

Anthony Olubunmi Akinbola: *Magic City*

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**John Michael
Kohler Arts Center**

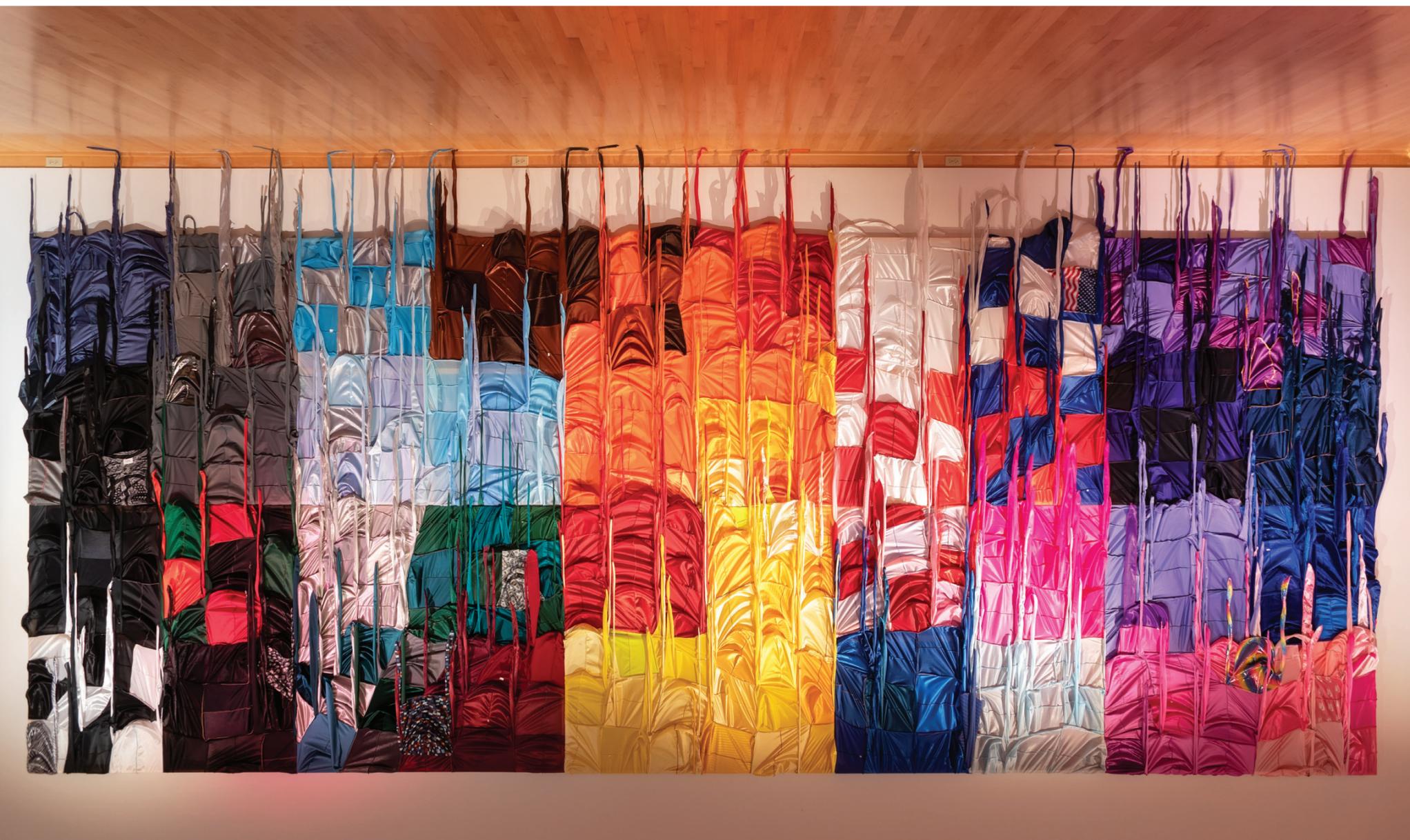
Conceived as a modern-day sanctuary, Anthony Olubunmi Akinbola's large-scale installation explores the commodification of Black culture and the relationship between Africa and Black America through the lens of fetishism.

The evocative nature of objects is at the core of *Magic City*. Akinbola transforms mass-produced and readymade materials—specifically those with cultural currency in the Black community—into animistic power objects that communicate the complexities of identity. Durags (kerchiefs used to maintain Black hair) replace oil paint as a medium for monumentally scaled action paintings; hundreds of stacked hair-pomade cans become looming minimalist totems; and a Cadillac Escalade morphs into a pulsating sound sculpture.

Akinbola engages the multiplicity of Blackness—as part of an ancestral lineage and a historical construction—through hybrid artworks. These act as surrogates for his lived experience as a first-generation Nigerian-American male. The objects speak in different codes simultaneously, and their meaning changes depending upon the cultural knowledge and personal perspective of the viewer. The work muddies the waters between artistic intention and viewer comprehension, floating in a liminal space where the multilayered facets of the Black diaspora are brought into focus.

