

Spirit Banter: Ezi Odozor

Transcript of A Conversation with Ezi Odozor, by Bruce Kauffman

SPEAKERS

Bruce Kauffman and Ezi Odozor

Bruce Kauffman: Just a brief note, before the conversation starts with Ezi and her exhibition called *Spirit Banter*, this was done on November 22nd, 2021.

And just key also is pronunciation, Ezi's last name is pronounced Aw-daw-zaw [phonetic]. So, it is like rhyming, just Aw-daw-zaw [phonetic].

And if you need to use her full first name, because it's written on our website, it's pronounced Eh-zee-won-neh [phonetic]. So, there you go.

Anyway, here was my interview with her, again, on November 22nd.

[Interview begins]

Bruce Kauffman: Well, it's nice to meet you, Ezi.

Ezi Odozor: It's nice to meet you as well.

Bruce Kauffman: Very cool. And you're from Toronto.

Ezi Odozor: I am from Toronto. So, I was born in Nigeria, but I grew up in Toronto in Mississauga.

Bruce Kauffman: Very cool. Maybe we'll just talk about the exhibition first. The title of the exhibition is *Spirit Banter*. Could you provide two or three key overview points that introduce your work?

Ezi Odozor: Sure. So, first of all, a kind of history of where everything came from: so, Qanita Lilla and Jason Cyrus actually approached me to create a piece that ties together their two exhibitions. So, Qanita Lilla is curating *With Opened Mouths*, which is essentially, she's trying to bring masks out of the space of just being objects for observation. And so it's the objects in conversation as they are meant to be. And then *History Is Rarely Black or White*, which is Jason Cyrus's exhibition, is looking at kind of archival fashion and the relationship between dress and

enslavement and the histories of kind of movement of both textiles and the things that were used to dye them and the people that were used to even make those textiles, through the picking of cotton and things like that. And so *Spirit Banter* creates a narrative arc – as they say on the website [laughs] – but it's a conversation between those two worlds. And so that's the entry point that I use to even start the piece, right? So, who are the people that are trying to be represented in these exhibitions? What are the traditions that are trying to be represented in these two exhibitions? And kind of what are the relationships, not just between people, but these ideas? And so it actually opens the first verse – that's actually what the first spirit – talks about, you know, deciding who you get to be, which is much, which speaks to Jason's exhibit, which is about dress and how people are able to show up in spaces, depending on their class, depending on their relationship to being either enslaved, formerly a slave, enslaved, and et cetera. And then the others you might see, like there's places in which you move through time. Here, where I've never been, but always known. And that is a kind of relationship to the spiritual, which is embodied in Qanita's exhibition. So, the piece, like I said, is a narrative arc, but it's also a conversation about relationships between people and relationships between ideas. And so that's how *Spirit Banter* came to, came to be.

Bruce Kauffman: Oh, very cool. Yeah, thank you very much for that. And I have seen just a little tiny bit of the video behind the glass. I haven't heard anything yet. And it helped for me to understand what I was watching there with what you just explained now. And so you may have already answered it, but what was the inspiration or relation as to why it was created?

Ezi Odozor: Yeah. So, like I said, it came about as, you know, being in conversation between two exhibitions. And then in a lot of my work, I think about like relationships: what are our intimate connections? And intimate not just in the sense of like, you know, when we often think about intimate, we think about, like pleasure, or like, you know, those kinds of relationships. But also just the things that kind of go unspoken, or the things that we're afraid to touch, or like fully speak about, right? And so intimate in that sense, the things that are near and dear, or the things that are complicated in relationship to our feelings. And so, some of the themes I will talk about are things like we're claiming agency or questioning the disappearing of, you know, Black bodies, like I'll insist that you see me as part of the poem. And so those are the kinds of spaces that I drew inspiration from, both in the sense of obviously connecting the two exhibitions, but also in the sense of what are the things that I talk about, and how do they show up in this space?

Bruce Kauffman: Oh, that's perfect. Thank you.

Ezi Odozor: You're welcome.

Bruce Kauffman: What do you feel makes it most interesting, important, or relevant, timely?

Ezi Odozor: I mean, for me, I never necessarily considered talking about Black life as to be untimely.

Bruce Kauffman: Yeah.

