

ARTFORUM

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WITH LOVE: JIMMY'S THRIFT OF NEW DAVONHAIME

Azikiwe Mohammed talks with Claudia Rankine



View of "Azikiwe Mohammed: Jimmy's Thrift of New Davonhaime," 2017, Knockdown Center, New York.

New York native AZIKIWE MOHAMMED has been making art for over a decade. His multidisciplinary practice—which merges painting, photography, sculpture, performance, and found ephemera—prioritizes, at its core, the experiences, needs, and

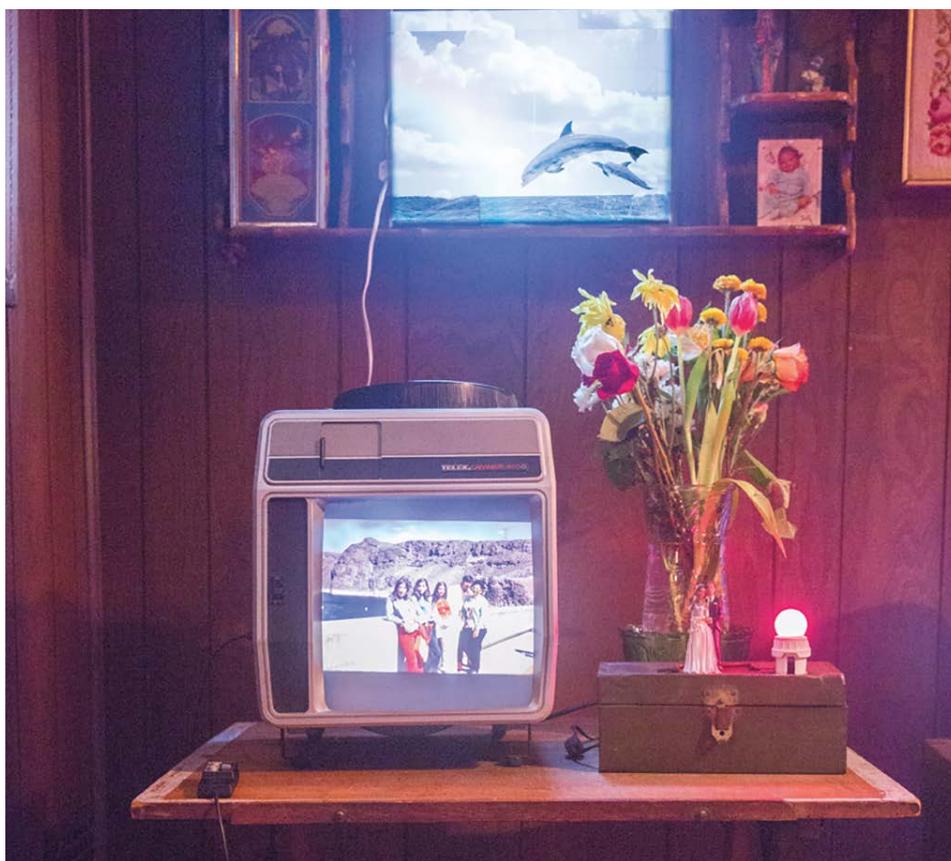
subjectivity of people of color in America. On the heels of his first institutional solo show at Knockdown Center in Queens this past fall, Mohammed spoke to visionary writer, poet, and playwright CLAUDIA RANKINE about his ongoing project *Jimmy's Thrift of New Davonhaime*, reimagining historical incongruities, and making art that is fundamentally participatory.



View of "Azikiwe Mohammed: Jimmy's Thrift of New Davonhaime," 2017, Knockdown Center, New York.

CLAUDIA RANKINE: It's such amazing work you're doing—not just making art, but creating experiences for people to reimagine.

AZIKIWE MOHAMMED: It's easier for me when I construct a circumstance in which people can tell me that I'm wrong. If I'm wrong, and it's in real time, then I can also fix it and try to get better immediately.



Azikiwe Mohammed, *Jimmy's Thrift of New Davonhaime*, 2016–, mixed media. Installation views, James A. Farley Post Office, New York, 2016.

CR: I guess we could say you've choreographed into your process the ability to include public thought, public imagining, public desire, public refinement. It's brilliant. It sort of goes against the whole notion of "fine arts."

AM: Yeah, well, that's boring, that's not fun.