The fetish—as concept and object—is central to navigating *Magic City's* mystical terrain. Akinbola's contemporary objects of desire highlight the similarities between early African material culture and Karl Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, a capitalist "religion of sensuous appetites" where consumer goods are venerated and ascribed magical properties and powers.

By tracing the arc of fetishism from Africa to contemporary America, *Magic City* challenges perceptions of cultural and racial identities by prompting us to question what makes an object "African," "Black," "White," or "American."



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What follows is a conversation between John Michael Kohler Arts Center Senior Curator Kaytie Johnson (KJ), and artist Anthony Olubunmi Akinbola (AOA).

KJ:
Let's begin at the beginning. Tell me about the idea behind the show's title, *Magic City*.

AOA:
Magic City has several meanings. It's a reference to Magic City, a strip club in Atlanta that's an important place for the rap and hip-hop community. And, it's a nod to fetishism—the belief that inanimate objects have metaphysical properties and powers. This show is my attempt to create a modern-day sanctuary and place of worship—a mystical space that's very Black.

KJ:
Many of the works you created for the show are equally as complex and multilayered as its title. I'm thinking specifically about the durag paintings and the new sculptures, which seem to provide the show's framework. Can you talk a bit more about these pieces?

AOA:
I consider the exhibition to be a single, large-scale installation that interrogates the relationship between Africa and Black America through the lens of fetishism. The three new durag paintings are a continuation of my *Camouflage* series, which I've been working on for a few years now. To me, the durag relates to larger issues such as identity, respectability, and the commodification of African American culture. There are also several sculptural works that I haven't shown before, like the three tall totems made from Murray's pomade cans. The relationship between the durag paintings and the pomade cans is the show's peanut butter and jelly.



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KJ:
You use products associated with Black hair care as art-making materials for several pieces in the show. In addition to the durags and pomade cans, you've created a wall installation with plastic hair picks and mixed-media sculptures that fuse African wood sculptures and Torino hairbrushes. Why did you choose to work with these materials?

AOA:
All of these materials refer to Blackness and the politics of Black hair in America. They also happen to be mass-produced, readymade objects that have significant cultural capital in the Black community. The 401 Afro picks embedded in the wall speak to protest in the gallery space, defiance within its four white walls. They're also a reference to 401 years of slavery. I feel slavery is the middle ground between Black America and Africa.

The mash-up of Torino hairbrushes and African wood sculptures is a continuation of my *Chopped and Screwed* series. When I was a child, we had some of these sculptures in our home; I felt they reinforced my Africanness, especially growing up in Missouri. To make these pieces, I literally chop them up and screw them together. Chopped and Screwed is also the remixing technique associated with the Houston hip-hop scene in the 1990s—that musical genre is so vital to a lot of current music.

KJ:
There's also a taxidermy goat in the installation. What does it signify? Why did you decide to include it?

AOA:
The taxidermy goat is related to my Nigerian background. In Nigeria, goats have supernatural powers and are associated with witchcraft. Goats also have connections with the occult—here I'm thinking about Baphomet. And, in popular culture, you have the G.O.A.T.—Greatest of All Time—which I associate with Michael Jordan, a pop culture icon who is worshipped and fetishized.

KJ:
The piece that anchors the show is a 2006 Cadillac Escalade that you've transformed into a sound sculpture. How does the Escalade connect to the other works?

AOA:
All of the objects—especially the Escalade—are related to Karl Marx's concept of commodity fetishism, specifically the idea of objects having value beyond their utility. An Escalade is used as a sport utility vehicle to transport things or to drive in rough terrain. But it also has cultural currency. If you own one, you're revered/celebrated in the same way the car is culturally revered/celebrated. They're used to transport high-profile politicians, celebrities, and rappers—even suburban soccer moms use them to pick up their kids from practice. An Escalade is a marker of social status—it represents how we fetishize objects. It is a fetish object.

KJ:
You've stated that this body of work interrogates the relationship between Africa and Black America and the duality that exists between the two through the conversation of fetishism. How do the show's component parts articulate this relationship?

AOA:
Within the context of the show, the connection between them is expressed through the lens of popular culture, the divination of objects, and traditional rituals under capitalism. I think that America and Africa are siblings, you know? I would even say that Africa is the older brother of America. Even though they are separated by the Atlantic Ocean, they're still inextricably linked. I think being Black is really just being American. I'm both of these things.



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Cover: Anthony Olubunmi Akinbola: *Magic City* installation (detail) view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2021.

1 Anthony Olubunmi Akinbola, *No Weapon Fashioned* (detail), 2021; wood, hairbrushes, and linen; 35 3/4 x 7 x 10 in. Courtesy of the artist.

2 Anthony Olubunmi Akinbola: *Magic City* installation (detail) view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2021.

3 Anthony Olubunmi Akinbola: *Magic City* installation (detail) view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2021.