

[MUSIC PLAYING]

TOMI LAJA: Hi, everyone. I am Tomi Laja, a master of Architecture II.

ESESUA And I am Esesua Ikpefan, a doctor of Design Studies candidate at the Harvard Graduate School of Design.

IKPEFAN:

The Nexus is produced in conjunction with a commitment to the Frances Loeb Library to acquire and create an open access bibliography of various media suggested by the community at the intersection of race and design. Today, we have the pleasure of having Kennedy Yanko and Camille Bacon in discourse together.

TOMI LAJA: Kennedy Yanko, born 1988, Saint Louis, Missouri, is a sculptor and installation artist working in found metal and paint skin. Yanko deploys her materials in ways that explore the limitations of optic vision, underlining the opportunities we miss when looking with eyes alone.

Her methods reflect on dual abstract expressionist surrealist approach that centers the seen and unseen factors that affect, contribute to, and moderate human experience. Select installations from 2021 to 2022 include-- *White, Passing* at the Rubell Museum, 2021, Miami, Florida, where Yanko was an artist-in-residence.

By means other than the known senses at the Unlimited section of Art Basel in 2022, Basel, Switzerland. And *Wo more Drama* at the Brooklyn Museum in 2022, Brooklyn, New York. In March 2023 she debuted her solo exhibition titled *Humming on Life* with Jeffrey Deitch Gallery in New York.

Yanko's institutional exhibitions include-- the Museum of Contemporary Art, Detroit; University of South Florida; and urban Institute for Contemporary Arts. Her work is included in notable private museums, namely-- The Bunker Artspace, West Palm Beach, by Beth Rudin DeWoody; Espacio Tacuari, Buenos Aires, with Juan Vergez and Patricia Pearson; the Rubell Museum in Miami, Don and Mera Rubell. And, most recently, Yanko's work was acquired by the Albertina Museum in Vienna Austria

ESESUA Camille Bacon is a Chicago-based writer who is building a "sweet Black writing life" as inspired by the words of poet Nikky Finney, and the infinite wisdom of the Black feminist tradition more broadly. Through a methodology that straddles rigorous research and divinely derived oration, she aims to excavate how aesthetics can catalyze a collective reorientation towards relation, connection, and intimacy, and away from apathy and amnesia.

IKPEFAN:

Ultimately, her work serves as the external embodiment of her commitment to amplifying the wayward ingenuity of the Black creative spirit.

Camille's work has appeared in *i-D Magazine*, *Frieze*, *Cultured Magazine*, *Studio Magazine*, *Momus*, *The Funambulist*, *Airfreak Magazine*, and *Burnaway* amongst other outlets. She currently manages McArthur Binion Studio in Chicago, Illinois, and formerly held positions at Gray Gallery in Chicago, and at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York.

She is also the co-founder and co-editor-in-chief of *Jupiter Magazine* along with fellow writer Daria Simone Harper.

Welcome, Camille and Kennedy, we are so excited to have you here today and for the conversation that's to follow.

CAMILLE Hello. Hello.

BACON:

KENNEDY Good morning.

YANKO:

TOMI LAJA: So where are we finding you both this morning?

CAMILLE I am currently in Tuscany, just out of Palaia and I'm partaking in my first residency program, which is in collaboration with Villa Lena and an organization called My Queer Blackness, My Black Queerness and Loro Piana. And yes, that is where I am this morning.

KENNEDY Today I am in the basement in Bushwick in my studio and I am here speaking with you beautiful ladies today. I'm so excited to dig into it.

TOMI LAJA: We're super excited as well. We wanted to start the conversation thinking about embodiment and deep listening. There's a clear connection with embodiment in both of your works, from using the body to go, search, and find material in the yard in search of metal, or traveling around the world or within the local community to immerse with artworks and discourse.

Camille, your recent writing for the *Funambulist Magazine* titled *Ibiyane, Physical Poetry and Spells for Sustenance* eloquently illuminates the Black feminist practice of embodiment. Tania Doumbe Fines and Elodie Derond-- the duo carves wood to sculpt their artworks.

Your collaborations and meditations with artists and creatives are always incredibly deep, genuine, and invested. What practices have you cultivated in your life to achieve the depth of attention in your listening, both with the artworks as well as discourse during studio visits? How has this impacted your practice? And can you speak a bit about your process and the role that embodiment plays in your own research and writing?

CAMILLE Certainly I really love this question. Thank you so much, Tomi. So I think it actually ties back to something that **BACON:** Kennedy is really invested in too, but where Kennedy is thinking about disrupting-- using your eyes as a way to see and thinking about how we can see with a more expansive or complete use of the entire body, I try to listen with my entire body too and not just my ears and that methodology really derives from my study of Black feminism.

And I try as much as humanly possible to cultivate a writing practice that extends the notion of bridging theory to practice and honoring feeling and intuition as really legitimate ways of knowing. And I think it's really also a question of writing in and through and alongside artists and artworks rather than attempting to write about them.

