

Ming Smith and Mark Sealy in Conversation

September 20, 2024 conversation between Mark Sealy and Ming Smith, moderated Yasmina Price, in the center's Film/Video Theater. Introductions by Gaëtane Verna, Mark Sealy, and Dionne Custer Edwards. The talk was part of the opening celebration for the exhibitions *Rotimi Fani-Kayode: Tranquility of Communion* and *Ming Smith: Wind Chime*, on view September 22, 2024–January 5, 2025.

This transcription is provided as a record of the live conversation, for educational use. [Read more about the Wexner Center for the Arts' Mission, Vision, and Values.](#)

Transcript

Gaëtane Verna (00:06):

Welcome, everyone. Let me be the first to welcome you to our fall 2024 opening celebration. Before we begin, please join me in respectfully acknowledging the past and present traditional owners of this territory and their unique role in the life of this region. The Wexner Center for the Arts is committed to honoring Indigenous people's unique cultural and spiritual relationship to the land and waters and the rich contribution to our society. We pay our respect to their elders past, present, and emerging. We ask that you respect the land and traditions of those who walked upon it for millennia before us.

(00:59):

Our center occupies the ancestral land and contemporary territory of the Shawnee, Potawatomi, Delaware, Miami, Peoria, Seneca, Wyandotte, Ojibwe, and many other Indigenous people. Specifically, the university resides on land ceded in the 1795 Treaty of Greenville and the forced removal of nations through the Indian Removal Act of 1830. As an institution, we want to honor the resiliency of these nations and recognize the historical context that continues to affect the Indigenous people of this vast land. I hope that you will join me in acknowledging the history, culture, and stewardship of the land. We seek to live in respect, peace, and right relations as we live and work on their ancestral territory.

(02:04):

Once again, welcome. I'm thrilled to see all of you gathered here tonight to help us celebrate the opening of our many exhibitions. I welcome you today on behalf of everyone at the Wexner Center for the Arts and our Board of Trustees at the Wexner Center Foundation, some of whom are here with us tonight. Members of our executive committee, Paige Crane, Dave Aronowitz, and Alex Shumate. We thank them and our entire foundation board for their trust and unwavering support. A special combination of exhibitions awaits you. In our lobby area, we present an installation by renowned American artist Nancy Holt. Her site-responsive sculpture titled *Pipeline*, installed inside as well as outside of our building, addresses fossil-fuel extraction, bringing critical attention to systems providing the power so necessary to fueling our world.

(03:09):

On the plaza that surrounds the Wex, we continue to interact with our commissioned installation by Columbus-based practice Outpost Office led by Ashley Bigham and Erik Herrmann, who design installations that challenge our architectures and our shared space. Do engage and interact with their modular large-scale furniture titled *Color Block No 2*. These works are spaces for collaboration, socializing, and rest that provide us with a different perspective on our shared spaces. In our galleries, we see the work of Awilda Rodríguez Lora's *Sustento*, a new video that is curated by Jennifer Lange. In this work, Rodríguez Lora poses the universal (distant squeaking) poses the universal (audience laughing)... Are we good? It's a universal question. The universal question of how we humans can sustain ourselves in the face of constant demand and oppression.

(04:25):

Moving on to our Galleries A and B, you will see a range of works by artist Ming Smith, raised right here in Columbus, Ohio. Smith has traveled extensively for five decades, capturing singular moments that expand within a wide variety of themes. She has found inspiration in the people that she comes across in the streets and cities of the world. With each image, she evokes and conveys the power of individual humanity through her viewpoint as an American woman of color. Her unique vision was recognized early on by the Museum of Modern Art, which in 1978 made her the first Black female photographer to be included in their vast and impressive collection. We are thrilled to present some of Smith's early works from the *Africa* series alongside very recent exploration into color and collage, as well as a newly commissioned soundscape by musician Mingus Murray accompanying her brand new work.

(05:41):

With this exhibition, *Wind Chime*, curated by Kelly Kivland, we honor Ming Smith and highlight the legacy of great artists linked to Columbus. We are collaborating for the very first time with two nearby institutions to offer a broader view of Ming Smith's extraordinary imagery. I encourage you to visit these other exhibitions this fall, *Transcendence* and *August Moon* presented at the Columbus Museum of Art and *Jazz Requiem - Notations in Blue* at The Gund at Kenyon College. I want to take this opportunity to salute Brooke Minto, CEO of the Columbus Museum of Art, and Daisy Desrosiers, Director and Chief Curator of The Gund at Kenyon, for their partnership and collaboration in organizing and supporting the work of Ming Smith in our region.

