

# QUEST



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## The Whole Tapestry

Words Mitzi Okou Photographs Sade Fasanya

In a time of awakening and reckoning, *Before Yesterday We Could Fly* is a rose from the concrete, emerging from a museological world that has long been rigid in accepting and allowing Black creativity into its realm.



Roundtable

Curated by Hannah Beachler, the Oscar-winning production designer behind *Black Panther*, and the academic Michelle Commander in collaboration with New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met), *Before Yesterday We Could Fly* is labeled as a "period room", although in truth it is everything but. The room is a replica domestic space, but one that proposes a new history of Seneca Village: a 19th-century community founded predominantly by free Black tenants and landowners that was razed in 1857 by the City of New York to create space for the construction of Central Park. *Before Yesterday We Could Fly* captures this community's past and infuses it with a present and future: what if Seneca Village, and historical and contemporary communities like it, had the opportunity to grow and thrive?

This question has allowed the installation's curators to bring together work from Black artists and designers from around the world to create a space that is monumental and iconic. Its pieces speak to moments, objects and people that have shaped universal Black experiences and similarities across different Black cultures, while also speaking to specific narratives that Black individuals can relate to. It is a moment that has been a long time coming, newly installed in the Met to offer a fresh perspective on the concept of the historical period room – a format that displays architectural components and decorative objects in an aesthetically pleasing way, but which typically tells only a partial truth or else leaves out the truths of the marginalised.

Rather than purport to represent a specific period, *Before Yesterday We Could Fly* is a space unconstrained by time, which collapses together the past, present and future. It is a reclamation and repurposing of history that allows Black people to think about possibilities that might push their minds and imaginations beyond the confines that the American system and its ilk have set for not only themselves, but for generations to come. Looking at the room, I imagine myself as a traveller through space and time, transporting myself to a future and a dimension where Black people are thriving and technological advancements are powered by stories, rituals, and movements.

The works within the room are driven by speculative thought and contribute to how the space changes based on how the viewer imagines or sees themselves within it. Pieces such as *Morning Cloak* by Tourmaline, a photograph in which a pink-haired,

Black trans woman sits angelically surrounded by decaying vines, or *Iya Ati Omo* by Yinka Ilori, a beautiful chair with the seat upholstered in African wax print fabric, capture cultural nods towards icons, memories, and thoughts from across the spectrum of Black experience – these works, and others like them, allow the room to simultaneously exist as a place of memorial and a playground for the imagination. It is a beautiful encounter between the different skills, crafts, and disciplines that have been used to tell a variety of Black stories. Inspired by the history and remnants of Seneca Village, the room reimagines the concept of "it takes a village", before visualising what that village might actually look like.

To learn more about the process behind the project, I moderated a discussion that brought together some of those who created the room: Beachler, the Met curators Sarah E. Lawrence and Abraham Thomas, and featured designers Jomo Tariku and Ini Archibong. Across the course of the conversation, an edited version of which follows, we traversed the journey that led to *Before Yesterday We Could Fly* and its importance to including, preserving, and amplifying the Black diasporic experience.

**Mitzi Okou** When I first heard about *Before Yesterday I Could Fly* I was so excited. Since George Floyd and 2020 there has been a lot of much needed disruption within the creative community. But one of the spaces and communities that has been very slow to react to that reckoning with racial injustice is the museological and exhibition world, which has always been inflexible in accepting Black creativity. When I learned about this space, I was over the moon because it's a moment we've all been waiting for. It's iconic.

**Sarah E. Lawrence** We're thrilled to talk about it and, given how you've framed your interest, I think it's important to emphasise that this project actually started in 2019. I arrived at the museum in March 2019 as department head for European Sculpture and Decorative Arts, which has a long, complicated history with issues of colonialism and empire. The director of the museum, Max Hollein, was interested in having a new type of period room, which was something I've always been interested in because of what I like to call "the conundrum of the period room". Every period room is an absolute fiction, but their effectiveness is predicated on the invisibility of the curators' hands – they seem very real, even though they're not. I was



Fabiola Jean-Louis's *Justice of Ezili*, next to Yinka Ilori's *Iya Ati Omo* chair.



Out / Side of Time by Jenn Nkiru.



A collection of ceramic pieces by Roberto Lugo.

in conversation with my colleague Ian Alteveer about whether we could start this project with that fiction, rather than concealing it – would that allow us to tell stories in our period rooms that are otherwise omitted? We were very sensitive to the fact that our period rooms are predominantly white, Eurocentric, affluent domestic interiors. We wanted to rethink that.

