

DANCEHALL DIARIES

by AKEEM SMITH

Akeem Smith's debut solo show in Europe Queens Street opens up at Heidi Gallery in Berlin, 18th November 2021. He will also be exhibiting work at the Biennale de l'Image en Mouvement 2021 in Geneva from 12th November 2021–30th January 2022.

I was working intensely to prepare my first solo exhibition, *No Gyal Can Test*, during the beginning and height of the Covid-19 pandemic. As I spent days and weeks immersed in archival materials I'd gathered over course of many years, I was thinking a lot about truth, how we decide what it is, and whose voices get to be part of telling it.

Working with materials that had already been faded by the passing of decades, I was aware how quickly the voices and the stories of people in a particular time and place can disappear. But as the pandemic got more intense, the whole idea of truth was being turned upside down.

Lots of voices in power were claiming to know what was fact and what was right, but they were contradicting each other and even themselves. Meanwhile, people were on their own and not spending time in the places where they might go to compare points of view or even get away from the noise. Churches, parties, stores, schools, work, vacations, psychics – people were cut off from the social scenes and spaces they used to check on what was actual reality.

During this moment when our truths and even our futures were being rewritten live in front of our eyes, I began to think of some one-on-one recordings that I'd started doing when I began archiving materials and images from the dancehall scene as part of my practice years ago. Honestly, when I started documenting those members of the dancehall community, I was just doing it out of curiosity about details of the looks, the parties and the people.

But the pandemic that we're in made me think more about how the history of African/Caribbean cultures is being written and what will be remembered in the future. As time and first-person witnesses slip away into the past, who would the architects of education about the culture be? What would dancehall culture be like post-pandemic, and how would it be interpreted?

My experience of the Black History curriculum taught in the Western world is one where first-person narrative is usually missing. The retelling of the past is a rewritten history, done with an outsider's eye pointing at the shiny things, burying the ugly and the painful past in the dirt (or the margins), footnotes out of view.

Dancehall Diaries records a history that places first-person perspectives about what happened, where and when as the primary sources of authority. In this work, the women pictured in the archive discuss where they were, the concept behind their looks, and share the image of themselves as they want to be remembered.

Their interpretation of the scene they created, lived and defined at the time is the one that defines truth. That means the truth isn't a single story. No one is digesting and judging these accounts into a retelling that claims to be the One Truth. It is the memory of the community by the community, preserved for those who come after to judge for themselves.

My hope is to have the archive work as a template for others to do the same for their communities. ♻️



SANDRA LEE

(SANDRA LEE 051)

STILL FROM 'SOCIAL COHESIVENESS', BY AKEEM SMITH, 2020

This party was a black and white affair. The dress I'm wearing weighed about 20 kg, heavy in sequins. I was going for a prom look, I wanted to look like a prom girl that night. The necklace was given to me by a boyfriend. It was an outstanding piece, gold and pure diamonds. I had the best necklace – I'm not bragging, but it stands out.

AKEEM SMITH: Let's talk about the beauty, the make-up. How would you develop your make-up looks?

SANDRA LEE: Well, it depended on the fashion I was wearing that evening and what came into my head. I do my best to try to display it on my face. At that time I was wearing Fashion Fair make-up, they used to sell it at Macy's.

