

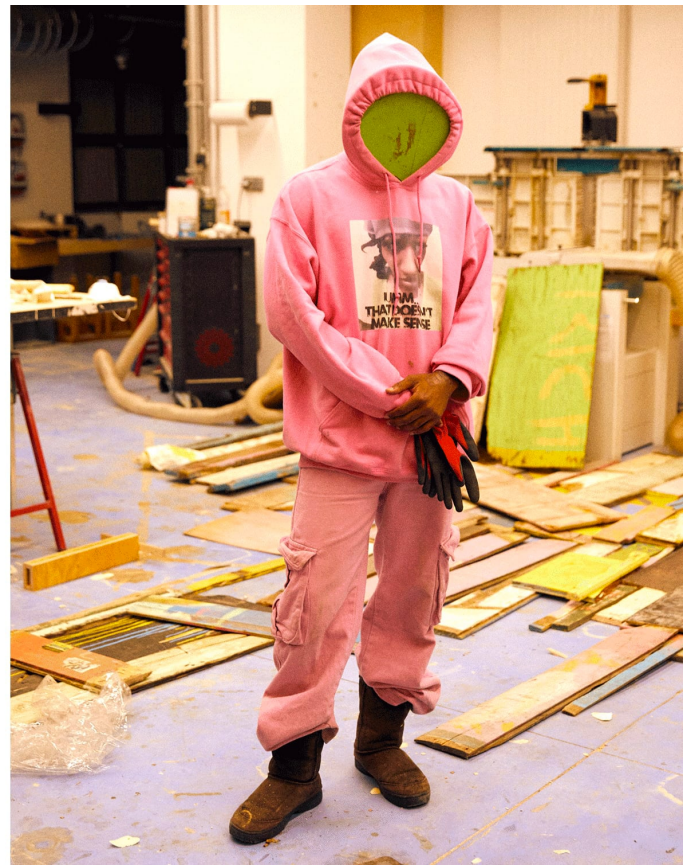
As told to Ingrid Luquet-Gad

How artist Akeem Smith created an archive of dancehall culture

'My work brings forth the unknown subjects of global Black history,' says the laureate of the Galeries Lafayette group's Production Support Program

'*Dovecote* (2020) is a video and a sculpture named after a burial ground in Jamaica [where the New York-born artist was raised]. It was a piece that I created somewhat quickly. I had a near-death experience that made me think about my existence. I started to plan my own funeral in my head, and this is how *Dovecote* came to be.

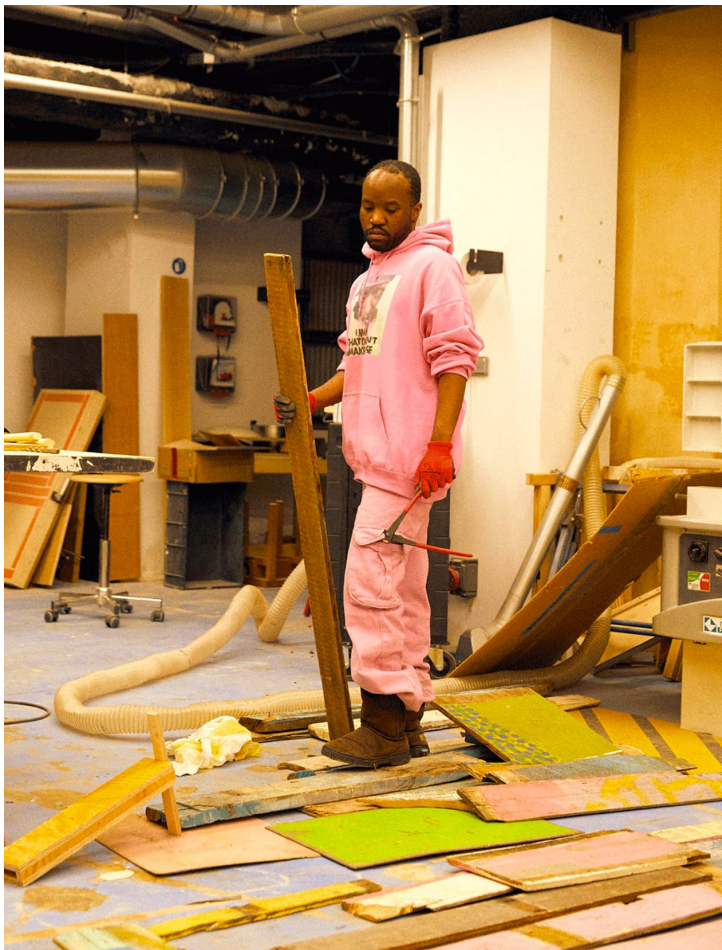
'The exhibition "One Last Cry" at Lafayette Anticipations shows this work in conjunction with the sculptures I worked on while I was in residency there. The new pieces can be seen as urns and the whole installation itself functions as a tomb that visitors can come into.



Left: Akeem Smith, Dovecote, 2020. Installation view of 'No Gyal Can Test', Red Bull Arts, New York, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and gallery Heidi. © Akeem Smith. Right: Akeem Smith in his studio in Paris. Photograph by Mathieu Richer Mamousse for Art Basel.

'Since 2008, I have been assembling an archive of dancehall culture. It started off with me just wanting to preserve my family's stories. They had a bunch of photos and moving images taken at various parties, functions, and events. Gradually, I began to casually reach out to videographers and photographers in Jamaica that used to take pictures at events. I was still working in fashion and for some time it remained my expensive hobby.

'At first, this material was specific to dancehall. I was gathering only the media that pertained to that culture: the newspapers, the VHS tapes, the DVDs, and the photos, spanning from the 1980s to the 2000s. Then, it turned into including other "shadow archives," meaning the visual cultures of smaller communities. For instance, the Panamanians often have a very specific, eccentric, and flashy style, especially when it comes to jewelry. All those subcultures connect into something that I would describe as a transatlantic visual aesthetic.



Left: Akeem Smith in his studio in Paris. Photograph by Mathieu Richer Mamousse for Art Basel. Right: Akeem Smith, *One last cry*, 2023 © Akeem Smith.

‘The first time I got involved with the material myself was when I made a small video snippet. It was a looped invite for a show at the artist Terence Koh’s gallery in New York in 2009. 10 years later, I ended up reusing it for my debut solo exhibition “No Gyal Can Test” (2020) at Red Bull Arts in New York. I had met Maxwell Wolf [the curator who founded the non-profit Red Bull Arts space in 2013] and the idea was initially to make a book. A year later, he suggested I do a show instead.

‘This came about as for some time already I had also been gathering physical material. I was really into the architecture of necessity and was grabbing things off the streets or in graveyards – wrought iron mostly. In Jamaica, I had a place to store it, but I did not yet know what I wanted to do with it. There was not a plan to follow a multidisciplinary approach, until I suddenly realized that everything could live together. Today, you can see how I used some of that material to make *Dovecote*.



Akeem Smith, *Dovecote*, 2020. Installation view of 'No Gyal Can Test', Red Bull Arts, New York, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and gallery Heidi. © Akeem Smith.

'The "mummifying of the culture" could be seen as a general theme for the works. Jamaica is a funeral culture where death is very present, and, to a certain extent, also loved. I wanted to reflect this by expressing the metaphysical and nontangible aspects that constitute a person, or a people. The works' status as an un-institutional archive is the most important to me. There aren't any places where you could go and see this sort of material per se, not even in Jamaica. When presenting the show in France, I am also wondering what other historical connections I can draw the work to. Ultimately, *Dovecote* brings forth the unknown subjects of global Black history.'