**Mitzi** And that was what led you to Seneca Village?  
**Sarah** Seneca Village was just 200 yards west of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and I felt strongly that the museum had both an opportunity and an obligation to address that proximity. Our fiction was to imagine that the Seneca community had continued to thrive – not been destroyed in order to create Central Park. Could we imagine a woman who was a descendant of the original community, who continued to live in her family home and, over time and generations, had accrued some degree of material wealth and furnished her home in a way that speaks to her family history and sense of self? That was our fiction, but it wasn't our story to tell. In thinking this through, the first thing that I thought of was the movie *Black Panther* – I had been deeply impressed and very excited by the interiors that Hannah had created for that, particularly the study/library room. Here was this designer who had already done serious research in imagining a kind of Pan-African, Afrofuturist domestic interior in a way I found profoundly compelling. So I thought, "Well, I should start speaking to her."

**Hannah Beachler** It was kismet. When Sarah called me I was in Detroit, working on a film that dealt with Paradise Valley and Black Bottom – predominantly Black neighbourhoods in Detroit that were razed for urban renewal in the 50s. We were doing location scouting and I was seeing the few Black homes from this period still standing around the city. I started getting really involved in the idea of how there had been a whole life there, but no one knows the story of what happened to it. Well, wouldn't it be great to purchase some of these homes and renovate them as living museums? At that point, I get a call from the Met, saying they want to talk about this project. I mean, I was just like, "The Met!? Of course – I'm completely available."

**Sarah** Hannah explained that she was already dealing with this pernicious history of the destruction of African American communities across the United

States through claims of eminent domain for urban development, which essentially precluded the continued existence of African Americans in these spaces and instead created leisure areas that were predominately for white populations. Hannah's vision and engagement with this project was so exhilarating that we basically handed her the reins

**“The beautiful thing was that the museum heard me, they listened, and it became this thing we were all inside of.”** —Hannah Beachler

and said, "Okay, you do this." We also reached out to Michelle Commander, a historian at the Schomburg Center who has worked closely on this material. But Mitzi, you mentioned the summer of 2020 and I should say that the inflection, framing, and conceptualisation of this project has been deeply informed by what happened between 2019, when the project had one intention, and its subsequent clarification and crystallisation in response to where we are now. That summer was a very powerful experience. I can speak for all of us at the museum when I say that it meant a great deal to have a project like this to get us through that experience in a way that felt like we were doing meaningful work.

**Hannah** Talking about that summer, I remember just breaking down. That was a pivotal moment in the direction of this. As a Black person, a Black woman, most of your life is about holding that space and not letting it out – letting it be within you, dealing with it without outwardly projecting. But at that point I was so tired. We were quarantining with Covid, no one knew what was happening, and I just broke down. The beautiful thing was that the team at the museum heard me, they listened, and all of a sudden it became this thing we were all inside of. How we were approaching it, how we were looking at it, and all of the individual details became so important in light of the conversation going on that summer around racial inequity; around the death of Black

men and women in the streets with no justice and no peace; and how we are taught the struggle and the pain of Black lives before we're taught their joy as part of our four weeks of Black history that we're allotted each year. From there, we all understood where we wanted to take this. It fell into place and I haven't enjoyed anything so much in my life. I have never felt so safe, which sounds weird, but you have no idea what it means to be in a space where you may have felt that you didn't belong, but then you find that you actually feel safe.

**Mitzi** There are so many things that are specific to one person's experience in the space, but which also speak to the universal experience that a lot of Black people have. Even though it's a period room, I feel like that term "period" constrains it a little bit, because it's collapsing time within itself. It's speaking to the past, the present and the future, all at the same time. How did you balance all of that?

**Hannah** Good editing and a good team. For the kitchen space, for example, a lot of it is just my experience of my Nana's house. There's so much stuff in there, but somehow it all seems put together. In that one kitchen you get your hair done, you clean greens, you have conversations. It's alchemy. The balance is the result of having a story, and each piece serves its purpose within that story. That's something that I do in my world as a production designer – I weave things through a set so that your eye is drawn through it. What beautiful furnishings can come in and speak to this space? We have our "village potter" Roberto Lugo, whose work has been set out as if somebody had just gotten up from the table, but you also see that those ceramic pieces feature Harriet Tubman, Stacey Abrams, Beyoncé and all these iconic Black women. For me, that is part of the empowerment of our person who maybe lives in this place and is bringing items from the past and the future – time tumbling and toppling over itself. That was a lot about how we could keep this space feeling dense, full, and lived in. How can we tell our story through these beautiful artists and their work?

