

With Opened Mouths: The Podcast

Transcript of Episode #4: Intimate Recollections of Black Lives

SPEAKERS

Qanita Lilla (host), Oluseye (guest)

[Music]

Qanita Lilla: Hello, and welcome to *With Opened Mouths: The Podcast*. I'm your host Qanita Lilla. This podcast runs alongside Agnes's exhibition of the same name. The show *With Opened Mouths* interrogates conventional museum practices. It asks if objects that originate outside western knowledge making systems can find their voices in new ways. In this podcast I sit down with artists, spoken word poets, musicians, and curators to discuss the expression of their practice, and to find out what inspired them to open their mouths and to be heard.

[Music]

Qanita Lilla: Today, we're talking with artist, Oluseye whose work *Eminado* is part of the show at Agnes, *With Opened Mouths*. "Eminado" is a Yoruba word meaning good luck charm. In this series, Oluseye re-imagines the talismanic objects that African past and present carried across the Atlantic for protection and for comfort. In his practice, Oluseye travels across the Black Atlantic collecting and re-purposing the diasporic debris that makes up his oeuvre. The term diasporic debris refers to the remnants, the discarded parts of life, out of which he attempts to resurrect and acknowledge people and histories. Oluseye's work embraces the magnitude and polyvocality of Blackness and the way in which it moves across space, place, and time, shaping and shifting in the world. Centring Yoruba cultural references, he blends the ancestral with the contemporary, and rejects the binary distinction between the traditional and the modern, the physical and the spiritual, the past and the future, what is new and what is old. He imbues everyday objects with the mythic attempt to reinforce African rituals and philosophies as living, complex, and valid traditions of the human consciousness. He has exhibited at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Patel Brown, and is debuting a new body of work at MOCA Toronto until January. Welcome, Oluseye!

Oluseye: Thank you. Thank you for having me. I was on mute.

Qanita Lilla: I'm so delighted to have you. I've been looking forward to this for ages. There's been so much, you know, good feedback like with *Eminado*. And so it's -- I'm just really excited to be able to talk with you today.

Oluseye: Thank you.

Qanita Lilla: So Oluseye, your work - is incredible. And when I was choosing work to exhibit alongside the African masks of Lang collection your work really spoke, to the central themes of the show. But it's also very unique, and I'd like you to tell me a little bit about what drew you into art in the first place.

Oluseye: Wow. [Laughs] I mean I always I guess painted as a kid and like, you know, sketched. I really enjoyed biology class because we had to do all like the sketches of like the human body and like the muscles and the nerves and the plant drawings. So I've always had an inclination towards the arts. But I think, you know, art as I know it like as a professional artist I think for me started in 2013 when Nigeria passed an anti gay bill, and I was in Nigeria at the time. And, you know, I was really hurt by it. I just found it very unnecessary especially because it was like part of a plot for the president at the time to get a second term. So I came back to Toronto and that pushed me to create and I started doing these drawings, these charcoal and pastel drawings, that actually took the Yoruba creation story with the different gods and deities and I kind of turned it on its head and I made some of these deities like, you know, gender fluid, and homosexual beings. So they all sort of engaged in acts of love. And that was how it started for me. I -- I wouldn't say I ever set out to be an artist, but I knew that I wanted to express the discontent I was feeling at the situation in Nigeria. And then I got invited to show some of that work in New York and I did that again not thinking of myself as an artist. It wasn't until after that show people started asking "What's next?" and I was like, "Wow. I guess -- I guess this means this is what I'm doing now. I guess this means I'm an artist." So yeah. That's how I, you know, got in to the art world per se. Yeah.

Qanita Lilla: I think what's amazing is that Africa stimulated that need, you know. And I feel that it doesn't feel at all as if your artistic practice is so new. It feels as if it's been living inside you waiting. It's been kind of like incubating for a long time because it's -- and then also, you know, I get a sense that it's definitely evolving and it continues to evolve and change. Yeah. So do you always -- do you start off with like a long term project in mind? How does your practice evolve?

Oluseye: I'm definitely inspired by the things that I see. I'm very heavily inspired by objects. In the last -- more recently I've moved in to like object based work. And a lot of the times it's the objects that will almost dictate to me what I'm going to make. Of course there's always going to be ideas that are floating in my head. You know, I'm very inspired by my conversations with people, so I look heavily at oral histories, like the stories from my family, the stories from the Black people in the Black communities that I've been fortunate to travel to. So these ideas are all sort of in my head, and then I'll see an object that sort of, you know, triggers a memory of a conversation I've had. And then I start putting those two things together and then I start doing some research into what these -- you know, what's the origin of the objects? Why am I interested in this object? How do these objects relate to some of those oral histories that I've stored in my head? So that's typically how it starts for me. I don't think that I ever have this sort of like grand idea that I'm thinking of and then decide, oh I'm going to work on this now. Yeah.

