

DAVID
KORDANSKY
GALLERY

AZIKIWE MOHAMMED

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Azikiwe Mohammed's multi-disciplinary project surveys what he has called "the landscape of Blackness," which he envisions "as a constantly moving target that is defined by the people most actively participating in said landscape. A portrait of Blackness is a portrait of reinvention and newness that exists outside of time." Accordingly, his work takes an ever-shifting variety of forms. He has designed and built immersive spaces that challenge aesthetic and ideological parameters imposed by white institutions; engaged in a long-standing practices of photographic portraiture and audio-visual documentation; and, as in the works on view in this exhibition, reimagined the function of and possibilities for legacy objects like jewelry within Black communities.

The artwork of Azikiwe Mohammed (b. 1983, New York) has been shown in galleries both nationally and internationally. A 2005 graduate of Bard College, where he studied photography and fine arts, Mohammed received the Art Matters Grant in 2015 and the Rema Hort Mann Emerging Artist Grant in 2016. He is an alumnus of Pioneer Works in Brooklyn, New York, and Mana Contemporary in Jersey City, New Jersey. Mohammed has presented a number of solo exhibitions in venues including Anna Zorina Gallery, New York (2020); Elijah Wheat Showroom, Newburgh, New York (2020); Mindy Solomon Gallery, Miami (2019); SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, GA (2019); Ace Hotel Chicago (2018); Knockdown Center, Maspeth, New York (2017); and IDIO Gallery, Brooklyn (2017), as well as multiple solo offerings at the Spring Break Art Show, New York. Group exhibitions include Say It Loud, Christie's Viewing Room (2020); Black Is A Color II, Antenna Gallery, New Orleans (2018); Black Is A Color, Charlie James Gallery, Los Angeles (2017); and Harlem Postcards, Studio Museum, Harlem, New York (2017). Mohammed's work has been featured extensively in magazines, including VICE, I-D, Artforum, Forbes, BOMB and Hyperallergic. He lives and works in New York and currently has his studio at Mana Contemporary.

AZIKIWE MOHAMMED

born 1983, New York, NY
lives and works in Manhattan, NY

EDUCATION

2005 BFA, Photography, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY

SELECTED SOLO / TWO PERSON EXHIBITIONS

(* Indicates a publication)

- 2020 *A Place to Sit With Magnolias*, Elijah Wheat Showroom, Newburgh, NY
396 Wortman Ave, Anna Zorina Gallery, New York, NY
- 2019 *Blackest Night: A Survey in Blackness*, SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, GA
90 – 91 + 2011 – 2019, Visions From Home, Mindy Solomon Gallery, Miami,
FL
Auntie / Uncle Julius: Welcome, Always, Public Swim Gallery, New York, NY
- 2018 *Jimmys Thrift Of New Davonhaim*, Ace Hotel Chicago, Chicago, IL
Black Labor, Rush Arts, New York, NY
- 2017 *Jimmys Thrift Of New Davonhaim*, Knockdown Center, Maspeth, NY
Armor Photo Studio: House Visits Welcome, Long Gallery, New York, NY
Potential Futures / Black Receipts, IDIO Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
- 2014 *Black Internet*, gallery: SENSEI, New York, NY
- 2012 *Frequent Aberrations 2009-2012*, 7Dunham, Brooklyn, N

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

(* Indicates a publication)

- 2020 *Say It Loud*, curated by Destinee Ross-Sutton, Christies Auction House

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

- FIVE.*, curated by Nina Chanel Abney, We Buy Gold
Won't You Call Me By My Name, Wassaic Project, New York; NY
The Living Room Kitchen, curated by Kiara Cristina Ventura, The Andrew Freedman Home, Bronx; NY
Welcome Home: A Sunday Afternoon in Mariel Capana's Little Stone, Open Home, Good Weather Gallery, North Little Rock, AR
- 2019 *The Autotopographers*, John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, WI
Landscape Winter Season, Elsewhere, Brooklyn, NY
Counterpublic, The Luminary, St. Louis, MO
I Am My Story, Mindy Solomon Gallery, Miami, FL
- 2018 *A Different World*, curated by Joygill Moriah, Bronx Art Space, Bronx NY
Record Keepers, curated by Anna Hoberman and John Ros, Duke Hall Gallery, James Madison University
Open World, Arlington Arts Center, Arlington, VA
Black Is A Color II, curated by Essence Harden, Antenna Gallery, New Orleans, LA
- 2017 *Black Is A Color*, curated by Essence Harden, Charlie James Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Harlem Postcards, Spring 2017, Studio Museum In Harlem, New York, NY
Fondo Malerba, curated by Frank Franca, Fabbrica del Vapore, Milan, Italy
Future isms, curated by Jon Feinstein, Glass Box Gallery, Seattle, WA
- 2016 *Timeshare*, curated by Joygill Moriah, Sarah Sandbach, Alya Albert, James Allister Sprang, Pauline Miller, Kenya E. Johnson-Freeman, Connor Messinger, Sarah Kisner, and Michael Miller, BHQFU, New York, NY
- 2015 *Power, Protest and Resistance*, curated by Oshun Layne and Daniel Simmons, Skylight Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
- 2014 *Radical Color*, curated by Jon Feinstein, Newspace Center for Photography, Portland Oregon
Exterior, Gitana Rosa Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
Fifteen Warren, 15 Warren Street, New York, NY
- 2011 *The Camera Club of New York's Annual Silent Benefit Photo Auction*, curated by Elisabeth Biondi, Matthew Leifheit, Saul Robbins, and Allen Frame, The Camera Club of New York, New York, NY