Postcards from Azikiwe Mohammed's *Jimmy's Thrift of New Davonhaime*, 2016–, mixed media, dimensions variable.

CR: But it's more than just creating fun. I think it's revolutionary, your ability to give up control and democratize both space and process.

AM: Well, I think one of the most important things we can do, especially as humans in the arts, is to replace “for” with “with.”



Azikiwe Mohammed, *Jimmy's Thrift of New Davonhaime*, 2016–, mixed media. Installation views, James A. Farley Post Office, New York, 2016.

CR: “With”?

AM: Yeah, with. That’s how things get fixed. I’m just the same as anybody else that would be coming to a show or event. Most of our problems are the same, so why don’t I try to address yours while you help address mine and we can jump a bit further?

My entry to art was through the lens of service. My father was an event slash school-portrait slash public-institution photographer. He worked to generate and preserve memories for people who were busy making them. For my show last fall at Knockdown Center in Queens, I included a makeshift photo studio. I was there almost every day. As visitors came by, I offered to take impromptu portraits of whoever needed to see themselves. I had a similar studio setup for two months in Harlem this summer. The goal was to make physical prints for people who haven’t traditionally had access to formal photography services. That was more people than I anticipated.

A utopia is a fantasy into which you dump all your wishes and dreams but which ultimately functions like a scapegoat. I wanted to envision something that could actually work.

CR: Could you speak to the kind of memory grabbing that you’re doing?

AM: In 2015, I created an imaginary town called New Davonhaime. The name combines those of five cities in America with some of the highest Black-population densities, as determined by census data. I took letters and sounds from each of these locations—New Orleans; Detroit; Birmingham [Alabama]; Jackson [Mississippi]; Savannah [Georgia]—and moved them around until I made something that sounded like a real place. “New” evokes people coming from somewhere who want to hold on to parts of that other place, but who also want to make a version that’s a little better.

I visited as many of these five cities as I could in two and a half weeks. I asked people, “What are your issues?” “What’s wrong?” “This is what I’m doing—does this work?” Most responses were pretty simple: “I don’t see enough of myself out there and the versions I do see I’m not happy with. There are some things I like, and I would like to see more of those things.”



View of “Azikiwe Mohammed: Jimmy’s Thrift of New Davonhaime,” 2017, Knockdown Center, New York.

CR: I’ve read that you didn’t want this town to be thought of as a utopia. Because utopias are never realized, right?

AM: A utopia is a fantasy into which you dump all your wishes and dreams but which ultimately functions like a scapegoat. I wanted to envision something that could actually work. You don’t work to make a utopia happen. You might work to make something based on a utopia, but you accept that whatever you come up with will be four or five steps

behind. You have to acknowledge failure as part of the plan.

Currently, New Davonhaime's only brick-and-mortar offering is my store, Jimmy's Thrift of New Davonhaime. The first iteration was at Spring/Break Art Show [at the James A. Farley Post Office in New York], the second was for a group exhibition organized by No Longer Empty [also in New York], the third was this past fall at Knockdown Center, and the fourth was in a currently functioning mall in downtown Miami, as part of [Jersey City, New Jersey-based] Mana Contemporary's offering at last year's Miami Art Basel. Across from me were a shoe repair person and someone who fixes watches. The thrift store as an institution represents places that have a history but a limited framework through which to express it. It is a living repository of memories and stories and the objects that hold these memories. The cultural heritage of the places I mentioned before stays static in a way that doesn't occur in larger urban areas, where populations and neighborhoods are in greater flux. People who live in these towns stay there for generations. A thrift store is a special space; everyone in a community has contributed to its story and has presented that story for others to continue telling.





Embroidered panel from Azikiwe Mohammed's *Jimmy's Thrift of New Davonhaime*, 2016–, mixed media, dimensions variable.

CR: Which parts of Jimmy's Thrift are made by you and which parts are found? And does it matter?

AM: This is a question that I get asked ad infinitum and—I'm really bad at giving straight answers, I'm sorry. So how's this: I like to leave people with something they can take home, whether it's a physical item or an idea through which they can imagine themselves. The postcards are free, I always have two or three items under ten dollars, and the rest is for sale at what I call "reasonable art prices." The items vary hugely. I make about 70 percent of my inventory; the remainder is found. With so many items of such divergent sorts sharing the same space, instead of "Who made this?" people usually ask, "Where did these things come from?" That question points away from me as maker and toward the complexities of how we situate creative output in the context of community, history, and circumstance. I think of myself less as the creator of New Davonhaime and more as one of its residents. This resident's name is Jimmy.

