When did you first see Nari’s work?

I can’t remember exactly when I met Nari, but I believe it was in the late 1980s. He was still a student at Hunter College, before going to do his MFA at Brooklyn College. It must have been around 1989 or ’90 when we first met. He wasn’t a sculptor then. He was a painter, but his repertoire soon expanded and he became an artist not burdened by any specific medium. We were connected through many other people and friends. We must have met through a photographer by the name of Gregory Christopher, who at the time worked as an assistant to the legendary photographer Roy DeCarava, and Iké Udé, who was an old friend from our boarding school days in Nigeria. I wasn’t an artist or an art critic or a curator. I was a writer, or an aspiring writer, and a poet, you could say, doing the rounds of poetry readings, art galleries, and museums. We haunted SoHo galleries and Lower East Side dives. We were intensely writing, reading, looking, and—in the jargon of the era—interrogating relations of power and domination. Those were halcyon days, but important ones for my formation thirty years ago.

What were your shared interests?

For me, it was a very meaningful context to be in; it allowed me to be in touch with a group of engaged black practitioners in their twenties with a certain commitment to the production of ideas and to challenging the exclusionary context of the artistic milieu in New York—that is to say, white power structures. Gregory, who was older, was deeply antagonistic to such structures. He was a charming and intense, but brooding character; his demeanor always reminded me of the title of Charles Burnett’s film To Sleep With Anger (1990). I think that’s how we were all formed. It also had something to do with our immigrant backgrounds. Our origins meant that we personally engaged the world not solely as black people doing emancipatory work. I believe that Nari and I shared that kind of sensibility. Of course, we were very aware of the exclusionary power of institutions and we knew it was going to be tough, but we were not overly awed or impressed by what the art world was throwing up. Today, I still see younger practitioners discussing and coming to terms with the very same structures that we were confronted with when we were coming up in the field.

As a poet and a writer, you have always been involved in small, self-published magazines and journals. You mentioned Iké Udé, who created his own fashion and culture magazine called aRUDE. With Nka, you went on to establish one of the most influential journals about African contemporary art, but before then, you were involved with many other magazines.

Before most of them disappeared, there was a very vibrant alternative publishing scene in New York, with zines and journals both academic and nonacademic. I spent endless hours wandering in bookshops and the library on 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue, reading across every conceivable category. Initially, I was deeply immersed in early modern African and Caribbean poetry and literary studies, and then postmodern theory and cultural studies. In 1991, for example, there was a publication called the Portable Lower East Side, which was edited by a Dutch man called Kurt Hollander, who went on to found the art magazine Poliester in Mexico City. That same year, I think, Hollander published an anthology titled New Africa that brought together young black artists, curators, and writers. Figures like Themina Golden were in it. I was included not as a curator, but as a poet. I don’t want to overstate the importance of this particular magazine, but it did capture a fragmentary landscape at a moment of change. This landscape would really come into full blossom a few years later in the now-legendary Black Popular Culture Conference that was organized by the Dia Foundation and the Studio Museum in Harlem, which came out in book form in 1994. It was a project by Michele Wallace. I see myself coming out of this very specific discursive formation that wasn’t necessarily curatorial, but had a much broader intellectual and cultural background and had so many different people working in it.

