

# T H E P O L Y G O N

## CHAPTER 1: THE THEATRE

*Rotimi Fani-Kayode: Tranquility of Communion* is curated by Dr. Mark Sealy, and organised by the Wexner Center for the Arts. We're proud to bring this landmark survey of the brief but influential career of Rotimi Fani-Kayode to The Polygon Gallery. While Fani-Kayode's work has been exhibited widely, this marks the first major touring exhibition of his career in North America.

Many of the works – including the first photograph we see, in the main stairway – are untitled. Several don't have dates. But we know that Fani-Kayode worked prolifically between 1983 and 1989, from the small studio he set up in his apartment, in the South London neighbourhood of Brixton, in Lambeth.

Rotimi Fani-Kayode was born in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1955, to a prominent family. His father, Victor Remilekun Fani-Kayode, was the former deputy prime minister of Western Nigeria as well as religious Yoruban nobility. The influence of Yoruba spirituality runs deep in Rotimi Fani-Kayode's work, right through to the final body of work he produced. This exhibition starts here, with some of these last photographs completed before Fani-Kayode's death in 1989.

This section of the exhibition is called *The Theatre*, with large, colour photographs showing dramatic tableaux. The first image in the TD Bank Group Gallery, close to the Diane Evans Bookstore, shows a blindfolded man biting into a fruit. The blindfold might invoke the beaded curtains that cover the eyes of Yoruban kings, to protect from the intensity of their gazes; eyes are believed to be sites of intense spiritual energy. But Fani-Kayode also merges this spiritual meaning with fetish play.

The theme of the “fetish” takes on various interpretations throughout Fani-Kayode's work. Fani-Kayode was openly gay, and was aware of the way Black men have been fetishised sexually; he also considers the concept of the “fetish” object, the notion that objects can be imbued with spiritual power: a concept often applied in Western discourse with regard to items from the African continent. With the large colour photographs in the Theatre section, Rotimi approaches this idea of the fetish object from a more unironic standpoint as well, allowing the photographs themselves to be vehicles for the sitter's spiritual power, or vitality. This is particularly powerful when we consider the context in which these photographs were taken: the height of the AIDS epidemic.

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The photograph on the far left of this wall is titled *Every Moment Counts (Ecstatic Antibodies)*, and this title implies not only Fani-Kayode's sense of having finite time, but also what he hoped to accomplish with these works. By showing people with AIDS standing in glory, power, and dignity, he suggests that photographs might generate their own kinds of antibodies – ones that might not be able to fight physical illness, but can perhaps heal the spirit, and bring a sense of solace to both the photograph's subject, and its viewer.

Between these two photographs, *Adebiji* shows a subject holding a mask representing Eshu, one of the Orishas, or Yoruban deities. Eshu is a tricky figure who presides over crossroads, and he's usually depicted with a large erect phallus; but interestingly, he isn't traditionally depicted using masks. This photograph shows how Fani-Kayode and his longtime partner and collaborator, Alex Hirst, created new interpretations of spirituality in the studio.

If you turn to your left and look through the glass doors, you'll see the Eshu mask recurring in another photograph, one that playfully combines fetish worship with fetish play. This photograph is part of the series *Nothing To Lose (Bodies of Experience)*, the last complete series of works that Fani-Kayode finished before his death. There are fourteen photographs in the series, and they are hung in sequence. So, walk through the glass doors, and start at the photograph on your left, next to the shelf where the exhibition guides are located; then continue clockwise, all the way around the room. The first fourteen photographs that you see, in sequence, are the *Nothing To Lose (Bodies of Experience)* series.

Eventually, this brings us to four more works that are not part of that particular series, but are done in that same style: saturated colour and deep shadows, like Renaissance paintings from the Baroque period. And indeed, the imagery looks Baroque, too, such as the white Venetian mask worn by the figure in the photograph titled *The Golden Phallus*. But that mask might also be read as relating to the *ororo* of Yoruban culture, a bird that connects the mind and soul to the spiritual realm; or, perhaps, it might also reference the beaked hoods worn by doctors during the bubonic plague, once again signalling the AIDS crisis unfolding.