And so one way I do that is by cultivating really sincere co-conspiratorship and sometimes even friendship with the artists that I write about. In the case of Elodie and Tania, we actually met a long time ago, in 2019, and would see each other whenever I was in Martinique. And it wasn't until probably two and a half or three years after meeting them that we even broached the topic of me writing something about their practice.

So when I enter a studio visit, I am as interested in learning about the inner workings of the person's mind and heart and learning about their personal history as much as I'm invested in a more formal conversation about the kind of aesthetic, and conceptual, and art historical dimensions of the work in question.

I also usually do several studio visits or have several conversations before, again, I even broach the topic of writing something about a particular person's practice. And I think that brings up a conversation about pace and tempo as it relates to deep listening too.

So it's not just about coming to the studio and trying to wrap my mind around what someone's doing and then extract the core of their practice through language, but rather it's really about cultivating intimacy and durational fellowship with the people I write about because as I began the Ibiyane essay with this quote by Prentis Hemphill, I agree when they talk about how we can really use intimacy as a measure of our proximity to liberatory conditions.

And I think that also means that there's a question of return that is really at the forefront of my practice too. And that always happens through the body. So it's a commitment where it's not just like I'm going to come to your studio, talk to you for an hour, and then scurry off to my desk and write about you and your work and then call it a day.

But rather, what are the modes of being and the kind of ethics that we can ground in to understand that when you're building language around someone's work, it's an incredible act of trust and faith that the artist is giving me, and I really want to honor that.

And so part of that is also through not only listening to what they're saying, but also listening for the tremblings that are just under the thing that they're saying and then asking questions about that, and that the kind of methodology or school of thought that emerges from is, again, this Black feminist notion-- that feeling affect-- and intuition are really legitimate ways of knowing and legitimate modes of epistemology and I take that very seriously in my practice.

The other thing is that I really think the responsibility of a writer, especially an art writer, is to archive an embodied experience. And can't archive things that I am not feeling. I cannot articulate things that I am not really, really working to stay present in, with, and through.

And this is a line of thinking that emerged from a set of conversations with fellow writer Angelica Jade Bastién during a program that I was doing called Chicago Critics Table. And she wrote about and speaks about how she wants her words to have a kind of physicality when they reach the page. And to, yeah, have that physicality when the reader encounters them too. And I think that's another thing that I really try to do in my practice as well.

And I think all of this also means that I have to take immaculate care of myself consistently so that I can really hold all of my receptors for feeling as open as I possibly can. And that's where my yoga practice, my meditation practice, my relationship with my spirit guides, my human support system, ancestral divination practice, like all these things come in as absolutely essential resources that allow me to really hold my senses open to the wind like that and listen again like I said for the thing that's just under the thing that the person said.

ESESUA
IKPEFAN:

Thank you so much for that full response. I loved when you said you're listening with your full body. And it's definitely clear that you have a genuine connection with being present. And I'm curious, as well, Kennedy for some time now I've been in awe with the skill that your work performs with, while still mastering incredible intimacy with the forms you negotiate with, as seen in some of your pieces from your 2023 solo show Humming On Life with Jeffrey Deitch Gallery. Sometimes the scale of your work requires from you to paint these massive, earthy metal forms outdoors with a large broom as your paintbrush after salvaging them in the metallic sea that is the yard. Can you speak a bit about the site visits you deploy in search of your materials and how does this influence the connection you have with your work.

KENNEDY
YANKO:

Thank you for that question. I really, really liked hearing you speak, Camille, about how you enter an artist's studio and how you enter it almost kind of with a cleansed palette in order to step into there and receive and explore and maybe walk away with that and then come back to it. And so much of my interest in finding my materials is in the idea of search and hunting and adventuring and looking and observing and seeing and trying to figure something out, or really looking for something to respond to.

So the thing that really stuck out to me in this question that really got my wheels turning in a new way was how this practice influences my connection with the work. So first of all, I'm really having to identify where I'm going, what kind of yard am I going to? Is it raining? Is it cold? Is it hot? Is it sunny? You know, what kind of environment do I need to mentally prepare myself to walk into.

And then also, do I have machines? Am I looking for something in particular? And I think because so much of the practice of what I'm doing is responsive, that the connection really happens within that cyclical nature of doing something over and over and over again. Because I am constantly looking for this material. And I'm looking for this interaction.

So I'm looking for very particular things. So it's a dialogue of being pulled by my heartstrings in a way. I'm out in the world, and I'm really waiting for that thing that really gets me and really connects with me and really kind of starts to spark my mind. So in a way, it's like that is somewhat of the muscle that I'm working over and over again to understand how much more clearer can I hear that thing light up within me.

I'd also say that excavation, not only just going through the yards, but the excavation within my research and my own internal excavation-- you know I have a background in qigong, which is energy work. And they talk a lot about the dantian which is the power source that kind of sits in your womb space. It's in your belly space, your lower belly. And the dantian is really just this hologram in a way.

