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This Nigerian American Artist Uses Durags As His Medium

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The durag is both practical and complicated. For many people with textured hair, the caps are a crucial part of everyday maintenance. The often colorful styles protect hair, aid in the development of waves, and sometimes simply add an impactful flourish to outfits. Their importance to Black culture can be seen and felt through their ubiquity in ’90s and 2000s rap videos and, more recently, with the Black-owned luxury brand Telfar selling upscale versions. But ever since its initial rise in popularity, which first began in the late ’60s, the durag has often been the focus of unfair attacks, with critics citing so-called associations with gang violence. Last year students at West Orange High School in New Jersey, which has a majority Black and Latino population, protested the school’s blanket ban of the garment. “Durags and other nonreligious head coverings are not aligned with the professional appearance that we promote to our students,” the school’s principal wrote at the time in a since-deleted statement on Instagram.

Nigerian American artist Anthony Olubunmi Akinbola masterfully draws on all these loaded connotations, using these scraps of polyester as his medium, almost like paint. His self-developed techniques involve taking a wood-frame canvas and covering it with dozens and dozens of durags that have been painstakingly cut, sewn, and overlaid. The

final product often resembles a brightly hued patchwork quilt—a powerful rebuke to the more dark and sinister perceptions some have of the durag. "I think the idea of bringing the durag into high art, you're repositioning who is in control of the power," Akinbola said recently, speaking over Zoom. An exhibition of his work is currently on view at LA's Night Gallery through April 29.

The 31-year-old artist has been working with durags for over six years now, sourcing and collecting them from various Afrocentric beauty shops across New York City. As a result, what Akinbola can create is frequently tied to what he can find. "There are times when you're working on a piece and you don't have enough material and you have to give up on that idea or let it develop into something else," he shares. "But I need restrictions when I work. I think if there's too many options, I get frozen. This has been a nice way for me to learn how to work with color."

Akinbola's creative preoccupation with the deceptively simple pieces of cloth stems from his personal experiences and history. A child of Nigerian immigrants, Akinbola spent the first part of his childhood growing up in Missouri. When he was a teenager, Akinbola and his family moved to Lagos, Nigeria, where his parents are originally from, for three years and then returned to America long-term. A sense of crisscrossing between two cultures has consequently shaped Akinbola and his work. "I think with how I look at materials, or things in general, is trying to pull things together that do not mix," he says.

For Akinbola, the durag is emblematic of his Nigerian American identity. "As I started growing up, I began having a rite of passage as a Black boy in America," the artist says. "No one knows if I'm Nigerian or Caribbean. I'm just Black. I think something about the durag…it kind of flattens identity in a sense. Once you put that durag on, you're seen in a very American context. Your identity is masked." Interestingly, Akinbola says, in his experience, durags seem to be uniquely popular among Black Americans. "They're not used in too many communities outside of Black America," he says. This is a critical part of their beauty and cultural importance to him. "There are not too many articles of clothing that you can say are explicitly *Black*. American Black too."

Akinbola is aware that his works may be pigeonholed as solely being about and for marginalized communities. He has made his peace with this. But the artist strongly believes that his "explorations in color study" can be viewed and appreciated by everyone. "You can experience the painting the same way as a non-Black person," he argues. He points to other Black-centric pieces of pop culture that have crossover. "It's just like FUBU or Telfar—we shouldn't necessarily put it in a corner."

Often people will ask Akinbola if the durag will ever stop being trendy and, if so, where his creative eye might focus next. But Akinbola does not see that happening anytime soon. "Black people have been wearing durags since the 1940s," he says. "It's similar to that of a belt or white T-shirt."

And in his opinion, it will never stop being a powerful piece of political fashion. As he puts it, "I think the act of being Black and not trying to assimilate and *flaunting that*, it's so powerful."