(06:37):

Lastly, in Galleries C and D, we are also proud to present *Tranquility of Communion*, by far the largest exhibition to date of work by Nigerian-born British photographer, Rotimi Fani-Kayode, curated by Dr. Mark Sealy. Though his career was tragically cut short by his death at 34 in 1989, Fani-Kayode nonetheless produced an extensive and influential body of work that fiercely explores issues of identity, race, sexuality, and spirituality. He also cofounded Autograph, London. To this day, the foundation supports artists who follow in Fani-Kayode's footsteps using photography for the benefit of human rights and social justice. He shares a belief that guides our work at the Wex that art is a vital forum to challenge, to raise questions, and to represent a variety of perspectives and lived experiences. Once again, our exhibition staff has outdone itself in steering these shows and transforming the galleries to accommodate the artists' works. So, congratulations to Interim Head of Exhibitions Kim Kollman; Exhibition Design and Production Manager

Dave Dickas; and everyone on the respective teams for a job well done. Please give them a round of applause (audience applauds).

(08:10):

I would like to thank Ming Smith and her studio for their thoughtful collaboration and their trust in the work at the Wex. Mingus Murray, also, for continuing the sensory journey that Ming begins with her images. And lastly, our past colleague Kelly Kivland, who was instrumental in bringing this project to life, to initiating the collaboration between the three organizations, and for being so dedicated to this exhibition and championing Ming Smith's work. We're also grateful for the partnership of Dr. Mark Sealy, the Director of Autograph, London. It has been a joy to work closely with him and his team as he opened the archives to share Fani-Kayode's beautiful and meaningful work. Many of these images have not been seen publicly since they were created, so thank you so much, Mark, for this incredible partnership.

(09:33):

Our work could not happen as it has without the generosity of donors. Our sincere thanks to these individuals and organizations for recognizing the value of the arts and these artists. *Ming Smith: Wind Chime* is made possible by support from the National Endowment for the Arts and Mike and Paige Crane. Support for *Rotimi Fani-Kayode: Tranquility of Communion* has been provided by Carol and David Aronowitz. Dave is here with us. Thanks Dave. Both shows are supported by FotoFocus and are part of the photography biennial's programming this fall. Our current exhibition season also benefits from donations by Bill and Sheila Lambert and the Crane Family Foundation. Our Learning & Public Practice programs, such as tonight's talk, are made possible by the American Electric Power Foundation, CoverMyMeds, Huntington, and the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation. Thanks to assistance from the American Electric Power Foundation, Mary and Robert Kidder, Bill and Sheila Lambert, and additional support from Adam Flatto, CoverMyMeds, and the PNC Foundation, we can offer free admission to our galleries to reduce barriers and promote access to all of our programs.

(11:06):

Our members also provide essential support to our work, and I encourage anyone who's not a member to consider the full benefits of joining, from tickets benefits to bragging rights of playing a part in exhibitions like this coming to Columbus. Please join us and become members of the Wexner Center for the Arts. Now, I would like to introduce Dr. Mark Sealy, Director of Autograph, to say a few words. Rotimi Fani-Kayode's exhibition is organized in partnership with Autograph, London. We will pursue our collaboration and produce an extensive publication as well as tour Rotimi's exhibition nationally and internationally together. Please help me to welcome my esteemed colleague, Dr. Mark Sealy. Thank you. (audience applauds)

Mark Sealy (12:18):

So I'm not going to try and repeat the lengthy thank yous that Gaëtane has taken us through, but I would just like to say a few words because I'm not here just as an individual. I'm here really representing Autograph, the organization that I've been working with for over 30 years, and which Rotimi is a foundational building block of. I just wanted to reiterate a few things really to just think about what it means to think about dialogue, to be speaking, to just be fair in exchange is to think about what conversation

does, how important it is to be closer to each other, to share those kind of ideas about what can be made possible. To think about alliances, it's a very important word for me because within culture, nothing really happens without alliances.

(13:12):

We know that there are institutional differences across spaces and ideological fault lines that keep things and people back, but having alliances, genuine alliances where dialogue and conversation can happen means that exhibitions like Rotimi Fani-Kayode's upstairs can be made real. And they can be made real in really tangible ways. Ways in which young people can encounter them. Ways in which we can rethink ourselves. Ways in which we can reformulate the world. Ways in which we can understand how difference operates. Ways in which we can understand things like identity politics, ideas of exile, ideas of just being—you know, a kind of shared, almost humanitarian sense. Ideas of taking responsibility as well, of thinking about what you might not be, but what you are responsible for. It's that shared space of recognition [which] is really important for me.