It's a hologram and it's a projection of your internal world, your internal power. And sometimes when you're playing with your chi in your hands, you're almost attempting to perceive this hologram in front of you and have the ability to play with it and manipulate it and be aware of it. And I think that within the work that I do and the repetition of going out into the yards and to finding the pieces and to making the pieces, I really find so many parallels between those two things of my internal interest and investigations, and then also just physically doing it in the world and going out and hunting and excavating and looking and searching and testing that muscle.

So there's aspects of the hunt that I'm interested in. And I think while I'm there, the actual physical experience I'm having in the yard is I'm looking down at my feet. I'm stepping through all these different kinds of trash and relics. And I'm walking over mountains and at the same time, I'm looking down and I'm looking around me, I'm having to also see all the things that are happening around me, like what machines are moving, what people are moving. You know I'm kind of in touch with a lot of people at once.

So there's this heavily concentrated physical awareness so I'm having to keep in touch with that's really beyond my eyes in some way. And I think that that physical awareness, that particular kind of perception it really does feel choreographed in a way when I'm moving through these spaces, whether I'm stepping over something or dipping into something, it's a more delicate movement. But if I'm pulling something, it's this vigorous, heavy, kind of swinging my weight around movement.

So there is kind of this choreographed sense of going back and forth between spaces. And I think that within the physical making of finding my materials, that's definitely the beginning of that dialogue

ESESUA

IKPEFAN:

Yeah, and just to further this conversation, I think what you said about your practice being responsive is actually very beautiful. And I'm just wondering how you entered into the world of art, what your journey was, and if part of your being drawn to this is in response, to use your words to your own father's architectural practice.

KENNEDY

YANKO:

You know, my dad's architectural practice it wasn't a very philosophical, conceptual-- he wasn't one of those kind of architects. He was working residential homes, beautiful neoclassical homes. And he was a painter as well. And the way that I started painting, I liked it. I enjoyed doing this thing.

And what was so special about it is our dialogue was always within the conversation of aesthetic language. I'd walk downstairs and I'd like, oh, you know what are you doing here. I like this thing you're doing here. What do you think about this? What do you think about that?

Our critiques were always just in this really casual form. It was a form of having a discussion and dialogue with a father, but it was also a love language in a way. Because I think that we both found a space where we could explore through a medium, as people who are interested in beauty and in making and moving.

ESESUA

IKPEFAN:

Yeah, I think your analysis of you both having two very different, do I say connection or approaches to your practice, but still being able to find that connection in the love of appreciating what was around you, to go back to our first questions and conversations where Tomi is talking about embodiment and the relationship between the body to space and what is around you and how that was a connection for both of you in your work. And I'm also now curious about Camille's journey into arts writing. And it seems to be one where you've allowed yourself to trust in your own experience and lead you to where you are.

And you've studied Africana Studies at Smith College, taking a year off of school to practice and study yoga. And now you're managing an art studio. And when Tomi and I were discussing this conversation one of the things that came up is how we don't speak enough in design discourse about the relationship of Black art and design and Black spiritual practice and heritage, and how this is something that's very difficult to separate. And I'm wondering if you can speak on your own experience with artwork and how you entered into your art writing practice and how this has become kind of an extension of your own spiritual practice.

CAMILLE

BACON:

Certainly. You're absolutely right in identifying that it has been a cosmic leap of faith is really how it all started. I was actually studying chemistry in school before I was majoring in Africana Studies as well, but had full intention of becoming a gynecologist. I remember I was in Martinique at my grandmother's house. It was the winter break between my junior, yeah, my junior year, first semester and second semester.

And it was getting time to take the MCAT. I had taken all the pre-med classes and I had to have this kind of return to faith moment with myself that I now have the language to understand. But at the time, I was really allowing my subconscious to lead me entirely and allowing the unseen to seize me in a particular way. And I ended up writing in my journal, I'm going to let myself free fall.

I'm going to take this cosmic leap of faith that was very, very unlike me. I formerly identified as extremely type A, extremely rigid in the ways that I understood my own self. And if I put my mind to something, I wasn't going to stop until it was finished. Now obviously, medical school is perhaps not something that we want to approach with that kind of mentality for obvious reasons, but that's really how it started.

I mean, yeah, I told myself I have absolutely no idea what is going to catch me. But I know that something will. And exactly a week later, I got an email from my school's museum and they were essentially promoting an exhibition called Black refractions. And all of the work was culled from the studio museum's permanent collection.

On a whim, very superficially, because I loved the image that they chose to promote the exhibition, it's "Lawdy Mama" by Barkley Hendricks. And I show up for the tour. It was early February of 2020. And I happened to be the only student who signed up to tour the show on that day.

