

AMMO MAGAZINE

ART TALK: Mendi + Keith Obadike



What's your AMMO?

We will give you a person and a place.

Person: One of our first big opportunities/affirmations in the arts came when novelist Toni Morrison invited to do a residency in her program at Princeton. Her writing, her way of working with culture, has been really important for us.

Place: Great things are happening in Africa right now! The fantastic artistic (music, film, literature, visual art, and fashion) and economic activity in Nigeria and across the continent is really inspiring. Heartened by the energy on the continent we decided to do a series of sound art installations in museums inspired by and using sounds from African cities. Last year we presented the first work in the series (commissioned by Rhizome/The New Museum and Ramapo College) entitled Sonic City Lagos at MoCADA in Brooklyn.

What inspired you two to pursue art, what is one of your youngest and most vivid memories of a growing relationship with art?

We grew up in Nashville, TN , a place where it was very normal to be a musician or work in a studio. Although we hadn't met each other yet, our families took each of us to the same Eubie Blake concert at Fisk University (a place rich with modernist art by Aaron Douglas and others) in 1983. We were about 10 years old and Blake was turning 100 years old. He died shortly afterwards. We later realized that it had a profound effect on each of us to witness an artist working for his whole long life and to live in the same moment as an artist who was working during the Harlem Renaissance.

What is one of the most important aspects of your creative process?

Collaboration with each other and our larger creative community is central to our process. All of our works spring from a dialogue about things that are just at the edge of language. Right now we are in the early stages of a new collaboration. We are writing songs and text for a collaboration with the dance company Urban Bush Women about the life of musician John Coltrane.

As a pair your work has been described as “conceptual artwork.” How would you describe your work?

In the spirit of making it plain, we usually say we make art, music, and literature. The process is important for us as well as the larger idea behind the work. Also, many of our works are in some sense ephemeral, so it is easy to see why one might look at the work through a conceptual lens. But for us both the conceptual aspects and the formal aspects hopefully come together in an interesting way in the works.

You both grow up on different parts of the country but managed to find each other, how does being married contribute to the work?

We were born in different parts of the country, but actually grew up together in the same town and attended the same junior high school. We’ve been together over 25 years. The depth of our relationship keeps us grounded when we take on exciting new projects with so many unknown factors.



There is a great emphasis on the cultural current events in the artwork you produce, what headlines have caught your eye recently? When researching for

the next piece is the goal more to influence the viewers thoughts or to just inform the viewer?

We think through what we consider to be interesting cultural issues (not necessarily current events) by making art, and the goal is to represent in a poetic way our reflections on the subject. The pieces say things that cannot be said in some other way. Our hope is that audiences find something to connect to in our work and that our musings are meaningful for others. We operate from a core belief that a unique kind of knowledge is produced by making or engaging with art. The work remains fascinating to us because when making a piece we can't be sure how we (the artists) will change in the process, or how exactly it will influence someone else.

Our current exhibition (American Cypher) is a sound installation with video and a series of prints. The piece was on view at The Studio Museum in Harlem from March-June of this year and it will be traveling around the country over the next couple of years. The piece is meditation on American stories about race and DNA. We didn't know where all of this was going when we started our project, but just last month The Supreme Court ruled that DNA material can be collected when someone is arrested, guilty or not. This means many innocent people will have their biological material stored in a national database. There are no easy answers to questions about DNA collection, but the direction of this legislation should be of great concern to anyone interested in civil liberties. Our work American Cypher begins by looking at an earlier DNA related story, the story of an enslaved woman named Sally Hemings who was owned and had children by Thomas Jefferson. After centuries of denial by many members of the white Jefferson family, the connection between the Black Hemings family and white Jefferson family was confirmed through DNA testing in the late 1990s. Sally Hemings' last known possession was a small bell given to her by Martha Jefferson (her half sister and Thomas Jefferson's wife). We made a recording of this bell and altered it to create our sound installation. Other more contemporary stories

about race and DNA (including stories about Obama, Oprah, and racist geneticist James Watson) are explored in a series of prints on the wall and a book in the exhibition space.

Both of you have talents in sound and music, over the years has there been a favorite piece? What medium would you love to try next?

We have a special place in our heart for Four Electric Ghosts, an opera-masquerade that we first performed a few years ago at The Kitchen in NY and last year in North Carolina. It was so meaningful because of our great team of talented, generous collaborators who have become very close to us. However, we are always most interested in our current project. One of our upcoming projects is a musical film installation that we are really excited about. The film is based around a family story set in the pre-civil rights movement South.

If you were to pick three words to describe the driving forces in your work, or creative process what would they be?

Blues. Curiosity. Love.

Any advice for young artists?

Don't take advice from older artists. Seriously, though, it's good to learn from the past and from those who've been around a long time. Study the models left by others, but you don't want to get too invested in what other people think you should do with your work. Everyone's path is unique, so hone your techniques, study yourself, and make a long range commitment to your art/life.

Be your best self. Keep going.

Where can we see your work next?

Right now we are in preparation for some new projects that will debut over the next two or

three years. The very next project is a sound art work / praisesong about Angela Davis commissioned by the American Studies Association. It will debut in November in Washington, DC.

For more from Mendi + Keith Obadike, go to blacknetart.com

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