Qanita Lilla: Yeah, but you know with *Eminado*, for example, the slave ship *Friendship*, that is such an amazing concept to kind of bring everything together. How did *Friendship* -- where did *Friendship* come from?

Oluseye: So with *Eminado* I had actually started collecting objects like maybe two years before I even started making that body of work. And this is just me like -- I had -- how this happened is actually pretty funny. So I used to drive and I had a few instances with being a not so good driver so I lost my licence. And then I just decided, you know what? I'm going to sell my car. So I -- so that's actually how *Eminado* was born. I didn't have a car so I now had to start walking everywhere or taking TTC and I started seeing all these objects and like I'm clearly attracted to black objects. And I noticed everything I was picking off the street was like black rubber, black plastic, maybe some metal accents. But everything was like aged and, you know, black was sort of the common theme as far as colour goes. So I amassed this like junk -- or this was even before I coined the term 'diasporic debris'. Right? So I had this for two years and I took a trip to North Preston in Nova Scotia which is one of Canada's first Black communities. And found some more objects there. And then when I came back from that trip I was like, "I need to do something with these objects." And I sort of started playing around with them like piecing one thing with another thing. Some things were perfect on their own. And I maybe made about 26 of those. And maybe a few months later I started -- I actually don't remember how I -- how the interest in Canadian built slave ships started or where that came from, but I think I found like a database and I think it's on the Harvard website that has like a full list of all the slave ships that were ever built. And then I was like, "Wow. There are some that were built in Canada. Some were built in Nova Scotia, in Newfoundland, on our east coast." And I had -- I was just there in Nova Scotia. Right? So I think I started chasing my own travels to Nova Scotia and to Canada's east coast with some of the places where these slave ships were built. And there's 27 slave ships and going through the list I was like, wow, there's actually a ship called *Friendship*. Like the irony of this. So that irony is what, you know, drew me to that ship. And then, you know, learning more about that ship, and then finding out that it actually sailed from -- it was one of the ships that took enslaved people from Nigeria to Montego Bay, Jamaica. And then obviously being in Canada where like Jamaican culture is probably the most noticeable Black culture. So there's those kind of connections that for me inspire my work. And at that point I had made 26 of these objects and I knew I wanted to carry on making them and I was like is there going to be a cap or do I just keep doing this for the rest of like -- is this a product that will be like a lifelong -- or career long project? But then I was like no. I could sort of for lack of a better word package this or honour the lives of those enslaved people by making this work about them. And then there's also the fact that all these objects have come from several different places which also mimics the different places and the movement of enslaved people throughout history because you have like the Jamaican Maroons who were taken from -- obviously from West Africa to Jamaica. And then there's a history of Jamaican Maroons being exiled to Nova Scotia. Right? And then from that group you have some of them who would then decide to make the trip back to Africa to Sierra Leone, to Freetown. So all of those connections really mimicked my own personal journeys, my own personal travels within Canada, across the Atlantic and back. And I wanted to find a way to link that to the lives of enslaved people. And that's how *Eminado* was born like in a nutshell.

Qanita Lilla: Yeah. And the fact that you've got such a strong link to the African continent, that you're always going back,, how do you feel this impacts on your practice?

Oluseye: It definitely -- Wow, how does it impact on my practice? I think for me the journey itself is the art practice. So as I work on like a revised artist statement now like traveller, collector, those are all words that I want to include in what this artist statement will be. So like yes. People get to see the finished product, but it's about what has the art done for me. And part of my process is travel. Right? So I also think that it helps keep my connection to the continent. It keeps my mind fresh because I've been able to do these two or three trips a year. It also -- there's sort of like a cultural mix and matching that happens as I make that journey across the Atlantic several times. And then the objects that I'm working with are also in some ways like symbolic of that, you know, transfer of cultural knowledge, transfer of aesthetics. And then you also start thinking about like, you know, the transfer of -- or even just like the transfer of like certain types of food from West Africa to the North America. So like okra, for instance, certain types of rice originated in West Africa and found their way to the Americas because enslaved people took it with them. And then now you have this like really rich North American -- African American cuisine that, you know -- that is -- has origins in West Africa, in Brazil, in the Caribbean. But so there's that sort of [inaudible] of like cultures and ideas that I'm able to live, you know, through my own travels, and then I'm able to sort of embody that in the objects that I make.

