The Raw Potential of Objects

Anthony Akinbola's art transforms the familiar into the profound. Using durags, hairstyling wax, and leather hides, his installations explore identity, consumption, and cultural heritage, challenging art's boundaries and reimagining the value of everyday materials.

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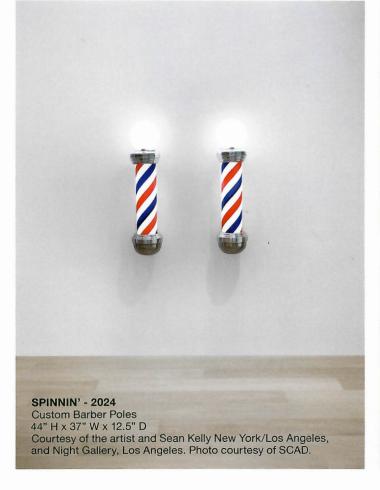


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A brightly colored jar of hairstyling wax and the silky sheen of a durag. These are household staples in the Black American home, but Anthony Olubunmi Akinbola's solo exhibition Good Hair at Savannah College of Art and Design transforms these functional objects into a celebration of Black Culture that defies typical art historical categories. The Price of Oil utilizes multiple metal shelving displays often found in pharmacies, these familiar-yet often unacknowledged structures-display neat rows of stacked jars arranged by color into a larger whole of structural chromatic units: section after section upon each shelf. It faces Sunday's Best, 2024-an expansive work spanning 48 feet wide is composed entirely of multicolored rectangles sewn together from durags. While each jar and

section of a durag constitute a product for a singular consumer, once multiplied, they create a monumental artwork bringing the two halves of the gallery in dialogue, nearly finishing each other's sentences despite their differing dialects. In paralleling beauty supply goods with art as a luxury object, Akinbola slyly unsettles capitalist hierarchies. This is fitting for an artist who believes that "the space of conceptual art can be very alienating, but it can also be very democratic".

Akinbola envisions the impact of an ensemble for these decontextualized found objects finding strength in numbers. The rhythms of color and joyful energy draw the viewer through the space, and mediate encouragingly the vernacular of each large







SUNDAY'S BEST - 2024

Durags on Wooden Panel, 576" W x 144" H x 3" D (12 x 48 ft) Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles, and Night Gallery, Los Angeles Commissioned by SCAD. Photo courtesy of SCAD.

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scale work. The artist "wanted to lean into making a multi color piece that had some movement and flow to it" as previous works were monochrome or illustrated the deviation of dye lots from different brands creating the same tone of colors. In an interview Anthony Akinbola shared that this Camouflage "painting at SCAD was like a step into really finding my voice and making the paintings that I've been wanting to make, but didn't know how to make for the past couple years, because I had to do the study and the experimentation." The artist's intuitive way of working imbues this monumental piece with expressive energy that unfolds in a symphonic nature, with a distinct lilt that seems to rise and fall-even crescendo-across its surface.

In its totality, what formal categorization describes this monumental piece? Is it a painting? Fiber art? A wall sculpture? Akinbola will tell you "I'm just not so keen on taking on titles that categorize... the direction for me is just contemporary art...anything can be art: the practice can be anything. And I've really found freedom in that." Therefore *Sunday's Best*, 2024 doesn't fall neatly into just one category:

interdisciplinary, simultaneously remaining all at once. Textile forms like ashoké-a popular Yoruban hand-woven technique of strip-cloth for Nigerian garments celebrating significant life events-or quilting techniques from the American South-notably celebrated by the artisans of Gee's Bend Alabama-appear to resonate within the artist's work, although the artist admits this is an indirect influence that may be subtly contributing to the final works as opposed to a motivated inspiration for them from the outset. When asked Akinbola replied "this is something I've been thinking of recently, but there is a narrative there about first generation identity, or hyphenated identity, where I'm able to play on this idea of being both Nigerian and American by using things that are primarily associated with Black America, but in an aesthetic that mimics traditional African textile creation." Reflecting the hybrid identity of the artist himself, as a Nigerian-American Akinbola equally draws influences from each cultural repertoire. Not hamstrung by overblown techniques nor myopic discipline-based boundaries, Akinbola's conceptual framing for a body of work comes first, generating





DETAIL OF THE PRICE OF OIL - 2024

Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles, and Night Gallery, Los Angeles. Commissioned by SCAD with generous contributions from Imperial DAX and Murray's. Photo courtesy of SCAD.