The Black Popular Cultural Conference established a crucial bridge between Europe and the United States. By Europe, I mean black British popular culture—and more specifically the work of Stuart Hall and the cultural studies crew, as well as artists and filmmakers like Isaac Julien and John Akomfrah—which finally expanded the dialogue with the work of African-American theorists of cultural studies. Coco Fusco had previously introduced the work of the black British filmmakers, and I think Hilton Als’s work with Isaac was important. All that really opened up a new discursive frame. By then, I was already publishing my own magazine, Nka, as a platform...
How do you think Nari’s first site-specific works in the 1990s, specifically "Island within an Island" (1993), with the rain puddle and the lines of the fire hoses, and the solemnity of the abandoned fire station, contribute to the narrative of that period, just as the discussion today is inevitably tied to an aesthetic that was only culturally or racially defined. Of course, how could it not? With this historical hymn and its meaning in American life, and the broken strollers, the lines of the fire hoses, and the solemnity of the abandoned fire station, for me,Amazing Grace represented an aspect of recognition of many of the battles of the period. Almost suddenly, Nari demonstrated that he had attained an objectivity, a kind of objectivity, and that his work could speak so broadly and inclusively. This is what makes Amazing Grace very powerful, because it is a work with no real content. I think it is so important to see how a work like "Island within an Island" could be so abstract and yet so specific in time and is very meaningful in the place where it first emerged. That Nari could achieve all this when he wasn’t yet thirty is really quite remarkable.

In retrospect, how do you see Amazing Grace in relation to other works engaging with the representation of New York City around that time? Think of the assemblages of Pepón Osorio or, more economical and therefore more touching and evocative, Gabriel Orozco’s photographs Islas en la Isla [Island within an Island] (1993), with the rain puddle and the World Trade Center in the background.

We were living in Harlem then?

No, I was called Akadibia, which is an Igbo word for the hand of the sorcerer or medicine man. I think either either or the brilliant young Nigerian-Liberian poet Chinua Achebe came up with the name. It was an attempt to encapsulate the context in which this group of young black immigrants was working, not in a figurative way but in a literal one. But it didn’t work, I don’t want to be too biographical, but I should say that we all soon learned that trying to squat a building in Harlem was not exactly the easiest thing to do.

Were you living in Brooklyn then?

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How do you think Nari’s first site-specific works in the former firehouse in Harlem addressed the neighborhood and New York City more broadly at that moment?

Let me just say that Nari’s Amazing Grace was an incredible leap of imagination and ambition. It was an impressive feat that both pleased and disappointed me. It represented the kind of work that I had come to expect from Nari. It was a powerful statement about the issues that Orozco’s work plays with. Similarly, Nari’s work in Harlem itself, maybe Staten Island. There were so many.

I knew Pepón, who was doing very important work around the performance of African-American artists in the 1990s, especially in relation to his work at Sean Kelly Gallery, Gary Simmons and Fred Wilson at Jack Tilton. And that was it! That was also part of the story of art at that time. asphalt and structures of legitimation.

I remember that around that time—it must have been between 1993 and 1995—there was a big article in the New York Times about the entrance of black artists into SoHo galleries, and it was perceived as a kind of breakthrough. Still, I remember this very clearly—it was Lorna Simpson at Sean Kelly Gallery, Gary Simms and Fred Wilson at Melike Gürsoy, Lyle Ashton Harris and David Hammons at Jack Tilson. And that was it! That was also part of the narrative of that period, just as the discussion today is about the performance of American artists in the auction market.

The early 1990s are also a turning point for certain definitions of globalization and debates around internationalism. If you think of your Johannesburg Biennial in 1997 or the Venice Biennale in 1993, which included Nari’s work Exodus (1993), it is clear that at the beginning of the 1990s, the European and the American art worlds—or certain segments of those art worlds—became

and anthropological, if you will. One thing that further cemented my interest in their work was their non-European or non-American, and yet I was always thought of such artists as kindred spirits. Their immigrant backgrounds, like Nari’s, and the existence of their work within a certain narrative of migration, and the existence of their work within the context of African-American artists, for me, was a great fillip to my own cosmopolitan and multicultural interests.

To your point about Orozco, the symbolism of an island within an island—and I hope to avoid any heavy-handed interpretation here—is an interesting example. I have always been intrigued by the idea that Orozco’s photographs are less images and more onerous monuments—small-scale monuments to the temporal world of the city, documented in a picture. In that way, Ejikani’s work, with its concern for the dynamics of power and culture, and the context in which this group of young black immigrants.

