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## Unveiling Identity: Exploring Afrofuturism in Ekow Nimako's Contemporary African Diasporic Sculptural Art

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UNVEILING IDENTITY: EXPLORING AFROFUTURISM IN EKOW NIMAKO'S  
CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN DIASPORIC SCULPTURAL ART

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Arts, Media, and Communications  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts in Art History and Visual Culture  
at  
Lindenwood University

By

Kandra James

Saint Charles, Missouri

December 2023

## Abstract

Title of Thesis: Unveiling Identity: Exploring Afrofuturism in Ekow Nimako's Contemporary African Diasporic Sculptural Art

Kandra James, Master of Arts and Visual Culture, 2023

Thesis Directed by: Sarah Cantor, Ph.D.

Identity expressed within African diasporic arts has historically been connected to traditional genres such as portraiture. Over time, contemporary artists have explored identity through genres beyond portraiture and through the use of non-traditional materials. The sculptural practice of Ghanaian Canadian artist Ekow Nimako, a fine arts sculptor based in Toronto, Canada, employs the unconventional material of LEGO® to offer a multi-generational perspective into deep diasporic memory. Examining Nimako's sculptures through the perspective of colonialism and de-colonialism, materiality, and Afrofuturism, this thesis investigates the artist's exploration of Black historical pasts to shape identities and construct narratives of Black futures. The monumental sculpture *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* emerges as a nuanced exploration of identity intricately connected to responses to colonial legacies. Nimako utilizes speculative storytelling to challenge colonial historical records by envisioning a future where Black individuals actively shape their own narratives. Nimako's specific use of black LEGO® material enriches his works and underscores the significance of Black identity in historical and future contexts. *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* becomes a tangible exploration of identity, challenging prevailing stereotypes about Africa and Africans of the diaspora and presenting a futuristic city where Black agency in identity formation is unshackled from colonial constraints. Engaging themes such as feminism, resistance to oppression, and the reimagining of highly technologically advanced Black individuals, Nimako's sculptural narratives surpass mere assertions of Black presence. They vividly illustrate the forward reaching results of Black agency, resilience, and innovation, and they make a substantial contribution to the ongoing discourse on identity within Afrofuturism. This work represents a unique analysis that contributes substantially to the art historical discourse on identity, contemporary art, Afrofuturism, and the sculptural practice of Ekow Nimako.

Keywords: contemporary diasporic art, colonialism, materiality, Afrofuturism, identity

## **Dedication**

I am beyond grateful for the love and support of my mother, Beulah Elizabeth James. Whenever I feel like I cannot, she reminds me that I can. I am all that I am and all that I will be because of who she is and the sacrifices that she made.

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## Introduction and Background

Artists from the African diaspora demonstrate a propensity for blending unconventional genres with abstraction, utilizing non-traditional materials to forge their personal and cultural identities. A compelling illustration is found in the work of Ghanaian Canadian artist Ekow Nimako, presently practicing in Canada. Nimako, identifying as a contemporary artist and a member of the Black African diaspora, employs LEGO® as an unconventional sculpting medium to provide viewers with multi-generational insights into deep diasporic memory—connecting the past, present, and future. Through his sculptures, Nimako not only depicts his personal journey but also intricately asserts his identity within the present while projecting an evocative vision of Black African diasporic identity for the future. This thesis investigates Nimako's sculptural practice in a unique and significant manner, as it represents the sole scholarly analysis of his work to date, delving into the intersections of colonialism and decolonialism, materiality, and Afrofuturism.

Contemporary works by Black African diasporic artists often serve as pivotal expressions of identity, depicting their self-perceptions and societal reflections despite the cultural burdens of their host societies and visual cultures. Their sense of self is a constantly evolving construct shaped by their social interactions within a shared cultural context.<sup>1</sup> This evolution is underpinned by identity indicators rooted in common historical experiences and communal cultural codes, which offer stability through a shared frame of reference.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, this sense

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 36 (1989): 69.

<sup>2</sup> Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic," 69.

of identity undergoes transformation through the rediscovery of lost histories or suppressed knowledge resulting from the African slave trade.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Ekow Nimako, Contemporary Sculpture Artist***

Born in Montreal, Canada on August 19, 1979, to Ghanaian parents, Ekow Nimako professes to have had a fascination with LEGO® since childhood. As a formally trained sculptor, Nimako began incorporating LEGO® into his practice while completing his Bachelor of Fine Arts at York College of Art, progressing to solely working with LEGO® as his medium by 2014. His career has grown exponentially as he is a respected visual, multidisciplinary artist best known for his Afrofuturistic sculptures created entirely from black LEGO®.<sup>4</sup>

The process of becoming a LEGO® artist has allowed Nimako to forge a partnership with the LEGO® Company; however, he still must independently source his LEGO® brick material from a vast network of LEGO® brick collectors internationally.<sup>5</sup> The investment has paid off for Nimako as he has exhibited his work globally, including at the Nuit Blanche Toronto art festival, the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, as well as exhibitions in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and South Korea. His work and choice of non-traditional sculpting medium challenges the traditional perception of LEGO® as a toy and elevates it to the status of art while simultaneously reflecting Black diasporic people and celebrating Black culture due to his subject matter, museum representation, and public recognition.

