

ARTFORUM

TOP TEN

AKEEM SMITH

By Akeem Smith



Ari Up performing with the Slits at the Coliseum, London, March 11, 1977. Photo: Ian Dickson/Shutterstock.

Akeem Smith is a New York–based artist and the founder of underground clothing label Section 8. He grew up in Brooklyn, New York, and Kingston, Jamaica. His first major solo presentation, “Akeem Smith: No Gyal Can Test,” is currently on view at New York’s Red Bull Arts.

01 **FRED M. WILCOX, *I PASSED FOR WHITE* (1960)**



Poster for Fred M. Wilcox's *I Passed for White*, 1960.

The YouTube algorithms dropped this flick at my doorstep. I'm not the biggest fan of old black-and-white dramas BUT THIS ONE—a psychological horror story ahead of its time—IS IT. I was shocked at the lengths to which the movie's main character, a “tragic mulatto” stereotype by the name of Bernice Lee, would go to conceal her Blackness—although she nearly gives herself away at several points throughout the film.

As someone who has never had the privilege of code-switching—I was always getting schooled that being myself was

inflected muddle, white women have a special value, a worth they're taught how to uniquely cultivate and deploy. When I learned that Sonya Wilde, the actress who was cast as Lee, was actually white, I screamed and it fucked me up all over again. But Wilcox's film still hits a nerve, and I've grown to cherish this obscure, perverse gem.

02 **AZEALIA BANKS, *YUNG RAPUNXEL PT. II* (2019)**



Graphic for Azealia Banks's digital mixtape *Yung Rapunxel Pt. II*, 2019.

When the musician, social commentator, and cultural prophet Azealia Banks dropped this sonic bible last year, it flew totally under the radar. This unmastered mixtape is Banks at her most masterful: It's a conceptually sophisticated and seamless thirty-minute track that is the most forward-thinking body of work that *any* mainstream musician has put out in years.

03 **LOVE ON THE SPECTRUM** (2019–)



Love on the Spectrum, 2019—, still from a TV show on ABC Australia. Season 1, episode 1. Ruth and Thomas.

I marathoned this Netflix reality show from Australia—which follows the dating life of autistic people—and now it’s become one of my favorite series. This show isn’t for the sanctimonious—it walks a tightrope over exploitation with scrupulous care and brings a rare, empathic take to reality TV. While the program’s participants were initially presented as being “quirky,” any divisions I might have found between them and myself rapidly disappeared. Their search for love and companionship wasn’t so different from my own.

04 **KELLYANNE CONWAY’S RESIGNATION FROM THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION**

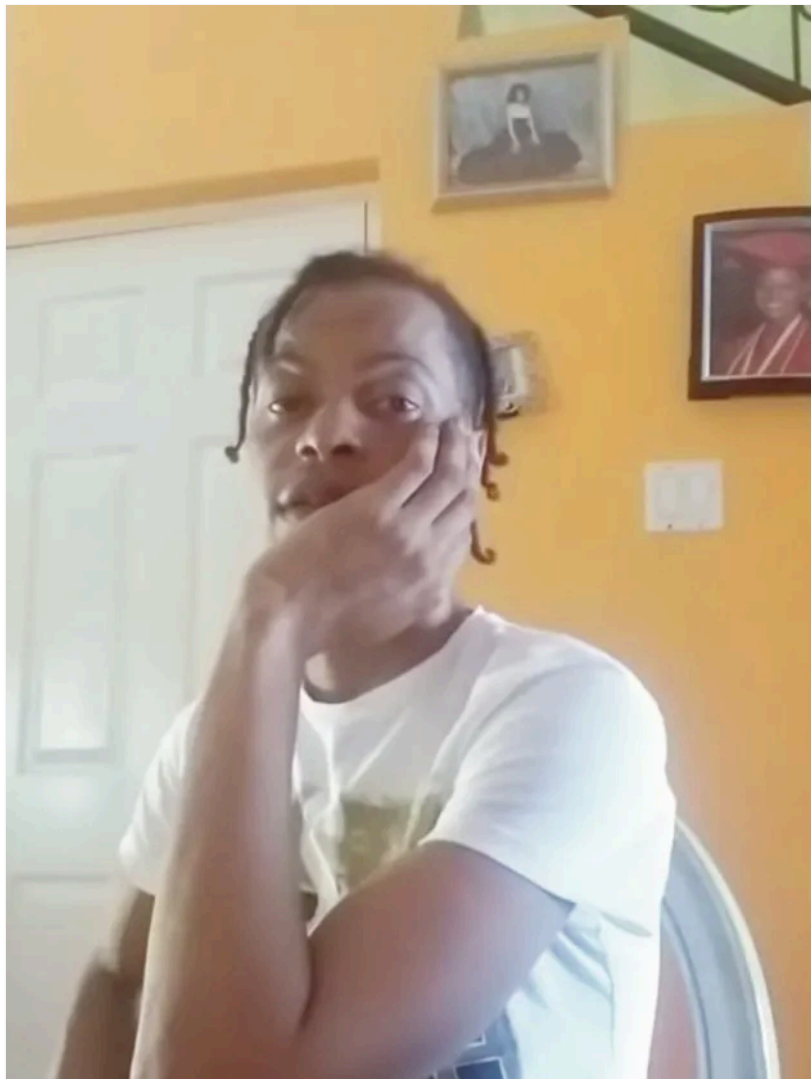
Knowing when to fold is a talent that not many have in this ego-driven society of hypervisibility. KC is going through some real-life shit: Her husband has been publicly asserting his hate for her former boss and colleagues since Trump took office, while the both of them try to raise four young children (including Claudia, a left-leaning teenager and TikTok queen who loathes her mother’s politics and wants to be legally emancipated from her parents). Going through all this during a pandemic? She can’t be the wind beneath the USA’s wings on Zoom. And let’s remember that she’s the first female campaign manager to win a presidential election, who’s now sacrificing her still-pre-peak career for the sake of family. *Where are the violins!?!?!?*