Qanita Lilla: I think also you once spoke to me about this idea of waste in Africa. You know, not waste, but like things like recyclable or, you know, reusable culture. And how you visited --

Oluseye: In Kenya?

Qanita Lilla: Yes. Yes. Yes. Can you talk about that a bit because it's really incredible? the way that you're talking about the differences in culture and the differences just like in use and reuse of objects.

Oluseye: Yeah. So during my time in Kenya there's a tribe or a group of people called Akala, I believe that they're called, A-K-A-L-A. And they're known for re-purposing tires, rubber tires. So they strip the tires. They turn them in to sandals. They turn them in to art, in to all kinds of things. So I was fortunate to meet a man, Mr. Sampson, spent some time with him, and he actually gave me like a stack of a lot of the things that I've come to use in my work. So rubber -- and I think this is also linked to my interest in like rubber, like black rubber specifically is -- it's durable. It stands the test of time. Rubber can be in the sun. It can be in the snow. It can be in -- like regardless of what the climate is, rubber will always sort of survive. And I was interested in how that could -- how that could be a metaphor for the lives of Black people, for the Black experience. You know, you think of enslaved people being brought from Africa to colder climates, oftentimes completely naked, but survived. You know. And then you have rubber that's able to survive in all kinds of climates. And then you -- and then I'm putting that in conversation with how Africans -- the ingenuity of Africans and being able to take things that are, you know, "discards." And, you know, breathe new life in to them. And that's really what *Eminado*, that body of work, is about. It's about taking things that we recognize that have been

thrown out, that have been discarded, and like, you know, giving them a new -- giving them new life. Yeah.

Qanita Lilla: You know, when I took the students around that body of work they also -- they picked up on a sense of humour that lives alongside it. And I'd really like you to talk a bit about that, you know, the fact that there are spikes and there are things that can cause pain, but there's also things that can cause pleasure like fringes and, you know -- and also like the cowrie shell itself is an ambiguous kind of object. You know, the fact that it was used as a form of exchange, but also, you know, it kind of mimics the shape of a vulva and a fingerprint and teeth and all those kind of things. So can you talk to me a bit about how BDSM plays kind of, havoc in your work?

Oluseye: So definitely as I'm making the body of work in *Eminado* I'm having fun with it. You know, like it needs to be enjoyable for me even though I'm speaking about, you know, ideas that are quite serious. So there's a sense of like humour and fun and also, like you said, there's like sharp things that can possibly hurt you. And I think as I was making the work I was also thinking about what some of these enslaved people -- the comfort that they might have wanted to like access through these objects. So, you know, reminders of home, things that might bring them a smile. You know, remembering a certain person. But at the same time I was thinking of objects that could also not just offer comfort and protection, but you know defence is also part of what I was thinking about. And, you know, protection. Being able to defend yourself is also a part of -- it's also a type of protection. So I imagine that, you know, there would have been times where they might have needed objects to attack and like to protect themselves and their families. So I was thinking of all of those ideas as I was making the objects. So how can, you know, a piece of rubber feel like something that's comfortable if held a certain way, but maybe if you hold it from the other side it can then become something you can use to attack someone who's, you know, threatening your own safety? So I like the juxtaposition of sort of the fun and danger, and I think I was -- I then started to look to like BDSM as a way to sort of like bring those two ideas together. So this idea that something could be a form of pleasure, but it could also be a form of pain. And sort of pain and pleasure being like one and the same thing or, you know, different sides of the same coin.

Qanita Lilla: Yeah. And I think also it gives like a complexity to those imagined people, you know, that hasn't been kind of thought of. You know, when people think of -- memorializing people they think of a kind of strong body and, you know, not -- focussing on kind of diversity and fluidity and things like that which I think that this, yeah -- this really like picks up on.

Oluseye: I think that sometimes, you know, when people explore like, you know, slavery, yes. They often forget the humanity of these people. You know, the fact that these people laughed and they told jokes and, you know, they had dinners with their families. And they gave each other gifts and like, you know, some of these talismanic objects would have been given by say a mother to her daughter or a grandpa to his, you know -- his grandson. So those are the kinds of things that, you know, I'm -- sort of the ideas thinking about the humanity of these people as I was making the objects. Just so they're not one dimensional objects that are -- they're not

intended to just reflect the hardship of what being an enslaved person was. They're meant to reflect, you know, just how varied their life experiences were.

Qanita Lilla: Yeah. Also maybe the kinds of things that people do to survive.

Oluseye: Yeah.