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<sup>3</sup> Hall, “Cultural Identity and Cinematic,” 69, 75.

<sup>4</sup> Aga Khan Museum, “*Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*, by Toronto artist Ekow Nimako, joins Aga Khan Museum’s permanent Collection,” press release, February 8, 2021, <https://agakhanmuseum.org/dataset-images/1wkyrtf741z-554a287b-b0e0-4979-a941-82d7f99811f9/Aga%20Khan%20Museum%20%E2%80%99%20Press%20Release%20%E2%80%99%20Kumbi%20Saleh%203020%20CE%20%E2%80%99%20March%20%20%E2%80%99%20Final.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Nimako’s partnership with LEGO® allows him to design and distribute custom LEGO® kits on his website, <https://www.ekownimako.com/shop>.

Nimako is drawn to Afrofuturism as it allows his work to flourish within the speculative realm that merges historical facts with imaginative fiction to create the possibilities of Black futures that explore themes of race, identity, and representation. Nimako is compelled to explore these themes through his LEGO® sculptures due to the lack of Black imagery available to him as a child. An example of this manifests in his work, *Cavalier Noir* (fig. 1) from 2018, a LEGO® sculpture depicting a young warrior girl, riding a unicorn with long hair flowing in the wind. These eight feet by six feet LEGO® sculpture allowed the artist to explore gender representation and aspects of feminism which are dominant themes in Afrofuturism. In addition to other large scale sculptures, Nimako creates African masks in a series entitled “Building Black Amorphia” and mythical creatures in a series called “Building Black Mythos.”<sup>6</sup> Nimako has also created several architectural monumental sculptures in a series called “Building Black Civilizations.” The works from this series will be the primary focus of this investigation. All his series allow the artist to speculatively insert otherwise elided African diasporic peoples into various art historical narratives.

### ***The Perspective of Colonialism and De-colonialism, Materiality, and Afrofuturism***

This study of Nimako’s work offers an opportunity to add context to the art historical record of the sometimes overlooked genre of Afrofuturism. By analyzing the works of a younger artist within a new scholarly context, this thesis addresses Nimako’s works through the perspective of colonialism/de-colonialism, materiality, and Afrofuturism. Nimako mines Black historical pasts to define Black identities while simultaneously creating identity narratives of Black futures through the perspective of Afrofuturism and the use of non-traditional materials.

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<sup>6</sup> To view these sculptures from previous series from Ekow Nimako’s oeuvre, please visit his website at <https://www.ekownimako.com/artwork/>.

Afrofuturism is a cultural aesthetic genre that crosses visual and performing arts, music, and literature. It combines history, science-fiction, and fantasy to explore the Black diasporic experience with goals to connect members from the Black diaspora with their forgotten and underrepresented African ancestry. Afrofuturism allows creators of material culture the opportunity to illustrate a future state of Black identity that rests on an understanding and reckoning of Black cultural and historical pasts. Afrofuturism engages themes of technology, feminism, gender fluidity, and posthuman possibility using the speculative arts.<sup>7</sup> Afrofuturism has developed into a core aspect of the diasporic techno-culture Pan African movement, or the growing diasporic Afrofuturism culture that is concerned with Black people, technology, and the future.<sup>8</sup>

To explore the connections between past, present, and future, this thesis views identity within Nimako's work through the perspective of colonialism and de-colonialism to highlight identity creation strategies. Each period has influenced how the works of contemporary Black African diasporic artists have evolved, and contemporary artists use identity creation strategies differently from their modern predecessors.

This is a key differentiator between many works by Black African diasporic artists of the modern era (roughly 1860 to 1975) versus contemporary counterparts (roughly 1975 to present). Contemporary Black African diasporic artists use their works to create and assert their identities with a less apologetic, angst-filled stance than many of their modern predecessors or with more

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<sup>7</sup> Reynaldo Anderson, "Afrofuturism 2.0 and the Black Speculative Arts Movement: Notes on a Manifesto," *Obsidian* 42, no. 1/2 (2016): 229. Anderson explores the concept of posthumanism in critical theory, highlighting its relevance within Afrofuturism as a way to contemplate the convergence of human, nonhuman, and technological realms.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, "Afrofuturism 2.0 and the Black," 229. Refer to these texts for more on Afrofuturism. Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," chap. 9 in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994). Elizabeth Carmel Hamilton, *Charting the Afrofuturist Imagery in African American Art* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023).

personal conviction that is not rooted in the need to prove their existence and value to a White hegemony.<sup>9</sup> Contemporary African diasporic artists are driven to choose topics for their works that express their self-identity and desire to define their culture for themselves.<sup>10</sup> In other words, these artists are creating art for themselves and to be consumed by their cultures. The topics chosen are also culturally relevant to members of the diaspora due to experiences of colonialism and de-colonialism and are often misunderstood by individuals outside of the diaspora. The materials chosen are also often relevant to the colonized experiences of diasporic peoples. El Anatsui is an example of an artist whose topics and non-traditional material choices reflect colonized histories.

