

## ABOUT: ADÉBAYO BOLAJI



Adébayo Bolaji, is a multidisciplinary artist who trained as an actor and writer at the Central School of Speech and Drama. His works are intuitively led, but often dealing with social-political, spiritual and psychological matters. Prior to the Central School, Bolaji studied law at London Guildhall university. A self-taught contemporary artist, who drew throughout his younger years, Bolaji was later influenced by the works of Francis Bacon, Basquiat, Dubuffet, Twombly and poet Allen Ginsberg. Often citing Bacon's unapologetic unraveling of the human body, Twombly and Basquiat's freeness yet, maturity in composition and execution. Having worked as an actor in the historic Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London, written and directed for the London stage and devised experimental theatre with designer Carl Robertshaw (Björk, Moma, Antony and the Johnsons) and two time grammy winner Lekan Babalola, Bolaji's paintings initially gained rapid success online- with positive response gaining his first solo show, commissions and artist spots. The latter was seen at international artist Yinka Shonibare MBE's Project Space showcased on the 28th October as part of Tangle's commissioned artist spot.

Bolaji works mainly in the painting tradition, using acrylic, oil pastels and ink as his primary components.

"I like to deal with the observational, I'm interested in people, I like people- I like things. I think it is important to see the beauty in everything- to see how even the unnecessary becomes necessary by virtue of no longer being needed- this is the beauty of process. I learned this as a director for theatre and law student - a sort of cross examination and researching, only this time with visuals, thus one becomes confident with what is left- you feel justified"

Adebayo's non-traditional route into the world of contemporary art is a testament to finding one's own path and being honest with oneself.

Read a short account of his story, in his own words:

I have always loved the arts, from drawing to just making things... I would always make things at home. I grew up in a very spiritual/religious home and there was always music because the church choir would rehearse in our family home... I even ended up playing the drums this way, it was all 'second nature'.

That said, the arts were not held in high regard in the home in the sense of a serious profession, what was upheld was academia eg maths, science and english."be a Doctor" was a poetical and dogmatic phrase/statement in the home... My parents (mainly my father) saw the arts as a poor man's profession and there was an inherent fear that, being black, African and living in the west, one would always have to push and work harder than 'the white man' so... be a Doctor.

To be fair, my experience as a young man (who is black) growing up- held up to the latter testament of my father's, due to the discrimination I faced.. even in the arts.

So how have I ended up being a 'full fledged' artist?

Well, I was lucky to find myself in one of the country's leading youth theatre groups , The National Youth Music Theatre (NYMT), whose alumni include Jude Law, Idris Elba et al however, I only just managed this as I had to secretly audition behind my father's back at the age of fourteen...

I got in (to the surprise of many as I was not a 'stage school kid') and was allowed to continue with the company for the rest of my teenage years, performing in the west end, Tokyo, Edinburgh festival ... so many places, and worked with numerous creative people. The great thing about the NYMT - till this day, was community, we were a group of young people who came from all over the UK and would spend a few months like a family, rehearsing from the early hours of the day to the late evening, you were immersed in the craft of acting singing and dancing but in a way that encouraged individuality as well... I think this was key and integral to my love of making things. However, I cannot but mention (with the fear of pulling the 'race card') I did somehow always feel alone, being if not the only one but one of two ( a lot of the time) black kids. I have never allowed myself to be defined/objectified by my race or culture, however, if I'm brutally honest, friends (and a lot are still friends) would say things that were insensitive or just ill informed... the consequences of such things created an experience of me somehow looking inwards at what was happening during these times and not completely 'part of the group'. The irony is, if one was to ask members of the company whether they saw or felt this they would be oblivious to it, simply because no harm was meant, I guess one can equate it to... ignorance. That said, these were small but poignant moments as I feel they plant a seed of the question 'who am I?'... 'where do I really belong?'. Furthermore, they were some of the best years of my life, let me be clear- there was no direct abuse, I was loved... it was simply a reality check of how the world (unfortunately in many places) is.