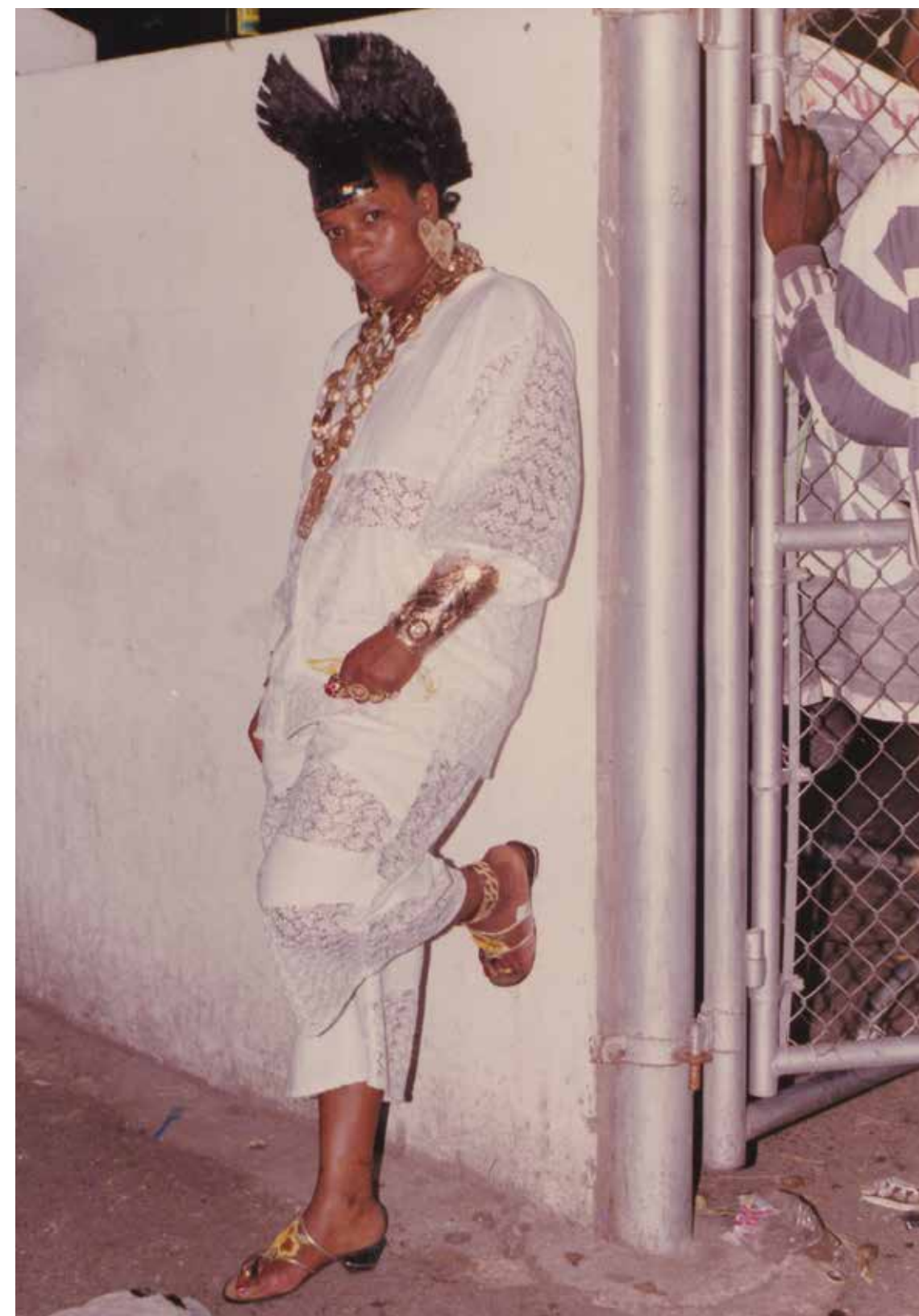


SANDRA LEE

(SANDRA LEE 056)

STILL FROM 'SOCIAL COHESIVENESS', BY AKEEM SMITH, 2020

SANDRA LEE: Wow. When I came to this party I came to star the show. I call this look the Movie Star Look. As you can see I'd lost a lot of weight, so the dress fit more drapey, a model form, slim and sexy. I think this was a jamboree at Skateland in Kingston, Jamaica. The shoes were by Anne Klein. I wore them to a funeral. We were dancing and I just left them at Dovecot burial ground.



WINEY WINEY

(NGCT2 _ 20161218 _ 0003)

DETAIL OF 'CENTERPIECE NO.4', BY AKEEM SMITH, 2020

WINEY WINEY: I think this was at House of Leo in Kingston; they hosted and promoted their own party. The linen suit I bought in England, purchased this from a lady in a market in London. My hair was done by this girl name Dolette. I'm very creative when it comes to hair, and I never wanted to look like anybody else. The end of the bang has a strip of sequins, which I added so it wouldn't look like the same hairstyle as anyone else. The suit: now, I liked things that were see-through with patterns, so it wasn't too revealing. Back then, Jamaican English girls, when they came back down to Jamaica, said, 'Da English dem neva look good.' If you look back, all the Jamaicans would come back with all these winter clothes, and it'd just look mad, and so my crew wanted to show them a different side. Being exposed to more things in England allowed me to be more extravagant with the clothes.



WINEY WINEY

(SCAN 13)

DETAIL FROM 'CENTERPIECE (MATCHES LANE)'

WINEY WINEY: Oh my god, Akeem! (*Laughs*) I don't remember where this was taken, but I remember getting those shoes from England. It was a very unusually shaped flat shoe, it looked very practical but it was weird. I think I got them from some kind of weird store in Soho.



DANCEHALL QUEEN CARLENE SMITH

(NGCT 025)

PHOTOGRAPH BY PHOTO MORRIS, 1991

DANCEHALL QUEEN CARLENE SMITH: This was in House of Leo – looks like it could have been one of those Big Dances, maybe 'California California' or something like that. Roger Rodney and I collaborated on this look. I always liked things that looked difficult. The back was exactly like the front. I wanted people to think, How did she get into that? Back then it was about IMAGE one hundred per cent. If you can't make people turn heads, just go do something else, go type or answer phones. I was not going to stop till what I present in my head comes into how I look. I was selling sex, but you can't buy it.



DANCEHALL QUEEN CARLENE SMITH

(NGCT 048)

PHOTOGRAPH BY PHOTO MORRIS, 26TH AUGUST 1995

DANCEHALL QUEEN CARLENE SMITH: I'm wearing a full Versace outfit from head to toe. It's a women's brief and bra set with a Versace robe with the emblem on the back, and on the back of the shoes as well. This was one of those show-off, name-brand moments. I came in with the robe closed and in the middle of the dance I just opened it.



DEBBIE OUCH

(DEBBIELAISLABONITA)

26TH DECEMBER 1994

DEBBIE OUCH: This was at House of Leo, around after Christmas in 1993 or '94. This was my baby-doll-go-punk look, with the all the accessories – silver bangles and big chunky rings. I created the earrings for this look as well.



PAULA OUCH
(NGCT _ 20161209 _ 0001)
DETAIL OF 'SUGAR MINOTT', 2020

PAULA OUCH: I love this picture. Barbara (Mama Ouch) made that vest – it was an odd shape with all a lot of trimming and appliqué. All done by hand. The Ouch rider shorts were patterned after some vintage gym shorts but tailored to give the batty rider effect. This was my signature hairdo at the time, the Nefertiti hairdo.



BEV
(BEV003)
IMAGE BEQUEATHED TO THE ARTIST, PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN, 1990

BEV: This dance (party) Peter Metro kept this dance over Almond Town, 1990. That's me in the blue, this outfit was made by a dressmaker in New York, this is a full body suit with the boots connected It took around two weeks to finish. Back in those days it was really important, to make sure your outfit was not similar to anybody else, this is not a uniform thing!