The Ghanaian Nigerian contemporary artist and professor El Anatsui consistently incorporates found objects as non-traditional art materials into his practice. However, the artist considers the found objects to be ‘objects the environment yielded’ which Lisa M. Binder interprets as objects that represent the destructive power of trade, consumption, and globalization at the hands of colonialization and subsequent de-colonialization.<sup>11</sup> Anatsui’s use of the materials accessed from the environment also speaks to a willingness to attach meaning to non-traditional art mediums that allow for a more culturally relevant reading within the work. This also addresses to identity expression through materiality.

This thesis delves into the exploration of identity through the utilization of unconventional art materials. It approaches the expression of identity by examining materiality,

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<sup>9</sup> Jacqueline Francis, “The Being and Becoming of African Diaspora Art,” *Journal of American Studies* 47, no. 2 (2013): 416.

<sup>10</sup> Francis references the ephemeral street performances of David Hammons as artistic insertions that offered understanding of African diasporic art. Hammons’s practice is centered around making modern Black identities culturally, materially, and politically equal by using nontraditional “de-Anglo-cized” materials such as dreadlocks and a knit Rastafarian tam and his body to tether Africa to the Americas.

<sup>11</sup> Lisa M. Binder, “El Anatsui: Transformations.” *African Arts* 41, no. 2 (2008): 35.

akin to Anatsui's incorporation of found objects as representations of identity impacted by colonialization. Nimako's deliberate use of black LEGO® in crafting sculptures specifically serves as a symbol of identity, significantly shaping the aesthetic encounter for viewers.

Materiality, per Petra Lange-Berndt, refers to the substance or medium which artists incorporate within their work; the significance of the medium can be concrete or abstract, and the medium can be given agency to imply meaning within the work.<sup>12</sup> To further elaborate on materiality, Lange-Berndt notes that reading art works through the perspective of materiality does not mean a simple engagement with aesthetic concerns of quality, expressiveness or symbolic content but to investigate transpersonal societal issues as well.<sup>13</sup> In the case of the Nimako's monumental sculptures, the artist's use of plastic LEGO® is the concrete material and the specific choice of black is the abstract material. Nimako's choice of material specifically allows the artist to control the intended reading and messaging of the works, asserting his agency. Agency as an identity device through materials is also evidenced in other diasporic artists' practices such as Yinka Shonibare's use of Dutch wax prints to how illustrate how identity is constructed throughout colonial history or Ai Weiwei's use of LEGO® to illustrate how identity is politically determined. In both examples, these diasporic artists are using culturally specific materials counter to their intended use case as a way of challenging stereotypes and authority structures.

### ***Ekow Nimako's Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE***

This analysis of Nimako's work will primarily focus on his monumental sculpture, *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* (fig. 2), currently in the permanent collection of the Aga Khan Museum of

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<sup>12</sup> Petra Lange-Berndt, ed., *Materiality* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2015), 13-14.

<sup>13</sup> Lange-Berndt, *Materiality*, 16.

Art in Toronto, Canada. Kumbi Saleh was a medieval city that was the royal and economic trade center for the Empire of Ghana. The artist has sculpted a vision of what he imagines the ancient city would have become without colonialism and the European-African slave trade. *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* sits within a larger context of a series that the artist has crafted called “Building Black Civilizations” which sculpturally reimagines architectural and mythical imagery from the medieval empires and kingdoms of West Africa. *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* and other works from this series were also a unique addition to the museum exhibition *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time* at the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, Canada in 2020.<sup>14</sup>

This show was the first major international exhibition to explore the cultural and artistic exchanges along the trans-Saharan trade routes during the eighth to the sixteenth centuries. The exhibition presented objects and ideas that connected at the crossroads of the medieval Sahara and recognized West Africa’s historic and global significance.<sup>15</sup> The exhibition addressed the shared and underrecognized history of West Africa, the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe. Dispersal and movement are key within the study of the material remains of this exhibition as these elements illustrate the breadth of reach of medieval West African individuals across time and geography.<sup>16</sup> The exhibition used recent archaeological discoveries of various material objects or fragments excavated from major medieval West African trading centers and displayed them alongside works of art from around the world, allowing the viewer to experience the

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<sup>14</sup> Organized by The Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, the museum exhibition *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time* was on view in Evanston, Illinois in 2019 and the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, D.C. in 2022. The overall power of this international exhibition is that it physically illustrates erased Black African histories and literally unearths Black pasts. The concept of Black erasure will be discussed later in the analysis of *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* of this text.

<sup>15</sup> Kathleen Bickford Berzock, ed., “Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: An Introduction,” in *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange Across Medieval Saharan Africa*, ed. Kathleen Brickford Berzock (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 26.

<sup>16</sup> Berzock, *Caravans of Gold, Fragments: An Introduction*, 23-24.

fragments as they once were.<sup>17</sup> Kathleen Brickford Berzock cites the greater motivation for the exhibition to be an archaeological imagination which is the power of the fragments to move historians and researchers from the concrete to the imaginable.<sup>18</sup> Through material art fragments, this exhibition defines an identity of a people and culture that had global influence on history from a multifaceted perspective.