Yet I do subscribe to a disciplinary frame that recognizes specific relations to an aesthetic discourse and those relations are fundamentally important to the way in which we understand the critical operations of contemporary art and culture. Of course, how could it not? With this historical hymn and its meaning in American life, and the broken strollers, the lines of the fire hoses, and the solemnity of the abandoned fire station, for me, Amazing Grace represented an aspect of recognition of many of the battles of the period. Almost suddenly, Nari demonstrated that he had attained an objectivity, a kind of objectivity, and that his work could speak so broadly and inclusively. This is what makes Amazing Grace very powerful, because it is a work with no real content. I think it is so important to see how a work like "Island within an Island" could be so abstract and yet so specific in time and is very meaningful in the place where it first emerged. That Nari could achieve all this when he wasn’t yet thirty is really quite remarkable.

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aware of their parochialism and created or accepted new ideas of cosmopolitanism. In retrospect, some of these ideas might even have, like the idea of a community of peers without borders that many other exhibitions in the 1990s incarnated, and that, in a sense, has its culmination in Okwui Szeemann’s 1999 Biennale, titled “DAPERTUTTO”—a play on the Italian word for “everywhere,” as if to stress this idea of an interconnected world.

Nari’s work is typically understood as part of a local context, but one of our aims with this exhibition is to show how he has been very much at the center of dialogues around globalization and the arts in the 1990s. What do you think about Nari’s place in dialogues around globalization?

OE I agree that often Nari is specifically understood as an artist from Harlem: it may have to do with the way in which Nari works with his materials, and his attitude toward materials—what I call a certain comfort with the vernacular, if you will. Sometimes his work appears to be so specific that some people have trouble seeing it in an international context. What I mean is that he invests the work with particular anthropological meanings and that he consciously plays with a vernacular dimension, against distinctions between high and low, between established modes and popular modes, so to speak. That, for me, is an interesting question in the reception of certain artists working outside of very specific traditions, or what is assumed to be a tradition. I think Nari consciously confounds expectations within the historical reception of his work. Think of his use of charged materials like tar, for example, or sugar and cotton—all those signifiers of cultural and historical identities. These materials are used in a very specific context: he is not just working with leftovers for the sake of it; he is working with them because there is a very specific investment, almost an anxiety, about understanding the relationships between materials and cultures, between matter and place. This is how I see Nari’s work engage with the local.

I agree that Aperto 1993 signaled a shift in the geographies of art in Europe and the United States, simply because the generation that made that Aperto was the generation that came after that of Szeemann: it’s the generation that, if we really want to talk about the end of the cold war, really opened up the framework. The generation of Szeemann had worked throughout the 1960s, ‘70s, ‘80s in a world that was divided into two: the East and the West, North and South, center and periphery. They were creatures of that historical understanding of the binary division of the world and they were creatures of a specific importance of what a work of art was, who made it, and who could continue to make it.

The 1993 Aperto marked the convergence of young curators, artists, and critics, who were in their formative years, albeit under the auspices of a magazine, Flash Art, which—

These bifurcated East-and-West, center-and-periphery systems and that there were new frontiers to embrace. There was a new kind of invitation that needed to happen within the heart of the discipline of exhibition-making, not necessarily only within institutions and museums, but more important in the more permeable systems of biennials and temporary exhibitions in which many independent curators were working.

I should add that there was another hugely influential institution that too often people tend to forget when it comes to conversations around cosmopolitanism and internationalism in the early 1990s, and that is Iniva, the Institute of International Visual Arts, which was founded in 1994 and led by Gillian Wearing, and one should also mention Third Text and the major conference held at Tate in 1994, called A New Internationalism, which was part of the launch of Iniva, and which prompted voices to the Aperto. And, in 1998, Giгласt talked about the Caribbean being rich in sediment and that richness also tends to bubble up in Nari’s work, both in affective ways and in more undefined, spiritual ways. Nari’s works have presence and they can activate different histories and geographies. When someone from West Africa sees a work like Iron Heavens (1995), they recognize it immediately. It’s like a shrine where offerings have been made and blood has been spilled. It is really quite engaging and touches upon multiple histories and traditions. It can also be repelling or fearful.