My parents, friends from school were all proud and encouraging, however, when I reached

nineteen- thus, University time, it was time to (as my father put it) “get serious”. When I think back to this time, I always wonder, why did I give in, why did I not just do what I wanted to do, like so many of my friends would boast? Yes, my father insisted that I left this acting nonsense now, and do something educational like... law. Arguments went back and forth and eventually I caved in, I was so against it that I remembering ushering forth the idea of studying anthropology... he just laughed... true story.

I studied law, I hated it , I hated it so much that (again true story) I cannot remember one person’s name from my three years of doing that degree.... isn’t that strange? I literally would just clock in and out. And forget about any idea of acting again... I put on weight, became really quiet, wouldn’t go out (this was very opposite to who I normally was) and not to sound dramatic, kind of became a recluse.

However, looking back a few crucial things did happen... Law does not allow you to escape reading- so I read loads, read all the time - for leisure (I hated this as a kid) and I found that my body adapted naturally, very naturally to this, of course I was in denial because I didn't want to be there.



(c) Chris Mann

I also became obsessed with three things, one was writing thoughts and ideas down religiously, I started writing screenplays, plays, social essays, but would hide these under my bed because I didn't want anyone to see... again strange. Two, I became transfixed with cinema, particularly four film makers, Woody Allen, Martin Scorsese , Ingmar Bergman and Spike Lee. The latter particularly due to Ernest Dickerson, Lee’s cinematographer. His work (the vivid visuals- particularly the bright red wall) in Do The Right Thing was hypnotic, I’ve watched that film so many times. And thirdly, walking through and just... sitting and ‘being’, in the National Gallery.

The third always offered a sense of serenity, and I’d constantly got a sense of urgency as

well at the same time, I understand what it means now, but then I was clueless, it was just a very emotional experience being in a place like that even though it's atmosphere with its great pillars and overbearing paintings and frames could potentially give the impression that a ripped jeans youngster like me was in the wrong place, I never felt this.

Law ended, I graduated, I worked in the city and as I like to describe it 'played that game'... only this game didn't last too long. due to a burn out.

Unable to walk, and having a heated body with pains that would scratch my head if I tried to think of anything, you know- things that needed to be done, I became bed-ridden. Blood was checked and all the necessary things doctor's do but ... nothing was wrong with me, well at least not biologically. In other words, I had hit a high stress level.

A friend of mine once said, listen to your body, your body knows who you are, what it wants.. and if you don't, eventually you'll fall sick - you won't be able to cope... and in a sense, I guess this is what happened.

So with my parents clearly realising that this law thing and city thing wasn't me, there was a sense that everyone just 'let me be', in fact my mother's words were just this "I just want my son to be happy".

So, I ended up working in a bookshop that sold theology and philosophy... this was a real healing time. The shop was a small charity type shop, and I know those who knew me and walked past the shop thought 'what is Ade doing in there?' but I didn't care, I was at peace, real peace - at least compared to where I was before.

During these times I'd make short films around the south acton estate (where I was now living) 'guerrilla type' (do it yourself- low budget) short films. I directed community plays, and started to draw again too... something I hadn't really properly done since I was a kid. However, this time my drawings were very abstract like, obscure, very emotionally and psychologically led but their aim was always part of self meditation notes that I made for myself... kind of like a diary, never to the end of 'showing a piece of art', I mean why would they be I was never allowed to see art (drawing) this way, at least for myself.

Thinking back, my room in south acton was piled with note books that were full of poetry, drawings and doodles after doodles, scribbles, legs, faces and strange looking creatures, some were clearly impressive since I remember my sister walking past me , I was holding a page open and she shouted "who drew that?"... I closed the book immediately.

Working in a tiny, independent bookstore provided for me something the big city jobs didn't... thinking time, healthy, meditative thinking time.

Consequently, one day, going into my second year at the store I all of a sudden saw a clear road in front of me and realised that nothing was in my way, I'll never forget that day, very clear - bright and hopeful. I decided to take sometime out to figure things out and during this time/break (seven days to be exact), on the fourth day a wave of a thought hit me, bringing to my remembrance that I use to perform- I use to act.

I'd also 'paid the price', you know, satisfied my parent's wishes... so I felt no guilt whatsoever, they'd also 'created the beast' since now, I could argue my way out of anything.