So the curator walked downstairs and she led me through the exhibition. I at that point, did not know what a curator was, completely took for granted the ways in which art objects end up on walls, let alone on walls beside one another or in space beside one another. And I asked her so many questions we made it through maybe half of the first floor of the show.

And she was kind of just offering our-- her name is Emma Chubb also. She's incredible. She still is at Smith and highly recommend anyone who finds themselves in Northampton, Massachusetts to go to the Smith College Museum of Art and say hello to Emma. But she was, OK, I need to go keep doing my job. But clearly something has been ignited here and sent me a bunch of resources, internships to apply for.

And that's how I started to understand that I could make a life for myself in this thing that we call the art world. And one of my kind of like older friends from school, she was a senior when I was a freshman, ended up taking a two year post back position at the museum. So she was still there as all of this was unfolding. And she happened to be running the museum's blog at the time.

And was basically we need someone to write something about some aspect of this show. And do you want to do it? And I was in my era of the cosmic leap of faith. And so I said, yes. I had never really written about art in a formal capacity in that way, let alone published writing before. And I ended up writing a short reflection on that Barkley Hendricks painting.

And the rest is history. And now here we are. So that's how it all began. And I think for that reason, because again, it really started for me with this cosmic leap of faith, it is completely impossible for me to separate my relationship with art, with artists, with aesthetics in general, and my relationship with my study of Black feminism, which really is my spiritual practice.

I really think of all of it as the same thing like if we can imagine the kaleidoscopic hologram that Kennedy was describing before, like any refraction of the image will bring you right back to another refraction of the same image. And that's really how I think about those practices in my own life too. So after that, I think it's also an acknowledgment that the mind and the body are not separate entities, and therefore the spirit, the mind, and the body are not separate entities either.

And so that's part of why my methodology is so invested in intimacy and so invested in this divine oration and in this kind of channeling. Because I've come to understand now that I'm not writing, I'm channeling. Like I'm a conduit. And so it's less about toiling in the sort of cerebral realm of these things, and more so about really writing from that guttural place of how is this object making me feel, and using that as the research question, right?

Like, OK, I'm in the face of this art object. I'm feeling XYZ sensations in my body. And that becomes the question, why am I feeling these Sensations and then that's the opportunity to then reach back into the Black radical tradition, the people that I study the people that I read, and all of that good stuff. But insofar as art objects are a manifestation of spirit, my writing seeks to extend and amplify that sensibility, especially for artists who are adept at keeping their heart above their hands like Kennedy is.

And so, I think it's also a question of pace, a question of rhythm, a question of tempo. Like when you work spirit forward, you can't force your pen. Like you have to surrender to the sounding and there's no real control around when that comes, how often it comes, and what have you. And that has definitely been a challenge for me is understanding that there's no such thing as a kind of consistent stream of output for me.

It really happens when it happens. So that's another element of all of this for me for sure. But I think it's all about surrendering to the natural rhythm of my body, my mind, and my spirit. And I think to work spirit first is to acknowledge that I can be in relation with artworks, that they're not just inanimate objects. They're charged with life force and can be regarded as a sort of ritual object that might allow us to more deeply regard the contemporary condition that we live in, ourselves, one another.

And I also think because my practice is imbued with spirit, my approach, the way, the impetus of the pen is not one of evaluation, but it's rather that excavation and that amplification of the spiritual core of the artwork that I am beholding. And I'm not here to treat the object as a cold, numb, unfeeling thing. Nor am I interested in writing about it as such. I want to illuminate that hum to use the title of Kennedy's last exhibition. Yeah, that's how I think about it.

ESESUA
IKPEFAN:

So many thoughts going through my head right now. I think this conversation is happening or the timing of this conversation, especially for Tomi and I, we had a previous conversation in planning for this. And I think we're both finding ourselves in moments of cosmic leaps of faith, where we had a conversation about how we've gone through all this school and training, and we're kind of finding ourselves at the other end of it and not particularly doing what we thought we were going to do when we entered.

And I think what you spoke about is also another conversation about in design and art practice, giving yourself the grace to not always be in production, to learn to understand oneself, to be more present with your work. And I think that also wants me to ask Kennedy as well about, you've had these conversations about your own spiritual practice and influences in your art and the influence of navigating. And I was watching a conversation where you were speaking about the seen and unseen factors of the human experience. And I'm just wondering how you then take those aspects of spiritual practices of the seen and unseen, and how do you form and visualize and communicate this in your own art practice?

KENNEDY

YANKO:

Well, I'd love to really just piggyback off of what Camille was saying because I think there's so many nuances in how we're approaching things similarly here. And really that it begins with an embodiment and trust, and just like trusting that I will be provided for, that what I'm looking for will come to me, that the next step is the right step. And I often refer back to this idea of expansion and contraction and internal expansion and contraction.

And it can be really as simple as thinking about someone you don't like and someone you do like. What is the difference feeling that you have inside yourself when you look at those two different things? And so for me, I'm usually going off of the compass of trusting my expansion. So when I have that little tingle or when I have that excitement or when I have that kind of thing, so much of my process has been like, how do I dig through that to go through the conditioned aspects of that for myself?