(14:08):

And this exhibition and the dialogues that we've been having with the Wexner at every level, and I stress that—at every level, every phone call, every Zoom call, every email exchange—has been fluid, has been tactile in a way. And I use that word very carefully, tactile in a way because it felt like the people here at the Wex cared for what we were trying to do rather than actually just becoming a functionary tool of operation. This idea of nurturing things and bringing things into reality is really the experience that I've had in working with the center. This idea of taking risk as well. There's 50,000 million artists on the planet. You don't have to say yes to a Rotimi Fani-Kayode show. But I think we do have to say yes to a Rotimi Fani-Kayode show because it's characters like Rotimi Fani-Kayode that are really special. It's characters like Ming that are really special because they take risks, they push the boundaries out there, they offer us gifts.

(15:08):

And I think curatorial work for me over the last 30 years has not been about trying to climb up the food chain of how one can be seen across our peers. I'm genuinely not interested in that. Curatorial work for me is about providing spaces where we can share ideas, where we can share things. And I think that's in many ways what you have here is a fantastic forum to share ideas within. The range of things that can happen through the well-endowed situation that you have here means that you have an infinite possibility to make change happen, to make things appear new, to reinvent and reestablish the old, to bring the old into a place of reinvention. That's what the arts are about for me. It's about learning and understanding.

(16:01):

But if we don't have leadership in that space, if we don't have those that are prepared to say: we can do things differently; we can do things a new way. We can open up new doors. We can stop maybe being so conservative about what we think. Our ideas really, if we're going to survive, means that we have to be fluid; we have to be tangible with each other. We have to kind of take off the lead boots that we often wear that have been given. And those who are responsible for that are really quite hard to find. Gaëtane has thanked a lot of people tonight, but I'm going to say thank you for her leadership and her

guidance in bringing Rotimi's work to the Wex we've been speaking for...(audience applauds)

(16:55):

So, allow me sometimes just to get a little bit emotional. It's not something that comes easy, actually. And it's because we meet so much resistance on a daily basis with artists say like Rotimi. And it's because when you've been on a 30-year journey with someone like Rotimi's work, that you begin to understand its possibilities and the investments that are behind it. And it's because you've knocked on so many doors, and the doors have gone, "no, no, no, it can't happen." And then when the doors do finally open, and you see the work, and it's all the things that you imagined for it become material, there is a moment of joy. I'm not feeling sad here today. I'm feeling overwhelmed with seeing what we've done upstairs. I'm going to be talking in a little bit and sharing conversations. I'm just going to say as a community, thank you for turning out tonight. It makes such a difference, and I hope you enjoy the work, and take the work, and spread the word, and celebrate what we collectively have done here today. So, thank you all very much.

Dionne Custer Edwards (18:23):

Thank you, Gaëtane, and thank you, Mark. Now you got me emotional. I'm so happy to introduce tonight's program and I cannot wait for you to see the exhibitions. Thank you so much for being here tonight. My name is Dionne Custer Edwards and I'm the head of Learning & Public Practice here at the Wex. Each exhibition opening, we strive to celebrate the artists and the work on view with a short conversation to introduce our communities to the exhibitions. A special thank you to Emily Haidet, Learning & Public Practice's curator of public programs, who organized tonight's talk. Tonight, I'm pleased to welcome Ming Smith, renowned artist whose exhibition *Wind Chime* you'll see momentarily. Mark Sealy, who we just heard from, Director of Autograph, professor of photography, rights and representation at University of the Arts, London and guest curator of *Rotimi Fani-Kayode: Tranquility of Communion*. And our moderator for the conversation, Yasmina Price, a New York-based writer, film programmer, and PhD candidate at Yale University. Please join me in welcoming Ming Smith, Mark Sealy, and Yasmina Price.

Yasmina Price (20:06):

Good evening, everyone. It is such a pleasure to be in a space of communion, of generosity. And before we get started, I'm just going to say a few words about accessibility during this event for viewers and listeners of the program. I'd like to share that, throughout the conversation, behind and above the panel of speakers is projected a slideshow of 17 photographs from the artists, Ming Smith and Rotimi Fani-Kayode. There are five color and five black-and-white studio photographs from Rotimi Fani-Kayode, which focus on Black men featuring various costumes, poses, and props. There are seven photographs from the work of Ming Smith, four black-and-white images from her *Africa* series, which feature people in motion in outdoor settings, an abstract image of a painted photograph, and two black-and-white images featuring women in personal settings. As the conversation proceeds, and if a particular slide image becomes the focus, I will jump in and further describe an image for the audience. We have heard from Mark, but I think we should welcome Mark and Ming together on stage.

