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Transcript #56 Power, Purpose and Privilege with Artists Nari Ward and Derrick Adams



Guests Derrick Adams and Nari Ward. Photo: Matthew Magelof

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Charlotte Burns: Hello and welcome to *In Other Words*, where we cover everything you ever wanted to know about the art world but didn't know who to ask. I'm your host, Charlotte Burns, and today I'm joined by two brilliant contemporary artists who live and work in New York.

Nari Ward is a sculptor who's also been called an accumulation artist for his poignant and innovative use of found materials. He is the subject of a major retrospective that spans 25 years of his production at the New Museum, entitled "[We the People](#)". It is on view until the 26th of May.

Nari Ward: *Maybe in some ways, it's a kind of a metaphor for what I think art should do. It should challenge, consume, maybe even disrupt—and then it should also figure out, because it is art. It is artifice. It is a safe space to consider those different moments.*

Derrick Adams is an artist who layers and hybridizes painting, sculpting, performance and video. He is the subject of two concurrent exhibitions on show right now in New York, "[Derrick Adams: Interior Life](#)" at Luxembourg & Dayan Gallery until the 20th of April; and "[Derrick Adams: New Icons](#)", which is the final exhibition in the uptown Mary Boone Gallery, on show until the 27 April.

Derrick Adams: *My takeaway was, "if they can do this, I can do whatever I want, too."*

Before we begin, here's your reminder to subscribe to our *In Other Words* newsletter at artagencypartners.com. And now, onto today's show.

Nari and Derrick, thank you so much for being here today.

Nari Ward: Great to be here.

Derrick Adams: Yes, great to be here.

Charlotte Burns: Tell me how you two came to know each other.

Nari Ward: We see each other a lot in openings and mutual friends who we have, but in terms of a real sit down, I don't think we really—

Derrick Adams: Had a sit down. No, this is going to be our official sit down for the public.

[Laughter]

Charlotte Burns: I'm glad that we can facilitate that.

Derrick Adams: I know Nari's work from the time I was starting as an artist, and I've just been very interested and intrigued by the process. You look at it—I think the first thing you think about is commitment.

Charlotte Burns: I agree. I was talking to somebody about the exhibition at the [New Museum](#) and they said they thought it was the best exhibition they had seen in as long as they could remember. We were discussing the ways in which we both felt we knew your work, and then we went to see the show and were like, "Oh my God." It was so good to see it all together.

Nari Ward: Yes, I've heard that a lot, and thanks, Derrick. I also really admire Derrick's work and I feel the same way. That was when the chance to sit down kind of happened, I was like, "Yes, let's do that." It was also through [AC Hudgins](#), a mutual friend that hit me to Derrick. We actually met more times at AC's spot than probably in the real world.

Getting back to the show though, the reaction has been pretty amazing and unexpected. This exhibition is more a kind of deep dive into my process and work—a lot of work from the 1990s, a lot of early works. A lot of people haven't seen those more immersive environments that I did early on. I think that the idea for me, early on, was to create a space for the viewer in some capacity and using these so-called "found objects" and creating the environment for them.

Charlotte Burns: You both find ways to connect with your audience more directly. You were both trained formally and you've both discussed the formal art history that you bring to your work, but the ways in which you at some point, essentially, found that restrictive and wanted to be more directly involved and even more metaphorical with what you do: I thought there was a kind of connection.

Derrick Adams: Coming from an academic background, I think I realized early in my education at [Pratt](#) when I had to learn about a lot of artists' works that I was interested in—but also some that I wasn't interested in—my takeaway was, "if they can do this, I can do whatever I want, too". That's what I thought. I was like, "if they can do this and I have to look at it and study it, then that's a motivation for me to think about having that freedom and using that freedom to express the ideas I have"—but also thinking about how it is to be looked at as a committed artist.

A lot of artists that I was looking at in undergrad—which were mostly African American artists or artists from the African diaspora—I was well aware of who they were, but the rest of the world didn't. And I just thought as a black artist, "I'll be making work, and no one might know who I am but the people in my community." That was a reality that I was really okay with at some point. I just thought that that would be my—

Charlotte Burns: That would be your fate.

Derrick Adams: Yes. That would be my fate, but I was okay with that because I thought that's what art was about. It was about making work even when people weren't looking. Everything that's happening for me now, it's just an extra part of it that I didn't even think about as much.

Nari Ward: Yes. I think we both kind of came from similar generational expectations. I think the artists I was looking at are the same ones you're talking about, the [Al Lovings](#) and the—

Derrick Adams: [Ed Clark](#), all those guys. [Frank Bowling](#) and all those guys.

Nari Ward: [Ed Clark](#), [Jack Whitten](#). They were just making work. The other piece of that, what you were talking about, also, is the folk: who's the audience for you? I never saw a distinction between the academic indoctrinated history and the folks that were being talked about that weren't being shown.

Charlotte Burns: Right.

Nari Ward: Folks are saying, “oh, you’re close to the outsider artists,” or “there’s this kind of folk sensibility to your work.” That was just trying to connect to as many people as possible, whether they’re art-trained or whether they’re working in a gas station. That directive led us to choose materials and forms that, for me anyway, was the most accessible.

Charlotte Burns: Why is it important for you to connect to as big an audience as possible?

Nari Ward: In the academic space that both Derrick and I were navigating early on, our sense of self was not really reflected in a lot of the artists. You talked about artists that we needed to negotiate in history, but we didn’t feel a connection to, but we did it because that was the expectation.

Charlotte Burns: What was expected, yes.

Derrick Adams: The curriculum.

Nari Ward: Yes, the curriculum, right. At a certain point, that notion of freedom was really about who do we start... whose methodologies we started to bring into our own practice. It was really that sense of liberation and also, it wasn’t in a vacuum.

At the same time as we came into the mix, things started to loosen up because there was a realization that there was a lot of folks missing—a lot of narratives that weren’t being engaged and that needed to be dealt with. I think the timing for our career ascension really allowed for the opportunity for us to keep pushing on the choices that we started to navigate early on.

Derrick Adams: Also, I think that in the mid-1990s when a lot of works came about that were really representing this perspective of identity politics in art as a platform, I think it shifted the priorities of art that allowed other conversations to come into the art world that were not just about form, which was what was being taught prior to the 1990s artists. It was mostly dominated by a particular group of people, where the idea of content was just too fussy and too murky, and we didn’t need to talk about the ideas behind things.

Now it’s kind of shifted because of the saturation of art and art schools, and people who are self-taught and people who are enterprising as artists, or even celebrities who are making art. It kind of made this space so dense that people are looking for a substance within art and it’s challenging artists from every background to talk about things with their work and to connect with people from various backgrounds.

I think it makes the artists make a choice about who your audience is and who you’re speaking with. I think it challenges you more to think about purpose and substance in a way that I don’t think artists thought about it before. Some artists, still, are grappling with the idea of just making art versus saying something with your art.

Charlotte Burns: Right.

Derrick Adams: For some people it’s easier than others.

Charlotte Burns: I want to ask you about two things here. One of them is this idea of the purpose—what you want to say with your art. The other thing that you said that was kind of interesting was this idea that in the early 1990s, there were exhibitions dealing with this idea of identity politics. There was a big push towards being more inclusive and then, after that, there was a backlash. This is something we wrote about in the summer when we did a [big data study](#) looking at the representation of African American artists over the past 10 years. We surveyed 30 museums and then looked at the markets in a collaboration we did with [artnet](#). The numbers were very low. It was 2.3% of all acquisitions over the past 10 years that had been of work by African American artists, and the market was even smaller.

Your comments about the identity politics at that time, that came up in the article. One of the things that people said was that in order to not have the same retreat that they felt had happened institutionally, you need to give people equity. I don’t think that we considered in the article what you’re saying, which is that under the surface people were still influenced by that. There were still artists making work, there were curators coming up who felt that they could push forward for that moment again.

Derrick Adams: Yes.

Nari Ward: The one important distinction—and it’s very different than now—is there was no money. Folks jokingly say “man, this is all going to dry up.” I’m like, I wouldn’t mind that because in a way, it takes away a lot of the folks who are in the art world for ego. There’s room for that too, I guess, but I think for me the directive and urgency of artists I like—and the respect and the messaging, the concepts they’re bringing to the forefront—is not about the marketplace. I always feel like it’s alright if things tighten up a little bit, because that’ll take a lot of the fat off and keep the leanness to it.

Derrick Adams: Exactly.

Nari Ward: I always jokingly say that I did better when the art world was broke. Now the New Museum show has changed that because I have more of a platform, but prior to that I was like, yes, I think I'm going to be all right.

Derrick Adams: In the beginning when artists were making more conceptual works in the 1940s, 1950s or 1960s leading up to the idea of the identity politics era of art-making, and then kind of trying to dismantle that—for a lot of the black artists, it really couldn't be dismantled because the basis for their platform was where they were speaking from culturally. So, it was already embedded in the material that they were using—

Charlotte Burns: Right.

Derrick Adams: —even with the way that artists were making work—like Ed Clark was making paintings with a push broom—even that language is embedded in the abstract painting. I think that people are now starting to understand the reality of where content comes from: form and content, how they can't really be separated.

Charlotte Burns: Exactly. It's this sort of misguided separation when you talk about identity politics because identity is political and it's what every artist brings to their life and therefore their work as well.

Derrick Adams: Everybody, yes.

Charlotte Burns: Everything is informed by who you are and where you came from.