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

- 2010 *The Adult Playground*, Spinks Gallery, New York, NY
 The Aljira Fine Art Auction 2010, Newark, NJ
 Behind the Scenes, The Camera Club of New York, New York, NY
 New Works, curated by Jon Decola, Hostetter Arts Center, Martinsville, NJ
 Le Roman Du Lievre, MTS Gallery, Anchorage, AK

AWARDS

- 2016 Rema Hort Mann Emerging Artist Grant
2015 Art Matters Grant

RESIDENCIES

- 2019 The Wassaic Project, Wassaic, NY
 Mana Fine arts @ 777 International Mall, Miami, FL
 The Luminary, St. Louis, WA
- 2018 Kickstarter, Brooklyn, NY
- 2016 Mana BSMT, Mana Fine Arts, Jersey City, NJ, 2016-2017
- 2015 Pioneer Works, Red Hook, Brooklyn, NY, 2015 - 2016
- 2013 ESKFF @ Mana Fine Arts, Jersey City, NJ, 2013-2014

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- 2020 Hawley, Anthony, "The Five Inescapable Moods of this Moment," *Frieze.com*,
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 Steinhauer, Jillian, "The Thrill of Unpredictability at Two Art Fairs,"
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DAVID
KORDANSKY
GALLERY

- 2019 Walsh, Brienne, "At SCAD, Azikiwe Mohammed Conceives of a Utopia for Black Americans," *Forbes.com*, July 25, 2019
Amussen, Jasmine, "Black, Soft, and Wavy: In Conversation with Azikiwe Mohammed," *Burnaway.org*, May 10, 2019
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- 2018 Ross, Jessica, "A Studio Visit and Interview With Azikiwe Mohammed," *Juxtapoz.com*, November 06, 2018
Matthew, Teresa, "Wakanda, New Davonhaime: The Yearning for a New Black City," *Citylab.com*, May 3, 2018
Rankine, Claudia, "With Love: Jimmy's Thrift of New Davonhaime," *Art Forum*, January 2018
- 2017 Ongley, Hannah, "artist Azikiwe mohammed is building a fictional town for black people who don't feel safe," *I-D.Vice.com*, January 27, 2017
Trouillot, Terence, "Portfolio by Azikiwe Mohammed," *BombMagazine.com*, January 27, 2017
Voon, Claire, "Spring/Break Art Show Trades Labryinthe Rooms for Immersive Installations," *Hyperallergic.com*, May 9, 2017
Mohammed, Azikiwe, "Prodigy (1974-2017)," *Artforum.com*, June 30, 2017
- 2016 Kerr, Dylan, "Strange Times at Spring/Break: 5 Must-See Booths at New York's Coolest Art Fair," *ArtSpace.com*, March 2, 2016
- 2015 Kerr, Dylan, "Meet Azikiwe Mohammed, the Meme King of Fast Food, Jailed Rappers, & Dreamy Dolphins," *ArtSpace.com*, July 31, 2015
- 2014 Silver, Leigh, "Artist Azikiwe Mohammed Talks Internet Inspired 'Free Max B' 'Free Bieber' and 'Free Lil Boosie' Tapestries," *Complex.com*, March 6, 2014
C, Kairi, "'Free *Insert Favorite Rapper Here*' – Now Available On Tapestries Thanks to Artist Azikiwe Mohammed," *TheSource.com*, March 11, 2014
- 2012 Storm, Christian, "Azikiwe Mohammed Takes Beautiful Pictures of His Roadside Meals," *Vice.com*, October 13, 2020

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artnet

‘You Can Build Spaces That Mirror the Safety You Wish You Had’: Meet Artist Azikiwe Mohammed, Who Designs Safe Havens for Black People

The artist, who works in a broad array of media, treats art as a service.



A detail from Azikiwe Mohammed's show, “Blackest Night: A Survey in Blackness” at the SCAD Museum of Art.

Azikiwe Mohammed was parked outside a Burger King next to the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the COVID-era world was changing.

“We don’t have a lot of physical spaces that we’re allowed to be in without having to buy something,” he said of the 125th Street Burger King, which was gated and abandoned in the wake of the pandemic. “You would think Burger King, you would have to buy something—you don’t. Just hang out, take a seat—a community room, right? So, seeing another one of those go always hurts.”