Qanita Lilla: And part of that is humour and, you know, the -- no matter how difficult things get, you know, we think of ways of kind of rising above or kind of, you know, negotiating that kind of thing. Your practice is not always easy. It can't be easy because it's really conceptual. You know? What are some of the things that you struggle with?

Oluseye: Some of the things that I -- wow. I think trusting -- I think time. Time is a thing that I struggle with because some things are conceptual and I think they need time to really like crystallize, and I can be quite an impatient person. So I'm learning to like just trust that everything will reveal itself in the right time. So like with "Eminado," for instance, I started making these objects. And the fact is I actually started making the objects almost like -- I wanted to make my own alphabet system. And that's how this idea really came about, you know. But then when I got to the 26th I was like why am I basing this on Western ideas of what an alphabet system is. And then I was like I need more time. I need more time to think this through. And then I was like so how many alphabets are there going to be in this system. And then I was like why am I even basing this on alphabets? Why couldn't I be maybe trying to express feelings through these objects versus like having a -- you know, an object represent what would be an A or B. It's like, you know, a lot of African languages, you know, are just very complex and one word can, you know, mean like five different things as objects or five different feelings. Like Yoruba is the same way. So it really -- I really started to think that way and I realized that time is what I need to give myself. So learning to be patient is a -- has been a challenge of mine. The other challenge that I face is because I scavenge like going through customs and trying to come back in to the country with all -- that's a very -- it's a very real life challenge for me. But, you know, I'm coming back with like all kinds of like, you know, junk so to speak. But I find that part of the -- that's part of the process. That becomes part of my practice like having to explain to people at customs why I'm bringing in all of this stuff, what it is. It gets easier. Any other challenges I --

Qanita Lilla: Do you have a problem with kind of framing things like in your mind? Because it seems as if, you know, these ideas are really big, and they're really expansive. And the more you work on them, they just grow and grow and grow. How do you kind of reign it in a bit?

Oluseye: I try not to reign it in. I just tell myself that there will come a time when I can create everything that my mind, you know, is currently thinking about, currently working through. I might not have the financial means right now or even just like the logistics to like bring back some of the things that I've found that I want to work with, but I just trust that it will happen. And I'm already seeing some of those things happen. Like with *Eminado*, it's grown like, you know, into 208 objects, but the concept is much bigger than the physicality of the objects. Right? And when all of these objects are together in one room it's way bigger than I even

imagined it would be. And every time I see people experience this work in person, I'm like, "The universal connection that they're having is just as big as I want it to be." So I never think that any idea is too big for me because I think it's the collective sharing of the idea that kind of makes it be as big as, you know, I want it to be or it needs to be.

Qanita Lilla: Who would you say enabled you as an artist? Which people in your life helped you to develop and, you know, nurtured your ideas?

Oluseye: Yeah. So the first person that comes to mind would be Anique Jordan. She's a peer of mine and she's just been the most supportive. Like I'm getting goosebumps because it's just every time we meet her -- the level of encouragement she offers me is just -- is just for me is just out of this world. For someone to like, you know, see me and like believe in what I'm trying to do, I just I mean I've had that before, but not in the way that Anique does it. She's just very --

Qanita Lilla: Anique is an artist herself.

Oluseye: She's an -- yes. Yeah.

Qanita Lilla: And, you know, she's also, you know, thinking about really intense issues, and working through, you know, ideas of memory and the archive and hauntology. You know, so yeah. But she's also she's got a very generous spirit.

Oluseye: Yes. Yes. Very generous, and just very -- like her practice is very much rooted in community building. And so for her I believe like that encouragement of me is also because she wants to see her community like, you know, operate at the highest level possible. That was a thing she told me that really stuck with me and she was like, "Oluseye, you need to situate yourself in your work." That's exactly how she said it to me. And like the meaning of that changes over time. You know, and it just -- it just -- has just sat with me. It's been about two or three years since she told me that, and I think it was at that point that I really started to like throw myself in to my practice in a way that I hadn't. And what I started doing was just taking the everyday things that I enjoyed and making that my practice. So like I like to travel. I like to wander around. And then, you know, now I'm doing that as part of my practice. You know, so my everyday life is my practice.

Qanita Lilla: That's really powerful. situate yourself in your practice? How -- geez. That's amazing. That's really -- that's really insightful that like everything you do is artistic practice, everything. You know, it's -- and I think especially for, you know -- I come from a family that doesn't -- that is not in the arts. So I had to kind of define how, you know, I do it for myself. And kind of thinking about everything that I do as part of that is really, that sounds amazing. Thank you very much for sharing, for sharing that with us. [Laughs]

Oluseye: Thank you, Anique. [Laughs]

Qanita Lilla: Thank you, Anique. So tell me about like -- a bit about your life growing up [inaudible] on this path.