One thing I want to ask you both about is—which is connected to this idea of message—is spirituality. Derrick, your current exhibition at Luxembourg Dayan is called "Interior Life" and was inspired by a tenet of Catholic theology that describes a life which seeks God in everything. Nari, your work often references spirituality and devotion or sacred spaces. I'm thinking about things like *Diamond Gym* (2008), *Carpet Angel* (1992), and of course, *Amazing Grace* (1993). I wanted to talk to you about the idea of spirituality and what it means to you in your work.

Nari Ward: I've always felt like when you start a work, it takes you on a journey. For me, the challenge was to figure out how to give into that journey and how much to control or how much to give over control. The spaces that the work brings me—the space of mystery, the space of introspection—is a space to connect with oneself that even you're not always fully aware of. It's a kind of awakening. For me, that idea of a kind of self-awakening and how that is manifested and mirrored needs to be experiential.

I grew up as a Baptist, initially. I'm not a practicing Baptist, but there are structures within the Baptist church—within any church—that I'm intrigued with. How it functions, or geometric structures and patterns, colors. The simple thing is adornment, to give you a focus; the storytelling component, all of those things are really inspiring spaces. So, my challenge was how to bring some of that formalism of a religious space without the direct tenets, the direct stories that might be associated with it.

Charlotte Burns: Right.

Nari Ward: It was kind of like creating that atmosphere of the sacred or spiritual, but with the most mundane material. Patterning is for me the key.

Derrick was talking about this sense of commitment, but it's really just this idea of the hand being laid on things as much as possible. Whether it's from weaving—

Derrick Adams: I like that.

Nari Ward: From weaving something or combining different visual rhythms within the work. I think the more I can do that, the more it declares a special moment for communing with that object or thing.

Charlotte Burns: Do you find that your hand leads you ahead of your brain, in a sense?

Nari Ward: No. It's not one or the other.

There are some pieces and some ideas that are driven by content. Then you get the material that can reinforce that and then you almost always are challenged to figure out how it works in the world. It had a presence in your imagination and then, when it comes into real world, it can never be as dynamic because it's not that space in your head. Then it's really about how you redefine it, refashion that thing to exist in the world that we know. What do you bring around that thing to make it stand out or stand apart, and at the same time make it mysterious? The church is still a space of mystery for me because—

Derrick Adams: Yes, exactly. I agree.

Nari Ward: Right? I mean, as much as I like to church-bash because of its problematic elements, I have a magnetic connection to what happens there and the sense of belief that's instilled in people there even though I do not—

Derrick Adams: That's the most important part is that the belief system I think is what, for me, I gravitate towards because I was created under the belief system. Even my resistance to it is still an acknowledgement of it.

I try not to critique it more than take it apart and try to understand it, because I really believe in this idea of things being physical and metaphysical. When I think about religion, I think about the conduit of it.

For me, I think about religion as it relates to the idea of spirituality with the female figures in my family, because in most black families the female figures are the dominant figures. They pray the most. They are the nurturing ones.

Nari Ward: Yes.

Derrick Adams: They're the ones who actually protect the guys in the family. For me, I'm always thinking about just that idea of the philosophy of metaphysicalness as it relates to "everyone is unique", and certain people are—based on their extension from their creator or the idea of the creator—they're here for a reason. They have a purpose. I think that when I think about spirituality as a human being, I reflect it more to these particular women figures in my family. I think they are the force behind some of the things that I'm thinking about when I'm making things, because just the way that they commune with each other on a daily basis is just something to watch.

If you're around my aunts in Baltimore, where I'm from, they have a certain type of aura around them. They basically haven't spent a day apart since probably they all came into existence.

Charlotte Burns: Right.

Derrick Adams: They go to the same church. I grew up in a choir singing in the same church, and it's multi-generational. They have this type of communion that is actually a really good foundation for me.

Charlotte Burns: A grounding?

Derrick Adams: Yes, for me as an artist. A lot of times I think about those types of experiences when I think about the idea of spirituality.

Charlotte Burns: It's a form of connection and nourishment.

Derrick Adams: I think about that in work. I think about what I want to say, who I want to communicate with. I think my shows are more successful when a person that I would never think would come into the space—a person that I connect with from where I'm from, who's not part of my peer group or the artists, and they just show up in the opening. It's usually someone who I end up communicating with throughout the night.

Derrick Adams: Before then, I think that I'm just doing what I'm supposed to do as an artist. You get a show, you make a show, you sell some art, whatever—but when someone comes in and they say "brother, I really liked that show" and they get it—I think to myself, it's official now. It's a good—

Charlotte Burns: You feel seen and they feel seen, which is—

Derrick Adams: I feel like that's who it's for. That's who it's for, yes.

Nari Ward: The idea of bringing them on a journey. You've brought them somewhere.

Derrick Adams: Yes.

Nari Ward: And they brought you somewhere in terms of where you see them as, where you see their arc.

Derrick Adams: All artists, all good artists, are people who are investigative in their practice and draw from different things. I just realized that the things that were around me were worthy of contextualizing. Even my aunts and even my family. They do some really interesting things that I think are a legacy practice. There are certain things that people in urban spaces overlook. A lot of times people think they're doing things new or things that have never been done before.

My place as an artist is to kind of aestheticize these things by extracting them out of that—

Charlotte Burns: Out of that context.

Derrick Adams: —out of that context. Putting them on a pedestal and saying “this is what you’re doing.”

Charlotte Burns: It’s a sort of monument.

Derrick Adams: Yes.

Nari Ward: I feel the same way. Trying to negotiate this broad experiential space, but then it’s about bringing that sense of the intimate into the monumental.

Charlotte Burns: Yes.

Nari Ward: I feel like that intimate—I see that in your work when I’m looking at the colors and the facets that you bring.

Derrick Adams: That’s what I saw in the strollers. I went in there, I was just like, wow. You saw the show—it was amazing.

Charlotte Burns: Derrick’s talking now about the work *Amazing Grace* (1993), which is a piece that Nari made in 1993. It’s more than 250—or is it 300 now?

Nari Ward: Well they started at—well, the full configuration is around 365.

Charlotte Burns: Oh, my goodness. There’s around 365—one for each day of the year—dilapidated baby strollers that you found abandoned on the streets of Harlem where you live. This is on show at the New Museum, and it’s a work that you showed at the New Museum in 1993. The strollers are arranged in a sort of oculi in this room. They resemble the hull of a ship in some way and the aisles are of flattened fire hoses that you can walk on while the gospel singer [Mahalia Jackson](#) sings “*Amazing Grace*”. It’s incredibly moving and powerful work.

Derrick Adams: Yes, it is.

Charlotte Burns: As you’re walking through this work, you consider the lives of the children that the strollers perhaps cradled. You consider the lives of the homeless people who repurposed them as a means of moving their possessions around the city. It’s about the city. It’s about urban devastation. It’s about, specifically, the AIDS and drug crises of the 1990s. But also about colonial histories, the idea of the slave ships.

Nari Ward: The passage, right.

Charlotte Burns: It’s so many things, that work.

Derrick Adams: It’s a masterpiece. It’s a masterpiece.

Nari Ward: Thank you.

Charlotte Burns: It’s a masterpiece.

Nari Ward: I think that the other keyword that both of us have in common is this idea of storytelling.

Charlotte Burns: Yes.

Nari Ward: The notion that we can tell a story but allow for multiple experiences to enter the dialogue with the narrative.

Charlotte Burns: Right.

Nari Ward: When I set out to do something, I start out with that personal space but then I try to figure out how to layer. Like building a building or something, the different floors. But there’s definitely movement. I lay moments for people to come back and reflect on. I never want to just, like an image, do one thing and leave it. There are so many little nuances that if you spend time with something, you’ll see something you didn’t see the first time or second time or third time you’re there. This idea of layering is so important. Within the layering of objects and form, there’s also the layering of the narratives.

That, for me, is really important. So that somebody who doesn’t know anything about the 1990s, like you said, can come in there and feel a connectedness.

Derrick Adams: Yed, exactly.

Charlotte Burns: I read that the *Amazing Grace* installation at some point was housed in your home because you were living in the old fire station. I want to ask you about living with that work.

Nari Ward: Initially, I wanted to show it in a church because when I was an artist in residence at [The Studio Museum in](#)

Harlem, I started the work and I actually felt like we were talking about sacred spaces. I wanted to bring in a space of hope. So that was the idea, to bring it to the church. I couldn't find a church in Harlem at the time.

Now they're being sold to developers, but back then it was almost like—to be quite honest, it was a tax haven, so nobody was going to give up their church because it was a chance to beat the government... and to minister to their congregation. It's a combination of both.

The idea was not possible, but somebody said, "Hey, there's an old firehouse I know of. Why don't you ask the woman?" I got in touch with the woman and this woman, Gwendolyn Govan, was nice enough to allow me to use the space. I used the firehouse. For at least several years it was a space to present the work and also to store the work, because it was actually cheaper to store it there than to put it in a proper storage space. I initially had the building under my sort of use for at least five years. This is a different time in Harlem. Then then I was able to purchase the building.

Charlotte Burns: With [Jeffrey Deitch](#).

Nari Ward: Yes. I was working at Jeffrey Deitch at the time. I told him that I was interested in buying this and would he be able to front me some funds before, based on sales. He was great.

That's the thing about Jeffrey. He looks at things historically and he was like, "No, this is the place you need to be. I think this is a great idea." He fronted me the starting down payment for it. That was wonderful. It was based on sales, but it was still great. It was great that he had that—

Derrick Adams: The vision.