While *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time* focuses on history, Nimako's *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* is a powerful and nuanced monumental sculpture laced with multiple layers of meaning to support the artist's vision of Black identities in the future. *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* illustrates that identity is intricately linked to responses to colonial legacies. Nimako employs speculative storytelling to create heroic Black figures, challenging colonial historical records and envisioning a future where Black individuals shape their own narratives. Nimako uses the materiality of black LEGO® to embed narratives of Black diasporic identity, interweaving cultural heritage, personal histories, and Afrofuturistic forms. Nimako's deliberate use of black LEGO® serves as a powerful statement, reclaiming representation in history and science fiction that historically lacked diversity. The black color signifies the presence of Black people, serving as an identifier that cannot be erased or denied. Nimako's clever, artistic choice to use black LEGO® adds sophistication to his works. This decision heightens the viewer's aesthetic experience and emphasizes the importance of Black identity in both historical and future contexts.

### ***The African Diaspora and African Diasporic Art***

As a Ghanaian Canadian, Nimako identifies as a member of the Black African diaspora. Chukwuemeka Nwosu defines the African diaspora as a state of being, or identity that implies a

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<sup>17</sup> Berzock, *Caravans of Gold, Fragments: An Introduction* 28, 31.

<sup>18</sup> Berzock, *Caravans of Gold, Fragments: An Introduction* 29.



group consciousness resting on old and new ethnic traditions from social and cultural communities.<sup>19</sup> The African diaspora includes all peoples of African descent who have been dispersed, forcibly or voluntarily, from the African continent in historic and current times. These individuals maintain an identity connected to Africa, their African ancestry, and their cultural heritage while simultaneously being established or establishing themselves in their new host communities and host cultures.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the African diaspora is not one physical location. It is the representation of people in a myriad of geographical locations who have dispersed around the globe from Africa.

However, because it is the historically largest and most significant circumstance of dispersal of Africans, Paul Gilroy cites the Atlantic African slave trade as the driving force that created what is now called the African diaspora. Furthermore, in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, “The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity,” Gilroy coined the term Black Atlantic to refer to the Atlantic as a geographical, analytical, and cultural reference framework to place the African diaspora.<sup>21</sup>

In the 2008 article "Cosmopolitanism, Blackness, and Utopia," Gilroy expanded his approach to studying African diasporic identity, emphasizing how African American freedom differs from other ethnicities.<sup>22</sup> He argued that within the African diaspora, freedom is tied to suffering, creating a distinct identity where redemption emerges from that suffering-induced

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<sup>19</sup> Chukwuemeka Nwosu, “The African Diaspora Studies,” *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 28, (2019): 217.

<sup>20</sup> Nwosu, “The African Diaspora Studies,” 217.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 15-16.

<sup>22</sup> Tommie Shelby and Paul Gilroy, “Cosmopolitanism, Blackness, and Utopia,” *Transitions*, no. 98 (2008): 116.

freedom.<sup>23</sup> This unique sense of freedom contrasts with historical notions of freedom seen in other cultures like the French or ancient Greeks who weren't under bondage. Gilroy also explored the concept of the Black Atlantic as a catalyst shaping African diasporic identity, highlighting its fluidity and its role in the transformation of African culture into what is now considered African American culture.<sup>24</sup>

Gilroy's research underscores that African diasporic artists use aesthetic strategies to shape their identities, aligning with Gilroy's perspective on the Black Atlantic. This framework supports an analysis of artist Ekow Nimako's works, tying his personal and cultural experiences as a Black African diaspora member to the evolution of his monumental Afrofuturistic LEGO® sculptures.<sup>25</sup>

Studying identity expressed within contemporary African diasporic art begins with level setting an understanding of contemporary African diasporic art. Tobias Wofford believes that it is important to put globalization at the forefront when viewing contemporary African diasporic artworks, especially given the pervasive use of technology. This is the focus of his article, "Whose Diaspora?" Wofford believes that one very pertinent fact that historians must be aware in the study of any diaspora is that this study resides at the intersection of human experience and attention to the experiences of dispersal.<sup>26</sup> Experiences of dispersal are a key element to consider, according to Wofford. Members of the dispersed groups' conceptions of belonging can and have proven to be disruptive to locally cemented identities, causing complications within the practices of established classification and art canonization that are significant to the academic and

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<sup>23</sup> Shelby and Gilroy, "Cosmopolitanism, Blackness, and Utopia," 119.

<sup>24</sup> Shelby and Gilroy, "Cosmopolitanism, Blackness, and Utopia," 119.

<sup>25</sup> Shelby and Gilroy, "Cosmopolitanism, Blackness, and Utopia," 121.

<sup>26</sup> Tobias Wofford, "Whose Diaspora?" *Art Journal* 75, no. 1 (2016): 74.

disciplinary study of art history established by the host culture.<sup>27</sup> Conversely, the dispersed community experiences anxiety of displacement due to the dispersed community being seen as the disrupter of the host cultures pre-established norms. Both points can have a destructive influence on positive identity development.

Art historians have investigated the politics of African diasporic identity creation in contemporary art extensively. Thus, while Nimako's *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* will be the primary work of focus, to better articulate the perspective of this thesis, additional works by Nimako and other African diasporic artists will be highlighted from other periods and genres. This will substantiate the argument that Nimako's African diasporic sculptural art can be understood through the three perspectives of colonialism and de-colonialism, materiality, and Afrofuturism.

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<sup>27</sup> Wofford, "Whose Diaspora?," 75.