DETAIL OF SUNDAY'S BEST - 2024
Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles, and Night Gallery, Los Angeles. Commissioned by SCAD.

Photo courtesy of SCAD. Photo courtesy of SCAD.



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JUBILEE - 2021

Du Rag and acrysc on wooden
8' x 9' x 3' (96 x 108 x 3 in Guggenheim, NY

inquiries into facets of human nature and experiential elements of contemporary culture. Then the materials best suited to share that sociological question with his audience become clear.

Springing from methodologies Conceptualism and hard-edge abstraction, Akinbola creates distinctly sculptural "paintings" such as Jubilee, 2021. Following the crown of one's head, the durag's round curve billows, gathers, and hangs loosely from its wooden panel mount, or the long ties-to secure it around one's headdangle beyond the work's bottom edge. By breaking the surface's fourth wall plane, each element pulls away from its backing to enter into the Guggenheim's gallery, claiming more space where it is included in the group exhibition By Way Of: Material and Motion in the Guggenheim Collection. Acutely aware of renowned museums' disconcerting reputation of displaying "art [that] alienates a lot of people, usually", the artist consciously works to address these systemic issues by tackling them head-on. Akinbola foregrounds his own experiences "as somebody that felt alienated: how do I upset that? ... I'm gonna work with shit I'm familiar with" in his practice. He intentionally connects with voices often sidelined by the establishment's dismissive demeanor; "if I'm gonna do hard-edge abstraction, I think it's gonna be based in where we are now."

The aroma of leather greets visitors entering Western Beef, Anthony Akinbola's solo exhibition at Galerie Krinzinger in Vienna, Austria. A stack of tanned leather panels-each tagged with sample inventory codes-are strewn atop a plinth-like pedestal titled Raw Potential, 2024. A starkly blank wall allows smell to come to the fore as an active agent and artistic medium. In an unending loop, animal furs rotate upon a machine reminiscent of a dry cleaner's rack-or the meat hooks of a commercial slaughterhouse in Carousel, 2024. Then at the heart of the gallery, visitors pass amongst a flock of carved wooden goats (Manikin 1-15, 2024) that are strikingly inanimate, frozen in anticipation of their next step. Just on the horizon-through the French double-doors into the next room-a suite of Minimalist linen stretched Butcher series "paintings" seem to float above the herd menacingly. Poignantly inverting the



RAW POTENTIAL - 2024 Leather, 65 x 160 x 130 cm



DETAIL OF CAROUSEL - 2024 Conveyor, Fur, 215 x 90 x 800 cm

Transforming everyday objects into art as "democratic enough that people could enjoy it"

states in which these bodies possess the capacity for movement.

Leather hides and fur pelts are soughtafter raw materials exported for luxury fashion in Europe, whereas the living animals are ubiquitous in Africa, where, as Akinbola notes, "being around a lot of goats is super casual." Yet the human labor of shepherding, shearing, butchering, and tanning African animals for European finery is rarely discussed in global supply chain economics. Akinbola's work upends the imposed distinction between "lowvalue" extracted raw materials from North African countries and their highvalue worth as handcrafted goods by French couturiers and Italian ateliers. By circulating the dead animals' pelts in the gallery space, Akinbola eerily spotlights the structures of commerce that corporations conceal from consumers to protect their aspiration towards acquisition.

By actively abstracting the originating environments of familiar objects-removation consumers' focus on exploitation-their desirability may be enhanced, to increase consumption of food, hair care products. and fashionable status symbols. Anthory Akinbola poetically reveals the large systems at play through these objects pathways to create dialogues of both inclusive celebration, as well as criticals of fostering economic inequality and silencing the implications of these consumption-centric capitalist cultures The real testament to Akinbola's defiachievement is the artwork's ability connect diverse audiences while casting and the alienation that has plagued galleries and institutions since the post-war period. The artist reflects upon his Camouflage series successfully transforming everyday objects into art as "democratic enough that people could enjoy it".