And although the symbolism is rich, humour also abounds in Fani-Kayode's work. For example, notice how the figure's penis is painted gold. Fani-Kayode is commenting on the stereotypes around Black masculinity, and virility; and the penis has to be held up

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with a string, as though the weight of expectation is too heavy. There's also a visual pun in the title of the next photograph over: *Black Friar*. Someone familiar with London might think of Blackfriars Bridge, or the Blackfriars tube stop, or any number of other places or things in that city named after the Dominican order of monks. Suddenly, this solemn image is infused with a joke.

Overall, we can see that Fani-Kayode was imaginative and resourceful in making his studio a holy place; a place where his friends and collaborators – writers, critics, activists, and fellow artists – could come and be part of his faith, or fantasy. There is something ritualistic about these photographs, but also playful. They're play-acting; it's theatre, after all. But importantly, Fani-Kayode is also twining together his queerness and his spirituality. They are not incompatible; one does not come at the other's expense. This is something that Fani-Kayode powerfully resolved in this final, completed body of work.

## CHAPTER 2: THE ARCHIVE

From the end, then, let's go to the beginning – to section of the exhibition called “The Archive.” You'll notice that this room is more dimly lit, owing to the sensitive nature of many of the archival works on paper – some of the first works that Fani-Kayode ever completed as an artist. Take a moment to look at these drawings: all untitled and undated. We can assume that many of these were probably made during Fani-Kayode's university days.

Rotimi Fani-Kayode moved to London from Lagos with his family in 1966, when he was a child. The Biafran War was breaking out, and Nigerian elites – like the Fani-Kayodes – had political connections in the UK, which had colonised Nigeria and ruled it until the country gained independence in 1960. So the Fani-Kayodes fled civil war, and Rotimi Fani-Kayode was educated at prestigious schools such as Millfield in Somerset. Then, his family sent him to Georgetown University, in Washington, DC, to study the “respectable” field of economics. But there, in the racing heart of 1970s American politics, Fani-Kayode discovered art – and through it, discovered himself.

It's likely that many of these works – variously rendered in charcoal, pastel, crayon, and watercolour – were made during Fani-Kayode's time at Georgetown, in the late 1970s. We can see him beginning to explore forms that will later manifest in his

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black-and-white photography a decade later, in the mid-to-late '80s. Interestingly, these early works on paper are hung in close proximity to some of the very last works that Fani-Kayode was experimenting with before his death: gum bichromate prints, produced in 1989.

The gum bichromate prints resemble paintings. It's an archaic form of producing photographs from negatives, one that was discovered in the mid-nineteenth century but was abandoned when gelatin silver printing proved more efficient, and commercially viable. Gum printing involves hand-washing the positive image onto a piece of thick, cotton-based paper, such as watercolour paper. Therefore, even when using the same negative, no two gum bichromate prints are exactly alike. Thinking about Fani-Kayode's treatment of the photograph as a spiritual vehicle, it's perhaps telling that he was, at the end of his life, trying out techniques that render photographs as singular, unique objects, incapable of exact reproduction.

And these painterly effects echo back to some of Fani-Kayode's earliest photographs. Fani-Kayode moved from D.C. to New York in 1980, to pursue an MFA at the Pratt Institute, and it was during that time that he further considered his place in a broader African diaspora, and in queer cultures. Take a look at the wall where "The Archive" introductory text is located. We know that in 1983, when Fani-Kayode moved to Brixton, he was experimenting with photographs like the colour image seen on the right, of the figure in motion while wearing garlands of Christmas lights. "Photography", as a word, comes from Greek meaning "writing with light", and Fani-Kayode was interpreting this literally, with slow shutter speeds and long exposures. An image very similar to this one appeared on the cover of *Square Peg Magazine* that year, in 1983, an indie queer publication edited by Alex Hirst.

Fani-Kayode met Hirst shortly after arriving in Brixton, to show him a sample of his work. Thereafter, the two of them became friends, then lovers, and were soon living together and collaborating artistically. Fani-Kayode's photographs circulated in underground gay publications like *Square Peg*, as well as in community art exhibitions organised at such local venues as the Brixton Art Gallery and Oval House Theatre; some exhibition posters and flyers are on display in this gallery.