Nari Ward: Vision and saw my vision and saw the need, that this would be a perfect place and it was. It was a perfect space for me to develop my practice around.

Charlotte Burns: Yes, and live.

Derrick Adams: I really felt like the encounter with the exhibition overall at New Museum was such a level of insight into your work.

This particular exhibition at the New Museum, to me, is my favorite show I've seen there.

Charlotte Burns: It's the best exhibition I've ever seen in that space.

Derrick Adams: Laid out in that space, yes.

Charlotte Burns: It's a tricky installation space.

Nari Ward: [Massimiliano](#) and [Gary](#), the curators, [Helga](#), they really did a great job. It took a lot of pulling me along because I wasn't always... More than once I was like, this is a big piece. I had to kind of always remind them, "This is a big piece—do you think it's going to work in this space?"

The space allowed for a lot more visual bleed from one work to the other. I think that, for me, was really exciting as opposed to just having these cordoned off sections. Also, the floors—the idea of having separate floors to experience a world, and still be in that world, is quite rare. I think that's really special.

Charlotte Burns: Yes, it felt like following your mind around as you'd made these works and seeing the links through them in a way that I'd never really seen before.

Nari Ward: For me it was a discovery also.

[Laughter]

Charlotte Burns: Yes, I'm sure. How did you feel looking back on 25 years? Did you see things you had not seen?

Nari Ward: Once I got past the anxiety of the installation and started to see it as a finished organism, I could really appreciate it and appreciate the curatorial moves, but I was stressed out right up to the opening almost.

Charlotte Burns: Of course.

Derrick Adams: Sure. I'm sure.

Nari Ward: It's just a lot of—

Derrick Adams: A lot of parts.

Nari Ward: Exactly.

Charlotte Burns: We were talking a little bit about the purpose of your work, both of you. Do you think you could describe that, easily?

Derrick Adams: I just started to realize the possibilities of what I could talk about in my work. I realized where artists were taking their information from.

I realized that even regardless of race, a lot of artists were taking history from very similar conversations that related to each other's interests, culturally, and a lot of it was going past a certain time that I thought was a very important time. There's a certain part of American history that has happened—1980s, 1990s—even with the idea of the 1990s movement and identity, there was a whole other era of the 1990s that was really more about people just existing.

To me, as an artist, that was a certain level of consciousness that is not celebrated. Even within some of the political figures that I look towards, like older political figures like [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), or [Malcolm X](#). When I'm doing research and I'm looking at images of them, a lot of images I see of them, even social media, are not images of them in any relaxed state or any celebratory state. They're usually images of them with some type of pushback or something dealing with the colonial structure. You never see images of them with their kids personally, or on vacation, in the pool—

Charlotte Burns: The idea of them as a person in the world.

Derrick Adams: Yes, giving us more dimension. Giving people more awareness that we're not constantly thinking about whiteness. Thinking about what white people think about us or how to navigate through the world.

Nari Ward: The piece that you did, the body of work, which is one of my favorite ones—I think it was called “[Floaters](#)” (2016)?

Charlotte Burns: I was just about to talk about that, too.

Nari Ward: I think that's a brilliant investigation because it talks about these individuals in their space, in amniotic fluid.

[Laughter]

It's so brilliant because it's also talking about the lack of pedestal. They're floating. I know that it was about this post-black idea. We don't exist as a result of this definition, we're there. We're here, and we're celebrating the here-ness. I think those bodies of work that best express that for me is “[Floaters](#)”, its everything you just said.

Derrick Adams: Even starting that series of work, it came out of something so simple as thinking about all the political issues I'm involved in, in conversations and thinking about art. Again, I go back to my mom and my aunts and I'm thinking, “Okay, what were they doing in the 1970s? What were they doing?” They were partying, they were working, they were paying their bills, they weren't necessarily protesting—

Charlotte Burns: Having a full life.

Derrick Adams: They were having a full life. They were existing in a way they could exist. I'm more interested in that. When I think about political movement, I think about what people were doing as a break.

Charlotte Burns: It's also, it's not separate. Something that occurred to me in the last few years is when you look back on periods of history, it's so easy to look back and see things in that linear way and think, “Why didn't people pay attention when this very troubling thing happened?” And it's because they're absorbed into the fabric of daily life. If you're not being super attentive to those things, or you're not looking forward with a view to looking backwards, it's very easy to allow yourself to not to identify things as they happen because you could just be so wrapped up in your daily life—

Derrick Adams: And that could take so much time.

Charlotte Burns: —and anesthetized by that and busy in all of that.

Nari Ward: Right, yes.

Derrick Adams: So, when I thought about it and I thought about these important political figures, I started Googling “Martin Luther King in a pool” just randomly. Then pictures popped up with him at a pool in Jamaica with his family, a spread in *Jet Magazine* or something.

Nari Ward: I remember that.

Derrick Adams: That was such a groundbreaking—

Nari Ward: He loved Jamaica.

Derrick Adams: Yes, he said he loved Jamaica. He said he felt like a real person in Jamaica because he was away from all the American politics, at the time.

It was a break from his reality, whatever he was with his family in a pool. You see that represented more with the white politicians of that time. You'll see even Kennedy and his family. You'll see them out in Montauk or wherever they were.

Charlotte Burns: It's a trope to have the figure with the dog, with the children, with the gazing wife.

Derrick Adams: We're family-oriented and it's okay to show that even in our current state. The majority of America is not upset that our president plays golf a lot. They almost say, "He should, he works really hard." In their mind, they're making—

Charlotte Burns: The "Executive Time"?

Derrick Adams: Yes, exactly. A lot of people of color the idea—even within our own culture—the idea of leisure is not even an option.

Charlotte Burns: When leisure started becoming a subject worthy of painting, it was to do with the class system, predominantly in Europe, with the idea that it was the bourgeoisie who could relax on the banks of the Seine.

Nari Ward: And then it transferred over to marketing and advertisers. Using leisure in that space to sell you something.

Charlotte Burns: Yes, exactly. The bliss of floating in a pool is just so peaceful and languid, but also as you say, unmoored from a pedestal. And it's such a successful work because it's a concept and at the same time, it's the formal qualities. One of the things about your work, Derrick, that's so amazing, is the ability you have to think in terms of perspective.

Looking at your work, it reminds me the first time I went to the South of France and saw all those houses that looked like cubes, and I realized that Cubism was actually something that visually looked like that. It was a way of representing the world rather than a wild invention—which is what it had seemed to me growing up in a kind of gray city in England. That seemed like a mirage.

I look at your work and I think, "Do you just see the world in that way, with those planes with this very flat but also perspectival approach?"

Derrick Adams: Saying this is even cliché for black intellectuals, but this idea of double consciousness is something that you just inherit and I think it becomes helpful if you become an academic person of color. You start to realize two things: how you want to be looked at in the world, and how the world will look at you regardless of how you want to be looked at. So, those two things are in competition in some ways with each other, because you really have to penetrate the world at a much more vigorous rate than most other people would have to in order to alter that perspective of you.

When I'm making works, I always think about how the idea of the power of colonialism is based on visual language and visual culture, more so than the violence that was attached to it. It started with creating the stained-glass windows in the cathedrals and manipulating the working class to have a spiritual response to the light coming through the colored glass, and not being able to read or understand the chemical reaction between light and glass because some people didn't even have windows.

When I heard that in undergrad, I was like, "Oh, that's what art is? Manipulating people and propaganda?" And those things weren't looked at as negative, they were looked at as, actually, mastery—

Charlotte Burns: Enlightenment.

Derrick Adams: Yes, so I thought that successful art was about penetrating the world with images that you want people to see. Other than looking at the images of these political figures in the pool, like Malcolm X in, like, his little swim trunks when he was a teenager—I just hashtagged #floaties one day, and there were no people of color on the floaties that were hashtagged on Instagram. My thing that I do every time when I can't find something, as an artist, I say to myself, "I'm just going to make it. I don't see it, so I'm going to make it." So to me, that level of discovery is a motivation. I think about, how can I offer another—

Charlotte Burns: An alternative.

Derrick Adams: Yes, of looking at the black figure in a way that will somehow give—

Charlotte Burns: It's hopeful.

Derrick Adams: Yes, give people stuff. Give them a feeling of normalcy that is not even promoted within our own culture.

Nari Ward: The thing about what I could get when I look at the work—there's this faceting, almost like he's like a diamond cutter—

[Laughter]

Charlotte Burns: That's what I mean about the perspective, it's so precise.

Nari Ward: These spaces that are seductive, and about light and about preciousness of the body and the skin and the people that you're depicting—

Charlotte Burns: There's humor, too.

Derrick Adams: Yes, humor.

Nari Ward: And it's corny! All of that!

Derrick Adams: Yes, it's a little corny.

[Laughter]

Nari Ward: In a good way!

Derrick Adams: No, I know, I know. It's like the salt and pepper shakers on the counter. I think there are things that are definitely—

Charlotte Burns: I like the figure peeking out of the shower.

[Laughter]

Derrick Adams: Yes. I think about activating the space because I think that, for me, art has to have some type of activation. I always think about the idea of the subject itself, engaging with each other even if the people aren't around looking at it.

A lot of times, people don't think about identity and commerce in the same way. Sometimes people think those two things are negative, but my work is really wrapped up in this idea of identity and commerce because I use a lot of objects in my work that are related to consumer products, which I think are a part of how American culture is established.

