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The New
Originals

Frank Ocean



Memory Collector

Akeem Smith is well-known in the fashion world as a stylist and a designer. His latest project is far more personal. By Max Lakin

Photographed by Nick Sethi

“There’s an art to having a good time,” Akeem Smith says. He would know. Even though he’s standing alone in Red Bull Arts, a cavernous gallery space on West 18th Street in New York, Smith is presiding over a raucous party. The bass wallops you as you walk in, and throbbing video light pulses off the floors of Smith’s solo exhibition, “No Gyal Can Test,” a paean to the Jamaican dancehall scene, the rowdier offshoot of reggae that developed in the ’70s and ’80s and replaced traditional instrumentation with a digital, programmatic thrum. Snapshots and supercuts of partygoers—all women—poke out from all corners, their wild, skintight outfits demanding your attention. The images and the clothes are from the ’80s and ’90s, but you can feel these women here now, a mash of limbs and teeth and cheetah-print bodysuits, their energy coruscating through the gallery as it once did on the dance floor.

Smith, who is 29 and speaks gently in conversation, as though he’s telling you a secret, is known in the fashion world for his work as a stylist, largely with brands like Hood by Air and Helmut Lang, as well as with Section 8, a well-regarded, semi-anonymous collective steeped in ’90s club-kid nostalgia that debuted in 2017. (Smith was long assumed to be a codesigner, a speculation he only recently confirmed.) Section 8’s deliberate elusiveness—it takes its name from the federal low-income housing program, making a wreck of the brand’s online footprint—is the kind of thing the fashion world eats up, but it’s more than shtick. Smith prefers to sidestep the cult of personality that can form around on-the-rise designers in favor of the work itself. “We just lived through an era in which getting too much attention made someone the actual president,” Smith told *Vogue* after the brand’s debut.

Though the Red Bull Arts show is his largest artistic incursion to date, Smith has flitted in and around the art world for years. He had an early job as a studio assistant for the feminist artist K8 Hardy, and has worked with the photographer Deana Lawson on several projects. He has also featured in several of Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch’s film projects, including *Whether Line*, a gonzo fairy tale that finds Smith and the designer Telfar Clemens in a distorted Trumpian American Midwest.

Throughout this time, Smith was also at work on what would become “No Gyal Can Test,” quietly assembling a massive archive of the Jamaican dancehall scene that had permeated his life since he was a child, grow-

ing up between Brooklyn, where he was born, and Kingston, Jamaica. Smith first had the idea for the project when he was 16 and has been nourishing it ever since, hunting for vernacular photography, party flyers, garments, and, crucially, amateur and semiprofessional VHS tapes of house parties and club nights from roughly 1983 to 2000. In the past year, as he began presenting glimpses of this material in group shows and art fairs, Smith ramped up his activity, making trips from New York to Kingston to meet with people there, gain their trust, and absorb their stories.

Dancehall emerged at a moment of political and social strife in Jamaica, colored by the oppressive tendencies of Edward Seaga’s conservative government (it’s not a coincidence that Seaga, an erstwhile record producer, despised dancehall: “If you can’t whistle it, it is not music,” he sneered). As a response to disenfranchisement, dancehall’s advocacy for attitudes of self-possession and permissiveness is profound. “I daydream about how people used to party then, even though they had someone’s knee on their neck,” Smith says.

One thing Smith isn’t interested in is presenting a definitive account of Jamaican dancehall—in fact, he says he doesn’t even love the music all that much. His concerns are broader. Smith views the dance hall as both a specific place and a performance of identity. For him, dancehall exists as its own ecstatic ecosystem, one in which attitude is currency. “As a child I thought of it as, Oh, this is a place where people get to really show themselves, who they really are,” Smith says. “I saw it as a place where people could really desegregate from their lives, but still, there’s some familiarity there. I saw it as a safe space.”

Smith’s introduction to dancehall came in the form of the Ouch Collective, the fashion business his godmother founded in Flatbush, Brooklyn, in the ’90s and migrated to Kingston, and which created many of the indelible styles that populate the show. “They brought more of an atelier vibe to the dressmaking and tailoring situation that was in Jamaica at the time,” Smith says. “Just by having a full look, with accessories, they approached it differently. It was ready-to-wear, everything—full-blown.” Smith is deliberately vague in discussing his upbringing. He says he was raised “by a lot of people,” but he readily admits that he enjoyed hanging around the women in the studio, watching the way



Akeem Smith in one of the structures he built for “No Gyal Can Test,” at Red Bull Arts in New York City, in September 2020. Smith wears a Loewe sweater and pants; his own shoes and jewelry.