In London, punk and the New Romantics were defining the cultural scene, and we can see the influence of these movements on Fani-Kayode's work: both in the hand-tinted and painted photographs seen on the wall, as well as in the Polaroids on view

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in the vitrine cases. Across these Polaroids, the act of getting ready for a night out at the club becomes almost like a process of apotheosis, or possession, or spiritual transformation. These ideas would continue to flow throughout Fani-Kayode's photography, even as he abandoned such overt punk-rock aesthetics. For him, punk wasn't an aesthetic, but an ethic. There were more subtle ways to make visual its principles of flouting gender binaries, collapsing class distinction, and muddling the boundaries between high and low culture.

We will see many examples of how Fani-Kayode's photography achieved this in the next exhibition section, titled "The Museum".

## CHAPTER 3: THE MUSEUM

"The Museum" represents the largest portion of Fani-Kayode's artistic output: gelatin silver prints, produced mostly between 1985 and 1989. Fani-Kayode didn't tend toward black-and-white prints due to preference. Simply put: this type of photography was the most affordable, given his economic means at this time in his life. Medium-format cameras and 35mm film were widely available, and there was a community darkroom in the housing co-op where Fani-Kayode and Hirst lived.

In the first large, salon-style arrangement of photographs in this section, there are examples of Fani-Kayode's earlier black-and-white experiments: for example, using double-exposure techniques to turn his singular subject into sets of twins. Twins, symbolised by the Orisha Ibeji, are considered sacred in Yoruban cosmology. Other Yoruba symbols include the later work *Sonponnoi*, from 1987, on the lower left. *Sonponnoi* is the god of plague. The white spots represent traditional body paint worn by Yoruban priests for certain rites; but there are also dark spots, perhaps a nod to the plague of the time – for instance, the Kaposi's sarcoma that appeared as round tumours on the skin of AIDS patients.

On the lower-right, the photograph *Ebo Orisa* shows a figure holding a gelede mask, a Yoruba mask traditionally worn by male dancers to honour women. And this confluence of genders – a tradition in which male performers celebrate female personas – is but one way in which Fani-Kayode might have recognised some queer potential in spirituality; or perhaps, spiritual potential in queerness. Interestingly, that is likely Fani-Kayode himself in the *Ebo Orisa* photograph, as well as the photographs

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to the upper-left: *Umbrella*, and *Waist Beads*. From photographs that exist of Fani-Kayode – such as the back cover of his book *Black Male/White Male*, in the final section of the exhibition – we can see that he has a distinctive birth mark just below his left shoulder, and a smaller one on his right shoulder. Knowing this, take another look through the exhibition, and see if you might recognise Fani-Kayode in any of the other photographs.

For the most part, though, Fani-Kayode was behind the camera. His models were friends, neighbours, and collaborators from the working-class, racially and ethnically vibrant neighbourhood of Brixton, in Lambeth, where he lived. Many were Black; many were queer. In this gallery, we see how Fani-Kayode's little studio became a meet-up, a social club, a shrine, for the communities that he situated himself within.

Continue moving clockwise through the exhibition, past the large photograph that you might recognise from the stairway, of the man crouching, to reach the next salon-style assortment of images of different sizes. Here, we can see that Fani-Kayode was responding to the exoticism, and the eroticism, of Black men. He photographed them with a tenderness and compassion that was sensual without being objectifying. He often leaves out his model's face, playing with ideas of anonymity, transformation, and masquerade; even so, there is a sensitivity in the way that he portrays his sitters.

But here, Fani-Kayode isn't photographing Black men exclusively; there are white men in the photographs, too. Fani-Kayode himself was in an interracial relationship with Hirst, who was white, which was unusual at the time. Being a queer man from Nigeria, a Black man in Britain, and someone in an interracial relationship were all ways by which Fani-Kayode might have seen himself as an outsider. Nevertheless, his photography is where he seamlessly synthesised all these aspects of himself, and of others. Two of these photographs are titled "Techniques of Ecstasy", and by "ecstasy", Fani-Kayode considers the physically intense state experienced by priests as divinity moves through their bodies. With these images, Fani-Kayode thinks about a queer experience of embodied divine revelation.

Fani-Kayode's artist statement, "Traces of Ecstasy", further extrapolates on this idea, and it can be read in full by scanning the QR code in the TD Bank Group Gallery next to the elevator. Excerpts from the essay appear throughout the exhibition.