And then how do I go through that and get to the core part of what could potentially be my truth? And can I trust that? And then how do I like-- then I'm building it over and over and over again every single time I'm making a decision about what goes where or what it looks like or how it feels. Or it's like, it's really just that give and take.

So for me personally, what I really feel like I'm doing is I'm energetically inserting myself in this work through the activity of making and through thinking. And I've talked a lot about this idea of transmutation from thought to thing or the different shows that I've had. Like I'm working with the material of metal, and then I'm working with the material of paint.

And these are like the limited palettes that I've given myself to go through and understand these things with. But somehow, a lot of times when I'm making shows and picking up on a particular kind of research, I think postcapitalist desire is such a great example of how that really came through in the work as I was studying economics and I was studying like the fact that our interests and our desires are chosen by our economic tides ultimately, that our minds are simple and malleable.

And when you looked at that work, and I was studying this essay it was called "Postcapitalist Desire" by Eric Fisher, and when you look at that work, you can really see the experience of the body and sexuality and chaos in the confines of industrialization. And then I can go to a different show where I'm talking about salient queens, where I'm experiencing an appreciating and breathing into all the different feminine energies in my life that have showed me the way to take up space.

And then you see that, you see their essence imbued in each individual piece. And I do think that that's happening because that's where my intention are and that's where my thoughts are and that's where what is coming through my hands as I press into the skin, as I push the skin. And there's something about having that external physical world that I'm working through and touching, and then at the same time that internal world, the ancestral world, the spiritual world that I'm churning and investigating and touching. And they're like playing together in that conversation, in that dance.

Also the idea of aligning myself with the next thing to do. Camille was talking about that when how she prepares to work. It's like she's sitting and listening and looking and waiting. And then she's moving. It's about the alignment for the information to come to be received. How do I create my body and my environment as a place for receptivity.

That's really the spiritual work. It is aligning the vessel and attuning the instrument, clearing the mind. And my deepest work has really been in my mind and trying to understand it, trying to accept it, and to watch it as well. So I think that all of those different factors holistically kind of become the practice in the work but also the existence.

**ESESUA
IKPEFAN:**

Thank you so much, so actually much of my own reflections on frequency. I really study the frequency of the interior, especially the quiet interior of the Black feminine, really pulling from Tina Campt and Lady Sasha Jones, who speak about opacity and frequencies and how diverse they are. And ontologically, both of your practices prioritize a trust in process, which we've talked about, a trust in the unseen and unknown, what some may call inspiration, divinity, spiritually guided curiosity, or The Way in Daoism.

So I'm interested to hear how you both understand frequency in your work, specifically harmony, but also as well as rupture. So yes, expansion, but also the contraction that may be present and how this friction kind of is used in your studio processes.

**KENNEDY
YANKO:**

Well, I think that Daoism is a really great philosophical place to start for me. It's one of the oldest forms of organizing thought and philosophy and being. And I can't help but think about the word friction, and that as the other experience too like easiness and things going well. I can't help to think about how much that word holds.

But one of the things that I've also been working on specifically for myself and my life and in my practice the last couple of years is really looking at the darkness, looking at the other side of things, looking at and digging into those things and the shadow perspectives that I use in my work. Sometimes you'll see these lines like jutting through my galleries or through the work or through the pieces. They all really started because I was looking at the shadows that were happening underneath the work.

I was tracing these strange shadows on the wall from the different lights and the different angles that they were coming at, and I was thinking about the things that we don't like, we cover up from, that are uncomfortable, the things we try to jump over, and really wanting to try to find space in the quietude that you speak of, the quietude of transition. Like how do I find more presence within this discomfort in this moment?

But my problem is that I've just trained my mind to understand that the obstacle leads to the next thing, right? In the same way that my expansion is going to lead to the next thing. If I'm presented with something, if I'm presented with an issue, the obstacle is what offers me an opportunity to understand something in a deeper way. And it really is what opens up my conscientiousness.

So when I'm faced with something like that, no, I mean obviously I'm a little brat and I get upset and I got to do my thing, whatever. But I'm working really hard on a daily basis to respond to the world in a way where that wasn't for me, or this is the direction, or maybe that's an idea. And I think so much when you're working in sculpture or in painting, the best things that happen are always something that got fucked up.

You always discover something, you always open up to something because that wasn't really what you were trying to do. So I think it's just having had that happen over and over again and understanding like, OK. I still have my fingers today. I still have my sun rise. I still have my love.

I think that it's really about understanding the things that really matter. And I'm making the art to chew through something and to understand something deeper for myself and to exist in a way that feels pure and right and inspiring. And I think that the discomfort is a part of that. And I'm really just trying to accept the full spectrum of what life is and what making is and take the challenging parts as just as juicy and just as full, if not more important than the things that feel good and taste good.