(21:19):

I am just going to offer a few words to situate us in this dialogue, in this shared space. When we consider the Western and the white art world, Black photographers have often been subjected to something perhaps more dangerous and more dismissive than exclusion and erasure, a fundamental illegibility, a misreading and a misrecognition, a harm of being reduced to vague stereotypes of otherness, of being essentialized and universalized. As though to say Black photographer could ever mean a singular thing about who is behind the lens, about their personhood or technique or Blackness or aesthetic or purpose. Ming Smith and Rotimi Fani-Kayode are two distinct Black photographers whose practices must be seen and felt and experienced in their particularities. But it is also from that place of recognizing what is distinct that the beautiful choreography of having these two shows side by side shines, where we can see where they meet each other and speak together.

(22:36):

Both in terms of their personal trajectories and their photographic practices, neither of these artists could be fixed in one place or made to fit any given template. They created their own ways of seeing. Between them photography and cosmology converge. A shared soundtrack might play Alice and John Coltrane. This medium associated with stillness is infinitely mobile, and they choreograph the divine in the interval of the everyday. Between them, we can trace the circulation of a shared Black visual language stretching across the African continent and on both sides of the Atlantic in the US and in the UK—a kinship of interconnections through Pan-Africanism; Black queerness; Black feminism; an Afro-diasporic constellation of performance, dance, spirituality, and music. So, we might begin there, in the Black diaspora. Ming Smith and Rotimi Fani-Kayode offer us a rich portal into thinking through image making across the Black diaspora in the most expansive sense.

(23:41):

And a question for you Ming, to begin. The photograph chosen to represent the *Wind Chime* exhibition is *Dakar Roadside with Figures*, which you shot in the Senegalese capital in 1972. Both sculptural and full of breath, this is a black-and-white photograph of a person walking along a road with a wall in the background and two trees. Their light clothing and the trees blow in the wind. As we sit here in Columbus where you were raised, where a camera was first placed in your hands by your father, I believe, and where your practice-

Ming Smith (24:16):

Me, just me.

Yasmina Price (24:17):

By you. I am so sorry. I gave the wrong person credit.

Ming Smith (24:20):

He was around, but I asked my mother to borrow her camera that sat in the closet. First day of kindergarten, and so I asked to borrow her camera. I knew about photography because my father photographed, painted, and did a lot of sculpture, but it was me-

Yasmina Price (24:41):

Self-directed.

Ming Smith (24:43):

... that decided to go borrow her camera, and I took it. And there was film in it that she never used, so-

Yasmina Price (24:48):

You found a use for it.

Ming Smith (24:50):

Yeah, [inaudible 00:24:51].

Yasmina Price (24:50):

It's intergenerational work.

Ming Smith (24:52):

My father had the expensive camera, and my mother just had the little Brownie.

Yasmina Price (24:57):

We don't want to think too deeply about what that means. But this is the place where you chose photography for yourself, and photography ended up traveling with you. So, I wonder with this photograph that was in a place where you were to be photographed, could you tell us a little bit about how the practice traveled with you? I would imagine how being in different places shaped the kind of images that you made.

Ming Smith (25:22):

Actually, it's interesting. This is a full cycle for me, and I don't want to get emotional. My son will say, "Mom, why'd you go stand up and start crying?" With this photograph—it's the man, and there's the tree. And for it, it's like a circle. They chose this photograph, but it's a full cycle for me. And it's like the beginning and the ending of a cycle with this photograph, so it was interesting. That was my first trip outside of Columbus to somewhere outside of New York over abroad. It was symbolic. It was also one of my first photographs that I thought was a really good photograph, and it's lasted. Some photographs don't last, they're timeless. But this piece has been timeless, and it keeps on coming up at really very special moments. This is my first photograph that I really loved.

(26:35):

I want to say it's a full cycle and it's like the wind, the exhibition, *Wind Chime*. I noticed the beauty, the movement, the light, the way people moved when I went to Africa, it was like... Way back then, the only images that I ever saw of Africa were people in the jungle. They were many times in cartoons, they were like... We were rooting for the cowboys, not the Indians. It was a beautiful world, and I saw the colors and people, the way they

walked in their clothing, and their sophistication, and just the way they did things— their grace, their humanity, and their love.