Charlotte Burns: Consumed internally and externally.

Derrick Adams: Yes, like buying a white fence is part of American culture to show a certain level of prestige. But American fences don't really cost a lot of money. And I think about those things when I'm making work and how to insert them into things I'm interested in.

Charlotte Burns: If you look at the work "[Sanctuary](#)" (2018), the exhibition you did focusing on the [Negro Motorist's Green Book](#), the annual guidebook published by the New York postal worker Victor Hugo Green between 1936 and 1967. The exhibition was 50 works of mixed media collage, assemblage on wood panels, sculpture and installation reimagining safe destinations for the black American traveler during the Jim Crow era in America, and that's an example of a work where you had a specific idea and a story you wanted to tell, but you found a way to tell that story that wasn't didactic.

Derrick Adams: The main reason for it even being focused on that theme is not even the *Green Book*, more so than the creator of it, Victor Hugo Green, and the fact that he was a regular citizen who had a full-time job delivering mail every day. And on his own personal time, he decided to compile this data of places to go through his annual union meeting with other black postal workers.

He was just doing it as a side thing at first, for people who drove, and when he retired he made it into a tourist thing. That was my first entry because this guy needs to have a show highlighting him. I tried to focus on the celebratory part of the *Green Book* and its ability to connect people, which was his desire.

Even the violence that was happening at the time that prompted him to make the *Green Book*, he even said so eloquently in his intro or statement, he said he created the *Green Book* so black travelers won't be caught in any embarrassing situations. I'm like, that's so eloquent. I actually thought that it was interesting that he made the book and that it was about connecting people. I met a lot of people who said their parents used the *Green Book* when they were young. They would map out everything before they drove on the highway. Also, I had the privilege of, now that I had the show, when I go to a different city in America I usually am contacted by one of the directors before I go to the city if I post something about it. They'll give

me a tour, they'll give me some history. A lot of these places were created and funded by doctors or professionals who realized there was no space in the town for their friends—

Charlotte Burns: Safe spaces.

Derrick Adams: Celebrities who came to town didn't have places to stay. Some of these people had money—they were a doctor or a lawyer—so they would build a nightclub that was a community used space—

Charlotte Burns: Gathering point.

Derrick Adams: And they would open a hotel, so when people like Ray Charles would come into town, or Ella Fitzgerald—you can see the books where they signed when you go to different ones. You see how relevant and necessary these spaces were at the time. What I've been thinking about—now it's an archive, but initially it wasn't thought about as an archive—

Charlotte Burns: It's just life.

Derrick Adams: Yes, it was just life. It wasn't a special directory and it ended up being a special directory. A lot of well-known places at the time didn't necessarily take ads out in the *Green Book* because people knew where they were. It was for people who needed business.

Charlotte Burns: That's so interesting. So, it's to do with commerce in that way, too.

Derrick Adams: Yes, so I'm always thinking about how identity and spirituality and all these things play a part in commerce and the idea of choice.

Nari was saying he grew up as a Baptist and I grew up as a Baptist, and there's a lot involved in detaching myself from that. It's almost like taking apart a computer. To not acknowledge that part of it would almost be like erasing a certain part of your psychological structure because a lot of things you're thinking about the guilt you have, the decisions you make. Decisions about morality and stuff.

Charlotte Burns: It's the storytelling and the spirituality and the commerce, all of that's in the churches.

I just wanted to ask you, Nari, this idea of double consciousness. I was reading the catalogue for your exhibition and [Okwui Enwezor](#) talks about the idea of young men—you and he being a part of a generation of men who were living in New York at that time who had been formed by an awareness of the exclusionary context of the art world and the exclusionary power of institutions.

You also said in a separate [article](#) that I read, "I think it was always the idea of fixating on otherness as being a fight—like I'm going to fight to declare my space—and I think there's much more an inquiry now as things have evolved from questioning what 'belonging' might mean. I think there is that double clarity of looking at the fiction of the system and discrediting it—the structure that has declared you as the other. At least my own evolution has come to that.

Now I see it as, 'Oh, there are a lot of lies and those lies have become institutionalized.' So, I think that woke moment is underlined by our current situation. The Obama moment made you think that it's all good, progress is happening; so I kind of chose to ignore the backsliding of history, and the indiscretions that happened. But I realize that those are not indiscretions; they're just a symptom of the lies that have been perpetuated from the very beginning.

That realization has kind of made me listen and have this double consciousness. I listen as a black person, as an artist, and as a human to try and negotiate my connected-ness beyond culture. I feel like that's where I'm at and where we are right now."

Nari Ward: I think all of that gives a lot of credence to what Derrick is saying about history. This idea that all this information that we get—one of the great things about being an artist is that we can borrow from it, we can reinvent it, re-situate and make it come alive again. That idea of making it come alive isn't to talk about the tragedy as much as plotting spaces for people to grow and really deal with it in a way that it's part of an active experience, active visual experience, active conceptual experience.

As an artist, I feel like that's my role. To bring that moment of history, that moment of doubt, frustration, of fear, into the present and finding ways to make layers of that so that the person who knows nothing about my experience can still have a sense of connectedness.

Charlotte Burns: There's one really powerful and infuriating thing about the exhibition, which is that so many of the issues that you make active in that way in works from the 1990s—poverty, race, consumer culture and all those people who have been neglected or exploited by other people who have more power—they remain so fraught. The fact that these works

resonate so strongly today doesn't make you feel great when you leave the exhibition. It feels like art for our time, even though it's an art you made at another time. I wonder how you feel seeing those works now, in the context of today when you made them at a different moment.

Nari Ward: Yeah, a lot of the *We the People* (2015), notice to the police [*Homeland Sweet Homeland* (2012)], the different works with, for instance, the Miranda Rights. That was a body of work that I started in the 1990s. That was pre-“Stop and Frisk”. It was just a reality that I realized—

Charlotte Burns: But you had had an encounter—

Nari Ward: My brother worked for [Legal Aid](#) early on, and he had a business card with the Miranda Rights on it. I thought that was really cool that he had this service connected to his business, to his practice. I said, “I’m an artist. I can have that kind of service connected to my practice as well.” So, I just started printing my information on the back of it. And the funny thing is, when I started giving it out to friends and colleagues and just randomly, people would kind of be taken back and almost feel a sense of accusatory tension like, “Why are you giving this to me?” As if somehow there was some element of guilt associated with it.

I thought that was really difficult and problematic, and I said, well, I need to normalize the Miranda Rights. To let them know this is actually something that you should be proud that you have, living in America. This is your right as a citizen. You should honor this and be aware of it and really be proud of it. So, I started doing this kind of ‘home sweet home’ version of it.

I think a lot of the work is trying to deal with these things that haven’t been... we don’t want to deal with it. Even if it’s an object that’s a discard. The whole idea of choosing a discard for me is that this thing no longer has a function. It’s supposed to be empty. And the fact that it’s seen as empty is a really great opportunity to use it as a vessel for talking about more and building a different dialogue around it.

Charlotte Burns: With the Miranda Rights, I read somewhere that they’d come in helpful for you. That you had—as a student—you were watching an incident where the police were yelling at a guy selling stuff on the sidewalk in the Lower East Side. You were watching this drama unfold as a bystander, then you got caught up in it and found yourself detached up until the point when you realized, “Oh, this is really real.”

Nari Ward: Yes. I was kind of the consummate gleaner walking around disconnected and connected to everything.

[Laughter]

I saw this incident where this gentleman was selling things on the side of the street, and he was blocking the sidewalk, so the police came, walked up to him and said, “Get out of here.” I’m just witnessing the whole thing as if it’s TV. I’m like, “This is interesting. Wow.” And the police turned around to me and said, “What are you looking at?” And I’m like, “I’m just standing here, nothing.” He goes, “Let me see some ID,” and I was like, “Officer, why? I didn’t do anything.”

“Oh, you’re a wise guy, huh?” That kind of thing. He says, “Okay, come with me,” and he basically just handcuffed me and brought me to the station, just because I was standing and looking at what was going on.

It was that moment where I felt like I was almost a witness to something, then it flips where you’re realizing now this is happening to you. So, I got brought to the station and it was a real awakening in a lot of ways. Even when I went to the station, the incidents that I saw, even just in that one hour—

Charlotte Burns: You said you saw some guy’s head—

Nari Ward: Yes, it was traumatic. That was when I realized this could go—

Derrick Adams: Really wrong, yes.

Nari Ward: —really bad. I was in the holding part where one of the other gentlemen who was brought in was there, and he said something to one of the officers, and the officer grabbed him from through the bar— grabbed him by his hair and pulled it right into the bar and hit his head against the metal.

Your rights are just given up when you’re in this space. We went to court and got it all dismissed. The funny part about it is when—this is also really interesting—when the officer brought me over to start looking over what was in the contents of my wallet, he saw my brother’s card. As soon as he saw my brother’s card, he goes, “Oh man, you’re like a nice guy. Why did you make me do this to you?” I’ll never forget that, “Why did you make me do this to you?”

Charlotte Burns: Because he recognized a symbol of power, basically.

Nari Ward: Yes, and now he had to have a different kind of relationship to the experience and what he was engaged with.

That lead me into dealing more with the Miranda Rights. All of those experiences kind of attributed.