CAMILLE

Absolutely. I feel like I really try to embrace rupture and disturbance as much as I embrace harmony, if not more.

BACON:

Kind of like Kennedy was saying at the end there. Like again, my maternal family hails from Martinique, like the entire Island literally sits on tectonic plates that are always trembling. And it feels like we are always on the edge of an eruption geologically, and also ideologically speaking. And so honoring rupture and disturbance and obstacle is an intelligence that I literally carry in my blood.

And that's another piece of where the ancestral or spiritual aspect of my practice comes in, where I think if you look at the landscape of Martinique, and we can think about all the ways, again, that spirit leads us back to the understanding that the wellness of the body and the wellness of the landscape that the body emerges from are in complete correlation with one another. Like Martinique is an extremely rugged island. It is covered in volcanic rock.

And that is the texture that I seek to bring through my writing too. And also Black feminism teaches us that resolution is not necessarily always the end goal that leads us to those liberatory conditions, that willingness to exist in the contraction just as much as we're willing to exist in the ease that I think many of us are searching for, and I think we need to learn to honor the indeterminate, honor the opaque, honor that which will remain a mystery to all of us in perpetuity. And that's really what my writing is also invested in.

So it's like studying my lineage, both familial lineage and lineage of thought and spiritual practice is what allows me to embrace that entire spectrum and pendulate from one end to the other. The goal is not actually perpetual harmony. I actually really don't want that.

And it sounds like perhaps Kennedy, you kind of like amplification of those shadow forms behind your sculptures might signify that we are in complete alignment on that fact, that it's not always the pursuit of the harmony that we're after.

KENNEDY

YANKO:

I think that I am interested in the harmony. But I'm interested in it for a different reason. And I think for me it's about as an example of the phenomenon, right? Like when we touch that skin together, that skin holds it. And whether or not that story is written about the piece when it goes on the piece, to me it is within it and that is like the spiritual phenomenon. And I don't even know how to really correlate it exactly. But I think for me it's something about that moment that is it. Because it's all together.

CAMILLE I've been like, the harmony and the kind of disturbance, they're together.

BACON:

KENNEDY They have to coexist. And so within our connection or within our impetus or our touch or our beginning that happens over and over and over again. And that's what I mean by the harmony, where it's like I am this body of mass. And I am all of these things. I am all of the things. And so in my movement and my touch and my interaction, that thing is transmitted. That's my kind of idea around it.

CAMILLE And I feel like that's where the mutual fascination and commitment to abstraction comes in too, because I think abstraction is the aesthetic home for the all of thatness and for the harmony and the disturbance to live together, and then create its own kind of harmony maybe.

KENNEDY Yeah. And it's a place where I think we can really talk about it. Like you were saying earlier about how we can't even talk anymore. But it's like it really is a space where we can explore every aspect of the human experience in a caring environment. There's a lot of possibility there.

ESESUA I am glad that you both brought up this conversation of abstraction and relation to harmony and disturbance in your work and in much of contemporary academic discourse, I think conversations at times fall short of including the political and the erotic and talking about abstraction and its powers and potentials, and especially in relation to Blackness and specifically the Black diaspora in its kind of constellation of diverse and complex experience, expression, and futures that often lie in these spaces of ambiguity and tension and constantly changing potential. And I would just like you both to speak a little bit more about your attraction towards art writing and art practice on Black abstraction and how this helps you think about Blackness and Black identity within your own practice.

CAMILLE First of all, I think abstraction is inherently mischievous, especially at the hands of an artist who happens to be Black because it evades the expectation that they will make an art object that is legibly quote Black or can easily be tied back to a Black hand. So abstraction is a kind of an aesthetic fugitivity. Or it's giving credence to the fundamental ungraspability of Blackness itself, but also of spirit.

And I think my attraction to abstraction really goes back to that. It's like it helps me understand the ways in which we have an incredibly limited imagination when it comes to the things we imagine Black people to be capable of, right? And of course that is a direct offshoot of imperialism, capitalism, racism, all of the things. But I think ultimately, like as a writer, I'm enthralled by the ineffable dimensions of our lived experience.

And I love spending time with forms that push the limits of language and challenge me to really excavate a new lexicon to describe the texture of aliveness itself, which, of course, is always specific to Blackness, as I am a Black woman and that is the lineage that I'm interested in continually naming because that again is the lineage emerged from but it's also a crucial component of what allows us to reckon with the fact that we all have an interiority that no one else will ever be able to fully peer into.

And that goes back to Edouard Glissant's idea of opacity, where he's essentially like under Western frameworks of thought in order to understand, quote unquote understand another person or an entity, you have to reduce them and flatten them so that the ways in which they're different from you no longer feel like a threat. And I'm interested in doing the complete opposite of that. So if that kind of framework is what Glissant describes as transparency, . I'm also interested in that opacity.

