

DEEP DIVE

Designers of the African Diaspora

Anna Sansom



The Black Lives Matter movement has stirred many within the creative sector to examine their own blindneses and seek out black talent.

Is this a short-lived spasm of conscience, or a longer-term cultural shift?

Anna Sansom sets out to investigate, interviewing designers on both sides of the Atlantic.

On 25th May — coincidentally the anniversary of the death of George Floyd in 2020 — the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) announced its acquisition of the first edition of a bleached version of the ‘Nyala’ chair (2021), designed by the Ethiopian-American furniture designer, Jomo Tariku. This three-legged ashwood chair, whose elegantly tapered back references the horns of an antelope, is the designer’s first piece to enter a museum collection. It epitomises how Tariku, 51, synthesises aspects of the African continent to develop a modern design language. The fact that this is the first of his objects to be collected by a museum offers one example of the difficulties facing designers of African descent in gaining recognition and support for their talents.

Tariku reports that since May last year he has certainly garnered more attention for his work. “I’m in discussions with two other museums and a film company wants to use my work – it’s been a crazy, intense few weeks,” Tariku says. “But it’s really hard to tell how well things are going generally across the industry for black designers.”

Tariku, who also works as a data scientist, is acutely aware of the challenges. In 2019-2020, he researched Architonic’s website to see how many furniture companies had collaborated with black designers. Out of 4,417 branded collections, only 14 featured black talents. “Whenever I open books, I think ‘Where are we?’” says Tariku. He published the data on the online magazine *Business of Home*, provoking a heated debate. “If you want to challenge the system, some will shun you as a troublemaker and some will want to work with you to solve a problem,” he adds.

Black designers are vastly under-represented in museum collections too. The Centre Pompidou has works by only one black designer in its design collection of 5,000 works: Togo’s Kossi Aguessy (1977-2017). Germany’s Vitra Design Museum owns works

by nine black designers including British architect David Adjaye, Virgil Abloh (Chief Creative Director and Founder of Off-White, and Men’s Artistic Director at Louis Vuitton), and Malian architect and designer, Cheick Diallo, from a collection including over two hundred designers. It is commissioning the women’s collective, Matri-Archi(ecture), to make a piece that will enter its collection.

The lack of opportunity for black designers prompted the ceramicist Malene Barnett to launch the Black Artists and Designers Guild (BADG) in Brooklyn in 2018. “It was essential to undertake this non-profit with other black talents, as there is significant under-representation of African, Asian and indigenous cultures in art and design,” says Barnett, whose rippling, intricately patterned clay sculptures are inspired by the traditional handbuilding techniques of mud houses in Nigeria.

Barnett aims to promote black creatives through BADG’s online directory and projects such as the Obsidian virtual house conceived by its makers. The guild has a search engine for disciplines and regions and counts more than 100 members. It is thanks to BADG that LACMA discovered Tariku’s work. “Without the guild, I’d have been trying to reach museums on LinkedIn,” Tariku muses.

Barnett believes the Black Lives Matter movement has raised awareness of the need to address racism and led to more social consciousness. “The impact of Black Lives Matter and countless black activists who have been fighting for the humanity of black people for years have led to this moment,” Barnett says.

However, she warns: “Racial awakening is only one step. Organisations must be guided by an interest in building an equitable and inclusive space for the black community and not just checking a box. Racism wasn’t built in a year, nor will the dismantling process happen in one.”

Lisa Hunt, a textiles artist and BADG member, echoes Barnett's concerns about companies "checking a box" in the aftermath of Floyd's death. "Since last year, there has been a huge attention on black creatives and companies wanting to partner up and commission work," Hunt says. "This was difficult for me as it felt disingenuous. Many companies that had not been very inclusive of black artists and designers before were playing catch-up and wanted things right away, like ten pieces by next week."

This year, Hunt's work has been exhibited at the International Print Center New York and at the Trout Museum of Art, Wisconsin. The latter's guest curator, Tyanna J. Buie, invited her to create a glittering, large-scale textile piece, 'Astral Variant' (2021), made from stitched-together, vertical strips of black fabric and gold leaf. "I showed Tyanna the textile pieces that were percolating in the studio on a Zoom call and she said, 'That's amazing, can you do a really big one?'" Hunt recounts, laughing.