Continuing clockwise, past the white doors, there are photographs featuring various

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traditional or cultural belongings. The mask in the large photograph is not Yoruba; it is a *Dan* mask, from the Dan people of Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia. Across these photographs, it's suggested that Fani-Kayode – like many photographers before him – had his own cache of props to play with.

Many European photographers of the modern era appropriated African artefacts; here, Fani-Kayode does the same, but with a heightened sense of specificity, if not outright irony. In these pictures, there are many references spanning art history, and photographic history in particular: the mythic, pastoral imagery of the early Photo-Secessionists, for example; and the formal experiments of the postwar avant-garde; or, the primitivism that the Surrealists invoked as they tried to visualise dreams and the collective unconscious. Fani-Kayode makes clear that he knows these histories, that he understands these references and has studied them well, but is doing something resolutely different, informed by his proud heritage as Yoruban royalty.

Continuing on, to the last two walls of photographs hung in grids, which are located back near of introductory text to this section, Fani-Kayode's project takes on different tenors: at times reverential, and at others, totally irreverent. Sometimes the spiritual and the satirical blend together in a way we might call camp. Many of these images are untitled, but some are notably named. In particular: the title "Abiku" is given to the photographs in which a clear plastic tube wraps like an umbilical cord around a man's body, as well as a photograph in which a man looks upward as a pair of shears sit threateningly over his jugular vein.

"Abiku" is a Yoruban word that means "born to die". It describes children who pass away before reaching adolescence, as though called back to the world of spirits early. These photographs titled "Abiku" are all dated 1988; and it is likely that, by this time, Fani-Kayode had a very acute sense of his own mortality – and, as an artist, was making every moment count.

If Rotimi Fani-Kayode had had more time, what else might he have produced? While it's natural to wonder this, there is also an incredible sense of resolution to his work: influential work made in a particular era, under very particular circumstances, but yet, which continues to be resonant across time, and in multiple contexts. It is complex, but remarkably cohesive; and while a major solo survey of his career has been a long time coming, his photography has been widely shown, internationally, and will no doubt continue to be.

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## CHAPTER 4: THE STUDIO

To conclude: a final section of the exhibition, “The Studio”, serves as an index, or end notes, to the chapters of *Tranquility of Communion*. Large reproductions of some of Rotimi Fani-Kayode’s contact sheets allow for a close look at the artist’s photo shoots, as well as his crop marks and selection process in deciding how the final photographic print should look. Several of the photographs are recognisable from the “Museum” section of the exhibition, alongside outtakes that are not featured in the show, and indeed, possibly were never produced.

Alongside the contact sheet is a short film, *Rage and Desire*, from the British Film Institute, on Fani-Kayode’s life and work. It was produced just a few years after his passing, and features an interview with Fani-Kayode’s partner and collaborator, Alex Hirst. Hirst passed away from AIDS-related illness just a year after this film was made. It is about sixteen minutes long.

On the adjacent wall are several publications. Some focus on Fani-Kayode’s peers and successors – contemporary artists whose photography resonates with similar themes, and indeed has been influenced by the work Fani-Kayode made. Others, selected by Vancouver-based curator Moroti George, speak specifically to queer Nigerian experience, including a book by Akwaeke Emezi, a collector of Fani-Kayode’s work. And of course, there are books on Fani-Kayode himself. One, *Black Male/ White Male*, was the only monograph produced by Fani-Kayode during his lifetime, independently published, with text by Alex Hirst. The other monograph was produced in the mid-’90s by Autograph ABP.

Autograph ABP, originally founded as the Association of Black Photographers, is a nonprofit visual arts charity based in London. It was established by Fani-Kayode and a group of his peers in 1988, and Fani-Kayode was its first Chair. Since 1991, the organisation has flourished under the directorship of Dr. Mark Sealy, the curator of *Tranquility of Communion*. Autograph has worked tirelessly at the intersection of photography and racial justice, producing hundreds of exhibitions and publications while also advocating for human rights in the UK and abroad. Autograph has also cared for Fani-Kayode’s existing artworks, negatives, and contact sheets; and therefore, this exhibition would not be possible without their research, their care, and their partnership.

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So, on a closing note, a major thank-you to Autograph for their work, and to Dr. Mark Sealy, for all that he's contributed to this exhibition; and to you, for listening. Thank you for visiting The Polygon Gallery.

-Elliott Ramsey, Curator at The Polygon Gallery