This page: Gallery attendant Dylan Garcia wears a uniform designed by Smith in collaboration with Grace Wales Bonner. Opposite: In the exhibition, scrap materials Smith sourced from Kingston, Jamaica, serve as scaffolding for personal photographs and decades-old video clips from dancehall clubs and house parties.

they interacted with one another. “I describe myself as a man with a woman’s intuition,” Smith says. “Obviously, I wouldn’t even know what a woman’s intuition feels like, but if I can guess, I think it’s something I have, just by being around women my whole life. I have a father—I don’t want to make it seem like I have some kind of absentee dad—but when I say I was around women, it’s the truth. They’re more cemented.”

Church was not exclusively a dancehall outfitter, but Smith remembers the care and detail with which the crew approached their party looks: the artistry of the hair and makeup, the elaborate costuming. It was clear to Smith that women were dancehall’s true protagonists, yet their contributions were routinely obscured by the DJs, who were all men. “The women in the dance hall are not really spoken about in the critical arena,” Smith says. “People write about them, but it’s a chapter in a book. Yet they’re the nucleus of the party. If the women aren’t having fun at the party, there’s no party. And it’s like, how are there 20 books on the sound system and not one about the main attraction?”

“No Gyal Can Test” is a corrective, a record of the female experience of dancehall: the ritual, the competition, the exercise of agency. The show’s title is taken from the note scrawled on the back of a photograph given to Smith’s father by its subject—a seductive promise, but also a demand of recognition. Sexual agency runs through “No Gyal Can Test” like a grounding wire, placing vulgarity and power on the same circuit. In one of Smith’s structures, titled *Soursop*, a delirious, mesmeric reverie of upskirt shots and crotch-grabbing seeps through the spare floorboards, as though seen through an inverted dance floor.

The exhibition is also a devotional act. One reason a dancehall archive like Smith’s didn’t already exist is because of the subjugation, and often self-diminishment, of Black personal histories in the slipstream of colonialism. “I think with certain Black history, and especially Caribbean diaspora, it’s not a culture big on archiving, at least in the lower socioeconomic part,” Smith says. Dancehall functioned as a kind of proto-social media. Photographers like Photo Morris would stalk the weekend scene in Kingston, offering portraits that would be printed and available at the next week’s party. VHS tapes would circulate between Jamaica and émigrés in New York, creating a tether. “It’s hard for them to see the value in certain things, because it’s not being

presented as valuable,” Smith says. Max Wolf, Red Bull Arts’ chief curator, tells me he feels Smith has hit a tipping point. “People are seeing Akeem as a preservation trust for so much of this history, which up to now was not necessarily coveted. It’s national heritage in his eyes.”

Remarkably, none of Smith’s fashion editorial work or Section 8 collections reference a dancehall aesthetic; his seriousness about the sanctity of the dancehall archive is such that he never cross-pollinated. “I think I held onto my intentions, and I think that helped me,” he says. Still, he did collaborate on the gallery attendant uniforms with Grace Wales Bonner, the British designer whose own line plumbs identity and race refracted through the Afro-Caribbean diaspora (her mother is white and English; her father is a Black Jamaican). Wales Bonner met Smith in 2013, when she was living in New York, and felt drawn to his work. The two had discussed collaborating but never found a project that felt natural, until now. Earlier this year, Wales Bonner traveled to Jamaica to meet with Smith on the design of the garments, essentially a draped, De Stijl color-blocked silk tunic that suggests regal finery. Wales Bonner says she wanted to create a uniform that spoke to her work but also “complemented the vibrancy of the worlds Akeem has conjured,” describing the archive as “an important record that deserves to be celebrated.”

Records can be murky, and Smith has no interest in clarifying them. He splices and combines footage based more on what feels right than on what might be strictly accurate. The artifacts that make up “No Gyal Can Test” are arranged in and around shanties Smith stitched together from found materials culled during trips to Kingston, where he grew up: flattened oil drums, concrete blocks, the splintered wood from a food stall, the rubber tarps that made up the roof of a bike shop. Smith’s sepulchral assemblages are made from the ruins of buildings from his life, and so their meaning is intensely visceral. “I don’t believe in negative memories,” Smith says. “I don’t believe there’s anything bad.” Smith sees the archive as a living document—the goal is not to explain what dancehall means to Jamaica, but to find healing in expression. “It’s not really for right now,” Smith insists, but to “help people in 2150 understand their own lives better.” “No Gyal Can Test” is a boast, but it’s also faith in the promise of another future. ♦

GROOMING: BLAIR PERRY FOR RHC; HAIR: PRODUCTS AND TOM; FORD: BEAUTY AT ART DEPARTMENT; MODEL: DYLAN GARCIA; PHOTO ASSISTANT: ETHAN GREEN FELD