OE No, he didn’t come to any of the platforms, but we did discuss his contribution to documents 11 very much at the time. He knew what he wanted to make. This, again, is what is very interesting about Nari. His work in many ways might seem immediately representational, but it is purely abstract. With his documenta piece, he wasn’t trying to put forward a very specific message, but he wanted to make a piece that conveyed a sensation—a sensation of instability and inscrutability that would carry through the duration of the exhibition. On the one hand, it was a work that had very clear technical demands and he was focused on how to solve those problems. He wanted this large metal tree to fall and rise. He wanted it to have a particular duration, but the tree was cobbled together out of all sorts of found materials, like wheels and washers, that made this movement, which is strange and funny object to contemplate. It had a sort of pretechnological Mad Max quality, if such a thing were possible. So the piece had this combination of extreme physicality and pure abstraction. It was very much handmade; it was not something that you could have ordered from a workshop, finely designed and manufactured. He wanted it to have a sense of rawness and that kind of Creolized, hybrid form. The work is about that, in a sense; it’s a very strong, suggestive presence that incarnates a very abstract idea.

I have always liked the title of that piece; Landings (2002), which is the title. It’s a title that makes you think, why did he give that title? I think Giгласt poetically could not come because he had Dengue fever, but obviously his presence was very strong nevertheless. It was interesting because that
It's quite significant that Nari was not in the 1993 Whitney Biennial or in "Black Male" at the Whitney . . .

No, he was not, simply because he was not making the kind of work that those two shows were presenting. That's precisely the point that I'm making. Nari's work does not participate in the overtly topical aspect of what one would call identity politics; it is a more fugitive approach. That's what I mean when I say that the work might look quite representational, but it is, in fact, quite abstract.

And then there is the choice of materials, that predilection for the vernacular I was talking about earlier. His materials are so specific and they allow him to evade what certain people expect from a certain idea of sophisticated theorization of identity.

It's quite significant that Nari was not in the 1993 Whitney Biennial, but was in the 1995 one, curated by Klaus Kertess, which at the time was described as the biennial that would restore the greatness of art, of real art, after the 1993 edition that, according to its detractors and some native critics, was not even really about art but about something else . . . Nari's work was brought into the 1995 biennial more out of a formalist idea of aptitude and presence. And he did give a tour de force of presence, with his hearse covered in tar and crowned with rusted car mufflers. Peace Keeper (1995)—that was the title of the piece—was quite dramatic, it was spiritual and solemn; that's probably why Nari was not in the 1993 biennial. Just like Amazing Grace, Peace Keeper didn't have the kind of frontality that much of the work in the 1993 biennial—to which neoconservative ideologues assigned the derogatory terms "identity art" or "protest art"—had. That sensibility was also how many of the works included in "Black Male" were interpreted, which generated heated discussions and oppositions. I organized a panel discussion with a number of senior African-American artists about that show with David Hammons at Steve Cannon's place on the Lower East Side, which we published in Nka in 1995. David disliked the premise of the show; Stanely Whitney, who participated in the discussion, defended it.

The interesting thing about Nari's inclusion in the 1995 biennial is that he was somehow expected not to subscribe to the identity politics agenda but he delivered two of his most political pieces, Peace Keeper and Iron Heavens, which addressed questions of identity and race but with his unique combination of materiality and spirituality. We should also remember that the 1995 Whitney Biennial was described at the time as the "NAFTA Biennial," because it was the first one to include artists from Canada—like Stan Douglas and Jeff Wall—and Mexico—like Juan Galan and Gabriel Orozco. It was the first time the biennial attempted to be international, which is also significant in relation to discussions around globalization in the 1990s.

Peace Keeper, like Amazing Grace, also continued Nari's reflection on memorials, which, as you mentioned earlier, is a defining aspect of his work.