Azikiwe—who self-identifies not as an artist, but as a “dude who makes stuff”—often makes temporary homes and physical spaces for Black people. Sometimes he designs places to relax, environments where a shared language is spoken, or sometimes places where new languages can be created.

These familiar-yet-dreamlike environments, imbued with a sense of safety, are often multi-room, multi-dimensional experiences. For “Blackest Night: A Survey in Blackness” (2019), a show at the SCAD Museum

Andrews, Arden Fanning, “You Can Build Spaces That Mirror the Safety You Wish You Had’: Meet Artist Azikiwe Mohammed, Who Designs Safe Havens for Black People,” *Artnet.com*, July 7, 2020



A detail from Azikiwe Mohammed's show, "Blackest Night: A Survey in Blackness" at the SCAD Museum of Art.

of Art in Savannah, Georgia, Azikiwe designed a bridge, a park, a neon dinner table scene, mounted televisions, flickering projections, and wall after wall of tapestries, paintings, photos, and handcrafted treasures memorializing lost community members.

“You can build non-threatening spaces,” he said. “You can build spaces that mirror the safety that you wish you had.”

And he doesn't restrict himself. When I asked about the media that he had touched in the past year, Azikiwe, 36, rattled off bronze casting, jewelry fabrication, painting, neon bending, photography, performance, video, and sound work. It's as if, like water, he's constantly moving and reshaping the landscape.

His latest video work, *Second Round*, recently debuted in “FIVE.,” a virtual show curated by Nina Chanel Abney for the We Buy Gold gallery. (The show, which included works by Solange, Nick Cave, Ilana Harris-Babou, and others, ran through June, and nothing was for sale. Instead, the gallery asked viewers to donate to Project EATS's COVID-19 Healthy Food Initiative.)

For *Second Round*, Azikiwe filmed New York beaches at dusk over multiple days as the basis for a surreal, 10-minute technicolor experience. The electric spectrum of sky, sand, and ocean in the film is accompanied by intermittent sounds of birds, applause, darkly cinematic synths, and waves.

Andrews, Arden Fanning, “‘You Can Build Spaces That Mirror the Safety You Wish You Had’: Meet Artist Azikiwe Mohammed, Who Designs Safe Havens for Black People,” *Artnet.com*, July 7, 2020



Azikiwe Mohammed, *Second Round* (image still, 2020).

“Every single time that we speak, I feel like I am getting introduced to yet another piece of him,” said We Buy Gold founder Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels.

“Like a vast home with seemingly endless rooms for every purpose, Azikiwe makes space for labor, play, retreat, learning, celebration, community, and memorial. And continuing with this analogy, there would definitely be a large and thriving garden with a body of water with depths that cannot be measured.”

Every Day You Wake Up Is a Triumph

Waves are a useful metaphor for the way Azikiwe thinks about his work.

“Blackness is 400 years old, and the only ground we have is ground we were brought here to give to someone else, to till for someone else, so our culture is in our body, not in the ground,” he said. “For us, to try and touch the rest of the world, it’s to grab a liquid ground that has been everywhere.”

“Rage is a wave that flows through you,” he added. “Anger comes in, makes itself at home, and then becomes part of you. Anger is part of the Black experience because where rage is more temporal, anger lives outside of time—but the waves keep coming. We are seeing one such wave now.”

As we spoke, a cop pulled up beside Azikiwe on 125th Street, which the artist described as one of his “favorite places on the planet.” Azikiwe paused, exhaled, and admitted it was “always terrifying” to see the police, even without a pointed interaction.

The possibility of death at the hands of police is constantly looming. Simultaneously, the Black Lives Matter movement has consumed America’s consciousness after the tragic police killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. It’s an ongoing and horrifying reality that Azikiwe’s work has addressed for years: in *Unarmed* (2016), he created a jewelry board displaying gold and silver nameplates of unarmed Black people killed by police that year. In 2017, he made a series of works named after Meagan Hockaday, Tyisha Miller, Aiyana

Andrews, Arden Fanning, “You Can Build Spaces That Mirror the Safety You Wish You Had’: Meet Artist Azikiwe Mohammed, Who Designs Safe Havens for Black People,” *Artnet.com*, July 7, 2020



Azikiwe Mohammed, *Unarmed* (2016).

Jones, and Mya Hall, each of whom was killed by police between 1998 and 2015. There are 17 victims in that version of his series, which he said is an unfortunately an ongoing work.

“As a Black man living in America, you are born dead,” he said. “And every day that you successfully wake up is a triumph, is a cause for celebration, and is a chance to close out the receipts left open from yesterday.”

A Sense of Responsibility

Azikiwe has shown work around the world: at the MECA International Art Fair in San Juan, Puerto Rico; the Material Art Fair in Mexico City; the Fabbrica del Vapore in Milan; Italy and at London’s 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair.