**Abraham Thomas** I love what you said about objects tumbling into each other, because that word "alchemy" is so central to the room. It also makes me think of experimentation and layering, and the idea of this room as a call to action or confrontational gesture within the Met and its history of period rooms. It is such an interesting curatorial and artistic statement,



because we have these very rich, complicated, messy layers within the room. As you mentioned, Mitzi, even the term "period room" is difficult because it has a bounding nature to it – the idea that these are distinctive historic chapters we're laying out, but that's not the reality of any lived experience of an interior space. What is so powerful about the Afrofuturist period room is that it embraces and acknowledges the idea that there's always artifice within conventional period rooms.

**Hannah** The Met has faced its history and present with its eyes wide open. They stepped away from the podium so these other voices could sing. Think about what that means to not just the artists, not just to me, but to everyone who walks through that space. So it is iconic, it really is iconic. This is where we need to begin with institutions taking a long, hard look at their history. How can the future be different in an equitable, inclusive way? Because diversity isn't just a conversation, it's action. That's what happened here: action was taken and that's what makes change. We stepped forward to show the pride and the joy of the Black diaspora. That's what you feel first with the

room, even if all of these other discussions about the pain and struggle are there too. You have Fabiola Jean-Louis's dress [Justice of Ezili, a garment made from paper, gold, Swarovski crystals, lapis lazuli, labradorite, brass, ink, and resin, ed.], for instance, which initially just seems like a beautiful dress, but when you start to look for longer you see it includes chainmail and you see that it's a body at rest, which you don't often see in the case of Black women.

**Mitzi** Jomo and Ini, how do you see your work within what we're talking about?

**Jomo Tariku** Why don't I start by indulging you with how I got into this, because if an Academy Award-winning production designer as accomplished as Hannah could feel whiplash from the Met calling, you can imagine how I felt receiving that first email – it was the first time I'd been contacted by a museum, let alone a museum of that caliber. It has been an emotional journey to get to this point where I have my Mido Chair [a technically complex walnut veneer chair that resembles an afro comb, ed.] in the Met's collection. I grew up in Ethiopia, where I had uncles with huge afros because they were into the Shaft movies or Jim Kelly, who was in *Enter the Dragon* with Bruce Lee. People like that were heroes, because you rarely saw Black people presented positively in movies. My uncles were imitating these African American actors with huge bell-bottom pants and elevator shoes, and as a kid I was fascinated by all these things. So I sent in the idea for Mido to the Met and they ended up commissioning it. I'd hoped that it might go along with Hannah's vision, but it was only later that I discovered that the archaeological dig at Seneca Village had actually turned up a comb. It felt like the universe was lining up.

**Ini Archibong** The biggest thing for me was how Hannah tapped into the element of Afrofuturism in my work. So in this collapsing of time that you described, the thing I was hoping to bring was the extreme future, the science fiction, the comic book – that side of things. The pieces that I included were pretty sci fi, but Hannah somehow treated them in a way where it didn't feel like a juxtaposition with everything else in there. She made choices like the TV set, which was simultaneously futuristic and retro [a multi-sided set designed by Beachler, programmed with a video by the artist Jenn Nkiru, ed.], being placed next to my Orion table and underneath my [Vernus 3] chandelier, which really helped to make it feel like everything

made sense. The Vernus in the room is actually different to the original, which had a springtime, floral colour, whereas this is a bit more sour and radioactive in its colourway, and we went with steel metalwork as opposed to brass. The concept of that initial piece was the hope that is represented by the first bloom

**“In this collapsing of time, the thing I was hoping to bring was the extreme future, the science fiction, the comic book.”** —Ini Archibong

of spring – a reminder that no matter how long the winters last, spring will bloom – but with this new colourway it becomes almost cautionary. What if you woke up when the snow has melted and all the flowers have bloomed differently as a consequence of the unnatural things put in the soil before winter? That can be taken however it wants to be taken. But all of my work has that cautionary element to it. So with my Atlas chair, if you look at its detail, you'll see a metal stone positioned between the seat and the leg – a little stone holding everything else up, like the story of Atlas holding the world on his back. As creatives of the diaspora, I think most of us can relate to that feeling of the weight of the world being on our shoulders to some degree. So all of the pieces fit within that context of having an Afrofuturist perspective and aesthetic, which is pervasive throughout my work.