## Literature Review

Art historians and curators have studied and analyzed the practices of modern and contemporary African diasporic artists who use a myriad of genres and styles, including portraiture and sculpture, as a tool to investigate personal and cultural identities. Because Ekow Nimako, the primary subject of this thesis, is a relatively new contemporary diasporic artist, there is very little scholarly research on his work. However, there is a considerable amount of press and video coverage about the artist as well as video footage of the artist speaking internationally about his work. Therefore, this valuable content will serve as supporting context for the analysis of the artist's work within African diasporic art through the perspective of colonialism and de-colonialism, materiality, and Afrofuturism.

### *Identity through Colonialism and De-colonialism*

While the study of African diasporic art is not a new field within art history, it is a relatively young and niche area that Nwosu dates to the 1950s.<sup>28</sup> This was a period when African states were breaking away from their European colonizers and asserting their own national and cultural identities. African diasporic art often reflects specific dynamics that present narratives of economics, culture, and social and psychological experiences related to identity creation and identity expression because of colonization and subsequent de-colonization. These dynamics include the function of political critique, the presence of abstraction as a device in the presentation of aesthetic concepts, and the diasporic artists' aesthetic responses to ideas about the body and gender.

Portraiture is a common genre used to render identity in modern and contemporary art and, much of the previous identity scholarship discusses portraiture. Contemporary African

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<sup>28</sup> Nwosu, "The African Diaspora Studies," 213.

diasporic Black artists use portraiture and self-portraiture to create an identity for their subjects and themselves as a form of agency. This is rooted in these artists' desire to define themselves as these artists see themselves versus the predefined, often negative stereotypical tropes that are prominent in visual imagery of Blacks created by Western society.

To study identity during decolonialism, author, Laurian Bowles held a series of in-person interviews with Felicia Abban, the first female professional photographer and the first Ghanaian woman photographer and owner of an Accra studio during the mid-twentieth century. The imagery created by the photographer was representative of modernity, or what the author refers to as visual speech.<sup>29</sup> Abban created a copious archive of self-portraits that offer a visual record of the use of clothing, accessories, and hairstyles as essential markers of identity during the period of Ghanaian independence. In addition, these elements were markers of social class and social status.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the photographic imagery that Abban created was used as a form of social currency.<sup>31</sup>

This idea of cultural currency can be aligned with Stephen Perkinson's proposed rethinking of previous scholarship about portraiture's origins. Highlighting ways that less veristic imagery can convey complex and specific forms of individual identity, Perkinson points out that verism is never neutral; thus, the propagation of individual imagery brings with it cultural codes and societal meaning.<sup>32</sup> There is a reliance on cultural iconographic codes within the imagery.<sup>33</sup> This is similar to Bowles' idea of social currency. Both examples illustrate the common strategy

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<sup>29</sup> Laurian R. Bowles, "Dress Politics and Framing Self in Ghana: The Studio Photographs of Felicia Abban," *African Arts* 49, no. 4 (2016): 48.

<sup>30</sup> Bowles, "Dress Politics and Framing," 51.

<sup>31</sup> Bowles, "Dress Politics and Framing," 49.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen Perkinson, "Rethinking the Origins of Portraiture," *Gesta* 46, no. 2 (2007): 135–57.

<sup>33</sup> Perkinson, "Rethinking the Origins of," 141.

of embedded cultural elements that express a specific post-colonial Black diasporic identity. Nimako exercises this same strategy within his Afrofuturistic sculptures by highlighting Black culturally specific hairstyles or incorporating African symbolism, for example period.

Previous scholarship has also examined how African diasporic artists use abstraction as a way to express identity and meaning within their artwork. In her basic premise that African American and Black British artists use inclusive and related traditions, Celeste-Marie Bernier poses an analytical framework of aesthetic elements evident in the art, practices, and traditions resulting from the transatlantic slave trade and its aftermath.<sup>34</sup> Despite differences between Black British and African American cultures, the equally marginalized histories create an aesthetic commonality to assert identity through victory within their works.<sup>35</sup> Bernier's analysis of various African diasporic artists' work illustrates how these contemporary artists include non-traditional elements that abstractly articulate personal meaning that is not European- or Western-centered.

Tina Campt posits that contemporary African diasporic artists reassign the structure of the gendered dynamic of visual spectatorship and pleasurable looking.<sup>36</sup> Campt highlights the classic definition of the gaze which traditionally privileges the White male viewer as the viewer and the White female as well as non-White subjects as the object to be looked at. Campt notes that scholars of Black culture have always registered this gaze to be political and White male.<sup>37</sup> Historically marginalized cultures did not control the narrative of their reality, nor did they

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<sup>34</sup> Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Stick to the Skin: African American and Black British Art, 1965-2015* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 20.

<sup>35</sup> Bernier, *Stick to the Skin*, 142.

<sup>36</sup> Tina M. Campt, *A Black Gaze* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2021), 37

<sup>37</sup> Campt, *A Black*, 37.

control how they were viewed.<sup>38</sup> Contemporary African diasporic artists are creating a vision of Blackness that is curated through a community perspective that is distinctively a Black gaze. This mindset of the Black gaze requires viewers to recognize their own possible discomfort while viewing.<sup>39</sup> The Black gaze requires a decentering of traditional, colonial symbolic interpretations when reading the works of contemporary African diasporic artists.