OPRAH

05 WINFREY'S *LEGENDS* *BALL* (2006)

This three-day gala (which was condensed into a television documentary) honoring twenty-five African American women from the realms of activism, art, and entertainment—and featuring A-listers such as Maya Angelou, Rosa Parks, Leontyne Price, Tina Turner, and Cicely Tyson—looks like the RADDEST party ever. I'm mad Whitney Houston, Beyoncé, and I missed it.

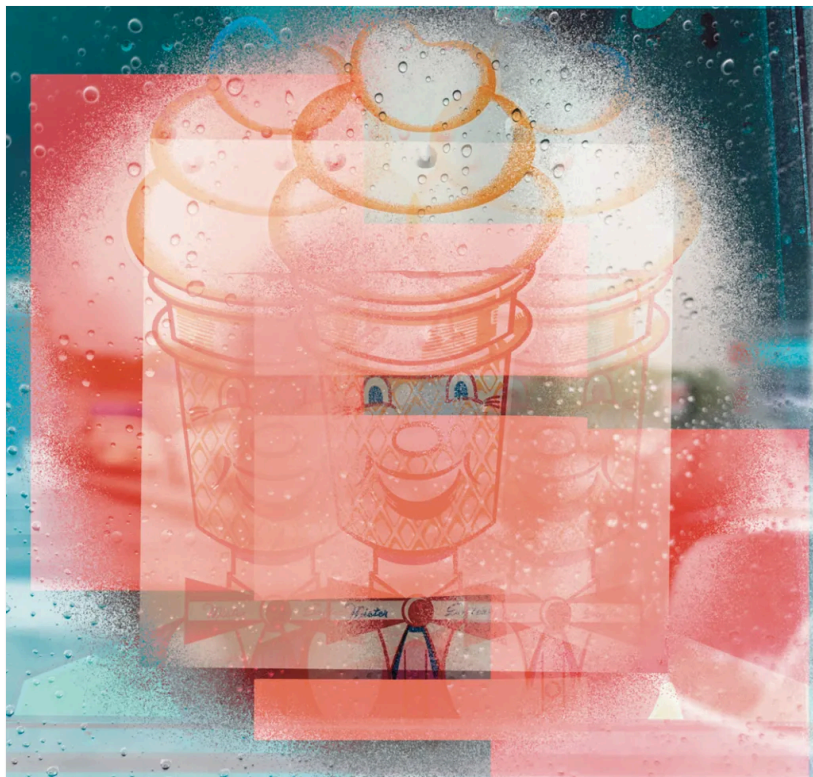
06 JAMAICAN COMEDIAN AND ACTOR KEITH "SHEBADA" RAMSEY'S YOUTUBE CHANNEL, HAPPY CORNER LIVE



Screen grab from Happy Corner Live's YouTube video "Shebada happy Corner Live (Work)," June 24, 2019.