But then I feel like Black abstraction can be language that is perhaps sometimes perilous, because I think it unwittingly maybe participates in that same flattening and reduction that Glissant warns us about, where it's like I always think about this. MacArthur always talks about how abstract expressionists learned how to improvise from Black jazz musicians. Also, Norman Lewis was in the room when the term abstract expressionism was coined, like he was part of those conversations, and he's never included in those ab ex survey shows or anything of that nature, I contend because he's Black and folks really again, this is where the limiting of the imagination comes in.

People cannot possibly imagine that Norman Lewis, a Black man, would be part of that discourse of abstract expressionism. And I think it's what you identified, Esesua, in your question of abstraction or formal Puritanism being kind of seen as separate from political or as separate from having this kind of social function in excess of being a formally speaking a beautiful object. And so I think I'm always interested in wrestling with that kind of line of inquiry.

But I think at the base, I'm also just a lover of poetry. I'm a lover of the things that make absolutely zero sense. I'm a lover of the things that really bring form to feeling. And as far as visual aesthetics go, I think abstraction is the closest thing we get to poetry, and that both are invested again, in bringing form to that raw feeling. And just as Audre Lorde says that poetry is not a luxury, I think abstraction is also not a luxury.

And it plays a really medicinal and antidotal role in my life, just as Black feminist literature does, just as poetry does. Because it allows me to have a boundless perception of myself and those that I'm in relation with and the worldly context that I inhabit more broadly, which then positions abstraction as a tool for intimacy building and the cultivation of this kind of relational intelligence across difference, where you stand in front of the painting that you cannot in two seconds come away with a clear interpretation of, and somehow find a way for that not to scare you. Or find a way to really inhabit that fear and allow it to move you to something else.

Because there are so many modes of interpreting and apprehending an abstract artwork, again, it reminds me that there are countless ways to interpret and apprehend myself, my experiences, the people that I love, all of that. And as someone whose practice is based in language and who really adores a challenge, I also love abstraction because it allows me to reach for more expansive and less declarative vocabulary, where again it's not about this is what Kennedy Yanko means.

But more so like this is what when I spend time with Kennedy's work, this is what it brings up for me on a sensorial level. And if I'm able to theorize through those sensations, I can make broader claims about the nature of being alive today rather than trying to again like necessarily define what Kennedy's work is about or what aliveness is about, because I actually don't think that's helpful at all. And so spending time with abstraction beckons me to experiment and to improvise and to evade legibility, both in my writing practice but also in the life that I live in excess of that practice.

And if we understand that we're spirit embodied, an abstraction, aesthetic openness, and this indeterminacy then can help us grapple with what it means to be someone who channels, what it means to be someone who really actually is guided by the unseen in a world that potentially gawks at that way of being. And so ultimately, I think I love it because it affirms the way in which I want to exist in the world and the way in which the people I also love want to exist in the world.

KENNEDY

And you know honestly when you first came to the studio, I hadn't had my work contextualized by a Black woman with that language and with that kind of understanding before and it moved me to tears. It moved me in such a deep way because for me, it's like my magic is in my hands and in my mind and how that's all translating in space. So to have it really expanded on for me in a way that opens my mind in a new way and that opens possibilities for me in a new way. I am so eternally grateful to you for the work that you put into doing that.

And I think for me in relationship to poetry and jazz and feeling and sensation, one of the powers I feel with abstraction and specifically what I'm finding within these sculptures is that when you approach them and when you stand within them and in front of them, they are formless in some way. They are levitating in some way. They are indistinctive in some way and yet so familiar at the same time.

And what I attempt to do with these found materials is I'm interested in recontextualizing in your ability to how you perceive them and how you experience them. Like can you take away the story that you're bringing to it. And that's not something I can say before you walk into a show. And it's not necessarily that I always do enough to respect work but it's the way that I'm trying to live in my life, which is present, imaginative, and allowing possibility and allowing something beyond the definition that my mind has been conditioned to define its own understanding of how we've moved through the world, for our own safety, for our own understanding.

It's like how can I get this work to start to challenge all of the immediate connotations of what it must be and what it is, merely from an existing. So for me, it's really about them boiling down to the essence of my own personal experience that is healing for me, but hopefully opens up the exploration for the others to see parts of themselves within that too.

CAMILLE

BACON:

I really love that because that is exactly of the reflection that you just gave. Kennedy. Is the reason I was also moved to tears following our studio visit, because there's this quote that Toni Morrison wrote in James Baldwin's eulogy. And I think I might have said this to you, Kennedy, when we were together. But Toni Morrison said of James Baldwin, "You gave me a language to dwell in, a gift so perfect it seemed my own invention."

And that's really how I felt when I was standing before the works that were in the studio. In your presence, Kennedy, it was like, it was finally somehow OK in the presence of your artwork for me to be completely unfamiliar with myself and for me to not fear the ways that I was really in that moment awakening to a new dimension of power within myself. And I think that's also why abstraction is so powerful.