Ezi Odozor: Right? It's always something that is an issue of now, I would say. For me, because I am Black. Right? And so that is my life. But also in just the year, the year, the last two years that we've had, really talking about how Black life shows up, who gets to decide, you know, how long that Black life gets to exist, who gets to interpret what it means, you know, who we are, all that kind of stuff comes into play. And so that is a timely conversation in the sense of the wider world. But I think they are topics that have always been kind of prescient for Black people. So, it's never out of time, necessarily.

Bruce Kauffman: Wonderful answer. Thank you for that. And can you, maybe you've already done this too, but select three to five key phrases that convey aspects of how to discuss, explain, and act your work in greater detail?

Ezi Odozor: So, I would say a couple of things that are key in terms of engaging with the work, let's say it that way. So, first of all, there's four kind of spirits represented in the piece. And each of the verses is one. So, there is a way that I presented it from the one, two, three, and four. But it can actually be read in any order. Right? And that's part of the banter. So, banter is supposed to be a jovial exchange, right? But then you have, instead of these poems, like very complex topics. And so it's kind of, it's not as light as banter would be, right? But it's also taking into account that these are spirits that are doing the banter. And so what might be heavy in a way for a human might not be the same way as it is for a spirit. Also, Black people have always had to have to deal with these very serious topics, and yet live. Right? And so to have that kind of free exchange still. So, I think "banter" is the keyword in really understanding what that relationship between "banter" is the idea in the dictionary, and "banter," what's actually happening here in this space. Their idea of time is also very important, because spirits don't offer, don't occupy the same liminal space that we do. Right? And so there's that one passage that I come back to a lot about here where I have never been and always known. Right? And so how we talk about ancestry in relation to Black diasporic peoples. Right? And ancestry being really important in how the ancestors are present, even if they are gone and how we are ancestors, yet to, you know, yet to be established within that realm. So, ancestry is an important theme. Time is an important theme. Banter is an important theme. And then I would say agency. So, even as subjects, we're still agents. Right? And we can sometimes see that in, even in histories of how Black people navigated the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade, in the sense that some people took their lives, right? And so demonstrating agency even in those moments, right? Even agency to a little end [sic]. Right? But also not just in death. Like there's agency in our joy too. And we've manifested that, right? So, there's also a line from it that says not always sorrow, joy too. Right? So, even in the midst of all of this, there's agency. So, agency, time, banter, those are all key ideas in this.

Bruce Kauffman: Yeah, that's wonderful. Thank you, thank you for that wonderful answer. I have just a few short, more casual, conversational almost questions.

Ezi Odozor: Yeah.

Bruce Kauffman: And you've already and one of them was to explain the title. You've already done that very well. Thank you very much for that. And I loved how you explained how banter for us in the spirit world would be, would feel different.

Ezi Odozor: Yeah, who knows how –

Bruce Kauffman: The spirits, you know, would be on a different level than it is what we would consider banter. One thing I wanted to ask too, though, will this be a part of the Agnes collection, and will it be available online?

Ezi Odozor: I haven't yet decided, actually.

Bruce Kauffman: Okay.

Ezi Odozor: I do, I am leaning toward it being online, just because I feel like in general I'm the person who's more interested in open access in general.

Bruce Kauffman: Okay.

Ezi Odozor: I don't know if it will be at the same time, however. But I think at some point it will be on there.

Bruce Kauffman: Okay. And very cool. And I was going to ask too, this is called a long poem. Is this part of a longer poem, what we see here?

Ezi Odozor: This poem is its own poem.

Bruce Kauffman: Sorry?

Ezi Odozor: This poem is its own unit.

Bruce Kauffman: Okay.

Ezi Odozor: I tend to actually write things that are shorter. And I kind of just like, it's like shorter emotional bursts that capture a moment. And so this is longer than my norm.

[Inaudible]

But in terms of will it be part of like an ongoing project or other ideas, yes, there's other ideas that I want to pair it with.

Bruce Kauffman: Is that right?

Ezi Odozor: Yeah.

Bruce Kauffman: So, this may be a segment in some future bigger project.

Ezi Odozor: Exactly.

Bruce Kauffman: Okay, cool. And I'm guessing it hasn't been published anywhere else then yet either.

Ezi Odozor: No.