I encourage my visitors to write a note on their postcard and mail it back to me. The prompt is as follows: "Write a memory of your visit to New Davonhaime in the form of something you're not getting here in America, but that you would like to get in a different place." Responses differ. For some people, America's fine. Great, I'm not mad at them; I'm just not one of them. Through collecting input from my visitors I get a better picture of what New Davonhaime looks like. I base the objects I make largely on these written memories.



Portrait from the photo studio in “Azikiwe Mohammed: Jimmy’s Thrift of New Davonhaime,” 2017, Knockdown Center, New York.

CR: You’ve created a democratized system of audience participation in which memories come from both solicited and random participants. How do you concretize this feedback—these thoughts, feelings, and ideas?

AM: My show at Knockdown contained many painted mirrors. A recurring theme in the postcards I received was people not seeing themselves, or being seen by somebody else in a way that wasn’t how they perceived themselves. That’s how I got the idea for My First Time. I asked people two questions: “When was the first time that you realized that you were Black?,” and “When was the first time your internal mirror met your external mirror?” I recorded their replies, which I then set to music and turned into physical records. Some of the stories pertained directly to skin color, some to other aspects of physical appearance. My favorite response was from a member of my family. As a kid, he touched the hand of his white teacher and thought, That’s not what hands feel or look like. He was used to the hands of his mother, who was also a teacher. If his schoolteacher and his mother were both teachers, what rendered their hands so different? What disparate life experiences would leave one teacher’s hands soft and bejeweled and another’s markedly less so?

I don’t pretend to speak for the needs of all of us on the margins. My work addresses

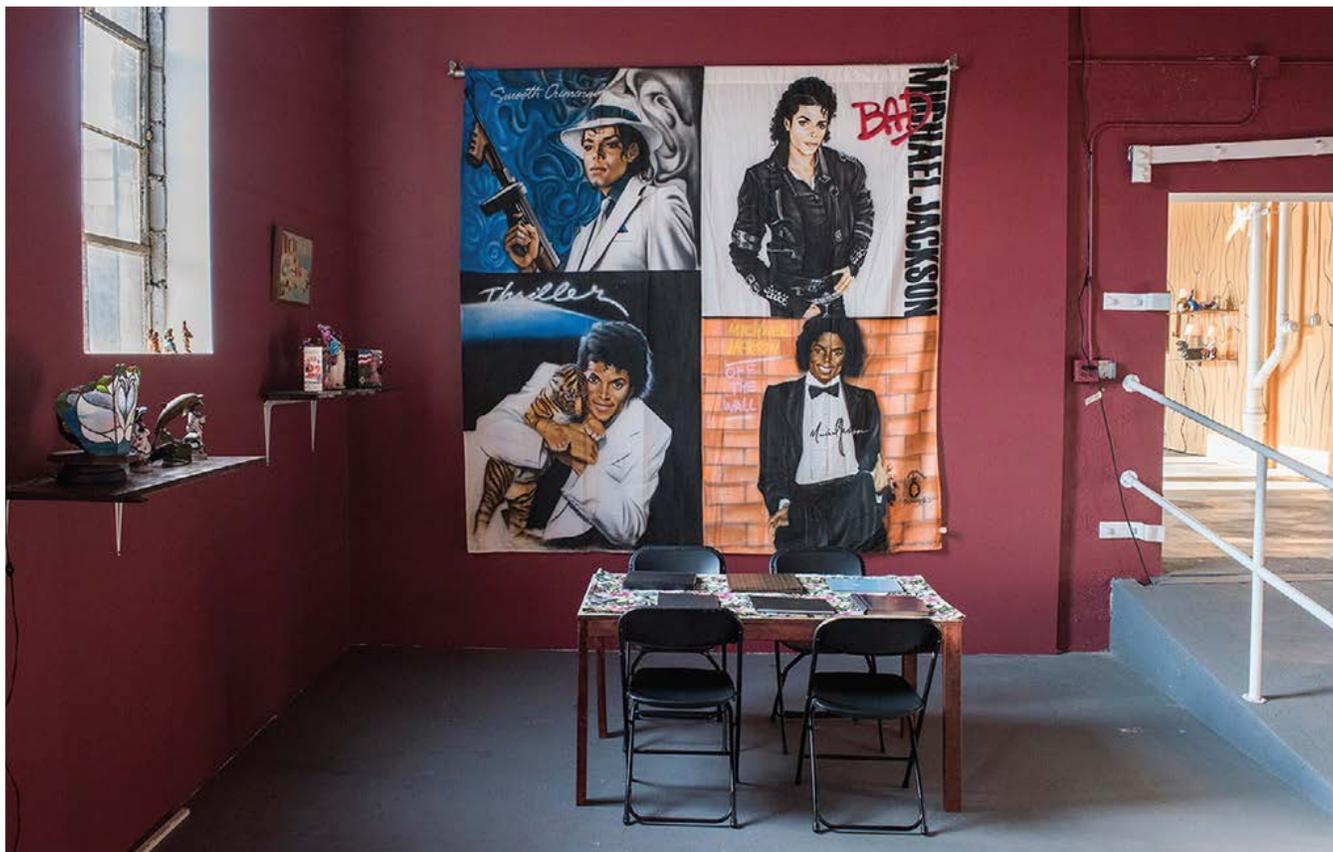
certain elements of a larger black and brown experience. At the first Jimmy's, the janitors would come hang out in the space in the mornings, just blaring the radio, and I was like, This is the thing. This is why this works.