Like another person that I read constantly and who's like always sort of in my head is Lucille Clifton. And she has this line where she talks about the peril of an unexamined life. And you just like read a quote or see an artwork or hear a song that is just going to live in your head rent free forever and be the thing that holds you accountable perhaps to your own development. And that, quote is one of those for me.

And I think abstraction in general but specifically your work, Kennedy, really gave me permission to examine my own life again. And so it's like, we're not talking about what that phrase, like art for art's sake, at this point we're talking about art as something, and perhaps abstraction specifically as something that can really be a functional material tool in building a life that you actually want to inhabit, which of course I believe is everyone's birthright that we've been alienated from.

But like, I truly cannot stress enough how spending time with Kennedy's work and thinking back to the conversation we had really provided me that ground to take the next cosmic leap of faith. And those are the things that just create a residue that stays in forever. And for that, Kennedy, I'm also eternally grateful.

KENNEDY

I think that what you're saying it also goes back to just the trust, right? Like the trust of going into something and being open to it. And what I'm saying with the material phenomena is carrying, is literally a sense of care. And all of the things that you experience in front of my work are the things that I'm going through. And that to me with an abstraction is the power. Because there was no word, there was no story, there was nothing you read, like you literally took that in. What more could you ask for as an artist? It's amazing.

YANKO:

ESESUA

IKPEFAN:

Incredible. So much to sit with. I'm definitely referencing this interview in my future writing. But to close, you have both highlighted the importance of embodiment and intimacy, spiritual practice, and the awareness of frequency in your respective practices. So to close in proper nexus podcast fashion, and to bring it back to your personal motivations, not that this whole conversation was not that. What is one work, a book, a film, music, that inspires you, and do you see any of that reflected in your work?

CAMILLE

BACON:

I mean my favorite book of all time is "Sula" by Toni Morrison. And this is the one thing about myself that I'm quite confident will likely not change throughout the course of my life. I think that that book holds so much wisdom when it comes to friendship, especially friendship between Black women, reflecting on girlhood, questions of loneliness, questions of what you do when someone betrays you, questions of how we can really, really prioritize our friendships as a site of knowledge production too and as a site to come to know yourself more deeply.

But I really just adore how carnal, how unapologetically defiant, how disobedient, how mischievous Sula as a character is. And I really think it's the kind of book that, if you reread it enough times, you'll identify with a different character every time. Or you'll identify with a different character at each point in the novel. And it's really wonderful because it follows three generations of women from two different families.

And so I think it then also, at least, so I've read it probably like five or six times now, and each time it becomes a mirror to the places in my psyche and the shadows in my psyche that I'm not necessarily super consciously willing to delve into. And so it then becomes a book that is a book, but is also so much more than a book and is something that I very frequently consult for the textual advice that I need.

And there's an idea in the book about secondhand loneliness and there's this epic scene where Nell and Sula-- I also am like notorious for giving spoilers. So I'm just going to very much so give the long and short of this. But basically Nell and Sula re-encounter each other after a moment of separation. And they're having this little tiff and Sula basically turns to her and does the mic drop moment of like, I might be lonely but at least my loneliness isn't secondhand loneliness. My loneliness is all my own.

And that's another quote that continually or just a concept that will forever be at the forefront of my mind. I love "Sula" so much and that is my thing right now. What about you Kennedy?

KENNEDY

YANKO:

Oh my gosh, when someone asks me about a book or my favorite artist or anything. I just get so overwhelmed. There's just so much to pull from. And I really couldn't think of a particular thing, because there's so many different things that I'm listening to and reading and thinking about right now.

But I thought there was a person that came to mind that I wanted to speak about. And I met her recently. Her name is Liz Kennedy, and she's a curator. And I was just talking to her about what she's up to, what she's been doing. She's like I'm actually about to be the new co-director of this emergency hotline for any kind of mental issues or things that you might call the police for and said, and I'm just going to be taking over this sector of it. It's a community based program. It's called care based safety.

And to me, I think that her action is such an incredible form of movement and moment to what we're experiencing right now with an affirmative action with what we're experiencing now with the Fourth Industrial Revolution. It's like what do we do to create the environments and the spaces so that we can care for each other, and maybe not necessarily looking and waiting for someone else to do it for us.

**ESESUA
IKPEFAN:**

Thank you so much. And first, I would like to thank you both for embracing your subjectivity, a dimension that Western canonical thought perpetually attempts to delegitimize. Yeah, this conversation has been beyond affirming. And that brings us to a close. Thank you so much for being here with us Camille and Kennedy.

TOMI LAJA:

I am Tomi Laja.

**ESESUA
IKPEFAN:**

And I am Esesua Ikpefan and you've been listening to the Nexus, a product of the African-American Design Nexus at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Today's episode was produced and edited by Maggie Janik, and to learn more about the African-American Design Nexus visit us online at adn.gsd.harvard.edu. Thank you for listening.