Hunt's new works are inspired by the historical quilt-making of enslaved women in the American South and how encoded symbols played a role in helping slaves navigate their escape on the Underground Railroad. "Enslaved Africans would stitch symbols into their quilts and leave them in windows so that other slaves could see them and know when and how to travel – it was an amazing way of communication," says Hunt, who is participating in a show



COURTESY: Lisa Hunt
PHOTOGRAPH: Kelly Marshall

this autumn at Highpoint Center for Printmaking in Minneapolis.

London-based furniture and jewellery designer Simone Brewster has also observed a shift in how her practice is perceived. "In the last year, I've seen a larger amount of interest," says Brewster, who has been commissioned to create a brass-and-wood bench for the Greenwich Peninsula in south-east London. "The new awareness about racial harassment is affecting every sphere of society. But artists have been making works about these issues and embracing their culture for a long time."

Brewster addressed the issue of slavery in her sculptural ensemble, 'Negress' lounge and 'Mammy' table in 2010. The 'Mammy' table, whose Primitivism-inspired base deconstructs the black female body through breast, leg and face elements, has recently been acquired by a British museum.

Brewster, however, believes enhanced engagement would have arisen without the outrage over Floyd's death. "This was going to happen anyway because of Instagram and the mobile phone," she asserts. "I've been able to connect with curators in different countries after posting something and people have started to generate an online community. The Black Lives Matter movement has made galleries and museums realise that they're potentially missing out on something. And now they're trying to be on the right side of history."



Ini Archibong, 'Atlas Dining Table', 2019 / COURTESY: Ini Archibong

Lani Adeoye, a multi-disciplinary Canadian-Nigerian designer and founder of Studio Lani, laments that it took Floyd's murder to instigate a wake-up call. "It's extremely sad that it took such unfortunate circumstances for others to notice systemic racism and how it has affected black people across the board," says Adeoye, whose fluid designs, such as the golden 'Lilo' chair (2015) inspired by a West African musical instrument, draw on Yoruba heritage.

"I'm hopeful that the industry will become more diverse," Adeoye says. "But I'm aware that it'll take time and lots of work. Essentially it's about redefining the narrative and reinforcing the notion that we have something to offer the global design conversation. Historically, we were conditioned to believe that our culture was inferior. Creating products inspired by our culture and honouring our heritage is visual activism in a way."

The British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare CBE has over many years developed an oeuvre, in sculpture, film, installation, painting and photography, that addresses the complex ironies of colonialism and class. His 'Windy Chair I', like many of his best-known artworks, celebrates the colourful patterned Dutch wax cloth beloved in West Africa, whilst also evoking the sails that facilitated the trade in cloth and slaves. Switzerland-based Ini Archibong too has drawn on the potent image of the sail, for his Pavilion of the African Diaspora at the London Design Biennial in June.

Chris Day, meanwhile, an emerging glass and ceramics artist with British-Jamaican heritage, reflects directly upon the legacy of slavery and civil rights in his creations. He finds the broader



Chris Day, 'Emmett Till', 2019 / COURTESY: Chris Day & Vessel Gallery



Yinka Shonibare, 'Windy Chair I (Orange and Blue)'
COURTESY: Carpenters Workshop Gallery

conversation surrounding Floyd's death has lent more prominence to his work.

A former plumber who is completing an MA in Design and Applied Arts, Day had his first exhibition at Vessel Gallery in London a year ago. Subsequently, his sculpture 'Emmett Till' (2019), has been acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum. Made of red glass, wire, a branch and clay, it references the murder of a black 14-year-old boy in Mississippi in 1955. "I'm not so proud of me getting into the V&A, but of Emmett Till getting there," enthuses Day, who is presenting pieces based on the rum trade in his solo show at Harewood House, Leeds. Yet Day, 52, is stunned by the absence of black glassblowers: "I made a shout-out on the BBC: 'Am I the only black glassblower and, if so, why?'"

It was to bring exposure to creatives of different origins and disciplines that Kenyan-born designer and curator Shiro Muchiri launched SoShiro gallery in London in 2018. SoShiro's spring exhibition, 'Welding Cultures', brought together furniture by Ini Archibong, sculptures by Day and textiles by Dalia James, among others.

Muchiri feels her audience's curiosity has been piqued in the last year: "The events around Black Lives Matter have managed to create the environment for a discussion to take place, which has brought more focus to artists from the diaspora." This autumn SoShiro will show the furniture of US-based Cuban artist Alexandre Arrechea, whose interdisciplinary works often examine issues of politics, power and urban space. Muchiri anticipates an eager audience.