Oluseye: I grew up in Lagos in Nigeria. I [laughs] wow. I dabbled in a lot of things. My mom really like wanted us to I guess do as much as we could. I never did quite specialize in anything, but like we did a little bit of tennis. I did take ballet dance classes. Swimming was I would say the one thing that we all enjoyed together as a family, and that we actually like really focussed on. So I come from a swimming family. I like being outdoors. Like I like collecting things. I always would be trying to build things. I remember trying to like build my sister like an outdoor kitchen like using scrap materials like things I --

Qanita Lilla: Wow. You're a good brother.

Oluseye: So I've always been kind of hands on in that way. And I'm also stubborn in the sense that I don't like to use -- like if I know there's a tool I can go and buy from Home Depot that will make this problem I'm trying to solve easier, I don't know if it's just me being cheap or not wanting to like do it the easiest way possible, but I will always try and do it with my hands first and do it with things that I can find readily available at home. And I think even like as I made the *Eminado* sculptures I've tried to maintain that because I think I keep going back to like okay, when Africans are making like the leather goods and things that, you know, I love to collect, they're not working for the most part with like any like high tech advanced tools. They've found ways to make these things durable, and they last. And they're much stronger than, say, if you're using like, you know, new methods. Right? So I'm always trying to like sort of tap into that sort of like ancestral way of creating would have been when I'm putting things together. So yeah. I definitely enjoy being outdoors and like playing in the sand, and like I biked a lot as well which I currently do. And, funny enough, I find a lot of the objects that I used in my work as I bike. So yeah.

Qanita Lilla: So does that like feed in to how you take care of yourself, how you kind of nurture -- you nurture the artist. Like how do you nurture yourself?

Oluseye: I nurture myself. I try to give myself -- so I bike everywhere. But then I will set aside bike time that is just for my own pleasure. It's like I'm not biking to run errands. I'm not biking to go to the clinic. I'm just biking because I want to bike. So I'm finding that as I get older and as I work and art, you know, gets busier, I need to be more intentional about my time. Like if this is time for having fun then I need to just have fun. Art will always be on my mind because there's no avoiding that. Right? So but I also find there's a quote by El Anatsui where he says, "You are more -- when you play, you're more honest." So I'm also finding that I need to set time to play and have fun because the art will always be there, and the art is more likely to be honest, you know. Like some of the things I find when I'm not actively thinking about art turn out to be some of the best things I'm seeing. I just feel like my eyes and my mind are seeing and hearing different things when you're just kind of like living, you know. Yeah.

Qanita Lilla: Yeah. But I also think that your practice is so inherently playful. It is so playful, you know. Even though it's -- so much of it is kind of heavy, you know. That kind of sits side by side and it really it sits comfortably. It sits really comfortably and well. Yep. So I think -- I think it's just it's awesome. And I've loved speaking to you Oluseye. It's amazing. Thank you so much.

Oluseye: Thank you.

Qanita Lilla: Thank you so, so much for talking with us today. It's been awesome. Yeah. And I'd love to work with you again. It's been amazing even though it's been tough. You know, especially during install. Chinny is amazing, and I know that she's listening to this. You know, like shout out to Jenny. She's -- it was amazing. Seriously like she came in to an environment where she'd never been before and she just kind of took hold. You know, said this -- yeah. Man, like this is how you want it. This is how we want it. And that's awesome. And, you know, like one of the like students who came to see the show asked me like "What, you know, if an artist wants something and you do not want it in the same way, if you don't share the same vision, how do you like, you know, reconcile that?" And, you know, I told them like very honestly that I approach artists whose vision I share. You know, and in order to be authentic to that vision it often means that curators have to bend and compromise. And yeah. I didn't have to do much of that with you, but it was really cool that you stuck to certain things that you wanted because I felt it really made things beautiful, made the show beautiful. So thank you so much Oluseye.

Oluseye: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

[Music]

Qanita Lilla: Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you for listening to *With Opened Mouths: The Podcast*. And special thanks to our great guest, Oluseye for speaking with us today. Thank you.

This podcast is hosted by myself, Dr. Qanita Lilla, and produced by Agnes Etherington Art Centre in partnership with Queen's University's campus radio station, CFRC 101.9 FM. The music is composed by Jameel3DN and produced by Elroy "EC3" Cox III. Subscribe now so that you don't miss our next episode. You can find the podcast on Digital Agnes, CFRC's website and on podcasting platforms like Apple, Google and Spotify. We'll see you next time.

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