**Mitzi** What was your first moment of going into the space when everything was on display like?

**Hannah** It was really heavy. I actually had to walk away and take a moment, because I couldn't put it into words at all. Part of why I love to design sets is that you have that moment when you walk in, but this had that extra personal moment of taking me back through all of our meetings, everything that had happened that summer, and everything that we all went through. Everything culminated with walking in, touching it and moving around it, seeing all of the thoughtfulness – I can't articulate how that feels. I cried, I screamed, I slapped people's arms – I just didn't know where to put all my excitement. I remember coming to the Met when

I was 13 with my friends and we felt so grown up. I was coming from rural farmland and had never seen a building like that. I had never walked through halls like that. I had never seen artwork like that. To actually get that phone call and be a part of this exhibit – I cannot express how incredible and life-altering that is.

**Abraham** Quite soon after I had joined the Met, Sarah very generously reached out and shared the project with me. Like Sarah, I'm a nerd about museum period rooms, so I loved that this was a piece of agitation around that form. For me, what was really important was the fact that there was going to be a long-term legacy. On a practical level, Sarah had said from the beginning that this project would involve making acquisitions for the permanent collection. My role is primarily as a curator of architecture, design and decorative arts, and a big part of that is adding things to the collection. That is such an important part of what we do as curators, so for me it's notable that we have acquired roughly 20 design objects ranging across furniture, ceramics, glass and lighting design, all by Black designers, of the African diaspora. This will be a multi-year project, but I love that even in 10 years time there'll be scope for these objects to be on display in our galleries and integrated with other curatorial collections to really elevate these stories and these makers in contexts that were previously unimaginable. When I saw that room open for the first time, it really got me thinking about what this will do for the Met's collection and displays, long after I've left the museum.

**ini** When I first went in I saw my pieces next to Roberto Lugo's work – who I'm a huge fan of – and among all this other amazing stuff by people like Zizipho Poswa. I went to that room every day for about a week and I still don't know if I've seen everything – every time I go in, I focus on a different thing. I live on a lake in a small town in Switzerland, I don't live in New York, so seeing a huge, grandiose thing like the Met's period rooms is not part of my everyday. Seeing my pieces in that context was overwhelming.

**Sarah** I was deeply, deeply affected by this project. The sense of camaraderie and community was really meaningful, because this was not a project that was immediately accepted by the Met community: it took a lot of careful work to explain not just the project, but the process, because we really wanted community buy-in. To say that this was a rocky road is kind of an

understatement. But we have gotten to a point where it is not only gorgeous – and every single piece in that room is just *beyond* – but it is also a new model of curatorial practice for the Met, which is a very hierarchic institution. We headed into this as a deeply non-hierarchic collaborative undertaking, in which curators and scholars and designers and artists were all working on the same plane to make this happen. My intention was to model new modes of curatorial practice that might make the Met a better place to work, for all of us. And when I say all of us, I mean our diverse audiences and collaborators too. We were exploring new modes of engagement with the world for the institution. We've been incredibly fortunate with its critical reception so far, but more meaningful is seeing people who come in unexpectedly and suddenly see themselves, their history, and their families in these rooms.

**Hannah** The response has been lovely. There were a couple of critics, which there are always going to be because you can't please all the people all the time, but here's what I say about critics: you're talking about it. End of story. You can hate it all day long, but you wrote about it, and you talked about it, and you published it. So you care about it. This means something to you, one way or the other. I would rather that than complete indifference, because this exists, it's in the world, and that has been so important. When you walk in, it's everything that we talked about. Njideka Crosby's wallpaper for the space is stunning and, when you look at it up close, you will see the collage, you will see the portraits in her work – that's what I want everyone to walk into. I don't care what you look like, who you are, where you come from, your station in life – this exhibit will meet you where you're at, and you will find something in there to relate to.

**Mitzi** This space is reclaiming and repurposing Black history so that it's sustainable for future generations. The key word is "sustainability", which is something we do not practice on. Sustainability has to do with profit, but not capitalistic profit: profit in a way that the people who benefit from that sustainability profit off of it, and therefore give back and it lives on. So how do we build more sustainable initiatives that reclaim and repurpose Black history so that people can continue to profit from generation to generation?