(27:33):

I have a photograph, I'm not sure if it's in this exhibition, but I'm in Gambela, and there's this little boy, and he's like this—and he's just standing like that. He looks like a voguer or someone's like... He does, but it's natural. It's just a natural way of moving. So, this was my first trip, but wherever I go in the world—because I've been to Germany; I've been to Egypt, Israel on the same trip; I've been to Mexico—the beauty and the humanity of people, that's what I wanted to capture, our humanity, our shared humanity. It's through the beauty, just physically, and the human feeling and interaction.

Yasmina Price (28:25):

Thank you. Drawing a little bit of what you were saying about you had seen a certain image of the African continent and then you created another one. For you, Mark, your stewardship of Fani-Kayode's legacy has coexisted with your own scholarship and curatorial work about how the histories of colonization and empire and racialized hierarchies really shaped photography as a medium and as a practice. And Fani-Kayode himself was keenly aware of how those structures of power functioned and very attuned to disturbing them. So, I would suggest maybe guiding us to the *Dan Mask* photograph, which-

Mark Sealy (29:07):

I think it's more a case of understanding where... I've always seen the camera really as part a wider colonial enterprise. That's just something to throw out because you don't have time to unpack all of that philosophical work tonight, but it's part of the machinery of occupation. So, it's not surprising that when we're growing up as young people that we're bombarded with degrading images of ourselves or the Black subject holistically or any other subject that isn't Eurocentric in that way. And I think what Rotimi is doing is he's presenting a new cosmology, a new history, a new sense of being. And by that sense of being, I mean someone who's infinitely wrapped up in the Yoruba way of being: masking, thinking, functioning, and staging, that using the camera to basically turn away from that observational gaze. So, this isn't about taking pictures, it's fundamentally about making pictures.

(30:07):

This is someone who's been to art school and understands that collage and bringing things together in a totally different way means that you can begin to create a disruptive narrative. Rotimi for me, is a disruptive crusader, if you like. That's an interesting—a disruptive crusader—maybe think about that a little bit. He's forged in exile, he's forged in diaspora, he's rich in culture, he arrives in London, he's educated in the UK. There's a polymathic way of thinking that means that you can take the camera and if you unhinge all the conservatives, whether in Africa or within Europe itself, there's a possibility of making something new. And the idea of the face and the mask—and the complexity of what you're looking at, what you're looking through, what you shadow, what you protect—the operation of what the mask can mean is really quite important because for me, the strength of that kind of work suggests that we're all operating, to some degree,

with a level of masking. So, it's about peeling that back and asking us to think about what really is the face of ourselves.

Yasmina Price (31:22):

There's too beautiful a transition between this image, which I'll just describe quickly, is the black-and-white photograph of a shirtless Black man delicately holding a shiny African mask above his face. The figure leans far back with only his arms, forehead, and cascading strands of hair visible. Ming, you have a photograph called *Masque, Cairo, Egypt*, which is multiple images which you developed in the same role of film from what I understand. It's a single black-and-white photograph of a woman and a child posing facing the viewer and a piece of lace obscuring her face. Behind them are a pyramid shape with the shadow of a figure within it and an industrial landscape. I think that there was a sense of happenstance. Mark, you'd use the word gift, and I think you've used that word also to describe that photograph. Could you tell us a little bit about the context of making it and how you received it?

Ming Smith (32:25):

I find that from my first photograph to my last photograph, it's a journey. And through my photography, I've grown not only physically, intellectually, but also, spiritually. That is one of the most real components of my work, although I wasn't really thinking of that even though I was living it and was on that journey. But there's been times, affirmations that I was on a spiritual journey. In life sometimes you need, especially an artist... For example, being a photographer. I don't think the young folks really understand. Photography, at one time, they weren't sure if they consider it an art form. So, there was no road, for example. You could see other artists, but for a career, or how are you going to eat, or who's going to be interested in it? That type of dialogue that came on... like with your artist, and other artists. What has happened—I just need to say this—is now the youth, young people, old people, anyone, there's a possibility of another way that wasn't clear, or you get to have something that you believed in.

(34:17):

Yesterday, there were some artists that were, young artists, really young, and one was talking about Alice Coltrane, and Pharaoh Sanders, and Katherine Dunham. This was communicated. It wasn't even about race; it was about other artists. So, with Black culture, this has been commonplace; I go, and the young people are interested in this, and they've opened up their world. It might just be one person, or it might be a photograph; there's some place to go. There's so much searching, I think, now. There's so many choices. Do you fit in, don't you fit in? Just confusion, I sense. But the students that I have met or young people, they're like, "This is it. I know this is what I want." I give them affirmation; if this is what they want to create—beauty and communication and love. Spiritually, this was just yesterday, I realized my work is really important because it's helping others. And that's what I initially wanted.