A large amount of his work is about travel. For the photo series “From Here On Out,” he followed a path carved by the Underground Railroad and came up with the imagined town of New Davonhaime, which takes letters from the five most densely populated Black cities in America (New Orleans, Detroit, Birmingham, Jackson, and Savannah).

Throughout his travels, Azikiwe has gathered objects—photographs, ceramics, cameras, and various painted items—and has arranged them, along with works he made, for a project called *Jimmy’s Thrift of New Davonhaime*, which he has realized in various iterations at MoMA PS1, the Knockdown Center in Queens, the Ace Hotel in Chicago, and the Spring Break Art Show in New York.

The idea behind the work, he said, is to provide a respite from that which “plagues Black and other marginalized people in America.” It’s here that he asked guests to send him recordings of them retelling the first time they realized they were Black, which he then arranged for an audio project titled *My First Time*.

“Whenever I have these shows, I try to provide some form of service, if possible, [even if] it’s as simple as



Azikiwe Mohammed, Jimmy's Thrift of New Davonhaim at "Blackest Night: A Survey in Blackness" at the SCAD Museum of Art.

taking somebody's picture and handing it back to them," Azikiwe said. "I always try to build something in, because if I have access to the resources, it's my responsibility to hand it back. We don't get handed back things often."

"This Has Always Been a Busted System"

Azikiwe's dad, a "man of many jobs," died when the artist was in his 20s and continues to occupy his thoughts.

"He took pictures at schools, of nurses, up-and-coming Black bands, gospel churches," Azikiwe said of his father. "It's a form of representation that's an externalization of self, difficult to achieve in other mediums and in general, so it's always service. Art is a service position."

Artist Leah Dixon has seen firsthand over the past 15 years how Azikiwe has connected with his subjects.

"Even though Azikiwe's practice is very intentional and planned, he leaves a lot of space to spend time with the people he meets along his way," she said, noting that "he forces us to become participants."

Much of Azikiwe's practice centers on performance as a means of being physically present—a feat many Black people aren't allowed to perform.

"We get killed outside, we get killed in the house, we get killed in the cell—death surrounds us at every single point," Azikiwe said of being Black in America. "We have to fight to stay alive, and that's an enduring performance that is really tiring. No performer wants to perform for that long."

"It's not that America is broken, it's working the same as it always has," he added. "This has always been a busted system, and that last bandaid just fell off. And thankfully, everybody's on board."

Burnaway

'Black, Soft, and Wavy : In Conversation with Azikiwe Mohammed



Azikiwe Mohammed, performance still of *Blackest Night: A Survey in Blackness*, courtesy of the artist.

Somewhere within every citizen's mind resides a familiar affinity with their country's important cities. Especially today, someone who has never been to New York or London or Paris still possesses an impression of those cities in their mind, as unshakeable as the weather. Artist Azikiwe Mohammed's speculative city New Davonhaime further experiments with our understanding of pervasive urban aesthetics through the kaleidoscopic lens of Black American life. The environment for Mohammed's ongoing project *Jimmy's Thrift, New Davonhaime* incorporates elements of Black cultural capitals and touchstones into a cohesive, uncannily familiar landscape. In *Blackest Night: A Survey in Blackness*, his first museum solo exhibition, the New York-based artist brings airbrushed t-shirts, gold chains, and porcelain plates bearing an array of Gucci Mane mugshots to the SCAD Museum of Art in Savannah. It's a family reunion in a museum — you can almost hear "Before I Let Go" playing. Through photographs, paintings, installations, and performances, Azikiwe Mohammed reminds us that it doesn't matter if you've never been to Atlanta or Harlem or Detroit, because Black people built it, colored it, abandoned it, burned it—their memories are our memories, and New Davonhaime is everywhere.

Our conversation was conducted via email in March and April and has been edited for publication.

Jasmine Amussen: The place where *Jimmy's Thrift* is located is an amalgamation of several American cities. Can you tell me about how you chose elements from each place to make this imagined Black city? What was important for you to include? Black people give cities such distinct personalities—I'm surprised I can't say Jimmy's Thrift is definitely in Atlanta.

Azikiwe Mohammed: As Black people we have always had to speak in codified language in the interest of safety, from the days of slavery to more modern times, as in cases of code switching in the workplace. This language often turns into cultural trends. As one portion gets taken and Post Malone'd, we make more—always have, always will. This constant need to rebuild and remake what has been taken from Black culture and bastardized makes for a language that, while seasoned by regional differences, is relatively universal and includes visual iterations as well as sonic forms. Due to this fluidity, I don't need to outline which parts of which place come from where, but the visitors to Jimmy's Thrift are able to throw their jacket



Azikiwe Mohammed, installation view of *Blackest Night: A Survey in Blackness*, SCAD Museum of Art, Photography Courtesy of SCAD.

onto the couch I have provided. The couch I have provided is called New Davonhaime, and the cities that make up New Davonhaime are New Orleans, Savannah, Jackson, Birmingham, and Detroit. These are some of the cities in America with the highest population density of Black people as determined by years of census data.