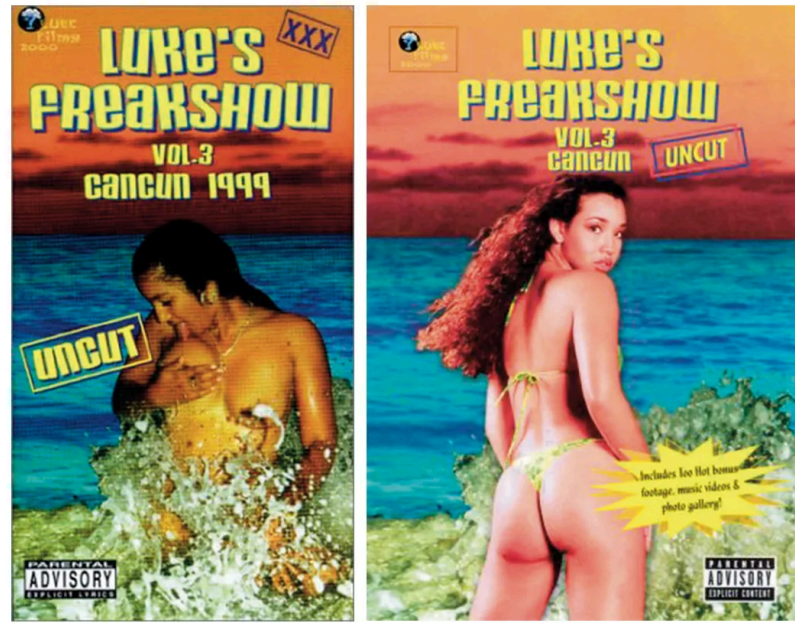
This is my version of AM radio, by which I mean programming stripped of all elements of professionalism. Usually filmed at his home or at a friend's place while *coching* (the term is Jamaican dialect for couch-surfing), Shebada makes meandering videos that refuse any of the preexisting vlogging formats: He doesn't do product reviews, unboxings, or the "like-share-subscribe" thing—it's just simple chitchat about his friends, his community, various Jamaican celebs, and assorted personal dramas, all in his native patois. Once I got over my initial this-man-is-literally-talking-to-his-phone-all-day-with-no-one-else-around-for-hours-he-must-be-nuts response, I started to appreciate it. Shebada initially became famous for his performances in "roots plays," slapstick theater productions that are popular in Jamaica. One can see this influence in his videos, which take on elements of Caribbean folklore and certain oral traditions. Though Shebada is not openly gay, he is a comforting and acutely queer presence.

07 JUSTIN NEELY



The artist titles his artworks very interestingly. The digital piece featured here is called *For More Fears*, 2018. I'm a junkie for clever wordplay.

LUKE'S FREAKSHOW, VOL. 3, CANCUN 1999 (2001)



VHS and DVD covers of *Luke's Freakshow*, vol. 3, *Cancun* 1999, 2001.

When Cancún was *Cancún*! Looking through my VHS archive, I discovered another GEM. *Luke's Freakshow* has toxic masculinity and toxic femininity on full display. I love the discourse around how media affects human behavior, and this document of spring-break debauchery—courtesy of Luther Campbell, aka Luke Skyywalker of 2 Live Crew—is a good case study.

09 ARIANE FORSTER, AKA MADUSSA (1962–2010)



Ari Up performing with the Slits at the Coliseum, London, March 11, 1977. Photo: IanB Dickson/Shutterstock.

I think I met this woman at a roaming bus-party event in Jamaica, and she introduced herself to me as Madussa, as she'd been nicknamed by a Jamaican MC. She was a sight for sore eyes in the dancehall scene, renowned for her impeccable dreadlock hairstyles. She became entrenched within that community—not even those born in Jamaica had as much access to that world as she did. Some were suspicious of her: At a certain point, rumors about Madussa being an FBI agent began to circulate.

One day during my teenage years, I was looking for a new song to put on my MySpace page and was shocked to discover that Madussa was a member of the punk band the Slits (back in those days she referred to herself as Ari Up). I became even more intrigued about all her different lives. She was my first introduction to transracialism, and it felt like an out-of-body experience. Her commitment to the dancehall way of life made wiggerism seem like child's play. I remember watching an old dancehall tape of her, and she's saying, "I'm a widowed baby mother; in fact, I am the original *Browning*" (the term is slang for "light-skinned person").

While Ari Up doesn't make an appearance in my show "No Gyal Can Test"—an excavation of my old dancehall archive—I want to give her an honorable mention.

10 UNTITLED VISUAL



Internet meme image, ca. 2017.

I don't know where this image comes from, but it calms me. It reminds me to take risks. *In luxury.*