged material of the durag, which he then stretches across frames in crisscrossing striations or Sean Scully-like stripes. In these works – three of which he has made here – he tests the extent to which an emblem of American Blackness can be only form.