

# **BROOKLYN RAIL**

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

November 10, 2020

## **Akeem Smith: *No Gyal Can Test***

By Darla Migan



Akeem Smith, *Memory*, 2020, Single-channel video, custom speaker system, color photographs, steel, score by Alex Somers. Courtesy the artist and Red Bull Arts. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

Akeem Smith's *No Gyal Can Test* is an exploration of the visual, sonic, and material culture emanating from dancehall, wherein the now globally exported form is understood from its social and political specificity and not simply for its unforgettable style. A homegrown, intergenerational, communal happening, dancehall originally emerged in Kingston, Jamaica with the growth of the capital's metropolitan life. Taking off in the late 1970s at the opening salvos of the neo-liberal—which is to say neo-colonial—response to worldwide anti-colonial struggles (which included Jamaica's own national independence in 1962), the Caribbean island's famous dancehall queens lit up the whole diaspora, tripping off of empires, and moving at the speed of globalized consumption.

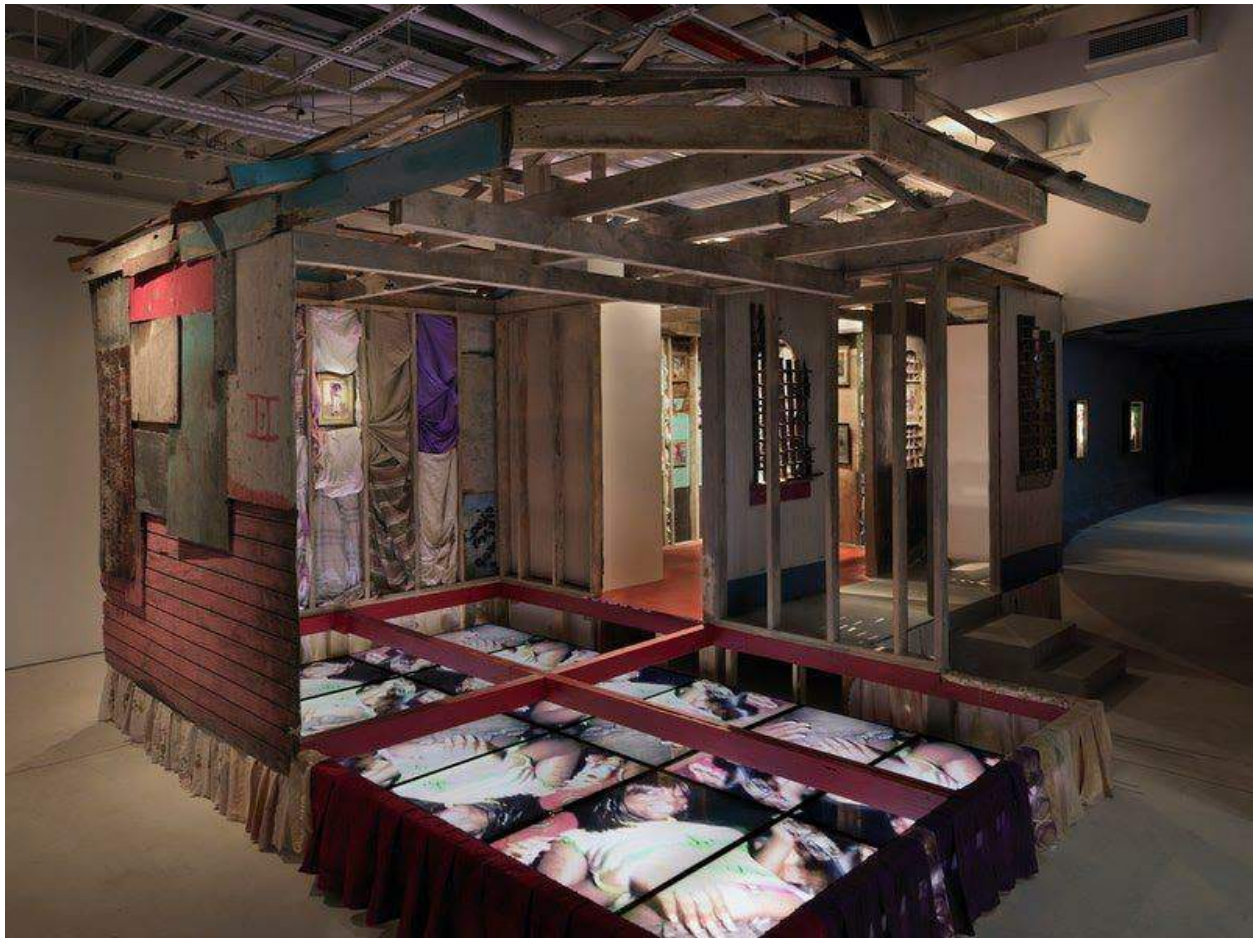
As both a refusal of disenfranchisement and as a party scene, dancehall is a movement centering peripheries. Although *No Gyal Can Test*, is a deeply personal project for the professional runway stylist and creative director, Akeem Smith curates his extensive archive of photographs and collection of video scenes (passed down from his godmother's Ouch Crew) to bring to life a critical genealogy of diasporic style that continues to influence millions.