JA: In addition to your solo show in Savannah, you recently got back from installing in Wisconsin. Tell me about the work you currently have on view at the Kohler Arts Center.

AM: That exhibition is a group show called *The Autotopographers*, which is based on an idea set forth by art historian Jennifer A. Gonzalez arguing that “aspects of biography can be revealed in the creation of one’s environment.” My offering for the show is a version of T.T. Davis Park, the first public space for New Davonhaime—its name is derived from the names of Harriet Tubman, Nat Turner, and Angela Davis. T.T. Davis Park is an attempt to look at public space in Brown communities, or the lack of it, to examine what it would look like if it were realized. My installation offers words and views from potential visitors to the park, as well as descriptions of the surrounding landscape in the form of audio pieces and bins of photographs that have descriptions of each image affixed to the backs of the prints.

JA: I found your journal imagery very delicate, almost wistful, suffused with longing—even beyond being shot on 35mm film. How does your personal work influence your professional work, or do you strive to keep the two worlds separate?

AM: At this point most of my personal work is my professional work, and I keep my road journal as a tool to remember all of the places I’ve visited, hotels I’ve stayed at, and locations of the photographs I took so that I could re-shoot anything without



Azikiwe Mohammad, from the series *From Here On Out*, courtesy of the artist.

needing to remember all of the details. This frees my mind to focus on the work ahead of me. I shoot 35mm because I think it looks better, and also, pragmatically, I print most of my own photographs in the darkroom, so it's easier for me that way. There is no need to long for an event that has already happened, but it is always good to remember so you can improve in the future.

JA: There is a lot of handwringing going on right now about digital cameras ruining our memories. Sally Mann, who is frequently criticized for taking pictures of a South that exists only in the white imagination, has also described using her camera in a similar fashion—as sort of an extension, an addition, but not a replacement of memory.

Memory is such an important facet of showing love and preserving treasure, and the Black memory is long, especially in the South, and especially in the places you modeled *New Davonhaim* around. It's also a huge part of mythmaking—at the bottom of every legend is a kernel of truth, a true memory. Is there a way to look at your work as an additional tool for memory—the memory of Black spaces (or Blackness), real or unreal? What myth you are making?

AM: I am thirty-five years old. I remember the internet not existing, the painful patience of dial-up and the first out-of-focus, banal photos a friend sent me with their < 1mp camera phone. We still used point-and-shoot film cameras. Most of those times I remember well, and it's not that they weren't documented as feverishly as we do now with our camera phones, largely for social media—but they were documented differently, with limits. You had twenty-four or thirty-six shots, and the ones that would now be deleted from your phone were still handled by the photo lab person, and they always resulted in a pile of prints.

As the years tick on, the images that seemed to be of less importance at the time have grown into the only ones I care about. That chance to allow time to curate your memories—not curating in the moment—is the main sea change we currently swim in. Memory grows as new experiences are added to either side of the mental memory scrapbook we keep in our minds, but if we only allow space for one page and constantly replace everything on that one page with something better, we lose context, and context is what turns memories into stories, and stories into fables. Fables are how we pass down history.

This is why many people my age and younger have added the point-and-shoot camera back to their visual vocabulary, why Polaroid is being sold at Walmart and Target. We may purchase these cameras as an attempt to swim upstream, but in most cases there is still something missing. Neither of these stores sells rolls of film. Rolls of film go into cameras that



Azikiwe Mohammad, from the series *Black Internet*, courtesy the artist.

are intentionality makers. Disposable film cameras require no commitment to the item and are usually turned into a CD of scans. The disposable camera acts as an in-person photo filter, not a return to intentionality. We are made to pay for intentionality. Nowhere is this better seen than in the over-inflated cost of almost any point-and-shoot reloadable film camera. As has always been the case, longevity is saved for those who can afford it, an extension of the expense of time, the most expensive of humankind's resources. This is where the creation of the white imagination stems from: an excess of time, an excess of resources, and oftentimes the cash to back both.

This is where my series *Black Internet* grew from. I wanted to see if the ideas and visual practices of the white imagination would still hold their form when applied to Black people. What is it that makes our language so malleable and the white imagination so monolithic? With my photographic work, I look to provide information that can be added to the left or right pages of someone's mental memory scrapbook, in hopes that a story will grow and that a fable of years past may get a new haircut. I don't want to make any myths, that's not my job. My job is to handshake the memories already created by our people, introduce as much intentionality as possible into all of these handshakes, and then hand them out to anyone interested in adding a page to their scrapbooks.