Charlotte Burns: Yes, that's so interesting. The idea of power and symbols is something that you're exploring in your current exhibition at the Mary Boone Gallery, Derrick, the "New Icons". They're combinations of emoji symbols to reference people who you feel are of particular importance to American popular culture, including the—well, I was trying to come up with a way to describe [Grace Jones](#), who's—

Derrick Adams: Out of this world?

Charlotte Burns: Yes, exactly. This sort of out of this world supermodel, singer, performer, actress, everything. Grace Jones, [Colin Kaepernick](#)—who is, of course, the former San Francisco 49ers quarterback who recently agreed to a settlement with the NFL over allegations that the league had colluded to deny him a contract after he took a knee during the National Anthem protesting the treatment of African Americans and other minorities.

I thought the use of emojis was an interesting way to deal with that. I guess this is really about symbols, the symbols that we have in the world around us.

Derrick Adams: In general, with my work, I always think about just the power of things that happen within my culture, or the culture we are in now that we sometimes downplay. We don't look at them critically. Popular culture is usually something that becomes riskier because it is so wrapped up in the idea of the familiar or the surface, that most people don't really go really deep into dissecting what it means to think about visual culture used in popular culture.

I think about identity in a way that pushes consumerism into different directions and the emoji images—I call them portraits—it's really more about a testament to the influence that millennials have on social media to the point where they've altered their imagery. At first, it was just yellow and because of the heavy use of the emojis through their black users—because I think social media became a really good platform in a creative world for a lot of young people of color—

Charlotte Burns: People took it into their own hands.

Derrick Adams: Yes, it benefitted a lot of the working-class people who couldn't afford a PR person. It allowed you to have more control over who you're communicating with and to develop a language of communicating. It has influenced the consumer part of visual culture in a way. When I started to step away and think about it, and think about the impact of it and even how the communications of when you're dealing with people through text messaging, how those things had become part of a choice of representation—I thought about this idea of it as hieroglyphics that exist and it's really interesting—these kinds of monumental images that I use a lot in my daily life.

A lot of times the things that are complex are sometimes the simplest things around you. It doesn't have to be ornate or opulent. Sometimes extracting one small thing out of something and putting it into somewhere else creates a different context of reflection.

Charlotte Burns: It's also the language that we have and that we use. I was thinking about language in both of your art this morning and then I was reading a Twitter thread by the [first female translator of the *Odyssey*](#). She's working on a new translation now of an ancient Greek text and she was bemoaning on Twitter the lack of language that we have. There aren't enough words to convey movement these days that aren't either mechanical or 1950s housewife-y. Like bopping.

Derrick Adams: Yes.

Charlotte Burns: Or clacking. A lot of the words, she said, the language has reduced itself in our moment. That there were more words in ancient Greek time for movement in different forms. There were different onomatopoeic words to describe battle noise than there are now. And so, she knows what the word means because she understands the ancient Greek, but she can't quite translate things.

Essentially the realization that language suits our needs and that we're all "little W=whilers", is what she called us. The language of our time is the language of just a short while. And it moves and changes with what we need. You're at a point in time where the emojis are a language that we need and use. Whereas for my parent's generation, I don't think my parents know what an emoji is and so it wouldn't occur to them to hold down and scroll across options—but that informs the way that the next generation will think, that there will be a way to hold down and scroll across option.

Derrick Adams: Yes. And in the next five years, those are going to be archive images because there'll be some other form of—

Charlotte Burns: Communication.

Derrick Adams: Communication or imagery that reflects those same levels of emotion. I thought this was more of a timely exhibition because with all the shows I've been creating, it's really more of a desire to archive a certain time through images

to kind of put them in the world.

Charlotte Burns: Kind of time capsule.

Derrick Adams: Yes. Put them in the world and give viewers other option of looking at black American culture in a way that is basically the most normal way that we exist. Alongside being socially aware and socially active.

Nari Ward: Tied into that is this idea of power, like you're talking about. Then it's all the same. I used logos like Chase Bank.

Charlotte Burns: Do you want to describe the Chase work for viewers who haven't seen it? I love that.

Nari Ward: I did two versions of CHASE. It actually kind of came about because right where I was living in the firehouse, next door to that was an empty lot and maybe five or six years, I've lived in this neighborhood and maybe two of my neighbors had actually spoken to me. It's just an urban space. You kind of focus on what you're doing. And as soon as CHASE put up this fence and they had "CHASE Bank investing in the neighborhood", whatever. That one week, five or six people were talking to me and like, "Oh, CHASE. CHASE is going to do something in that empty lot."

It immediately dawned on me, CHASE became like the weather. It was this thing that was safe to talk about but you can't control. So, I started doing *CHASE Weather Map* (2010). Then I started taking the logo, the form, and doing *AfroChase* (2010). The whole idea was to take this thing that we think we know—and we take as a kind of given—and fracture it and slow it down and make room for it within our imagination to be something else. Allowing the muscles of our imagination to become a little bit more involved in dissecting the things that are seen as monoliths.

As an artist, you feel like that's something you can take on. I think that's what you're talking about. Breaking these things down, slowing you up to start to re- reckon your experiences with the expectation of this thing and even the history of what this thing is. I started doing research on CHASE and JP Morgan and going back to slavery, the formation of the country. So, for me, it was this real investment in knowing about how I'm here and it and how it entered the neighborhood.

Charlotte Burns: Yes.

Nari Ward: The other piece of that is, how do you make that moment present? So, it doesn't just become research and the formal tools you use to make that present are the next thing for me.

The symbols that I choose are real, and the materials I choose are really specific to the content that I'm interested in negotiating with the viewer.

Charlotte Burns: I wanted to ask you if there was a material you won't work with because when you were talking about the *Amazing Grace* (1993) piece at some point, you said that there was one material, I'm going to quote you here, "that was so ubiquitous and so dangerous that I did not touch because it was so charged. And that was the crack vial. It was everywhere, almost like pebbles because it was such a devastating epidemic. I did not feel like I could address it at the time, but I do think about those vials and what having collected them would mean today as they were so much about what they represented in terms of loss, but also in times of greed."

Nari Ward: Yes. That's a material that I wish I had collected and I know, at the time it was too close. Too maybe tragic and painful. But now, I've formulate—and other people have formulated—a whole conspiracy theory around the crack epidemic and an urban, again, the re-situation of their urban space and gentrification. I kind of feel like it would be a material that definitely would talk about gentrification in a way that I don't think a lot of people are considering it now.

Gentrification is in a really charged moment. That's something that I feel like it's hard for politicians to take on. But is it perfect content for artists to negotiate because you can be as irreverent and as devotional and as true and as problematic as you need to be to get all the layers of truth and complexity—it's a really complex thing—out into the world.

Charlotte Burns: Something that really brought that home for me was the essay with Okwui in your catalogue where he talked about a period in which there was a collective going on and then it fell apart. And the interviewer said, "Well, why did it fall apart?" And he said, "I don't want to get too biographical about it, but I'll just say that we realized that squatting came with complications." And then he essentially said, "All praise to Nari because there were several of us who couldn't live without the creature comforts of Brooklyn. And so, we moved back." And he was describing the Harlem that you were trying to have this collective in. He said that you were so committed to it, which is—

Nari Ward: I think I was so committed to it because of my own fiction. When I moved to Harlem, I didn't just move into any neighborhood. I was fortunate to move into [409 Edgecombe](#), which was one of the most historic buildings in Harlem. Basically entertainers, judges and anybody who was... The whole element of the Harlem Renaissance kind of happened around 409 Edgecombe and it just so happened my uncle was the super there. So, I had this very romantic mindspace for what Harlem was. Even when it was in disarray, I would always use that as a backdrop for thinking about what it is and what

it was going to be. And so, I never lost that, even when they were selling buildings for a dollar and nobody wanted to buy it because they didn't want to live in these neighborhoods. I still negotiated the history of it as relevant and important for me to stay there.

Charlotte Burns: Yes. And how has your relationship with Harlem changed now with the gentrification that's been going on and continues to accelerate?

Nari Ward: It's really complicated. It's a dangerous subject because— we talked about greed. I think there is this kind of land grab that's happening. That's the part that's the most painful. Well-meaning intentioned people who come into the neighborhood will always act as if they want to be part of the neighborhood, but then they're not willing to send their kids to the same public schools. If people who are moving into these neighborhoods are really serious about being part of the neighborhood should send their kids to the local school. I think that's the real commitment. I always say that's the [John Brown](#) commitment.

Derrick Adams: Yes, yes it is.

Nari Ward: John Brown is hardcore.

Derrick Adams: Yes.

Nari Ward: There should be a street in every—nobody celebrates John Brown because they actually treat him as if he's some heretic and crazy man.

Derrick Adams: Yes.

Nari Ward: Because they don't want that white male narrative to be instilled in the expectation of that masculinity. I think we should have a John Brown Street in Harlem. We should have a John Brown Street everywhere, right?

Derrick Adams: John Brown School, maybe.

Nari Ward: Yes. Because this idea that you are privileged, and you need to take a moral position to change for other people. Not for yourself, but because you know what is right. You know what is just. It's not for me as a black person to say; it's for the white people to take action.

Derrick Adams: Take the action because it's important. Gentrification, overall, really affects women of color, single mothers with kids. In my building alone, most of the people who had to move out of my building as it's become more polished and the community becomes more polished are the single mothers with one or two kids who are not able to benefit from the gentrification that happens in the neighborhood when a new school comes or new stores or supermarkets or whatever.

