



Akeem

Text by Courtney Malick
Portrait by Anders Edström

Akeem Smith, all of 33, has, in fact, been an artist for much much longer than one might think. He has been lauded for his standout work in fashion, which includes styling, editorials and designing, for over ten years. And yet, as his ventures into contemporary art take hold, it is clear that those prior endeavors were heavily rooted in a shrewdly artistic sensibility all along. Furthermore, initial plans for his seminal art project, *No Gyal Can Test* (2020), which is now known as a most distinguished entree into the art world, were already in the works as early as 2010. Yes, when he was still a mere teen, he was bestowed with a vast treasure trove of an archive, handed down through relatives that had been integrally involved in the Dancehall culture of Kingston, Jamaica. Smith, who was raised in New York, had also spent time in Kingston while growing up and visiting his maternal grandmother, who owned a nightclub. These archival photographic, video and printed materials were all apiece of the layered history of Jamaica's vibrant Dancehall scene of yesteryear, replete with the fabulous fashions and outrageous personalities of various "crews," prime among them the Ouch Crew, spearheaded by Smith's paternal grandmother and aunt. Considering that Smith understood, so many years ago, that a slice of history as rich as this was destined to one day be shared within art spaces and discourse, it is perhaps a bit ironic that he should necessarily be thought of as an artist of *his*—or of *this*—generation. Maybe, rather, it is this current moment of ours that is finally catching up with Smith's distinctive perspective, wherein he has transubstantiated the narratives and aesthetics of the history of Dancehall with a cheeky sense of humor and pith that belies his eclectic upbringing and manifest dynamism.

First exhibited at the now defunct New York Red Bull Arts space in late 2020, anticipation for *No Gyal Can Test* ensured that the show's content would excite prospective viewers. What people were not prepared for, however, was the singularly immersive and transportive puissance of Smith's architectural installations, which were configured to house the stories that *No Gyal Can Test* tells. In part, what makes these structures (within which video screens, speakers and printed materials are strategically folded and featured) so compelling, is the tangible interiority that they evoke. Having culled found materials like housing

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panels and wrought iron gates directly from the same Kingston streets that hosted many of the community events that are documented within the exhibition, Smith draws viewers in to his labyrinthine fabrications. With this, he celebrates the place, its people and history, while also reframing the abundance and complexities found therein.

But beyond their physical intrigue, there is something especially illustrative about Smith's sculptural edifices—something that speaks directly to the in-descript or duplicitous nature of today's goings on. Smith once described these works as having a sense of "the survival of the fittest." They are at once bold and statement-proclaiming, and yet are just as seemingly precarious and fragile. Conceptually, these works straddle a divide between production and destruction that is deeply—if perhaps subliminally—felt throughout the world at the moment, as geo-political conflicts are inflamed by shifty rhetoric and tech, all while democracies hang in various states of balance. The same contradictions that we are facing globally, are, on a far more specified scale, laid bare in the dichotomies that Smith's structures etch out between the protective cocoons of domesticity, and the aggressive consequences of instability and accelerated flux.

After the incredible response to this microcosmic work, additional versions of *No Gyal Can Test* have gone on to be widely exhibited, with a recent and nuanced extension of the project, titled *One Last Cry*, which was developed during Smith's 2023 residency with Lafayette Anticipations in Paris. With *One Last Cry*, Smith again applies his archival talents and ties imagery from the past with culture today. This somewhat site-specific translation of his produced sculptures whose tonality relates to the infamous, makeshift barriers and assemblages that had organically formed in the city during the historical events of civil unrest in May of '68. However, unlike *No Gyal Can Test*, which elucidated upon specific times, places and peoples, *One Last Cry* focused on broader themes, such as manmade geographical borders and, as Smith put it, the "cultural denominators," that bind us together despite so many supposed disparities. Here, his works are less spatial, instead claiming a ceaseless type of independence that recalls familiar diachronic markers, like tombs or literature. A series of such sculptures, titled *Books* (2023), lean upwards into pyramid-like forms as if having grown directly out of the gallery floor over long periods of time, throughout which more and more

rumination unto them has accrued, rendering them as totemic caches.

The breadth between these two inter-related bodies of work ensures that Smith's take on issues—past or present—will continue to invigorate with his keen brand of percipient vision. Now represented by Heidi Gallery in Berlin, his works travel to various exhibition spaces, where they find themselves in the rather unusual position of operating as formative agents for recontextualizing the kinds of sociographic conversations that art, at its best, ought to foster.



Memory, installation view, Red Bull Arts, New York, 2020 Photo: Dario Lasagni
 (p. 326 top) *Queens Street*, installation view, Heidi, Berlin, 2021 Photo: Diana Pfammatter (p. 326 bottom) *With Love 85*, 2023 (detail) (p. 327)



Ashland Mines audio mixing *Social Cohesiveness for No Gyal Can Test*, Red Bull Arts, New York, 2020 (p. 328 top) *Social Cohesiveness*, installation view, Biennale de l'Image en Mouvement, Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève, Geneva, 2021
 Photo: Quentin Touya (p. 328 bottom) *Stone Love*, 2024 (p. 329) All images Courtesy: the artist and Heidi, Berlin ©Akeem Smith