

# The Guardian

## 'Giving homage to the past': Nyugen E Smith's fascinating found object art

The artist's latest exhibition continues his interest in reclaimed materials and what they can tell us about the past and the future

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17 February 2023

For interdisciplinary artist Nyugen E Smith, the origins of his new show go back to around 2009, when a chance encounter in a high school history class ignited his imagination over the Democratic Republic of the Congo. "I was substituting for a history teacher, when I saw all these VHS tapes and was attracted to one that read 'Lumumba'. I took it to see what it was about and popped it in the VCR in a free period. I had never heard of Patrice Lumumba before, and everything was so fascinating to me."



*Bundlehouse: Lukasa Tribute, 2023. Photograph: Vivian Doering*

So began Smith's interest with the history, culture and global impacts of the DRC that has resulted in *Ancient Future Memory*, showing at Cultural DC through 12 March. Exploring what Smith has gleaned from his years-long interest in the DRC, the show offers sculptures and mixed media pieces on watercolor paper and is notable for Smith's use of reclaimed materials. It incorporates bits of things, like fabric, tarp, rubber hoses and old bottle caps, that he found while in Kinshasa.

Although the use of found materials is now central of Smith's artistry, it originated out of necessity, when he was emerging as an artist with insufficient resources to pursue his art. "I was a budding artist and didn't have much money for art supplies," he said. "In Jersey City we had all of these buildings, and we would salvage for found objects and materials to work with." It also goes back to the years he spent in Trinidad

as a child living with his grandparents, where utilizing found materials in novel way is enmeshed in the way of life. "So much in the built environment in Trinidad is built with reclaimed materials, so that way of making things was already in my visual vocabulary."

For *Ancient Future Memory*, Smith was particularly inspired by ritual objects made by the Luba people, who have inhabited lands in the Congo for centuries. He first discovered these objects during a visit to the Congo's national art museum in Kinshasa. "I was just really struck by their beauty and their difference from art objects in other parts of Africa. I was struck by the elegance in the simplicity."

Smith found himself especially drawn to Luba lukasas, or memory boards, which are used to map the historical, political, and territorial memories of the Luba people. He found these objects extraordinarily sophisticated and beautiful, and he felt especially attached to how lukasas act as maps. "I liked the idea that they're a way of mapping, because in my work I deal a lot with maps."

Conceptually, lukasas worked their way into *Ancient Future Memory* through the tension between protecting a culture's memory, but also allowing outside forces to infiltrate. Smith was struck by how one must be initiated in order to read a lukasa and interpret the memories it holds. He found this akin to what he was attempting to do in creating his art. "These things are what I'm thinking of when I'm trying to represent a place but also keep these sorts of things secret."

This can be seen in a piece like *Bundlehouse: Migrant Magic*, which depicts a person carrying a map, while at the same time being a container for a map. In the figure's arched posture and the heavy yet delicate load he bears, *Migrant Magic* conjures a sense of both precarity and determination. It also impinges notions of migration, while indicating how our histories can be integral to where we are headed. "I liked this idea of giving homage to the past while going to the future, this is exactly what I'm thinking about."

*Ancient Future Memory* is a part of Smith's larger *Bundlehouse* series, which originated in 2005, when he happened to see photographer Chenoa Maxwell's shots of a refugee camp in Uganda during a trip to London. He was struck by how the refugees had used reclaimed materials to build their camps, almost as though they were sculptures. The photos also inspired Smith to raise awareness of the global impacts of the wars of extraction in the region that had contributed to internal displacement and violence. "I couldn't get those photos out of my head, and I started making drawings on the barf bag in the back of the seat of the airplane on my way back home from the exhibition in London."

Although *Bundlehouse* is based in the African diaspora, for Smith the project has a global scope, tracing the web of interconnections as the effects of the diaspora has been felt worldwide. "I started to find through lines and connections to the African diaspora, the Caribbean being one of them. When we think about the Caribbean as ground zero for climate change, all of these different types of circumstances perpetuate a living that I would describe as *Bundlehouse*."

But even though the series is strongly rooted in particular forms of historical wrongdoing, for Smith it ultimately transcends particular identities and events to implicate a basic part of the human experience. "Bundlehouse is not just about the structures made of these found materials, it's a wider concept – thinking about what it means to rebuild your life by picking up the pieces again after a traumatic event. Building these structures within the context of a traumatic event or crisis."



*Bundlehouse: Kinshasa Memory, 2023. Photograph: Vivian Doering*

Ultimately, Smith's art is all about deconstruction and reconstruction, integration and layers. The intricacy of his work in *Ancient Future Memory* is reflective of how he builds his artistic practice through various different forms of artistic expression. Smith is always drawn toward the linkages, attempting to elaborate the web of interconnections that reveal the complexity of the world we live in.

"When I'm in the studio, I'm constantly cutting away from one piece to add to another piece. Nothing is really safe or sacred in the studio until it's completely finished. There are all of these layers – if one is to look closely, you can tell that there is a history there."