I thought I would never act again, but now everything seemed possible, I was encouraged by a former director not to go and spend three years doing what I already 'know' however to do an MA (Master's degree)... I ended up auditioning for one place only; The Central School of Speech and Drama. I got in, lost weight and finally began to feel like me again. I even got my first job before I graduated (a testament to my parents that their son was simply meant to be doing such things).

However, something was still not quite right.

Just before drama school, I started to get these unusual headaches- they would come intermittently, and they continued throughout, in fact they became sort of part of me so



never really gave them attention, they were actually the reason why I was sometimes late to lessons even my end of year performance...the headaches would just come and go. My acting career was ( I guess one could say) thriving (depending on what that/success means to you) however, I still secretly felt like there was more I wanted to give- more I wanted to say. Between acting work, I formed a theatre company of my own, made my own work, thus, wrote and directed plays, led workshops and taught some master classes too. Again, the frustration with lack of satisfaction grew and grew, and what also grew and grew were notepads upon notepads, in fact a common gift from friends, partners etc for me was always a notepad. And... the notepads were filled with what they have always been filled with... words and images, images and more doodles, scribbles and words. The turning point came when during what other actor friends would see as a great fulfilling job (and objectively it was), however I became furiously bored during my day (free)times. What also increased (to my displeasure) were these headaches, they could no longer be ignored, almost personified into a annoying ghost who hangs about and just prods at you. With all this, I thought it meant that I was to do something like... write a play, so I tried that, but whenever I tried to write I'd end up drawing - as if automatically , no words just eyes and heads , lots of faces ... true story. Of course, I was fighting against this because I wanted to write something meaningful and 'obvious', what were these heads... why was I bloody drawing? I actually remember throwing a pad across the room... it was all too confusing... until the next morning.

I was so down, tired, near depressed with these headaches, with the need to release a big burden, feeling that it must be that I should write something, and that it wasn't being released when I was on stage in the evening... what was it, what was going on?

I'll never forget what felt like a clear, calm voice that I heard... I heard (since there is no other way to say this) the words, "go and buy paint". I also remember feeling like a

calmness had been released once this idea, this instigation came into my head- like a 'that's it'. I told my partner that once the play was over and I was back in London, that I'd go and buy paint... she thought it was sweet.

Now, ink was familiar to me, I used ink for my pads a lot, but paint... well, all I knew was that it couldn't be water colour, it had to be strong, heavy and dense and the colours had to be bright, strong and unapologetic... all this was purely instinctive, nothing conceptual- at least not yet.

I bought the paint along with some fresh ink and drawing pads.... I drew non- stop on the bus back home, it felt effortless, like I knew what I wanted to say... and the image that appeared in front of me was bold and strong.

I then laid the paint out and the only way I can describe it (and I apologise for the 'drama') was like someone had gripped or gotten hold of me, a confidence was there and happiness, a kind of 'coming home' feeling. I painted and painted and understood, understood how I wanted to compose, construct and ...'play', a sort of improvisation with a sense of guidance and constructivism (like in theatre... and I think-subconsciously, even what I learned as a law student). More importantly, the headaches and feeling of frustration, not being able to 'release' ceased... I felt charged.

Just to say, looking back, studying acting offered something valuable to me as an artist... as an actor one is taught to be metaphorically naked, to leave oneself alone, to be in the moment and yet understand that a story needs to be told within a specific given space and time. One also understands process, especially in devising new work or creating a character, dealing with layers, understanding what is necessary and putting the story at the heart of the matter. These principles are so strong and valuable that they cross over to almost every art form, especially painting. Furthermore, at acting school, I was never taught to adhere to one school of thought however, to be aware of them but most importantly to be aware of myself. This informed and has continually informed my 'style' of painting i.e. a combination of the abstract of expressionists and contemporary art. Again, as a law student, although I hated my time there, I fell secretly in love with Jurisprudence (the philosophy of law), and became obsessed with the realms of objectivity and subjectivity. Ian McCleod (the only name I can remember from my law years), taught legal method, and inspired my obsession with philosophical ideas... which, has also informed my art.