Installation view: Akeem Smith: *No Gyal Can Test*, Red Bull Arts, New York, 2020.  
Courtesy the artist and Red Bull Arts. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

While the viewer experiences a certain spatial specificity—an invitation to the yard so to speak—and a sincere sense of a particular history sometime in the near past, this exhibition gracefully refuses the pathos of an ethnographic display. Instead, Smith creates fresh angles of retrieval through selectively composed archival material, new works, and collaborative designs—with gallery attendant uniforms by Grace Wales Bonner, heavy-duty sound system architecture mirroring practical shelter, four new sculptures by Jessi Reaves, breathtakingly remixed multichannel video installations, and original soundscapes from Total Freedom, Physical Therapy, and Alex Somers. Overall, Smith shows off the complexities of Blackness through dancehall, both a unique site of cultural innovation and a future-facing, internationally intertwined movement; one that comprises a rich energetic field both inspired by and potentially inspiring to Black women-led resistance against ongoing and interconnected systems of inequality and violence.

At the age of 29, Smith is known worldwide as a wunderkind stylist of runway fashion. In this exhibition, he directs our gaze by syncopating the viewer's sightlines with their movement through the galleries. Passing through the Red Bull Arts foyer before encountering the standard-issue wall text announcing that we have entered the space of art, between having your temperature taken and checking in for the appointment to keep capacity limited, we glance over the landing and are at once captured by an incredible sight: bejeweled hands moving rhythmically over a gyrating crotch. Far below and out of grasp, craning the neck for a better view does not help in the darkness with the gallery's own beams further crosshatching the gigantic wall of screens below, *Soursop* (2020). Close-up shots of dancers vying for the symbolic capital and other economic rewards of celebrity radiate up from what feels like a hundred feet below, signaling the recalibration of an inevitable voyeurism that works to overwhelm the viewer's trained male and colonial gaze. That anticipated gallery gaze, which always orders Black women's bodies to be kept down low, is short-circuited and we are immediately advised to reorder our sense of direction and open up new lines of sight. This intentional moment of disorientation creates a semi-autonomous gaze back, affirming that the dancers' bodies are conjuring titillation on their own terms.



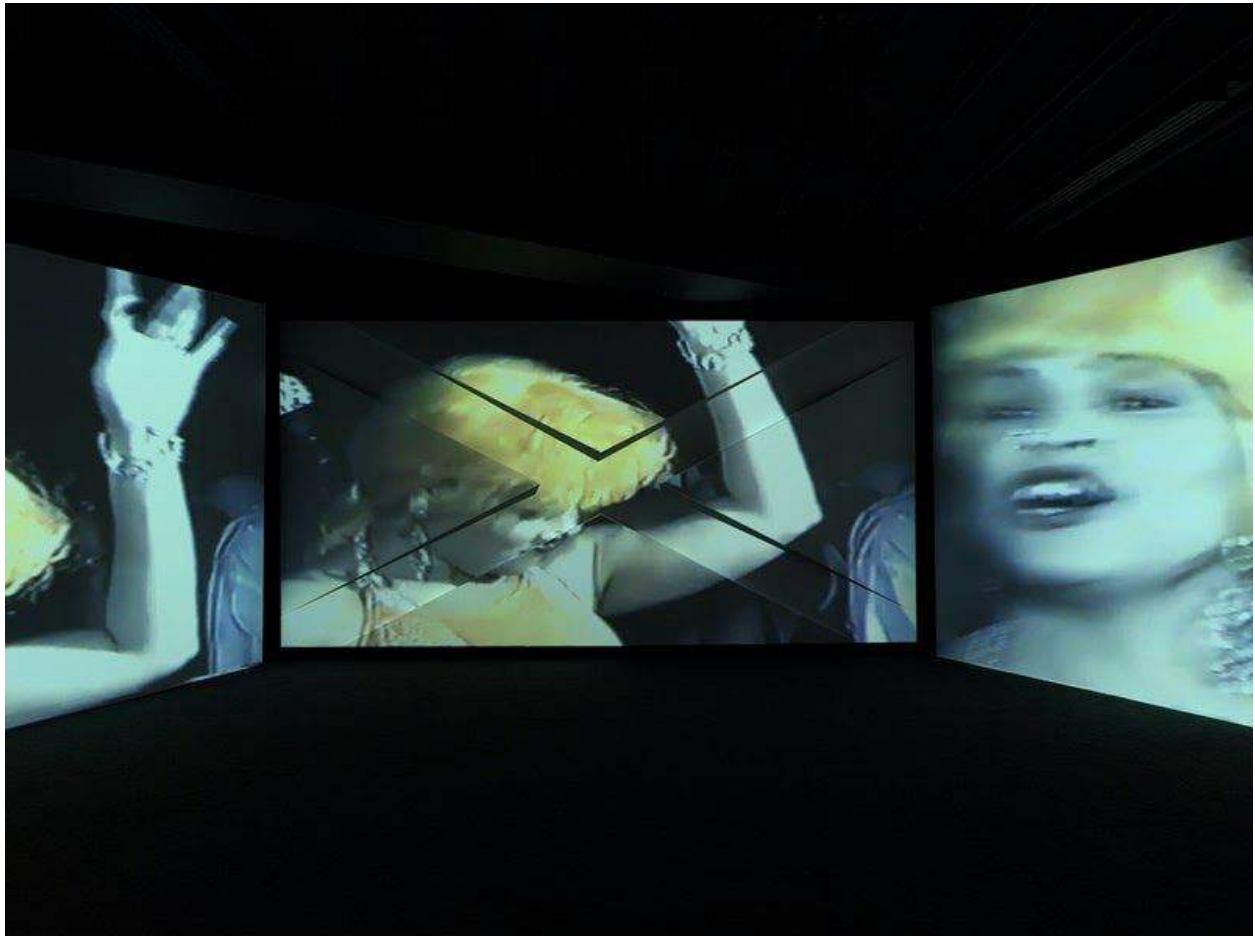
Installation view: Akeem Smith: *No Gyal Can Test*, Red Bull Arts, New York, 2020.  
Courtesy the artist and Red Bull Arts. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