I have been thinking about this quite often lately, as I am working on the Alain Locke lectures at Harvard. I have been thinking about surveilling the performative of Donald Trump and thinking about the period immediately before the presidential election, with the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson and the stand-your-ground laws; the spate of police killings of black men and women we have witnessed in the past few years; Black Lives Matter; and then of course the slaughter in Charleston and Obama's eulogy, which ended with him singing "Amazing Grace" and the audience joining in. I've been thinking about the lack of recognition of the grief that has overtaken the nation and African-American communities in particular, as well as the impunity of white supremacy. To contrast those images, just think of Trump closing his campaign in Gettysburg and visiting the graves of the Union soldiers, or think of Charlottesville and Trump sending messages to amplify the grievance of a particular white constituency.

This contrast between black grief and white grievance is the subject of my exploration, which focuses in particular on the idea of mourning and the black body in contemporary American art. I have been thinking about different artists engaging with these topics, like Arthur Jafa, Kerry James Marshall, Glenn Ligon, Carrie Mae Weems, and Julie Mehretu. It is in this context that I think that Nari's works Amazing Grace, Iron Heavens, and Peace Keeper have particular resonance.

How do you see Nari's work in relation to the tradition of assemblage in 1960s California, to the work of John Outterbridge or Noah Purifoy, and even early David Hammons?

What I was referring to as the vernacular interest in Nari's work connects him to the so-called junk sculpture tradition of African-American art in California, but I think we also have to be careful not to use a certain tradition as a way to pigeonhole an artist's work. The specific comparison with Hammons also doesn't really work. Nari is interested in a more modernist approach, while Hammons has a more ritual and ancestral references that inform contemporary assemblage practices. The two artists have profoundly different, I believe. Even though the use of certain found materials may suggest some affinities, the intent is entirely different. Even in relation to the California assemblage tradition, I think those works are inherently modernist in their orientation than their current reception would suggest. This is certainly much more pronounced in Outterbridge and Betye Saar, to name another California example, than Purifoy. Nari's work is much more Creolized, much more pluralist, in a sense.

If we really want to place Nari's work in dialogue with some of his peers, I think it could be interesting to think of artists like Leonardo Drew, who had a very inspiring show in the early 1990s at Thread Waxing Space. I would also mention Terry Adkins, Willie Cole, and Renee Stout as part of the genealogy of artists working with assemblage and unconventional materials, or what could be described as the art of salvage by black artists. Theaster Gates is a recent example.

The terms hooch, initially deployed by Ishmael Reed, and neo-hoodoo have been used by curators like Franklin Sirmans to systematize how artists, especially black artists, think about the symbolic structure of objects that have passed through spiritual, cultural, and aesthetic circulation. This is one approach to describe or theorize the way such material salvage operates in relation to spiritual and ancestral references that inform contemporary works of art. In this sense, it would be necessary for me to clarify why I said that Outterbridge's assemblages were more modernist in their orientation, in the way that, say, some Arte Povera is. The recent exhibition of the late Jack Whitten's sculptures at the Metropolitan Museum of Art also proves revelatory in this regard, as does Hammons, particularly for their work with and on materials and for their combination of spirituality and concreteness. Among younger artists, you could draw a connection between Nari's work and Mark Bradford's use of assemblage and montage or Rashid Johnson's paintings; I see Oscar Murillo as part of this broader genealogy. As Glissant made us aware, the field of black creativity is rich in sediments. And here I dismiss that entire appropriative and limited mondialization view of certain curatorial positions that have taken root as Glissant's philosophical contribution to ideas of our time. It seems to me that this deliberate misreading is more about suppressing his enlivening and fundamental ideas around race and the diasporic features of black thought than any enlightened reading of Glissant.

It would also be particularly interesting to think of Nari as one of the most original artists working in this regard, one who completely transformed the scale and the ambition of installation art. Nari doesn't often get credit for this, but with Amazing Grace and Hunger Cradle (1996) he completely transformed the articulation of space within sculpture and installation.