

Lonnie Holley: Power Figure

Hanna Girma, Senior Editor and Curator of Editorial Projects at Serpentine Galleries.

In Central African spiritual practice and lore, a *nkisi* is a power figure imbued with spiritual and mystical properties of healing, strength and protection. While there are different types of *nkisi* that are used for various purposes, most were modeled after kings, and lords. The central structure of the figure is made using natural materials like wood and soil. Acting as keepers of power and peace, the figures are fed through a collaborative and communal practice made between Kongo sculptors, ritual specialists, ancestors and civic offerings by various community members¹. The honorific figures are carved and embedded with industrial nails, broken glass, ceramic, cloth, charms and other materials to accumulate power, seal important contracts and end disputes. At times *nkisi* can embody the dead, acting as spirit guides, they are placed at grave sites to assist with ancestors crossing over into the next realm.

Crucial to community affairs, they maintained the social and spiritual wellbeing of the congregation. Each nail a transaction and a witness to social health and judicial process, each piece of fabric, blade and packet of medicine that adorns its exterior a testament to efficacy and power². Considered a threatening idolatrous figure, many *nkisi* were destroyed by Christian missionaries in iconoclastic bonfires, while others, labeled as fetish objects by European collectors, now sit as a prized possession within the vitrines of ethnographic museums³.

In his essay "My Black Death" Arthur Jafa describes the two major shifts/rifts in Western artistic practice with the introduction of African art or Black aesthetics. The first being the most well known influence of "primitive" art by way of masks, sculptures, and other imagery and "fetish" objects⁴. These objects altered perception and depiction of the human form by proposing non-fixed vantage points leading to the cubist abstraction of the body by artists like Picasso. But Jafa asserts that Duchamp took that initial influence further, pulling the ethos and efficacy of the African objects and their ability to transform time and space, and applied this thinking to the mass-produced and industrial object: "Duchamp, smarter than anyone else around became deeply interested in how African artifacts behaved rather than simply how they looked (their gaze). Duchamp peeped that these artifacts were, not art but instruments whose functionality had been arrested and that much of their power was derived from their radically alienated and de facto transgressive, relationship to the context in which they found themselves. Consequently, Duchamp's urinal was engineered by his desire to model a work after the contextual dissonance provoked by the placement of these (black) artifacts in (white) museums."⁵

So these "fetish" objects, now displaced, unnamed, and castrated by their lack of agency take on a different efficacy or "magical" within white venerated museum spaces. Their alchemy and power now lies within their disruptive proximity to whiteness, their otherness. Dada takes this and applies it to the disruptive power of placing a non-art object in this venerated space. Does this then conflate a urinal with an ancestor? Because ultimately that's what these African objects often are. Yet *nkisi*'s aren't simply aesthetic objects, they are ones of transference and embodiment, they are ancestors, they are judges, they hold the dead and generational history of communal healing, growth, progress.

In many ways Dada divorces the object from the ritual practice of artmaking, whereas these objects rely on ritual. Without being fed by communal offerings, the object, the ancestor, is rendered powerless without Black magic fertilization. Possibly the ancestors and secrets held within have adapted (as that is the Blackest thing they could do) and now take their power from "white magic", siphoning and feeding on the entropy of western aesthetics. So then, can BLACK Dada re-introduce those tools of ritual, embedded knowledge systems, embodiment and alchemy into the object?

To me, the compositions of Lonnie Holley are Black Dada. His guttural soul-clenching music mirrors that of his sermonic stream-of-conscious conversational style, shifting space and time with no fixed point, requiring active listening but at moments space to become lost in meandering flow of pattern. When I spoke to Holley in the winter at his Suffolk studio it was like listening to jazz free-style or watching street basketball that seems like chaos, the logic and repetition hidden to those it is not meant for. Holley is less the tactical nonsense of Hugo Ball's 'Dada Manifesto'⁶ and more Amiri Baraka's 'Black Dada nihilismus', with a bit more optimism than nihilism, but the same sharp criticism of the bleak racial disposition and eroding social systems that persist in America and beyond.