JA: Your series *Black Internet* reminds me a little bit of soft ghetto and other sort of Black-on-the-internet aesthetics that were a little absurd, a little sexy, a little hardcore, and very meticulous and consistent. *Soft ghetto* and those other sort of Tumblr aesthetics don't really exist anymore, and Black Twitter is more and more appropriated every day. Where do you see the Black internet living now, or in the future?

AM: I was not familiar with *soft ghetto* until just now, and thank you. The aesthetic is quite wavy. I think a lot of these parallel visions of and alternatives to mainstream Blackness exist because celebrating the wide landscape Blackness grows across is a task only accomplishable somewhere with enough space, and one of those places is the internet. Tumblr was a great tool for many of us with these similar aesthetics to find each other, but as the wider definitions of Blackness have become more mainstream or socially accepted, the role of these online spaces hasn't diminished but has shifted. What first existed as an internet aesthetic now lives in the real world as the line between both spaces continues to blur, and I hope this only continues further as time goes on. As for Black Twitter, whenever they take something from that complicated and magical space, we gone make up some next, so I'm not worried about anything over there. We always gone be fine.

ARTFORUM

WITH LOVE

AZIKIWE MOHAMMED TALKS WITH CLAUDIA RANKINE ABOUT
JIMMY'S THRIFT OF NEW DAVONHAIME

This page and opposite: Two views of "Azikiwe Mohammed: Jimmy's Thrift of New Davonhaime." 2017, Knockdown Center, New York.



New York native AZIKIWE MOHAMMED has been making art for over a decade. His multidisciplinary practice—which merges painting, photography, sculpture, performance, and found ephemera—prioritizes, at its core, the experiences, needs, and subjectivity of people of color in America. On the heels of his first institutional solo show at Knockdown Center in Queens this past fall, Mohammed spoke to visionary writer, poet, and playwright CLAUDIA RANKINE about his ongoing project *Jimmy's Thrift of New Davonhalm*, reimagining historical incongruities, and making art that is fundamentally participatory.

CLAUDIA RANKINE: It's such amazing work you're doing—not just making art, but creating experiences for people to reimagine.

AZIKIWE MOHAMMED: It's easier for me when I construct a circumstance in which

people can tell me that I'm wrong. If I'm wrong, and it's in real time, then I can also fix it and try to get better immediately.

CR: I guess we could say you've choreographed into your process the ability to include public thought, public imagining, public desire, public refinement. It's brilliant. It sort of goes against the whole notion of "fine arts."

AM: Yeah, well, that's boring, that's not fun.

CR: But it's more than just creating fun. I think it's revolutionary, your ability to give up control and democratize both space and process.

AM: Well, I think one of the most important things we can do, especially as humans in the arts, is to replace "for" with "with."

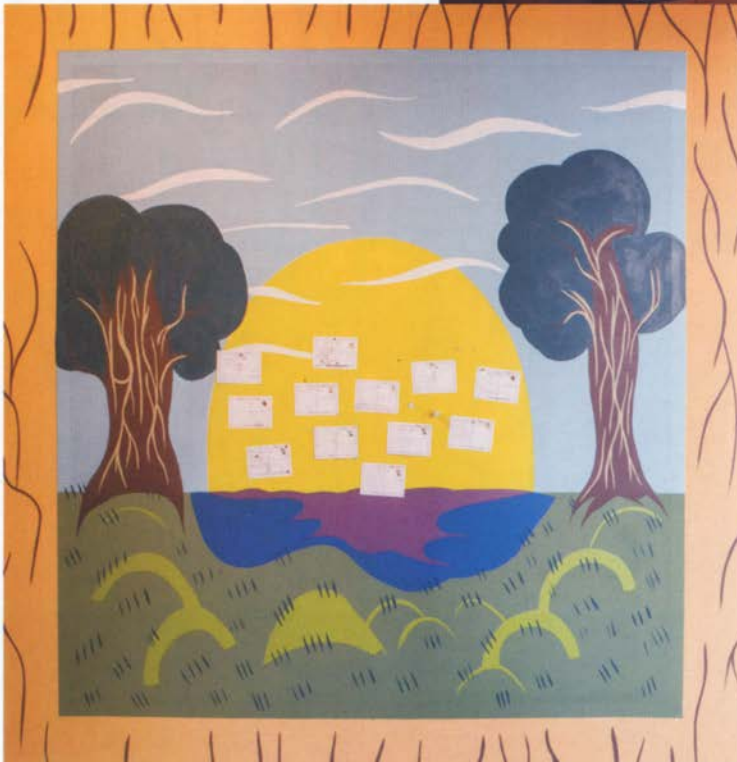
CR: "With"?

AM: Yeah, *with*. That's how things get fixed. I'm just the same as anybody else that





Above and right: Azikiwe Mohammed, *Jimmy's Thrift of New Davonhaine*, 2016-, mixed media. Installation views, James A. Farley Post Office, New York, 2016. Below, left: View of "Azikiwe Mohammed: *Jimmy's Thrift of New Davonhaine*," 2017, Knockdown Center, New York. Below, right: Embroidered panel from Azikiwe Mohammed's *Jimmy's Thrift of New Davonhaine*, 2016-, mixed media, dimensions variable.