(35:54):

So, getting back to the pyramid, just want to say this one thing about validation. Sometimes validation doesn't come from a person, it comes from a spirit. It could be your grandfather; it could be something in life. And with this photograph, it was definitely a validation or affirmation that I was on the right path.

Yasmina Price (36:25):

Thank you. I would like to stay in this space of spirituality and draw on something, Mark, you were saying about how Fani-Kayode developed his photographic practice by integrating a Yoruba cosmology with the functions of the camera itself. And I think when you have the deep pleasure of seeing the images, they are so sensual and so embodied, but also transcendent. And in a different but shared way, Ming, your practice has so many spiritual qualities. I would say that the way you use light has a spirit to it, but also that so much of that has to do with both of the processes of the artists. That there is this aspect of ritual, of improvisation, but also, of a magic that's built into the everyday. In both, and I think this again returns to this idea of dialogue and communion, that this is both about the intimacies but also the opacities of how we relate to each other.

(37:26):

Maybe moving back to Fani-Kayode's photographs, and the way they're so thick with shadows and these entangled bodies, and that they are so intensely transformative, and one of the recordings that he's performed is one of classical references—as one of the many approaches that we could call a queered method. Maybe we could now go to *Every Moment Counts (Ecstatic Antibodies)*, and you could tell us a little bit about this image.

Mark Sealy (38:05):

I think the key thing when we think about people like Rotimi and as Ming was saying, photographers generally at the time—if you transgress in the 80s, and photography, let's be frank, was like the bastard child of the fine arts anyway; museums were not collecting it; Tate Museum in the UK didn't have a fully-fledged photography curator 'til about 2006, 2007. So that's 20 years before (that) Rotimi's making work. So, you're dealing with an art form that was having to prove itself from the very beginning in fact. It's the critique of it, so it's always been problematic. And I think using that as license, its multiple, reproductive qualities means that you can... all those things like double exposure... and that multiple identity formations that can come out of the camera, once you begin to play with it and not allow it to be just an indexical coding system, then its creative possibilities become infinite.

(39:17):

If you are someone like Rotimi Fani-Kayode and his partner, Alex Hirst—you've got a white queer guy living in Brixton, London, and an African queer guy, and they're coming together. They're young, and they're thinking, and they've got their fists up in the air, and they're radical, and they want to talk about things like housing, love, tranquility, ways of being, all kinds of social formations, different types of communities. Then to have a conversation with the art world, unfortunately, or a lot of the time, means you have to try and use its language. So, you take its language, you take its history, and you begin to understand it, and then you bend it, mold it, reshape it, re-present it, and then offer people the opportunity to think differently about what those histories are capable of doing. That's the performative nature of what both Alex and Rotimi were doing through their dialogue as individuals.

(40:10):

So, they're talking about different histories, different cosmologies, and it's one of the things why I think what was so special and influential about John Coltrane and the whole jazz movement is that it has a structure in place. It's a bit like the fine art tradition, it has a kind of structure in place. The best thing that you can do with radical thinking is understand those structures, take them on, learn them, and then bend them, right? Because that's much more engaging than just shouting and screaming for difference because you have to work through language. One of the things that I would consider Rotimi's work to be doing, if he's part of an imagined collective, is that this is an improvised moment based on a fundamental structure. There are others playing and keeping the rhythm of resistance alive. You can take this camera and go off and do a wild improvised solo moment, but still have this umbilical cord, which you will see upstairs, still tied to the place of birth, and origin, and culture, and history. That's what I think is really radical about RFK's work.

Ming Smith (41:23):

I want to say something. I just also want to add to this, regardless of the subject matter and everything that's involved in it, but he is a fine photographer. He's an artist, just visually, regardless of his... The way he uses light and the composition. He's a beautiful artist. I think sometimes people get confused because I've seen photographs of, whatever, but because it's a specific subject matter, it's not really a beautiful image. It really is not high. I learned photography, I approach photography as fine art, and he was definitely a fine art photographer.

Mark Sealy (42:14):

Oh, absolutely. It's part of it. It's in the DNA, it's in the language which he's using. He understands chiaroscuro lighting, Caravaggio, Rubens. Those colors are not just found, they're positioned in their place, and they're deliberate. And the work is also really important because anything around the Black body becomes very phallogocentric very quickly. It's like Black men, cast as penis very quickly. The idea of the work, we must think about what he's trying to do really quite carefully because he's trying to think about things like ecstasy, things like pleasure, things like desire. It's very far away from the scopophilic gaze that locks into the groin or the penis or the pornography of it all.