In the *Black Dada Reader*, curator Adrienne Edwards discusses the links between Blackness and abstraction as foundational in the formation of the United States under capitalism, the structure which also shaped Blackness. Edwards discusses assemblage by way of Deleuze and Guattari's, "line of flight", by way of their encounter with the prison writings for Black Panther George Jackson⁷.

1. Metmuseum.org. 2022. Mangaaka Power Figure (Nkisi N'Kondi). [online] Available at: <<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/320053>> [Accessed 25 April 2022].

2. Fowler Museum at UCLA. X65.5837 Power figure | Fowler Museum at UCLA. [online] Fowler Museum at UCLA. Available at: <<https://fowler.ucla.edu/product/x65-5837-power-figure/>> [Accessed 20 April 2022].

3. Newell, Sasha. "The matter of the unfetish: Hoarding and the spirit of possessions." HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory 4, no. 3 (2014): 185-213.

4. Fowler Museum at UCLA. X65.5837 Power figure | Fowler Museum at UCLA. [online] Fowler Museum at UCLA. Available at: <<https://fowler.ucla.edu/product/x65-5837-power-figure/>> [Accessed 20 April 2022].

5. Arthur Jafa, *My Black Death* (Moor's Head Press, 2016): 4

6. Jenny Schlenzka, 'What can black dada do for my institution black dada, some thoughts' in *Black Dada Reader* ed. by Adam Pendleton (London: Koenig Books, 2017): 15-20.

7. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987): 232-309.



Lonnie Holley: *The Growth of Communication*, installation view, Edel Assanti, London, UK, 2022. Photo: Andy Keate

Drawing from this assertion that assemblage is the only way to break through structures of control to achieve or consider the possibility of freedom, Holley's assemblages are conduits to free the object.

When someone has lived a life like Lonnie Holley it is hard to separate the work from the artist and see it as something that stands alone. (I'm not sure that is something we should ever do). But in this case I think it's easy to get swept up in his surreal life story. Growing up in Jim Crow era Alabama, the artist survived a series of unfathomably and unfortunate events that bring him to this body of work today.

Traded for a bottle of whisky when he was four years old and shipped off to a negroe children's forced labor camp at eleven, his life was reduced to a commercial object. It is no wonder Holley has become obsessed with material culture, mining and repurposing refuse.

Blackness and industrial production in America are synonymous. Mass produced, packaged and consumed, Blackness is ready-made. The success of American capitalism hinges on Blackness and the violence of that construction still reverberates from the mass produced objects. Blackness is the technology on which America was built outrunning obsolescence. Therefore, a Dada object of mass industrial production still holds the trauma of the labor that shaped it. So what happens when the readymade returns to the hands of the maker?

Blackness has always repurposed the materials of oppression. To imbue them with magic, the slave chain becomes the gold chain, cotton becomes the crisp long white tee, the table scraps are injected with soul. Blackness is the kudzu brought to America to treat waste that invaded the southern ecosystem and the music enslavers tried to drown in the middle passage that resurfaced in the fields, adapted, transgressed and invaded the radio systems⁸. Blackness bathes the everyday with magic as a means to endure and transform the historical violence that an object holds. Holley's work does the same, repurposing everyday industrial objects that accumulate in waste heaps, Holley embeds his own mythology and ontology to create something new. The artist describes the metamorphic nature of his work, "I think my work is John Lewis... I'm a trouble seeker... Trouble is almost like Midas turning everything he touched into gold. Isn't that what I'm doing? I'm taking your trash. I'm taking face after face up or face in face and I'm showing you how I'm putting it all on canvas. I'm saying look deep enough and here and you'll see the pyramid... But it's still coming out of my brainsmithing."

These "faces" refer to the artist's shadow-like paintings which show the vestiges of his history. During our studio visit, Holley brings me over to a wall to capture my profile in the light spilling in from the large barn windows. He said the light fed him, the shadowplay he weaved together until forms blended, were lost and reappeared.

8. Arthur Jafa, *My Black Death* (Moor's Head Press, 2016)

He patches his silhouettes together like a Gee's Bend quilt, cutting out contours, spray painting them, layering, leaves and chains, layering, each with a narrative of how he perceives the world around him.