The traditional idea of the gaze and the contemporary Black gaze as described above are both referring to looking at female bodies. However, Campt expands her perspective of the Black gaze to a universally Black social position of imaging Blackness beyond the limits of the current manners of representation which see Black lives as disposable to a future that places value in Blackness.<sup>40</sup> When applied to this thesis, the Black gaze becomes a tool for reading Nimako's works and the need to decenter Eurocentric medieval history that has often downplayed or omitted the existence of an African historical record before European invasion. The Black gaze

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<sup>38</sup> The concept of the gaze, heavily entrenched in identity discussions, revolves around the notion that much of one's identity is shaped by external perceptions influenced by dominant societal norms. Laura Mulvey, a British film theorist, introduced the idea of the white male gaze in 1973, positing that it imposes fantasies onto women, conforming to its expectations. Mulvey's goal was to dismantle how cinematic traditions reinforce patriarchal ideals. This construct has been expanded by others like Campt, applying it to various facets of identity exploration. Ahmed Ilmi, a first-generation Somali immigrant in Toronto, examines Black diasporic youth sub-culture through the perspective of the white gaze, highlighting how it perceives Blackness as linked to academic struggles and predisposition to societal issues within the educational system. Katarina Hedren, a film programmer involved with festivals like Women of the Sun, delves into the notion that Black women employ a gendered, female gaze to redefine reality, showcasing diverse representations of diasporic Blackness. Referencing bell hooks' "Oppositional Gaze," which originated from enslaved people in America covertly looking at White individuals, Hedren suggests that breaking these societal rules empowered them to comprehend and change their reality. Researchers and artists like Nimako utilize the gaze as a means of agency in shaping and defining identities across various disciplines and artistic expressions, illustrating its multifaceted role in identity formation and representation. See the following sources for more information. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975), 6-18; Ilmi, Ahmed. "The White Gaze vs. the Black Soul." *Race, Gender & Class* 18, no. 3/4 (2011): 217-29; Katarina Hedrén, Jyoti Mistry, and Antje Schuhmann, "'Women, Use the Gaze to Change Reality,'" in *Gaze Regimes: Film and Feminisms in Africa*, edited by Jyoti Mistry, and Antje Schuhmann, 182-187. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2015.

<sup>39</sup> Campt, *A Black*, 8.

<sup>40</sup> Campt, *A Black*, 46-47.

also brings the value of the *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time* exhibition to full circle as a tool to bring forward historically underrepresented stories.

In his 2007 article, “Post-Soul Aesthetics in Contemporary African American Art,” Richard Schur studied the shift in aesthetics of African American modern artists’ works compared to the works of contemporary African American art affected by post-soul aesthetics.<sup>41</sup> Schur defines post-soul aesthetics as the post-Civil Rights era aesthetical outcomes that demanded that Black artists rethink and redefine the standards of beauty and identity representation in their works.<sup>42</sup> With an implied assumption that Black cultural visual imagery could adjust social relations and the world, Civil Rights era artists placed their emphasis on the struggles of romantic heroes against a racist society using innate knowledge of action and demanding immediate change.<sup>43</sup>

Schur’s article discusses how post-soul aesthetics have shifted contemporary African American art away from the tone and content of previous eras like Civil Rights and Black Power. He examines how irony now predominates over tragedy or romance in art, focusing on artists like Alison Saar, Michael Ray Charles, Kehinde Wiley, and Kara Walker illustrate post-soul Black bodies and Black identity. Schur contrasts these contemporary artists, known for humor and irony, with earlier artists like Henry Tanner (1859-1937), Charles White (1918-1979), and Gordon Parks (1912-2006), as well as with contemporary Afrocentric or protest art by artists like Aaron Douglas (1899-1979), Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000), and Romare Bearden (1911-1988),

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<sup>41</sup> Richard Schur, “Post-Soul Aesthetics in Contemporary African American Art,” *African American Review* 41, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 641.

<sup>42</sup> Post-soul aesthetics is a term coined by Schur that encompasses Black contemporary artists’ freedom to question race social construction, while reexamining ways that African American art is or should be connected to African American communities. Post-soul aesthetics predicts that the contemporary artist’s emphasis on irony will revert to a revitalized form of realism.

<sup>43</sup> Schur, “Post-Soul Aesthetics in Contemporary,” 641.



Betye Saar (b.1926) and Faith Ringgold (b.1930).<sup>44</sup> Specifically, Schur highlights Kehinde Wiley's use of realism, merging racial concerns with Western portraiture, signifying a shift in ironic purpose towards a new African American cultural renaissance.<sup>45</sup> Schur concludes that post-soul aesthetics allow artists to question racial structures, explore African American community identities, and predicts a future return to realism in the African American contemporary art scene. Schur's research into post-soul aesthetics provides a valuable framework for investigating Ekow Nimako's sculptural works. The artist creates his sculptures in a manner that incorporates realism in conjunction with other genres including Cubism and Abstraction. However, because the artist's works are also developed within the Afrofuturist genre, they incorporate elements of irony in their vision of the future, which is examined in Schur's research.