Bruce Kauffman: And I really, I like to find out about a person's creative process. I researched you a little bit. I found your LinkedIn page. And I also found a little blurb about you. I don't remember where I saw that. But I got a little bit of information. But one thing you mentioned, and it is that you've written and/or published I believe both in fiction and non-fiction. Your work centres around, focuses on things of identity, culture, gender, race, health, and intimacy, which you had already mentioned all of. And more lately and specifically, you mentioned themes of love, citational politics and anti-colonial interventions for global health. And that and poetry. So, a couple of questions. That's a long lead into this. But first of all, I'm just curious, between the genres of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, do the words arrive for you differently, like from a different place?

Ezi Odozor: I don't think so. I don't think they arrive from a different place because all of it is from my experience. Right? Everything I think that anybody does goes through your lens, whatever it is, however it comes out finally. I've always been like a very multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary person. And so just as you're saying like, you know, my work is in health, my work is also in higher-ed, but it's also like I do creative writing. And that has just always been true of *me* as a person. These are the things that I'm interested in, so this is what I do. And so even when I'm writing about global health, the way I'm writing it is that I tend not to write in a super academic way in that sense. It still has rigour, it still has all the things that it needed. But I write in conversational ways, even in my, in the space of like writing academic work that is fiction – or non-fiction, sorry. And then in terms of if I'm writing a story or if I'm writing like recently I've been doing a lot of screenwriting, right, even in that, even though there's certain formats – for example, screenwriting, you write what they're doing and not all of the things that you would write for say a novel or to describe like every little piece of the relationship and what's happening outside, you don't necessarily write that. But even in the style or approach of how I communicate what they're doing, it's still very much, you know, in view with like a kind of poetic narrative for me. Everything to me is storytelling. Everything to me is storytelling. Whether it be I'm telling a story about, you know, what needs to happen in the field of global health for it to actually encapsulate good health for all. Or if, you know, I'm writing about, you know, the fairies on the windowsill. Or if I'm writing about, you know, my grandmother's hands, or if I'm writing about spirits, it doesn't matter. To me, it's all in telling a story of what, what's happening at that moment or in some other moment in time. So, for me, it's coming from the same place. I still use a similar style. I just apply that style to the circumstance.

Bruce Kauffman: Yeah, that's very, really, I really enjoyed that. And I enjoyed that perspective. And also I enjoyed your answer at the end very much. So, thank you for that. And I'm just

curious too, I mean, you're actually speaking on camera here, but do you perform spoken word, do you perform your work occasionally as well?

Ezi Odozor: Yeah, I think that when I was in undergrad, I did a lot. Like, I was super into it. There's a place, I was in Toronto, so there was a place on Bathurst station called The Trane. And so it was a jazz bar that was named after John Coltrane.

Bruce Kauffman: Okay, cool.

Ezi Odozor: It was very cool. It was unfortunate that a lot of these venues close over time, but they used to have like a poetry night every couple of weeks, and so I would always go to that.

Bruce Kauffman: Yeah, sweet. So, was it just like regular poetry, people would come there, or was it like a slam competition ever, or was it just all spoken word?

Ezi Odozor: I didn't do the competition. I never did a slam competition. But it was like an open mic night.

Bruce Kauffman: Yeah, sweet.

Ezi Odozor: Yeah, and so there were musicians, and also musicians would play to the poem that you wanted.

Bruce Kauffman: Okay, cool. Yeah, yeah.

Ezi Odozor: And so I was at poetry. And that was just, it was just such a nice environment to just test out my ideas. And it felt good to do it, because I also, sometimes, you know, when you're trying to find out if you're an actual writer or an actual poet, whatever that is, you know, there can be a style that you might see that's always published. And it might make you question like what your style is. But I feel like performance in general let you have your style, like regardless of whatever the rules were. And it also made me feel that, you know, with engaging people and people actually responding in real time to what we were trying to communicate, it also gave me a little bit of like reassurance that like "No, your style is valid." Like it doesn't need to be, you know, such and such a structure, it rhymes here, has this many lines, and this many words per line for it to matter or to be poetry or to be real or to make you a real poet or a real writer. You're real in doing it. So, it was a good face for that. You know, as of late, obviously the pandemic, but obviously just with all the things, the *muchness* of life. Haven't had as much time for performance, but, you know, it's a space that I would like to explore again.