**Sarah** One of the challenges we had is that this project seemed like an outlier: it seemed out of keeping with



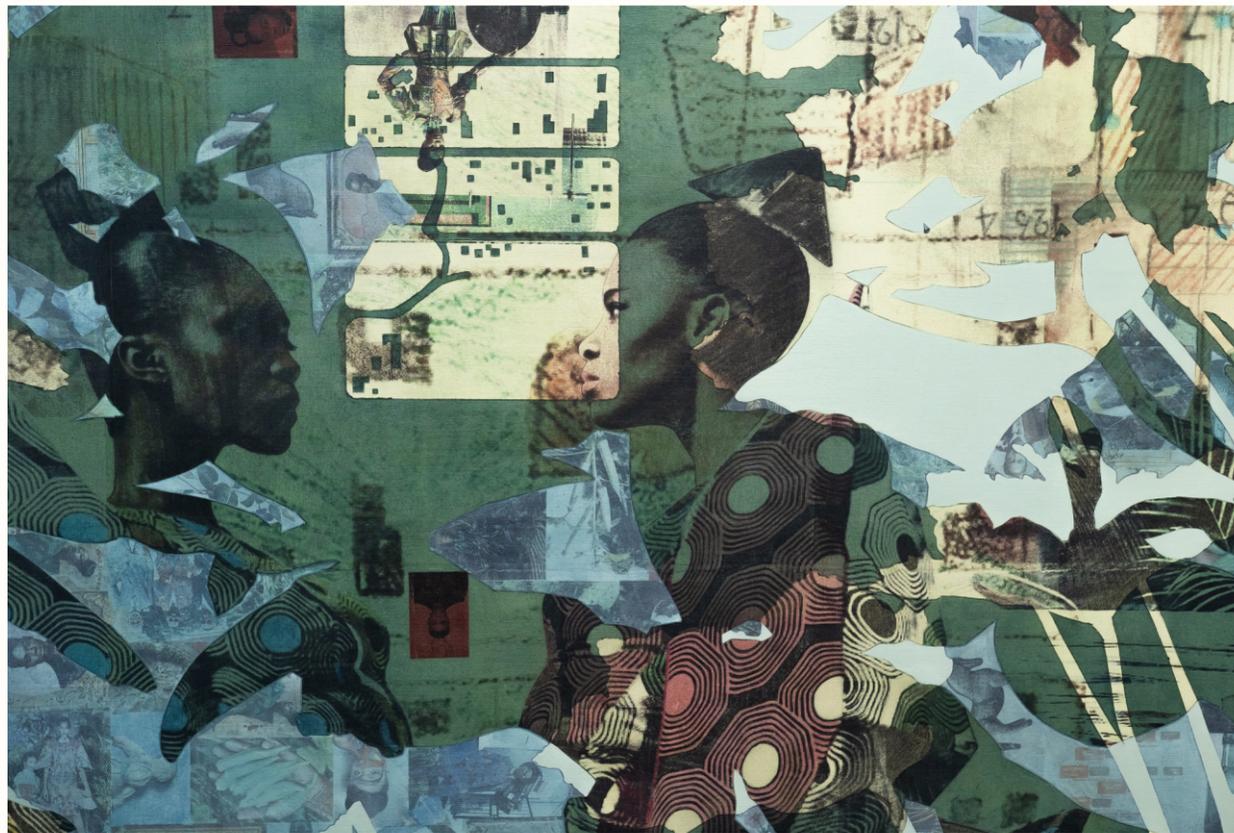
Magodi - Noxolo by Zizipho Poswa.



A jar by Thomas W. Commeraw.



Prestige Stool: Leopard by Bamileke or Bamun master beaders.