(43:00):

This is about offering the body as a place of infinite pleasure. And I think that's the work that opens up to the idea of caress and care, that offers you a place to think about what love might look like in all kinds and all forms of different shapes. The idea, as you've been in Africa, watching men hold hands in West Africa is a wonderful thing. It's just an everyday occurrence. Signs of intimacy get broken very quickly in different cultural codings. I think he reminds us that it's okay to be in love for the sake of being in love, that it doesn't really matter where you sleep with or who you sleep with. What matters is the relationship. (audience applauds)

Yasmina Price (43:53):

I think that really is beautifully echoed, Ming, in your practice, which is so much about Black people being amongst each other. And I think there is such a care and such an ethics to the way you look at the large us, whether that's individuals or groups of people.

I wonder, is there a similar thought system with you as you've moved around with your... What are you searching for when you move with your camera? Because it does seem like it's looking for those points of interconnection, even when you only have a lone figure.

Ming Smith (44:33):

I basically search for the light. The light is what I look for. I like to say I photograph just from my instincts, and I don't really think about it. It's like the image catches me. You could be photographing, and you're photographing, and it's just perfect, the lighting, and then a cloud comes past it, and it changes the image completely. So, you lose that image. I think I look for the light and light is everywhere.

Yasmina Price (45:14):

Thank you. I think there was also an echo between what you were saying about seeing the importance of your work through what it's inspiring in younger generations. And Mark, what you were gesturing to, which is a kind of learning which has to be accumulative. And I think that returns us again to the questions of dialogue and communion, and the fact that none of this is really done alone. Both you and Fani-Kayode at some point created from a place of Black kinship. You were each involved in collectives by Black photographers as efforts in a collective self-determination and having real artistic autonomy.

(45:53):

We heard a bit about the history of Autograph, which was founded in 1988 in London, and you [Ming] were part of the Kamoinge Workshop, which is founded in 1963 in New York. But I thought we could start with Autograph, and if you could tell us a little bit more, whether it's about the organization or about collectivity or the fact that Fani-Kayode was working in a very specific moment of 1980s Black cultural production, which also had a component of it that was also a specifically queer Black ecosystem. And also, you've mentioned Fani-Kayode's partner, Alex Hirst, so whichever entry point you would like to take, but something about this fact that it's both, that the making has to be done collectively, but the sustaining of the legacies also.

Mark Sealy (46:46):

Okay, there's a lot there and limited time. I guess the best way to think about London in the 80s is a mad republic. It really was. And there were two sides to London. There were those that were on the North Bank, and those that were on the South Bank. There were those that were wrapped up in the conservative institutions, let's just say Tate because it's an easy target to have, it's big white cubes foundationally built on imperial histories and all the rest of it. And then there was squats and housing cooperatives and people trying to... Social mobility through networks. There was queer, feminist, Black, working-class hybrid cultures. There's Rastafari, there's reggae, there's sound systems, there's carnival, there's all kinds of weird sound systems. There's specialist clubs, gay nights. I'm laughing because it was a brilliant madness of relationships.

(47:54):

You looked around and you think, wow, are they really all in this collective space? But it wasn't collective in terms of manifesto. It was collective in terms of this is what it means to be young in a city, to experiment and to be free. I think one of the things, just as a little aside, I lament those times around what cities were because places like New York, Paris, London, you could be young in them without having any money. You could survive in them, and you could be in them, you could survive with their energy. There was a way of getting through, it felt. All that social mobility thing is being closed down.

(48:32):

Railton Road where Rotimi lived with Alex, there was Darcus Howe's *Race Today* magazine; C.L.R James, one of the most important Black historians, lived across the road. You could literally knock on C.L.R James's door as Rotimi and say, "what's happening?" One of the most important Caribbean historians around Black presences was across the road. At the same time, Sonia Boyce was living three doors down. Ajamu was living up... That's what I mean by the sense of community. I mean they're all different, but they're all aware of each other. They're all having to tolerate each other. They're all having to look at each other. But at the same time, you've got the Police. And at the same time, you've got the Clash. And at the same time, you've got Rock Against Racism. And at the same time, you've got the Black People in Solidarity March because half a dozen kids have been killed in a house fire.

(49:27):

So, it's a really intense place. And you had Greenham Common feminist activities calling out macho bad behavior. So, it was contested, and they were all in the same space, and they were all arguing at the same time. And even within Autograph, all of those fractious differences somehow made up a weird form of collective. It's not like everyone was goose-stepping in the same homogenous scenario. They were walking differently, but at least in the same direction.