Bruce Kauffman: Yeah, cool.

Ezi Odozor: Yeah.

Bruce Kauffman: Yeah, when the timing is right.

Ezi Odozor: When the time was right.

Bruce Kauffman: Environment is right and all of those things.

Ezi Odozor: Exactly.

Bruce Kauffman: Just a couple of final questions. Where do you create? Do you prefer like a quiet setting, or do you maybe feed off of other energy, moving around outside and maybe more able to write more easily in like more of a public space, like a party, a park, or a cafe, or something like that?

Ezi Odozor: I think my most concentrated writing happens when I'm on my own. But my ideas will come any time. Like I'm notorious for like talking while walking [laughs] and talking to myself because if I see something, I'm like, no, I have to, I have to record this somehow. So, I'll either, like I have an app on my phone that's a recorder, and I just have so many random statements that I'm like, okay, and I'll always say like, "Oh, this happens at the corner of Queen and Bathurst" or something. I'll say where it happens. And I also have a notebook. So, sometimes I'll just like go to like an old pub somewhere and just like sit and like record the relationship between two people.

Bruce Kauffman: Sweet.

Ezi Odozor: Just to have ideas about, you know, how things happen in life and how I see them. Right? Because they're happening one way. But then what is the way – what is the relationship that I am imagining here? Because I don't actually know these two people. Right? And so it's nice to have those kinds of moments that offer inspiration, and so I'm writing in that moment. But in terms of piecing it together, I think I need a more quiet space to do that and to map out the thoughts there.

Bruce Kauffman: Yeah. No, I totally, I get that. And I was going to actually lead into the last question, which is, I mean, I found this in your LinkedIn, [Ezi laughs] so I'm going to mention this. But I know a lot of people do blog, and they do find those things. I read in your LinkedIn that you said, that they said people, other people will most likely find you either with your nose in a book or something like that or boxing. [Ezi Laughs] So, what I wanted to ask about is: do you get that same sort of, you might not get those, you feel like a release from doing something that physical, that afterwards you're more open, and things can arrive or however. I was just curious about that.

Ezi Odozor: Yeah.

Bruce Kauffman: Because I know it works that way with walking for a lot of people, me included. I didn't know if it would or

Ezi Odozor: Yeah. You know what's interesting, I took a psychology class recently where they talked about like, you know, people think that if you want to get over anger, you punch it out. But actually I've heard that makes you even angrier.

Bruce Kauffman: Oh, really?

[Both laughing]

Ezi Odozor: Because it heightens – [laughs] But I've always been super active. So, in elementary school, straight up through high school, I played basketball, volleyball, and high school I did archery. Like I was always practising. And so boxing is just another activity that I really like to do.

Bruce Kauffman: Okay.

Ezi Odozor: It's just, it's nice. I feel – I used to do it just as like a cardio activity. But then I started to actually do it like technically.

Bruce Kauffman: Uh huh.

Ezi Odozor: And it's just, I'm always laughing [laughs] because it's like what are you laughing about. But I'm like it's fun, it's just, it's just good to, especially, you know, around conversations around like body image and those kinds of things, and people are always working out to change what they look like, but I think it's like one of the activities that I can do that has nothing to do with what I look like. It just, it's just nice to do. So, for me, honestly, it's a place of cathartic release. [laughs] But it's just fun. You know?

Bruce Kauffman: That is fun. [Ezi laughs] Wonderful.

Ezi Odozor: And I get to, and I get to be strong. [Laughs]

Bruce Kauffman: Really it could be said that in the long run, if it makes you a happier person, it makes you more creative indirectly.

Ezi Odozor: Exactly.

Bruce Kauffman: And it is doing that.

Ezi Odozor: And I've met people who, you know, I've actually put some of their faces in the, in the video. So, yeah. So, you know, having yourself open to different experiences just makes you just a wider, a more open person in the ways that matter. And so sure I'll talk about boxing in that.

Bruce Kauffman: Well, this has been a lot of fun. I really enjoyed this. I really enjoyed your answers. So, thank you very much for taking the time to do this.

Ezi Odozor: Thank you for having me. I appreciate it.

Bruce Kauffman: My pleasure.