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Rotimi Fani-Kayode: 1955-1989

Nashwah Ahmed


Raw, exotic, provocative. These are the first three words that spring to mind when viewing a collection of Rotimi Fani-Kayode's most iconic work, which was on display in the Light Work exhibition at the Kathleen O. Ellis Gallery in Syracuse, New York in the fall of 2015. Produced during the latter part of his life, in collaboration with his partner Alex Hirst to celebrate their budding relationship, Fani-Kayode's portraits boldly explore and celebrate sexuality, ethnicity, and hybridity—three areas that have contributed greatly to shaping the core of his identity. Despite being inspired by Robert Mapplethorpe's work, Fani-Kayode's photography was never a derivative of it. Instead, his work was primarily and significantly influenced by his personal struggles as he found himself caught in the conflict between his homosexuality and his traditional Yoruba upbringing.

During his lifetime, most of Fani-Kayode's work was considered too political in nature and, hence, unsuitable for viewing in a gallery. His identity as a Nigerian homosexual photographer was not respected due to societal ignorance. In Africa, his family's social standing prevented him from practicing photography; in the Western world, his work was often

overlooked. It is important to note that his photographs are far more than a mere display intended for shock value or an elaborate form of self-expression. They are a depiction of the richness and diversity of his background, a visual narrative of his own personal experiences. In Fani-Kayode's own words, "It is photography, therefore—Black, African, homosexual photography—which I must use not just as an instrument, but as a weapon if I am to resist attacks on my integrity and, indeed, my existence on my own terms." (Rotimi Fani-Kayode, 1988).

The show opens with a relatively simple, black and white photograph of a man with his arms crossed. His hair falls past his eyes, obscuring them from view. As one walks around the gallery, it becomes evident that this concept of "blindness" is a recurring theme throughout the collection. Eyes shut tight, hands pressed firmly against eyelids, a single blindfold wrapped around—all symbolic of man's unflinching ignorance, his vain attempts to see only the things he chooses to.

In "Nothing to Lose XII (Bodies of Experience)," fruits are strategically placed to convey a sense of pure desire in a manner that manages to be simultaneously loud and subdued. However, that is not the only message delivered



by this collection. The careful placement of the exposed subjects against a black, indistinct background with a soft, glowing light that gently highlights only some of their features leaves room for interpretation. Their haunting, melancholy expressions collectively contribute to an air of vulnerability, ambiguity, and sensuality. The lighting creates an interesting interplay of shadows and highlights that gracefully transition into each other, enhancing the theatrical nature of the photographs.

Through his work, Fani-Kayode's primarily transmits emotions. He does not employ euphemisms to alleviate the impact of his photographs, making, instead, a sincere effort to preserve the raw, gritty nature of the image. "The Golden Phallus" (1989) is perhaps the most gripping photograph in this collection, the highlight of the show, the culmination of Fani-Kayode's career. It is a marvelous, abstract representation of how lust and desire are feelings triggered by circumstances beyond our control. The portrait perfectly captures and portrays the feeling of shame and uneasiness one is trained to experience when confronted with questions and matters of sexuality—the constant need to hide behind a mask, to be ashamed, to be afraid. The mask, in this case, offers a barrier between the model and the viewer, providing the model with anonymity and possibly rescuing the viewer from the uncomfortable experience of looking into the eyes of the subject.

In addition to exploring sexuality and the popular perception of homosexuality as something illicit, Fani-Kayode's also addresses the issue of belonging. He famously described himself as "an outsider: in matters of sexuality; in terms of geographical and cultural dislocation; and in the sense of not having become the sort of respectably married professional my parents might have hoped for." "Maternal Milk" (c.

1986) is a black and white photograph of a solitary figure shrouded in obscurity that accurately conveys the feeling of loneliness experienced by "outsiders" like Fani-Kayode's. The endless, desperate pursuit of support and acceptance is best represented in "Every Moment Counts" (1989), which features two subjects cherishing their rare, precious moments in each other's company.

Strangely enough, for a man so explicitly homosexual, Fani-Kayode sought to transcend worldly restraints and find his true spirit through his photography. Infused with spirituality, some of Kayode's photographs also incorporate elements from ancestral rituals to depict suffering and hope. "Nothing to Lose VIII" (1989), which presents a solemn subject, donning a tribal wreath and pendant, and gripping a knife, is strongly symbolic of the sacrifices that "outsiders" such as Fani-Kayode are forced to make in an attempt to fit into a mold shaped and deemed acceptable by society.

Fani-Kayode uses his photography to create a fantasy world where the concepts of date, time, and location are irrelevant. These photographs represent acts, fragments of plays created by Hirst and Kayode, relating to cultural dislocation and disruption. They depict the black male body as a means to interpret and probe the boundaries of spiritual and erotic fantasy—of cultural and sexual difference.

There is no doubt that Fani-Kayode's work is still generating waves in the photography world long after his passing. His legacy continues to be an active part of the battle against prejudice in the fight for the eradication of stereotyping and labelling. His vivid photographs are a source of enlightenment—the kind of photographs that remain etched in memory and refuse to fade away with time. Whether you love or hate Fani-Kayode's work, one thing is glaringly evident; his revolutionary, bold ideas will continue to make a statement for many years to come.