Charlotte Burns: My family were immigrants to England and the way they describe it is that immigrants would move in from different countries into the same neighborhoods and they would be replaced by new waves of immigrants as those immigrants had enough money to move to other areas. And that's a different form of real estate in that way.

Derrick Adams: The reason why gentrification is such a tense subject within the black community is because a lot of neighborhoods that are being gentrified, the banks and the other opportunities that existed were not offered to black working class people. So, a lot of the people who bought the property had to actually band together and create little groups where they put their money together and buy property because in certain neighborhoods that exist now that are gentrified, you can't get a bank loan because you're black.

Nari Ward: You're black, right. The building that I was able to purchase early on, when I finally got started on the process and wanted insurance for the building, the guy came and he was like, "You know, we don't do this neighborhood."

Charlotte Burns: Just don't do it. Yes.

Nari Ward: This whole red lining and this is in the 1990s. This isn't going back into the 1940s and 1950s. He was like, "Yes, we don't really insure these neighborhoods, but it's changing and now I think we can do this area."

Charlotte Burns: Wow.

Nari Ward: So that was just when they were willing to insure the space.

Derrick Adams: People don't understand. That's why you move into a neighborhood and people say, "Oh, this neighborhood wasn't that... Maybe me moving in here, the neighborhood is better now." But it's not better because the people in the neighborhood didn't want it to be better. It's because they didn't have the ability to make it better, and you

coming in here brings another level of value to the neighborhood that people are seeing because of your presence. Not because the people there before you did not work hard or did not save their money—

Charlotte Burns: Create value, yes.

Derrick Adams: —and try to create value. It's just that it was purposely denied for the idea that they were just holding space. Some of these neighborhoods that have houses are abandoned and these buildings had been abandoned for over ten, 15, 20 years—the people who own the property don't live in the neighborhood and they'd rather pay whatever the penalty is for having an abandoned place than to let someone buy it. Until now, where developers are banding together and creating groups to buy big property.

Nari Ward: That was the part of my conspiracy theory idea. When I was there, it was devastated. There were all these empty lots because the buildings had been knocked down. Nobody wanted to live in them. Even when they gave that dollar incentive because if you were a policeman or a firefighter and you decided to move your family there, that would be crazy. Plus, you couldn't even get insurance for the building if, God forbid, anything happened to it. So, you put all this money and you could in theory lose it all. It really wasn't a smart move to do any of that. The whole idea of people taking on that responsibility wasn't there.

Derrick Adams: Didn't make any sense. It didn't make any sense.

Charlotte Burns: Right. Yes. That's really where you start talking about systems of institutional power, which is kind of your point that you were saying. It's not really about belonging, it's about a series of lies and opportunities.

Nari Ward: But that's what I mean.

Charlotte Burns: Challenges.

Nari Ward: The next step was when the government steps in, right? Supposedly. And they create these empowerment zones and then they bundled the property and start to give it out to investors to develop. That's what you have now, are corporations owning these homes that, in theory, they were just regular families that owned them, mostly of color. Now they're just scattered.

When I get back to the crack vial, I felt like that was a metaphor for a very insidious means of transforming the neighborhood and one set of beliefs that you could put in place. Whether it's true or not, there's enough truth there to consider. But I always look at those facts and really think about, but what is it about the history that hasn't been told?

Charlotte Burns: Yes.

Nari Ward: What are the other possible spaces that we can talk about and bring that narrative to fruition?

Charlotte Burns: This idea of gentrification, I was thinking about *Hunger Cradle* (1993), which is a work that in its various incarnations has been a witness to that. You said that, "The piece was purchased, and in a moment of crisis it tested my artistic integrity. Does it make sense to sell this piece from this space in Harlem? What does it mean if it goes off to another place? I decided that it would function only if something is added to the work within every new context, so it almost absorbs another element of its own history." That's about gentrification and that's also about the market and navigating that, which is something I wanted to ask you both about.

Nari Ward: Yes. The title is key to that piece as well. I always wanted to say that because it also deals with this notion of consumption. This idea of hunger is this kind of urgency of consumption, but then consumption and care. There's the other part of cradling, of caring for or protecting. I really wanted to consider this, both of those things. Maybe in some ways, it's a kind of a metaphor for what I think art should do. It should challenge, consume, maybe even disrupt—and then it should also figure out, because it is art. It is artifice. It is a safe space to consider those different moments.

Charlotte Burns: Yes, and try to think in different ways.

Nari Ward: And sort of have a creative growth. That growth of the imagination is the real crisis that we're talking about. That's the danger of these power symbols, that we kind of dismiss language is that our imagination. The space of our imagination is being preempted somehow. Yes.

Charlotte Burns: Sort of usurped.

Nari Ward: Yes. I think that is that the thing to check, to fight for and figuring out, as an artist, how to help the muscle exercise the imagination.

Charlotte Burns: And therefore, being more open to new ideas.

Nari Ward: The full person, you know what I mean? Really—

Charlotte Burns: Yes. It's not something that we're born with. It's something we have to build. The experiential piece has to really happen—and all of us live in different pockets. So, it's really about finding ways to sort of rupture those pockets for other information to come in, other sets of feelings and ideas to come in.

Derrick Adams: When you're making work or when you're creating work, you really learn a lot by the response you get from the work, too. You actually learn a lot more about yourself as an artist based on who responds to your work and the way that they respond to your work. I became really focused on my practice and my subject of thinking about this idea of the normalcy of life and some of the things that I think are actually radical.

Presenting the idea of normalcy, to me, is radical because I don't remember seeing it when I was even in grad school. Even with some of my instructors who were black, because it was such a time where, again, people felt like even showing the idea of leisure or celebration or normalcy was not an adequate way to represent the subject at a time where there's so much unrest happening.

Charlotte Burns: It's sort of like how the best Oscar never goes to a comedy.

[Laughter]

Derrick Adams: Yes, exactly.

Charlotte Burns: It's sort of what we value.

Derrick Adams: Yes. It was really more about that. I would think about the future generation. For me, I'm always thinking about what I want young people who may be nine or ten now to see in the future because I know that the work I'm looking at did not happen. I rarely think about my own peers when I'm making art because artists are just trained to be critical of each other. We come into openings looking for what's wrong rather than what's right.

We do. We come to looking if it's too crowded, first. If there was too much work in the show. That's how we look at it. How much real estate an artist has taken up to talk about their ideas. Is it necessary? We come in very critical. We have to break through all that before we start to appreciate the art. You have to go do all the stuff from the academic perspective of, is this the best way to present this idea? Did they use the right paint? Do they—

Charlotte Burns: Is it rigorous enough? Yes.

Derrick Adams: Yes, is it rigorous enough? Are they digging deep and all those things. So, I know that I'm thinking about those things and I know I think about those things constantly when I'm making work. But also thinking about a recipe.

I think the most successful recipes I found is when you eat someone's food and you don't know everything that's in the food.

Nari Ward: But you have to have faith.

Derrick Adams: You have to have faith. Yes.

Nari Ward: You've got to have faith. You have to know that the person has your best interest at heart.

Derrick Adams: Yes, exactly.

Nari Ward: I think that's the key. For me, the faith part. Who's designated what's valued? And and I think that's the part that is the most contentious because all those folks that we mentioned—artists of color that we respected and we didn't hear about it early on—they weren't in museums back then. As a person, how did they function? Somebody like Al Loving, his practice, and really dig into the decisions he made as an artist of color at the time that he was doing it and how that manifests in the work. For me, when I think about researching that element of faith, it's really what they were challenged with and how they reacted in their creative search. For me is inspiring to see all these artists.

Derrick Adams: Those artists like Al Loving and Ed Clark and Frank Bowling and [Herb Gentry](#).

Nari Ward: [Betye Saar](#).

Derrick Adams: [Betye Saar](#). To keep making work when you're not really selling work but making work like you have a museum show every week.

Nari Ward: I love it. Yes, yes, yes.

Derrick Adams: These people were making shows like they had a museum. If you go to their studio, they have racks and

racks and racks of stuff.

Nari Ward: William T's the same. I remember I used to go to his studio, man, nobody is buying anything. He had work. He was just making it. He'd just keep making it.

Charlotte Burns: It's that sort of drive.

Nari Ward: Yes. This is what an artist does. The thing about it is they had to demand their own space and challenge themselves. There wasn't intuitional support that you would normally expect from somebody who's working.

Charlotte Burns: They had a different set of values.

I did want to ask you about that idea of values and how you navigate that. Specifically, Nari, with you, with *Hunger Cradle* (1993), I thought that was so interesting, the idea of what it meant to you for that work to be sold from the space that you'd conceived of it and displayed it and where its history was invented. And also, Derrick with you on that similar front, you talked about art as being a kind of bridge between commerce, art being a bridge between commerce and spirituality.

Derrick Adams: Yes.

Charlotte Burns: So I wanted to ask you both as a final question, how do you grapple with that? How do you grapple with the moment that we're in where there's a lot of institutional support and market support? Do you feel validated by that? Do you feel threatened by that? Do you ignore that?

Nari Ward: I don't think you can ignore it, but I think you have to be aware of your own buttons. What's guiding certain decisions. There are certain bodies of work that, or a piece, that takes me on a journey and I don't know where it's going to take me and I'm just following it. And that's great when that feeds the mystery and the growth. Then once you get there you're like, "Oh, okay. I can do another version of this. I know what this is, and I can do another because I want this thing to be out in the world. I don't want it to be just one piece. I know that there are different conversations that could happen around this journey I just took."