Thriving and Potential, Displaced (Again and Again and...) by Njideka Akunyili Crosby.

the Met's normal curatorial programming. But now that it's open, there are a series of exhibitions and acquisitions that will follow. We have another exhibition that will open in March 2022 [*Fictions of Emancipation: Carpeaux Recast*, ed.] dealing with the depiction of the Black body and abolitionist sculpture, for example. This will become part of a broader institutional commitment on the part of the museum. It's very important for the Met to hurry up and get to a place where this is what we do and that it doesn't attract attention because it's an anomaly, but because these are extraordinary, thoughtful, provocative exhibitions, displayed right alongside others that may be considered more in keeping with the Met's history. In the next year and a half or two years, we are going to be there in terms of our programming, but we are still not going to be at that kind of sustainability that you're talking about until our curatorial staff represents the diversity to which we aspire. I'm a big advocate of collaborating with colleagues outside of the Met. Hannah and Michelle [Commander] are amazing examples of that. *Fictions of Emancipation* is a collaboration with Wendy S. Walters, who is a poet essayist at Columbia University and a woman of colour. When I think of diversity in our curatorial practice, it's not simply a question of race, but also new methodologies and professional modalities. I love working with people who aren't art historians. My hope is that we can get to a point where we'll have that diversity internally, but also through sustained collaboration with new types of colleagues from outside of the museum. That will become a kind of default setting so that we will have rich curatorial voices in our exhibitions. When we get to that point, we will have reached that notion of kind of sustainability.

**Jomo** Since my introduction to the Met, I have had four more acquisitions of my work by other museums. Out of the four, I think three are by curators who were previously at the Met. Work still needs to be done behind the scenes. In my former life, I was a data scientist, so I'm always looking for patterns. There needs to be a conversation going on about making a more robust effort on how to do a better job curating and acquiring Black art. The Met is the leader, so we are going to expect more from what it can do, other than just more installations. **ini** There needs to be more, and it needs to not be derived from a fetishistic lens – a lens that came

from the establishment of what it meant to be wealthy when travel was limited and people started to get access to "exotic lands". Now that we're in a global society, it's time to shed that exoticism and fetishisation. Something like this shouldn't be a novelty – it's just what we do. It's who we are. **Abraham** In terms of broader sustainability and future projects at the Met, I'm actually currently working on this year's Roof Garden commission, and we've invited the Los Angeles-based artist Lauren Halsey to produce it. Lauren is creating an extraordinary, large-scale architectural installation that will draw upon many themes related to Afrofuturism and the power of speculative imagination, so I'm excited to see the dialogue that will emerge between Lauren's work and that of the artists and designers in the period room project, and to build off that existing momentum. Jomo makes an important point about the Met being a leader in the field, and the responsibility to model this sort of curatorial methodology that we've been talking about. As Sarah said, the change has to come from within, and the diversity of backgrounds we need is not just based on race or socio-economic background, but also in the range of approaches that we bring to this work. We can't afford for a project like this to be a flash-in-the-pan outlier. When I think about this period room's location, it's great how it is physically sited in the museum. It's wedged between an 18th-century Italian bedroom and the British Galleries, and right outside is a key collection of medieval art. There's this idea of asserting presence and saying, "No, we are here." This room literally asserts its presence in the heart of the museum, and I hope that can be a metaphor for how we think about projects like this. They shouldn't be shy and skirt around the edges, they belong right in the centre of these varied collection displays.

**Hannah** It's also a big responsibility for Black creatives in positions like my own. When we think about maintaining sustainability, we also need to think about the fact that when you're the voice in the room, you need to say exactly what's on your mind. I'll give you an example of what I'm talking about. Not long ago, Prada had that issue with the little figure they had in their window [in 2018, Prada provoked outrage when it displayed products utilising Sambo imagery as part of its Pradamalia line in its New York boutique, ed.]. Everybody was like, "Well, if there was a Black

person in the room, that would have never happened.” Well, actually, it would have in some cases, because in some cases you just want the job. In some cases, you just want to be there and you’re just happy to be there. So you stay quiet. That is not sustainability: that is not thinking about future sustainability and profit in the Black diaspora. Whatever institution, whatever industry you’re in, you have to be strong enough to speak up, even if that thing may be uncomfortable. I’ve been in positions where I’ve felt like I should say something, but just stayed quiet. And then that little figure gets in the window.