A utopia is a fantasy into which you dump all your wishes and dreams but which ultimately functions like a scapegoat. I wanted to envision something that could actually work.





Two portraits from the photo studio in "Azikiwe Mohammed: Jimmy's Thrift of New Davonhaim," 2017, Knockdown Center, New York.

would be coming to a show or event. Most of our problems are the same, so why don't I try to address yours while you help address mine and we can jump a bit further?

My entry to art was through the lens of service. My father was an event slash school-portrait slash public-institution photographer. He worked to generate and preserve memories for people who were busy making them. For my show last fall at Knockdown Center in Queens, I included a makeshift photo studio. I was there almost every day. As visitors came by, I offered to take impromptu portraits of whoever needed to see themselves. I had a similar studio setup for two months in Harlem this summer. The goal was to make physical prints for people who haven't traditionally had access to formal photography services. That was more people than I anticipated.

CR: Could you speak to the kind of memory grabbing that you're doing?

AM: In 2015, I created an imaginary town called New Davonhaim. The name combines those of five cities in America with some of the highest Black-population densities, as determined by census data. I took letters and sounds from each of these locations—New Orleans; Detroit; Birmingham [Alabama]; Jackson [Mississippi]; Savannah [Georgia]—and moved them around until I made something that sounded like a real place. "New" evokes people coming from somewhere who want to hold on to parts of that other place, but who also want to make a version that's a little better.

I visited as many of these five cities as I could in two and a half weeks. I asked people, "What are your issues?" "What's wrong?" "This is what I'm doing—does this work?" Most responses were pretty simple: "I don't see enough of myself out there and the versions I do see I'm not happy with. There are some things I like, and I would like to see more of those things."

CR: I've read that you didn't want this town to be thought of as a utopia. Because utopias are never realized, right?

AM: A utopia is a fantasy into which you dump all your wishes and dreams but which ultimately functions like a scapegoat. I wanted to envision something that could actually work. You don't work to make a utopia happen. You might work to make something *based* on a utopia, but you accept that whatever you come up with will be four or five steps behind. You have to acknowledge failure as part of the plan.

Currently, New Davonhaim's only brick-and-mortar offering is my store, *Jimmy's Thrift of New Davonhaim*. The first iteration was at Spring/Break Art Show [at the James A. Farley Post Office in New York], the second was for a group exhibition organized by No Longer Empty [also in New York], the third was this past fall at Knockdown Center, and the fourth was in a currently functioning mall in downtown Miami, as part of [Jersey City, New Jersey-based] Mana Contemporary's offering at last year's Miami Art Basel. Across from me were a shoe repair person



Above: View of "Azikiwe Mohammed: Jimmy's Thrift of New Davonhaime," 2017, Knockdown Center, New York. Below: Azikiwe Mohammed, *Jimmy's Thrift of New Davonhaime*, 2016–, mixed media, installation view, No Longer Empty, New York, 2016. Opposite page: Postcards from Azikiwe Mohammed's *Jimmy's Thrift of New Davonhaime*, 2016–, mixed media, dimensions variable.

At the first *Jimmy's*, the janitors would come hang out in the space in the mornings, just blaring the radio, and I was like, *This is the thing. This is why this works.*



and someone who fixes watches. The thrift store as an institution represents places that have a history but a limited framework through which to express it. It is a living repository of memories and stories and the objects that hold these memories. The cultural heritage of the places I mentioned before stays static in a way that doesn't occur in larger urban areas, where populations and neighborhoods are in greater flux. People who live in these towns stay there for generations. A thrift store is a special space; everyone in a community has contributed to its story and has presented that story for others to continue telling.

CR: Which parts of *Jimmy's Thrift* are made by you and which parts are found? And does it matter?

AM: This is a question that I get asked ad infinitum and—I'm really bad at giving straight answers, I'm sorry. So how's this: I like to leave people with something they can take home, whether it's a physical item or an idea through which they can imagine themselves. The postcards are free, I always have two or three items under ten dollars, and the rest is for sale at what I call "reasonable art prices." The items vary hugely. I make about 70 percent of my inventory; the remainder is found. With so many items of such divergent sorts sharing the same space, instead of "Who made this?" people usually ask, "Where did these things come from?" That question points away from me as maker and toward the complexities of how we

situate creative output in the context of community, history, and circumstance. I think of myself less as the creator of New Davonhaime and more as one of its residents. This resident's name is Jimmy.

I encourage my visitors to write a note on their postcard and mail it back to me. The prompt is as follows: "Write a memory of your visit to New Davonhaime in the form of something you're not getting here in America, but that you would like to get in a different place." Responses differ. For some people, America's fine. Great, I'm not mad at them; I'm just not one of them. Through collecting input from my visitors I get a better picture of what New Davonhaime looks like. I base the objects I make largely on these written memories.