Charlotte Burns: Yes.

Nari Ward: Being an older artist, I wouldn't have wanted to take that on as a younger person. I think now I kind of know where the choices are that are valid and keep that sense of integrity about what decisions I make about production.

Charlotte Burns: Yes.

Nari Ward: It's also the toolbox: what are the parts you have in in your toolbox and how you can you employ them to create another experience for the viewer? I feel like you have to have a good enough toolbox to figure that out. That's why I'm always telling young artists to really be careful about jumping into the production space of the marketplace.

For some artists—and I'm not going to put my cross on them—they are formalists. Their decisions are based on a formal iteration and so it's an easier space to navigate.

If you're not in that, and you're trying to think about the human condition in a way that maybe I react to the world. I can't just produce. I have to slow down and really take into consideration what the thing means and what kind of meanings are being gathered around it.

Charlotte Burns: And what you're trying to do.

Nari Ward: And yes. How I want to see that in relationship to the other journeys that I've taken. The other bodies of work.

Charlotte Burns: Which I guess means having the confidence to edit and say, "No, I'm not there yet." Or, "I haven't made that sort of connection that the material and the idea, I haven't quite found the right manifestation."

Nari Ward: Yes. Or they are pieces where I have gone out and said to the gallery, "Bring it back. I realized that it shouldn't have been sent out."

[Laughter]

Derrick Adams: Yes.

Nari Ward: You're still on a journey with the thing. I could always say that sometimes it's good to have a deadline.

Derrick Adams: Yes. Finish it.

Nari Ward: Yes. I could just keep working. You need that—

Charlotte Burns: That's true of every article I've ever written too. You just—

Nari Ward: You need the deadline.

Derrick Adams: You could add so much more.

Nari Ward: My friend [Chen Zhen](#) used to say you need the flame at your eyelashes to get it resolved.

Derrick Adams: Yes. Totally. For me, it became really more of an idea of knowing how to formulate objects and conversation around objects because I was really interested in how the people see how we are now. How this idea of self will develop through media.

I know people aren't going to stop wearing certain things or buying certain things but I'm okay with that. I'm more interested in thinking about how to open it up and how to help them to have a bigger conversation about it through other options of commercial culture.

For instance, one of the thing that really was striking for me in grad school was the first time I saw the [Gordon Parks](#) photo of the doll test and it was a kid and they were offering the black doll and a white doll. It was a whole critical conversation about it. I was laughing because I said, if I had a kid, I wouldn't give them the choice. They would just get this black doll if it was a black kid. I wouldn't say what doll you want. I think that's the issue, that this test was flawed to me because it represented the way culture imposes this idea onto the child and made the child victim of these things, where if it was a white child they would just have the white doll. But the black kid was in the situation where he took on a choice as an adult would, to be part of a subject of an art piece where that doesn't really happen in other cultures where people think, "I'm looking out for this kid and what I think they should be able to have,". If it was my kid, I would have just given him the doll. This is a doll you're going to have. That's how white culture is. Maybe it's become a little more progressive where people are thinking about choice and identity in a more complex manner, but the fact that if you see this doll on television, if you see this doll not on television, you're going to pick the doll that's on television. You're going to pick the doll that's marketed more. There's a whole other backstory that you don't see that comes with consumerism; why people choose what they choose.

Charlotte Burns: How we're programmed for that.

Derrick Adams: Exactly. I think that, to me, ignited a certain way of making art when I saw that photograph because I realized there's a certain power in structuring things. There's a certain power in denying viewers a choice.

Charlotte Burns: Right.

Derrick Adams: "This is what I want you to pay attention to."

Charlotte Burns: That's very interesting.

Derrick Adams: So, I started thinking more about that as a platform of inspiration for making work.

Charlotte Burns: Yes.

Nari Ward: The one thing that's changed for me in terms of talking about labels—you're talking about labels—I no longer say "white", I say, "European American people," the same way we say, "African American people".

Charlotte Burns: That's interesting.

Nari Ward: European American.

Derrick Adams: That's true.

Nari Ward: We were so fixated on whether we should be called black, negro, African American. No, it should be, "Oh yeah," and I say to people, "So you're European American," and they're like, "Oh, I'm not." "Yes, you are,".

Derrick Adams: Yes.

Nari Ward: Once that happens, they realize: "Oh, it's the same." It's this fictional white thing is what—[LeRonn \[P. Brooks\]](#) does this thing, the [Racial Imaginary Institute](#).

Derrick Adams: Yes, I love that. I love that.

Nari Ward: I think that's really smart to really reconsider those models that we take for granted and just take them and

say, “This is how it should be.”

Charlotte Burns: Yes.

Derrick Adams: That is still a conversation, the idea of race and whiteness and Europeanness and Americanism, or Americanists’ perspective and identity is also a topic that’s becoming more present—

Nari Ward: Because of the current political climate.

Derrick Adams: Yes, exactly. And also, as a teacher, as a professor, when I’m teaching and there’s a broad range of different types of people in class we were talking about it, it is a challenge for some European Americans to think about content and network outside of this idea of just the material, of what they’re making, because it’s something that if they’re coming from a particular school in undergrad, they may have never been faced with thinking about—

Nari Ward: Because that’s what privilege is. It’s like the air. I own this air.

Derrick Adams: Yes. Yes.

Nari Ward: You don’t think how much of this is mine and how much is—

Charlotte Burns: Yes.

Derrick Adams: Where are you pulling from?

Nari Ward: Right.

Derrick Adams: Where are you pulling from? I don’t think that was a question for a lot of my peers at certain points based on their culture and perspective. They don’t have to. I hear stuff like, “I’m not thinking about anything.”

Charlotte Burns: Right. “Maybe you should.”

[Laughter]

Derrick Adams: Yes, my work is not about anything. I’m like, “What? Everything is about something,”. We all have content.

Charlotte Burns: We also have content. Exactly.

Derrick Adams: We just have to figure out what it is. You think about some of the artists that I studied in undergrad, like [Rauschenberg](#) and people like that, that was never part of the discourse surrounding their practice.

Now, it’s starting to be dissected by historians and things now thinking about gender as a part of, what things are made, how they’re made. But these are the artists that we look at as heroes and a lot of younger artists think about themselves in that way.

Nari Ward: Thinking about their source.

Derrick Adams: Yes.

Charlotte Burns: Exactly. That’s the thing with identity politics. The voices that are usually saying “ugh, identity politics”—but you’re talking about your identity when you’re saying that. You’re having your own identity politics moment right now. It’s just that what you’re trying to say is, “my identity is the dominant one and I want that to be the politics”, but that’s still identity politics.

Derrick Adams: The thing is that they don’t realize that their work is going to be better if they deal with that. You can just tell, like, you’ve reached a glitch.

Charlotte Burns: Yes.

Derrick Adams: Once you get past their hurdle, work is actually going to be better. I think grad schools got better when they opened up the demographics of people in grad school. My thing that I noticed when I was in grad school is that a lot of conversations were being repeated based on the lack of inclusion in the programs, so I felt like a lot of the students there were not going to succeed because a lot of them were coming from a similar source and they weren’t trying to dissect the source to splinter it.

Charlotte Burns: Exactly. Diversity is a strength.

Derrick Adams: It's a strength.

Charlotte Burns: You look at monarchies—monarchies will breed themselves to death if they stay insular.

[Laughter]

Derrick Adams: Yes. Yes. Exactly. Yes. That's totally it. I was thinking, just the fact that we're different in the space is almost an asset and when things start to become a way that's overly familiar, then what can really come out of that?

Charlotte Burns: Yes.

Derrick Adams: I remember looking around that class in grad school and looking at everyone in the class and I said to myself—this is what I thought was really funny—I was the only black person in grad school at [Columbia](#). I said to myself, "They're going to really have it tough when they get out of here," I said, because I'm the only black person here, and it's 20-something students here. Most of them are either white guys or white women or other, which was a smaller percentage. I said, "I feel like I have more options,". I said to myself, I said, "If I'm successful, I can show at The Studio Museum in Harlem and I can show at MoMA," both. I can show many places based on the conversation in my work and the formal structure of my work and I think that these artists could also show a broader context too if they saw a broader context in the work and because they were rejecting that, I felt like they were going to have it really hard.

Charlotte Burns: Yes.

Derrick Adams: This is me as a black guy. I'm having a moment of sorrowfulness.

Nari Ward: I don't know if they were rejecting it as much as it's painful for folks to dive—

Derrick Adams: It's painful. Yes, it's painful.

Nari Ward: It's really painful exploration. It can be traumatic.

Charlotte Burns: Yes. It's a reckoning.

Nari Ward: Yes, it is.

Derrick Adams: You should be happy that you have your own personal archive that is not just about color or form. That you have an understanding of why you like something.

Charlotte Burns: It comes back to this point which is, what are you doing? What are you saying? We're all "little whilers". What are you doing with your little while?

Derrick Adams: Exactly.

Nari Ward: Little while.

[Laughter]

Derrick Adams: It's true. I felt liberated at a particular point because I went to grad school because I had already established my community of artists within—

Charlotte Burns: Your personal—

Derrick Adams: My personal life and my culture because again, I was meeting with these legendary artists and basically, these artists would have little parties at their studio and if they call you up and invite you, as a young artist, you're just so excited to go you don't even talk. Now, because of the way generations are, a lot of the younger artists will talk a lot when they're around older artists. They'll offer their insight about life and stuff like that. When I was younger, I would just be quiet.