**Jomo** I’ve done data research on Black designers in furniture design; I did my own survey of 173 companies, which found that 0.3 per cent of their designers are Black. When I told a couple of friends about this project, they pretty much said, “Look, you release this thing and you’re on a blacklist. You won’t get licensed.” But I needed to put this data out there. Did I get calls from furniture companies? Absolutely not. But you know what, museums did call. A MoMA curator was the first person to reach out to say that they’d always known this was an issue, but they’d never seen it in numbers. What I like to tell young Black designers who reach out to me is that they should be doing more than just design. It should be about learning your history, and putting your version of the story out there. It has to be more than just, “Oh, I want a career,” because we need to win this battle. When we reach an equilibrium, maybe we can rest assured that things are going okay and we can lay off the pressure, but at this moment in our history change needs to be made. I think that’s part of the sustainability question you have. Advocating for others should be part of our work – it shouldn’t be a case of making it and then forgetting the rest. It took somebody’s death to accelerate the debate to this level, which is deeply saddening, but it has had an effect of change on museums. Nevertheless, I recently saw that of the top 18 US museums – and that includes the Met – just 1 per cent of the art they collect is from Black artists. More work needs to be done. I watched the virtual opening of *Before Yesterday We Could Fly* again yesterday, and it really got me emotional, Hannah, when you talked about a Black girl walking in there and the effect seeing this would have on her. I consider this more than just a period room – it is about changing the tone of an industry within the creative world.

**Mitzi** That’s something that is not taught in design practices or creative practices: how to create something that can be sustained for longer than you’re alive, but also sustain others as well.

**ini** But if documentation, recording and inclusion hold any importance to anybody, it’s not to us as

**“I consider this more than just a period room – it is about changing the tone of an industry within the creative world.”** —Jomo Tariku

Black people. Putting our work in a museum doesn’t help us to remain relevant or in the zeitgeist of our people – it allows me to be included in the narrative of Western society. If there is a benefit to that, it’s a benefit to the world at large, but not necessarily a specific benefit to people of African descent. I don’t say that to be controversial, I’m just trying to be objective. If I wasn’t being put in a museum, and I was still doing my work amongst my people, such that they were the ones learning from it and absorbing it, it would continue to affect the way they did things going forward. It would build upon itself generation by generation. If we weren’t forced to fit into this paradigm, we wouldn’t need to be included in order for there to be a preservation of what we’ve contributed.

**Mitzi** I’m glad you said that, because it’s a perspective we need in this.

**ini** I’m not a separatist or anything like that – I just like to be honest about what it is that’s happening. From my perspective, one of the important things about this kind of outward display of validation is connected to my belief that there is a universal unification of all things. As long as anything is not being recognised for the value that it adds to the universal whole, then that whole is suffering. Although I said it’s not necessarily important to us to be included, it is important for everyone else to have access to the creativity that we have to offer.

**Mitzi** But what are your hopes for the future of *Before Yesterday, We Could Fly*? And those can be completely



wild because the room itself is actually based off of speculative thought.

**ini** I hope they make it bigger and that it’s the beginning of more rooms like this – the beginning of the rest of the world being able to tap into what we have to offer as a people from our myriad different perspectives. The Afrofuturist angle is a great place to start, but there’s a whole gamut out there that can be explored.

**Hannah** Imagine an Afrofuturism period room that is all music and instruments from throughout the history of the Black diaspora. How would that story feel when time is collapsing over itself and you have past, present and future instruments? Bring in Questlove or Kendrick Lamar – that would be fabulous, because there are so many ways the story could be told. Other people can take this on and push it, so we can watch it transform a further time. I think that the Met is avant garde, because they’re the first to do something like this and really fight for it and bring it to into existence. As they say in the film world, it’s canon. They’re the first and everyone else didn’t get in the car quick enough. Because this is history and this will go down in

history. You can say words all day long, but it’s action that makes change and they took action. For me to have been a part of the seed being planted and to watch it grow – I couldn’t ask for more.

**Abraham** Something that resonates with me is this idea of working with people who aren’t art historians. I’m a big fan of cinema, so the idea of working with a production designer of Hannah’s pedigree was amazing. I love the idea of doing more projects like this, so we’re not just working with curators, historians, connoisseurs and experts in the traditional sense. We could work with production designers, musicians, playwrights, librettists. I like the idea of this room expanding the idea of how we tell stories. A big part of being a museum professional is telling stories and engaging audiences. I would like to see how we can build on what this room has achieved and think about how we can learn from other experts outside the museum to tell stories in different ways and explore this rich, multi-layered narrative. This room has shifted us into an arena where we can be a bit more vulnerable about how we present the established last word on something. We’re open to numerous interpretations and there’s that sense of ambiguity about the stories we’re telling. There’s not one single narrative or way in which we present these histories; we can bring in other voices, and I hope that that can be something that permeates the way we and other museums do things. It’s not just an ivory tower, didactic way of crafting a story or presenting history. There is an element of rupture within this project, which can be very healthy going forward.