Portrait from the photo studio in "Azikiwe Mohammed: Jimmy's Thrift of New Davonhaime," 2017, Knockdown Center, New York.

CR: Your work emphasizes the archival, the gestural, the process of documenting events, but it seems there's also a desire to change history. Maybe not to change it completely, but to step into it and redirect it. There's that nagging curiosity to know: If I change x thing, what else is possible? When you consider the structures of white supremacy that are a foundational influence on American life—which have as their aim the annihilation of African Americans—it's hard for African Americans to envision a history outside of that. And it seems like you're saying, "Okay, this is the life we have, but what happens if we interject?"

AM: Yeah, totally, we change stuff all the time.

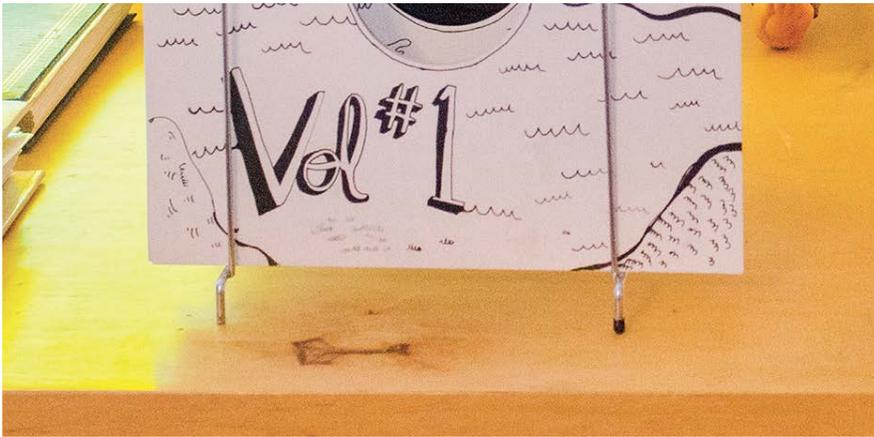


View of "Azikiwe Mohammed: Jimmy's Thrift of New Davonhaime," 2017, Knockdown Center, New York.

CR: So, creating counter-narratives or reframing?

AM: Both.





Azikiwe Mohammed, *Jimmy's Thrift of New Davonhaime*, 2016–, mixed media. Installation view, No Longer Empty, New York, 2016.

CR: Reframing so that the emphasis is on life rather than death?

AM: I think time is holistic and fluid. People talk about lynching as a dated phenomenon, and I'm like, "Well, a kid got lynched last month." It's easy to perceive this country's history as long but, realistically, it's super short. I try to use that shortness and our shared language to offer a different starting point from the one we were given. For a while, I was making paintings of alternate endings to major historical moments. I'm looking to my needs and the needs of those around me and thinking, How do I address these? Because what I'm doing isn't going far enough, it's not working. There needs to be more. How do I make more? Hopefully, New Davonhaime can be that place of more. Hopefully, by including the voices of others, I can address our collective needs in a way that making art for myself simply cannot.

— Azikiwe Mohammed, Claudia Rankine

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