Nari Ward: You would just listen. Yes. You're a fly on the wall.

Derrick Adams: Yes, I would just be quiet, listen to them, hoping that I can have them comfortable enough that they—

Charlotte Burns: —might impart some brilliance.

Derrick Adams: Yes.

Charlotte Burns: It would rub off a little bit.

Derrick Adams: Yes. I would never insert myself in a conversation unless they asked me a direct question or usually never, I was always just smiling and saying to myself, “I can’t believe I’m here with this person and they’re talking to me and I’m having a beer with them and this is their studio,” and even then, I thought that I was privileged to be in this space because as I got comfortable with them, they would talk about their life as artists and all the obstacles and challenges they had as an artist and some of them were upset about where they were personally. It was really more about money. I felt it wasn’t really about the gallery or about the museum. It was about the fact that they needed money to keep doing what they were doing and that was the thing.

A lot of them in the 1990’s, late 1990’s when I came to New York—they were working with galleries. A lot of these artists still weren’t selling work fast enough to accommodate the legacy that they were leaving behind with kids and artist’s assistants, and so some of these artists would still sell work out of their studio to people within the black community who wanted their work. Then they would get dropped because the whole idea is containing all the work in one space and keeping the market, but these artists were so used to survival.

Nari Ward: Yes, they’re selling it for cheaper.

Derrick Adams: Yes, whatever. Their rent. Whatever, their rent. Because they weren’t so popular, they weren’t selling enough work. That work was still lower than most artists.

Charlotte Burns: That’s an interesting thing that came up in our data study when we were interviewing people about the market, some dealers were saying, “You get these big galleries coming in and swooping these artists up”, and then we were talking to some artists who were saying, “I just wanted to make some money at some stage. I’m sorry that I did that, but I want to make sure that my archive is in shape, that there’s some money behind it.” Recognition is really interesting, but at some stage, you need the financial freedom to keep going.

Nari Ward: That’s the problematic part, because it is this personal and business dialogue that you establish. There’s a personal piece to it and there’s the business piece and then the galleries feel betrayed because they’re like, “Oh, they were part of the family”, in some mindset, but yes, this is business. This is my life.

Derrick Adams: Yes. That’s important. I think a lot of those artists who are so pioneering in some ways, in a lot of ways, have always thought about success as a way of being able to pay your bills. I think for the artists I look up to, have looked up to, it’s always been first about how to take care of yourself with your art. How to pay your bills, how to be able to have a drink when you want to, where you go, take your friends out. It has always been very much about community first.

Nari Ward: When I meet older artists that you think, “Oh, I’m meeting this person that I respect and is historicized,” they never really want to talk about art. They want to talk about, “What’s the gallery doing for you? Are they taking care of you?” It’s always how are you doing in the business part, because that’s the anxiety piece for them. They figure that stuff out and you can figure that out.

Charlotte Burns: You can figure out the art.

Nari Ward: The control part—

Derrick Adams: And the mental well-being. They ask you, “Are you okay? Are you doing a lot? Are you going to slow down? Do you get a vacation?” You almost become part of this club. This cool club that you never even thought you were going to be in. They just bring you in. You can’t apply for it.

Charlotte Burns: Yes.

Nari Ward: Right. Right.

[Laughtere]

Derrick Adams: They just tell you, “Look out for this,” or, “I heard you’re doing this with this person,” and you realize that it’s no longer about competition. It’s about how to navigate and the way you learn to navigate is through conversations with artists that you respect, telling you things based on their experience.

Nari Ward: They’re experiences. Yes.

Derrick Adams: Yes, and that’s it.

Nari Ward: And that’s something you can’t get out of a book.

Derrick Adams: Yes, no.

Nari Ward: You got to live that.

Derrick Adams: Not only you got to live it, but without trying, you have to prove yourself worthy of that, getting that—

Charlotte Burns: Worthy of entrance.

Nari Ward: Information, right?

Derrick Adams: I think you get way more of a positive response and more support—

Charlotte Burns: If you just do it.

Derrick Adams: If people see you doing it. A lot of people talk about doing stuff. I remember telling a young artist one time who was an undergrad and he would always show up at all these events, a bar he would be there.

He would have these conversations with me about the gallery stuff and then I found out that he was an undergrad and I said to him, “Listen.”

Nari Ward: He needs to get back to the studio.

[Laughter]

Derrick Adams: “Don’t talk to me anymore at these opens. You’re jumping the line. There’s artists who are just coming out of grad school that need to be talking to you and you are blocking.” Not saying that you’re not a good artist, but there’s certain things that you should have experiences with before.

Charlotte Burns: You should be working right now.

[Laughter]

Derrick Adams: Yes.

Charlotte Burns: Yes.

Derrick Adams: A lot of undergrads are not going to grad school because a lot of smaller galleries are really pulling a lot of the younger artists, especially black American artists who are coming out of grad school. A lot of galleries are working with them at really early stages in their career and now, instead of making work just to make work, they’re making work for shows.

I think of the studio as being a privileged place to be in. It’s not even about social class. It’s just about the idea that all your job is to do is to come in here, close the door and make something.

Charlotte Burns: Yed.

Derrick Adams: You can make whatever you want, out of your mind, and you can do it every day of your life until you die. You can come up with a cup of coffee. You can put some music on and you can make a mess and I think that’s great.

You can’t make yourself interesting. You just have to be interesting. You have to be around interesting people.

Charlotte Burns: You have to be interested.

Derrick Adams: You have to be interested. You have to be engaged. You have to be in uncomfortable situations, sometimes with people that you wouldn’t normally talk to or whatever the thing that maybe your phobia is as a creative person, you have to be able to deal with all those things and think of them as research or some type of experience that’s going to make your work interesting. To me, it’s the only challenge—

Nari Ward: Yes. That’s the gleaner. Everything is experience.

Charlotte Burns: Yes.

Nari Ward: Even the most mundane thing, it’s something you get from it. People are always saying, when I write about my work, they’re always saying, “It’s labor intensive,” and I’m like, “Don’t use that,”. Labor intensive is the guy who has to work the whole 12 hours just to move cement. That’s a privilege what I’m doing. It may be labor-full, but it’s not labor intensive.

Derrick Adams: You can tell you’re into the idea of the transformative nature of things. You can tell that it’s almost like an experiment of doing, like seeing if things can work together or what doesn’t work or whatever. It just seems more about, for

me, looking at your work or coming in contact with your work, it's thinking about your choices.

It just makes you think about the inner workings of the creative mind and your reasoning for it. But also, you kind of know as a viewer, when you start to sit in the space with your work that everything is meaningful in the arrangement of things and everything has a purpose and it's up to us to find out what the purpose is. It's really up to us as the viewer to figure out how these things click with us. When people walk into the room with the stroller installation, *Amazing Grace* (1993). Everyone had very different... I thought about my grandmother because I heard Mahalia Jackson playing and I know that growing up in the 1970's, for my grandmother, that was considered the most melodic—

Nari Ward: My father would play Mahalia all the time. That was what I grew up around.

Derrick Adams: Yes, that was it. Women would try to sing like her. My grandmother would try to sing like that because that was a style of singing that some people don't even think about as a style of singing. We don't just sing. We think about arrangement. We think about audience. We think about how. I grew up in church. I knew that when certain people sing a song, it would evoke a certain emotion.

Usually in church, people sing *their* song. When they're called to sing, that's the song you have to sing. Don't go singing a new song that we never heard before. You got to keep singing that same song until you're no longer able to sing it.

[Laughter]

Charlotte Burns: Yes.

Derrick Adams: So, I think of art in that way. There are certain things that certain objects can do to activate certain types of responses and that certain people can do really well. That's why we're thinking about the idea of metaphysics, in a way, because you have to believe. I think I try to do that with my art, you have to believe that everyone here contributes something to the way we look at ourselves. And in order to understand the physical world, you have to understand the metaphysical world which not may sound hokey. You have to believe that if you believe in the idea of the creator, you have to believe that if he's that infinite and spectacular, if he had created you, then you must be.

Nari Ward: Oh, yes, that's not hokey.

Derrick Adams: Yes.

Nari Ward: It's facts.

Charlotte Burns: This has been such an interesting conversation. I'm sad to have to end it, I wish we could stay here and talk all day. It's really interesting to talk to you both. You're both fantastic artists. Thank you so much for making the time to come on by. One thing about listening to people and talking to people, whenever I've interviewed artists I've always thought, you're always talking to people who really spend a lot of time thinking about what it means to be alive and I think that's something you've really both talked about openly today and with curiosity and endeavor, so thank you very much for spending the time, giving us all your wisdom.

Derrick Adams: Thank you for having us both here. I really enjoyed just having this discussion about my work and hearing Nari talk about his work and speaking with you here. You know, I'm taking it back to my studio. I'm going to take this back to my studio. It's great.

Charlotte Burns: Thank you. Thank you both. For anybody who hasn't seen the shows, please do go to see "Nari Ward" at the New Museum. It's a beautiful, moving, powerful body of work that you probably need to see several times to let it layer down and please see Derrick Adams, who has two shows at Mary Boone and at Luxembourg & Dayan. Please go see them both before they close. Really great shows. I love the one at Luxembourg & Dayan, "The Interior Life". It's just fantastic.

Derrick Adams: Thank you.

Charlotte Burns: Okay. Thank you so much.

Nari Ward: Thank you so much.