Nana Adusei-Poku has investigated Black identity in the work of Black artists born since the mid-1960's.<sup>46</sup> This period after the Black Arts Movement was identified as post-Black, emerging from the curatorial work of Thelma Golden and Glen Ligon of the Studio Museum of Harlem, New York City, New York in 2001.<sup>47</sup> The post-Black period resulted in artists creating works that challenged and emphasized a changing meaning of Black identity that embraced African roots and heritage.<sup>48</sup> Adusei-Poku notes that post-Black highlighted the newness of being Black after the 1960s through the 1970s, culturally and historically.<sup>49</sup> The post-Black newness was an identity that had a historical past that was connected to Africa and a future-forward vision of identity creation and expression. Post-Black art reflects the unique, varied, and

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<sup>44</sup> Schur, "Post-Soul Aesthetics in Contemporary," 641-642.

<sup>45</sup> Schur, "Post-Soul Aesthetics in Contemporary," 652.

<sup>46</sup> Nana Adusei-Poku, "Post-Post-Blacks?," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 38-39, (2016): 80.

<sup>47</sup> Adusei-Poku, "Post-Post-Blacks?," 82.

<sup>48</sup> Adusei-Poku, "Post-Post-Blacks?," 80.

<sup>49</sup> Adusei-Poku, "Post-Post-Blacks?," 82.

specific experiences of being Black in Western society that can only be expressed by Black African diasporic people who have the experiences of colonialization and subsequent de-colonialization.<sup>50</sup>

Artist El Anatsui's sculptures are another example of this type of artistic creation born out of experiences with colonialization, de-colonialization, and the sense of nationalism that Anatsui says was the euphoric feeling across Ghana and other de-colonized African nations from the 1950s through the 1960s (fig. 3). Anatsui's monumental sculptures made of discarded metal, liquor bottle caps, and copper wire which manifest into large metal sheets are visually reminiscent of kente cloth.<sup>51</sup> Because of his use of these found materials, his works could be considered works of bricolage, or works that incorporate the innovative use of by-products and discarded materials as a celebration of the process of excavating history which is a common theme within Afrofuturism.<sup>52</sup> However, Anatsui's works speak to the artist's concerns with the

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<sup>50</sup> Golden and Ligon coined the term post-Black in 2001 with *Freestyle*, the first in a series of five Studio Museum shows featuring up and coming Black artists. Golden and Ligon described post-Black art in the curatorial notes as a generation of artists who were rebuffing identity categories such as Black while still using Black culture as a source for redefining Blackness on their own terms. The series includes *Frequency* (2005), *Flow* (2008), *Fore* (2012-2013), and *Fictions* (2017-2018). There were many facets that influenced the aesthetical output of the third show, *Flow* (2008). *Flow* (2008) was the first to present works of African diasporic artists, allowing new terms to enter the post-Black discussion. Due to the 2008 United States presidential election, notions of race, power, and governmentality as well as oppression and solidarity based on race were being challenged. Additionally, *Flow* (2008) expanded the idea of Black artists beyond being exclusively African American, recognizing that the Black diaspora is much more diverse than it had been portrayed in previous shows. This part of the series included African born or African lineage artists, giving Black diasporic artists a platform.

<sup>51</sup> Kente cloth is a fabric born from the centuries old weaving traditions of the Ashanti people of Ghana and West Africa. The fabrics are made-up of 16 to 24 stripes that are cut and sewn together to create a checkered pattern of highly saturated colors, primarily in deep reds, blues, golden yellows, greens, black and white. Each block, pattern and color embed meaning into the fabric. Originally the fabrics were used exclusively to dress kings and their courts. For more details about kente cloth, see John Gillow, *African Textiles: Colours and Creativity Across a Continent* (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd, 2016), 23, 26, 34.

<sup>52</sup> Sofia Samatar, "Towards a Planetary History of Afrofuturism," *Research in African Literature* 48, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 178. While Nimako's works also celebrate history and use non-traditional materials, this body of research will not analyze his work through the perspective of bricolage, as this term carries connotations of material usage in a manner that does not align with the artist's strategy. Bricolage, initially coined by Claude Lévi-Strauss was used to distinguish Western invention from the lesser reinventions made in a haphazard fashion and working with second-hand materials that were the leftovers from various cultures. While there are many Afrofuturistic

themes of consumption, trade, and globalization that permeate much of his oeuvre.<sup>53</sup> It is through the symbolic reference of kente cloth as a fabric of West African cultures and the consumption of liquor which is imported from European countries, that the artist touches upon the impact of de-colonialization on the African trade economy as well as African economic identity.

As a contemporary Black African diasporic artist, Nimako creates monumental Afrofuturism sculptures with the intent that viewers read a repositioned vision of Black futures that reaches beyond de-colonialism. Nimako's sculpture works within the "Building Black Civilization" series, including *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*, are sculptures created within an Afrofuturistic genre to present a vision of Black futures with a history, specifically for Black people. The artist has expressly stated that his goals include delivering a positive vision of meaning and identity of Black people for Black people, particularly Black youth. This level of intentionality is in line with the decentered visual perspective of the Black gaze proposed by Campt, post-soul aesthetics posed by Schur, and the post-Black perspective of Adusei-Poku.