Instead of merely showcasing the history of dancehall through the repetition of scantily clad bodies, Smith offers a personal articulation of his polysemous abodes—moving between enclaves of “home” that both hold back secrets and overflow with vivacity—to become a continuous celebration in the future perfect tense. By reordering the gallery gaze and flipping around outsider-insider status, Smith speculates on



what will have been by reassembling the fashion, rituals, and nightscapes forming the habitus of his own youth from an undetermined—yet not unimaginable—future. Upon entering the series of installations (alongside a fellow Black critic) we immediately feel relaxed and begin to reminisce about childhood trips taken back and forth from the global North to extended family living further South and on both sides of the Atlantic.

To recognize the dancehall diaspora does not necessarily require that we have been to the same places or even share some totalizing set of familiar folkways. But like Proust's madeleine, what comes flooding in for a Black woman by way of the hail "gyal," for example, is thick sensorium—so culturally heavy, carrying the weight of an existence so tightly bound up with the interpolation of what it means to become recognizable as such. It is a word with connotations so deep and so wide that it cannot be communicated via mere translation from the patois. Roughly, gyal means she is coming into her own and it is a term with a multitude of inflections which cannot be mistaken even when experienced in a new context. To be called gyal is, among other things, to be accused of acting grown, sometimes in seriousness or perhaps in playful jest based on tones learned (and never forgotten) from aunties. But it is also an indication that "she" is an erotic being, capable of experiencing pleasure for herself. Scribbled onto the back of what is now an archival photograph, the exhibition's title, *No Gyal Can Test* means then, that shining under the "video light," the gyal in question is the maker of her mark, the keeper of her life's direction, if only in that very moment of self-adulation.



Akeem Smith, *Social Cohesiveness*, 2020. Three-channel video installation, score by AshlandMines.  
Courtesy the artist and Red Bull Arts. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

Smith's reordering operations, placing the marginalized at the center, hit a peak chord in the three-channel video installation *Social Cohesiveness* (2020). Memorable images of a single, slim dancer, costumed in pink and filling her own stage in the dawn light hours of the yard, keeping the rhythm of her own mesmerizing groove, are juxtaposed between flashes of newsreel footage of Princess Margaret's visit to Jamaica in 1955 and the blue-sky-and-smoke-filled screen of the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center. Separated by a space of two generations, the score to *Social Cohesiveness* by Ashland Mines—which took my breath away—weaves together two very different scenes of imperial disintegration, leaving the only integrity intact that which is commanded from the confidence of the dancer's indefatigable grit.

As *No Gyal Can Test* testifies, the significance of celebrating Black culture in an anti-Black space and time is to remind Black people that we continue to understand ourselves and our cultural contributions quite well; and to show that it is we who continue, in fact, to make the co-mingling of joy with the tightest axes of power available on the world stage while also setting it aglow.