**Mitzi** What did you or what do you still want to personally say to Black creatives?

**Hannah** That you are a part of this, you’re a part of this world, and you belong here. The thing that sat with me was that almost every time we spoke to artists, they would say, “The Met? I would never see my work there.” What I would say to Black creatives is: don’t ever think that. Always know that you can get there. There will be someone, whether it’s a Sarah or an Abraham or an Ian, who is there and who wants to make a change. They want to push the envelope and bring something new, and that could be you. It’s a shift in our mindsets to know that there are people fighting for this. The same thing happened with *Black Panther*. Victoria Alonso [*Black Panther’s* executive producer and Marvel’s president of physical, post production, VFX and animation, ed.] fought for that



Mido chair by Jomo Tariku, next to Ini Archibong's Orion table.



Venus 3 chandelier by Ini Archibong.



Ceramics by Roberto Lugo atop the Imbizo table by Chuma Maweni.

film to come to fruition for 15 years before I showed up. She fought the good fight. So don't ever think that you do not belong, or that it is out of your reach. You just have to believe and, when it's the right time, it will happen. You won't see the entire tapestry, you will only see the strings that are in your life, until one day you'll step back and see it all. But know that there is purpose and reason for your work, for your story and for your voice, and follow those strings because you will eventually see the tapestry.

**Jomo** It's hard to follow that, but I would say that Black creatives who have struggled have a different view of what perseverance means. I started this whole idea of creating an African furniture line back in 1992 as part of my thesis work in industrial design, and I never let it go. I've had friends saying that if I dropped it I would be more hireable by others, but I wouldn't let go because I knew it had a place in an industry that was ignoring it. Hannah, you mentioned the canon – the canon needs to include our conversation and our perspective. We are the advocates on the frontside, but on the backside we need people like Abraham and Sarah to do the work for us, because I have no clue whether museums get together and discuss this issue or not. All I can do is fight for this idea and, if a road is open for me, I should be able to bring other Black creatives along with me. We need advocates who say "Come on in."

**Sarah** I would certainly echo Hannah in urging for perseverance. What's also incredibly exciting and important is the ability of designers to be able to communicate the content of their work, and in that way educate the broadest audience, whether that's a museum curator or the person on the street. I came to the Met from Parsons School of Design, where I was dean. We worked really closely with helping to educate our aspiring young designers to learn how to talk about their work and see how important that is. It's difficult, because you react to furniture and decorative art objects and any work of art through a non-language based response. To learn how to put that into language, to help your audience feel that your work is approachable, meaningful and resonates for them, is a challenge. My message to other designers is to take that responsibility seriously. It is so important in supporting your creative act that you can explain it, because these are often very complicated designs that draw on a range of traditions, social practices and new technologies. The richness of that creative work

is not immediately accessible to everyone. To do that additional work to help articulate your practice is a very important part of this. And I would say this is not specific to Black designers, but it is a moment where the voice of Black designers has a particular resonance. This is a time where these explanatory, elaborating voices have an enormous impact on the future of a diverse creative practice for design.

**Abraham** It's really about the invitation. I hope this can be a statement about generosity and an invitation to engage in dialogue. An important legacy of this is that the work of Black designers has a place on our part of the map and the real power here is to integrate this work amongst the encyclopaedic range of our collections. Jomo talked about the archaeological object, the comb, that we have in the room and how that connected with him, but you're also thinking about the way in which Ini's work relates to his collaboration with Murano master glassmakers or Southern California modernism and the work of someone like Fred Eversley [an American sculptor known for his work with cast resin, ed.]. There are so many interesting connections with these works that they deserve more than just being sequestered away in a narrative around diasporic design. I think that's what we can offer them.

**Ini** A lot of the time we've seen examples of Black creatives being forced into a framework that may not necessarily be natural to us. My biggest message is to do things unique to the experience we have, because we're now getting to a point where we actually have that opportunity to do so. I'm an industrial designer who was educated at top design schools, mostly by white people. That experience has been important to me, and I wouldn't have been able to make my work if I didn't have those tools, but I use them in service to an expression that comes naturally from me. I now have the opportunity to express myself without being confined by the canons of appropriate expression that we learned in school. Finding the way to balance the inescapable system that we're born into while not losing ourselves is the key to our ultimate success. **END**