Like my friend once told me, my body was trying to inform me about myself, in one sense all these years and arguably (without sounding too spiritual) waiting until I could fully understand and appreciate what it was I really want to do and say... but through the medium of paint. Somehow, it had to be visceral for me, an emotional and 'sensational' act, however, not without insight or awareness, not judgement but one could say ... relevant self-knowledge. To see and be aware of how I see the world, my world, honestly... and in turn wholly respond to it, but not just respond technically or intellectually. For some reason, paint psychologically and physically satisfies the need or provides itself as the sufficient 'channel' I've instinctively been looking for.

I don't think we can always explain why our bodies respond to one medium over another, I could give 'on the surface' reasons, but even these do not suffice at least not now.

I do know that it (for me) satisfies the emotional, psychological, physical and ... spiritual/ metaphysical, and so becomes a complete medium that feels effortless and enjoyable and in turn allows me to communicate fully, for that moment. Whereas, every other medium before had only went at the most, just over half way.

One of my favourite artists, Francis Bacon (also a self-taught artist) took a line from van Gogh's letters, the line: 'Real painters do not paint things as they are... they paint them as they themselves feel them to be.' And for me, this relates to consistently remaining truthful...

Bacon himself said in a letter to French writer Michel Leiris: 'For me realism is the attempt to trap appearance with all the sensations that a particular appearance starts up in me.'



c) Chris Mann

-Adébayo Bolaji

## EXHIBITIONS

- 01- OFFBEAT - Solo Show/ STUDIO 73, Brixton, London/ [May -June 2016]
- 02-Artist Residency/ YINKA SHONIBARE MBE GUEST PROJECTS SPACE./London./ [Oct 2016]
- 03-NEW CONTEMPORARY V OLD . Group Show /Adébayo Bolaji, Le Corbusier, Sam Francis, Nancy Guggenheim, Gottfried Honegger, Brad Howe , Alexej Jawlensky, Paul Jenkins, Robert Rauschenberg, Sergio Tappa/ GALERIE PROARTA, Zürich/ [Dec 2016-Jan 2017]
- 04- Artist Residency and Solo Show/ GALERIE PROARTA, Zürich/ [March 2017]
- 05- DIALOGUE SHOW: BOLAJI & OYELAMI/ Tafeta Gallery, London [April-May 2017]
- 06-ORIGIN AND FLOW/Art Cafe Brooklyn, New York, [May-July 2017]
- 07-Artist Residency/ PRAH FOUNDATION, Margate/ [Oct 2017]
- 08- Book launch and art installation/ CONCEPT LONDON, London /[Dec 2017]
- 09-Transitions-Solo Show/SOMETHING CONTEMPORARY GALLERY, London/ [Feb-March 2018]
- 10- Artist Residency with solo show/GALERIE PROARTA, Zürich/ [March 2018]
- 11-Group Show/Adébayo Bolaji, Francis Bacon, Sonia Delaunay, Kazumasa Mizokami, Paul Jenkins, Karina Wisniewska/ GALERIE PROARTA, Zürich/ [April-May 2018]

## UPCOMING.

Group show/ SERENA MORTON GALLERY,/London/July 2018

Solo Show/ PUBLIC GALLERY/London/September 2018

### Some notable performances as an actor, writer and director:

- .-946- Shakespeare's Globe Theatre directed by Emma Rice. Aug-Sep 2016
- .SPINE, directed by Adebayo Bolaji, written by Clara Brennan, Harlow Playhouse, March 2016
- .The White King, recently featured at Edinburgh film festival, Cinema release 2017. Directed by Jörg Tittel and Alex Helfrecht. Sep - 2015
- .In Bed, London Theatre Workshop Art Space, directed and written by Adébayo Bolaji Sep 2014
- .One Child, Three Part BBC2 Drama- John Alexander 2014
- .Cucumber EP Four. Channel Four 2014
- .The Scottsboro Boys, (award winning production), directed by Susan Stroman, Young Vic Theatre, Sep-Dec 2013
- .The Colour Purple, Menier Chocolate Factory, directed by John Doyle, 2013
- .Ghost, West End, Queens Theatre, directed by Matthew Warchus.

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