Holley's work is possibly so invested in transformation and rebirth because of his own life experiences. It seems his life has revolved around death and birth. Although this could be said for every being, it is exceptionally true for the artist. Holley lives amongst ghosts and he says the spirits will help him "one way or another." After being run over by a car as a child, he was pronounced brain dead before coming back to life and he first began making art after he had to carve tombstones for his sister's two children after they were killed in a fire and she could not afford to buy proper markers. Using discarded sandstone-like byproducts of metal castings he found at a foundry near her house he had a spiritual awakening and found his calling. It seemed the spirits were indeed helping him then and continue to today. His story, and those that came before, are entangled in the artist's practice.

When Holley speaks, sings and makes, he is not alone. He is being led by an ancestral guide. The artist claims his genealogy affects his brain cells, the way he carries, understands and imparts knowledge and memory. Like many of his works, *Hung Out III*, 2020, draws on Black femininity and womanhood in its construction.

Holley explained, "Mama, grandmama, great grandmama all of them, they washed our clothes, and they hung em out. Now we are the target. We have been brainwashed and hung out as the target." Holley's grandmother worked until she was in her 80's and saved him from a child labor camp when he was eleven. His mother that he refers to as a "queen of giving birth" gave birth to 27 children out of 32 pregnancies. Now Holley gives birth to new works guided by these ancestral forces. His work takes influence from these matriarchal figures in his life, the small gestures and unsaid communication of a look over the shoulder or a glance in the rear-view mirror is communicated through his sculpture and paintings, "I wanted to give the glory back to the story makers and that the story makers was the woman cuz she gave birth to this children and then the children grew up then they had children. So that carries on into another into another, that's why you'll find so many faces in my work."

The Artist often compares his appreciation for earth and nature to his matriarchs. The traces of the strong female presence are felt in his assemblage of female mannequin forms in *Still Busted Without Arms*, 2019 and the wooden ladder lined with high heels in *Her Steps to Success*, 2020. The heels on the latter metaphorically symbolize the farce of upward mobility, the thorny subaltern ascension to the top of a ladder with no destination. The heels become the tools and the weapons to get there, *but where?*

While Holley inserts his own narrative into the found objects he uses, he also acknowledges their history. The artist has spent his entire career mining materials and objects. From industrial waste, to antique shop memorabilia to garden trimmings, to him, "objects is very, very important because if we throw away everything that's precious, and know how our ancestors have kept them for years and years and years." This communion with the ancestors guides not only his artistic practice but also his search, "If there is junkyards and scrap yards and, and places that is just cluttered with materials, I know now where to go to find something up the creek, down the creek, up to ditch, down the ditch, and know to go on the side of the river on the shoreline of where you find all the different types of material. What is my story? My story is pollution. My story is discarded material. My story is too much plastic. You understand what I'm saying?" The artist hopes this can be a tool for cherishing objects and battling waste, stating, "we are going to create our own demise, we are headed to death one way or the other."

In *In The Break: The Aesthetics Of The Black Radical Tradition*, Fred Moten discusses Baraka's often used poetic devices, "Montage renders inoperative any simple opposition of totality to singularity. It makes you linger in the cut between them, a generative space that fills and erases itself."⁹ Holley's work presents these snapshots into his life, revealing his conversations with the other realm. When we concluded our conversation, Holley talked about working in the UK, how he is surrounded by the castles of storybooks but was never told about the queens and the kings in the bush. He talked about how when he searched for objects, "most of all of our objects, our memorabilia, they put it back in the corner of the antique shops. You know it's valuable, but they try to keep it a secret." With this notion of what Jafa refers to "the inconceivability of the black body in the white imagination" Blackness and Black object ontological tradition can only be understood in the white abstract¹⁰. Holley's practice uncovers and feeds those secret treasures, his work harboring the souls of those he speaks to and the power the artist has adorned each object with. Holley himself is a *nkisi*, adorned with long crown, knitted layers and an abundance of jewelry he holds knowledge and, deep history, and magical healing qualities.

9. Fred Moten, *The Break: The Aesthetics of The Black Radical Tradition*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2003): 89.

10. Arthur Jafa, *My Black Death* (Moor's Head Press, 2016): 3.