Yasmina Price (49:58):

Collectives aren't easy.

Ming Smith (50:02):

I lived in the West Village, and that was my home. It was made up of artists and people who seemed to be... They didn't fit in. Like me, I didn't fit in Columbus, Ohio. And I ran to New York. I became friends and my main core of friends were... I did this video, "What's Love Got to Do With It." We were all artists, but the choreographer—it was Tina Turner's "What Love Got to Do with It"—and the choreographer that was a friend of mine, he ended up because I said, "Oh, you should be the actor in it." So, he became the actor. Toyce, who was an artist. He ended up being the, what did you call it, the designer of it. Angelo, who was Grace Jones's stand-in, became the makeup artist and me, who was the photographer, which I took those photographs because I was there, I was a dancer. I danced in Angelo because I'm also a dancer. I studied Dunham.

(51:29):

We all did different things to survive. That was the beginning of dance studios, people were getting the costumes, people were doing... We all doubled. We were all friends, and if someone had a gig, then he would bring his friends. They used to go and see

Basquiat and them, and I would run to dance class, that's what I was like. That was where I used to stay. So, we had community that way. Also, one of the biggest, most... growing up was when AIDS came and all of them were wiped out, all my friends. We all had to recover from that. That's why life, there's different periods—and many times, it's like 9/11 or the pandemic—you're living life, and then all of a sudden, something happens.

(52:35):

There was no AIDS before that, so we went through the struggle of like, oh, so what is this? What should I do? Should we just try to heal each other? How can I help you? Or one day someone come to the dance class, and they had the markings and you knew that... So, that emotional, I don't think people really understand that the communities, friends had to... What I was getting at, it was like it was just not the community, it was like your family. It was even more like family, and you helped each other survive. We were all wanting to be someone, to...

Mark Sealy (53:23):

Yeah, I think I agree with you, Ming, there was another way of being in family. Families were constructed, they were made. There were support structures which were outside of the traditional family. Often, the traditional family couldn't cope with what people wanted to become, whether it was an artist, whether their sexuality, moving away from home, families were made. The impact of AIDS in UK late 1980s was phenomenal. It was like a domino effect. People were literally dropping and Alex and Rotimi were all part of that. And there was work upstairs that directly references that period. I think if you watched the small film upstairs, those moments are being played out, reimagining that time, the almost inevitable waiting for it as well.

Ming Smith (54:19):

Oh yeah, it's like...

Mark Sealy (54:20):

So, it's dark, and it's creative, and it's fluid, and it's easily turned into a romantic place but it's also difficult times, really difficult times because people were trying to live without the care in the family sense, without blood family, but having to be in relationships that were really complex and supportive in different ways.

Yasmina Price (54:45):

If we could maybe pull up one last photograph, which is, Ming, your 1978 *Survivor*, which I'll briefly describe is a black-and-white photograph of a shadowed figure standing at the base of a staircase, a window shines light on the back wall to our left, casting shadows of the staircase railing. Since we have come to the end of this talk, I think a deep gratitude is owed to you, Ming, for the art that you've created and to you, Mark, for the art that you stewarded. Because in every way, you have offered us porters of survival because in a lot of ways, the history of Black people, but the history of our shared fate on this planet has been one of survival again and again, of making families, of making life possible. So, thank you both very, very much.

Mark Sealy (55:45):

Thank you.

Emily Haidet (55:48):

Thank you so much, Ming, Mark, and Yasmina for what was a lovely conversation. We're really grateful for your time and generosity. Really quickly, I just want to introduce myself, I'm Emily Haidet, Curator of Public Programs in the Department of Learning & Public Practice. I want to once again thank you all for coming tonight and celebrating the exhibitions' opening with us. Before we visit, I do want to encourage you all to also attend what will be a fantastic performance this Sunday at 7 PM with Grammy-winning instrumentalist, singer, songwriter, Meshell Ndegeocello. The performance is *No More Water: The Gospel of James Baldwin* and is a tribute to Baldwin and his revolutionary work. You can find tickets at our website.

(56:44):

I'd now like to invite you to open the galleries with us and experience the exhibitions. There's a beautiful learning guide also available, created by our team at the Wex, available within the galleries if you'd like to go ahead and dig deeper into the work. And the Wex Store has books on Ming Smith's work, on Nancy Holt's work, and also, Rotimi Fani-Kayode. The store and the galleries will remain open until 9 PM. Thank you so much and enjoy your evening. (audience applauds)