CR: You've created a democratized system of audience participation in which memories come from both solicited and random participants. How do you concretize this feedback—these thoughts, feelings, and ideas?

AM: My show at Knockdown contained many painted mirrors. A recurring theme in the postcards I received was people not seeing themselves, or being seen by somebody else in a way that wasn't how they perceived themselves. That's how I got the idea for *My First Time*. I asked people two questions: "When was the first time that you realized that you were Black?," and "When was the first time your internal mirror met your external mirror?" I recorded their replies, which I then set to music and turned into physical records. Some of the stories pertained directly to skin color, some to other aspects of physical appearance. My favorite response was from a member of my family. As a kid, he touched the hand of his white teacher and thought, *That's not what hands feel or look like*. He was used to the hands of his mother, who was also a teacher. If his schoolteacher and his mother were both teachers, what rendered their hands so different? What disparate life experiences would leave one teacher's hands soft and bejeweled and another's markedly less so?

I don't pretend to speak for the needs of all of us on the margins. My work addresses certain elements of a larger black and brown experience. At the first *Jimmy's*, the janitors would come hang out in the space in the mornings, just



blaring the radio, and I was like, *This is the thing. This is why this works.*

CR: Your work emphasizes the archival, the gestural, the process of documenting events, but it seems there's also a desire to change history. Maybe not to change it completely, but to step into it and redirect it. There's that nagging curiosity to know: If I change *x* thing, what else is possible? When you consider the structures of white supremacy that are a foundational influence on American life—which have as their aim the annihilation of African Americans—it's hard for African Americans to envision a history outside of that. And it seems like you're saying, "Okay, this is the life we have, but what happens if we interject?"

AM: Yeah, totally, we change stuff all the time.

CR: So, creating counter-narratives or reframing?

AM: Both.

CR: Reframing so that the emphasis is on life rather than death?

AM: I think time is holistic and fluid. People talk about lynching as a dated phenomenon, and I'm like, "Well, a kid got lynched last month." It's easy to perceive this country's history as long but, realistically, it's super short. I try to use that shortness and our shared language to offer a different starting point from the one we were given. For a while, I was making paintings of alternate endings to major historical moments. I'm looking to my needs and the needs of those around me and thinking, *How do I address these?* Because what I'm doing isn't going far enough, it's not working. There needs to be more. How do I make more? Hopefully, New Davonhaim can be that place of more. Hopefully, by including the voices of others, I can address our collective needs in a way that making art for myself simply cannot. □

"Portfolio by Azikiwe Mohammed," *BombMagazine.com*, Januray 27, 2017

BOMB

Portfolio by Azikiwe Mohammed

Potential Futures / Black Receipts



Azikiwe Mohammed. *Nadir*, 2016, C-print from the series *From Here on Out*. All images courtesy of the artist.

Multimedia artist and photographer Azikiwe Mohammed makes work that straddles the line between playful exuberance and serious social commentary—in fact, it holds that line extremely well. Both a collector and maker of objects, he dutifully investigates, grapples with, and redefines notions of Blackness and commodity fetishism in ways at once smart, funny, and fervently political. Coming off the success of his ongoing project Jimmy’s Thrift: A New Davonhaime Thrift Store (2016–present)—a thrift shop in a fictional town based on an amalgamation of the most densely populated black cities in America—Mohammed continues to make work that focuses on black excellence as a way to adumbrate the social ills of racist America, without losing sight of our present reality.

As I look at Mohammed’s recent body of work, I can’t help but think of Kerry James Marshall’s *The Lost Boys* (1993), a painting that depicts two young black boys—one playing with a water gun, the other seated in a toy car of the type found outside a supermarket. This painting also serves as a memorial to the lost youth or innocence of these boys, perhaps best indicated by the votive candle at the bottom of the image. Mohammed’s gold and silver nameplates commemorate those black men and women who were killed by police in 2016, and his penchant for using votive candles in his photographs takes aim at this loss of innocence; however, here perhaps he is looking at objecthood, and even that of a photograph, as a means to tell stories of resistance and hope.

— Terence Trouillot



Unarmed 2016, 2017, gold and silver nameplates on jewelry board.

"Portfolio by Azikiwe Mohammed," *BombMagazine.com*, Januray 27, 2017



Potential Futures #4, 2016, C-print.



Potential Futures #7, 2016, C-print



Josie from the Happy Hocker, 2016, C-print from the series *From Here on Out*.



Tamara, 2016, C-print from the series *From Here on Out*.



Aisha, 2016, C-print from the series *From Here on Out*.



Tierra's House, 2016, C-print from the series *From Here on Out*.

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Cecil Robinson, 2017, C-print from the series *From Here on Out*.



1986–2011, 1919–2015, 1994–2005, 2017, neon sign.