### ***Identity through Materiality***

Scholarship on materiality uncovers an art historical debate about whether materials have meaning on their own, or whether the materials are inert objects used in the work.<sup>54</sup> Ann-Sophie Lehmann addresses materials as dynamic factors that tell histories in the onset, production, and interpretation of artworks.<sup>55</sup> Within Lehmann's framework, 'material attribution' refers to the language that is used by a culture in textual references of the material. Lehmann

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creators whose works could be celebrated in this manner of description, bricolage does not apply to Nimako, who specifically sources his LEGO® brick new.

<sup>53</sup> Binder, "El Anatsui: Transformations," 29.

<sup>54</sup> Ann-Sophie Lehmann, "How Materials Make Meaning," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek (NKJ) / Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art* 62 (2012): 10.

<sup>55</sup> Lehmann, "How Materials Make Meaning," 16.

believes that this gives viewers the opportunity to use culturally specific language to discuss material qualities that lie outside of the material itself.<sup>56</sup> In other words, the materials represent ideas that are not specifically about the actual materials. Nimako's use of non-traditional materials imbues his work with identity markers specific to Black African diasporic art. Therefore, materiality provides a valuable foundation for analyzing Nimako's monumental LEGO® sculptures.

Valerie J. Mercer analyzed the mixed-media sculpture, *Caged Brain*, 1990 by Tyree Guyton.<sup>57</sup> Guyton represented a caged mind by filling an old and rusting bird cage with old discarded rope (fig. 4). Guyton's goal was to encourage viewers to question why they do not work towards their dreams, instead of allowing barriers to hinder their intellectual and psychological progress.<sup>58</sup> Mercer notes that the sculpture is simple in its use of found materials while simultaneously being complex in the visual dialog that it attempts to have with the viewer by attaching meaning to the materials which abstractly represent human, tangible objects. Referencing Guyton's artistic inspiration, Marcel Duchamp, Mercer considered how the artist challenged the boundaries between art and life while introspectively challenging the viewer to question the cultural status quo.<sup>59</sup> In this instance, the artist emphasizes the potential held back by a society that restricts certain individuals from fulfilling their dreams and goals by imposing limiting identities upon them. This is similar to Nimako's Afrofuturistic works that ask the viewer to imagine Blacks in a speculative future that was not disrupted by colonialism.

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<sup>56</sup> Lehmann, "How Materials Make Meaning," 20.

<sup>57</sup> Valerie J. Mercer et al., "Examining Identities," *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts*, 86, no. 1-4 (2012): 69.

<sup>58</sup> Mercer, "Examining Identities," 69.

<sup>59</sup> Mercer, "Examining Identities," 69.

Mercer pointed out that many currently practicing African American artists exhibit an interest in the concerns and subjects investigated by their predecessors as evidenced in their practice, illustrated through non-traditional material choices. Contemporary artists use perspectives that are more diverse, specifically personal, and self-critical of the culture. Mercer credits the growth in scholarship and cultural criticism that is devoted to African American history, visual art, and culture as the driver for the introspective nature of African American identity within contemporary African American artists' practice. Guyton's use of non-traditional materials to embed meaning and identity markers support this project's argument that contemporary African diasporic artists utilized non-traditional materials along with a mixed-genre approach to express identity within their work.

Previous scholarship on the materiality of LEGO® is also extremely important for analyzing Nimako's work in tandem with the art historical perspective of materiality. In *LEGOified: Building Blocks as Media*, Nicholas Taylor and Chris Ingraham have compiled a volume on the study of LEGO®-specific materiality that places the study of the manufactured bricks outside of its common research domain of education.<sup>60</sup> By nature of LEGO®'s obvious first audience, children, and usage as a toy, education offers a wealth of research and information. However, that research does not tend to address its usage as a material substance for art making. *LEGOified* addresses the materiality and usage of within the larger international community among 'Adult Fans of LEGO®' or AFOL. Within the LEGO® community, AFOL are defined as adult-aged enthusiasts who are a key demographic of a heterogeneous community encircling a broad range of identities, activities, events, and practices, all of which are

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<sup>60</sup> Nicholas Taylor, ed. and Chris Ingraham, ed., *LEGOified: Building Blocks as Media* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 34.

characterized by a serious, passionate, and often quite professional engagement in what is conventionally regarded as a children's toy.<sup>61</sup> The authors have applied a multi-approach strategy to studying the materiality of LEGO® and usage among AFOL. This includes what the authors call diffractive analysis. Diffractive analysis is a strategy pronounced primarily through the work of feminist scholars of science and technology that affords researchers the ability to approach and describe phenomena that resist any singular, authoritative reading.<sup>62</sup> This practice works to understand how differences are made and why they matter, recognizing rather than erasing the tensions and disconnects within and across the community.<sup>63</sup> This has included studying the multiple, complex, and often inconsistent ways in which communities of adult enthusiasts, artists, and entrepreneurs work with LEGO®.<sup>64</sup>

Additionally, Taylor and Ingraham's research provides a distinction between artists who use LEGO® as the material of practice which differs from LEGO® builders. LEGO® builders construct models as hobbies within close-knit communities of like-minded enthusiasts who collect and play with LEGO® as a pastime. Conversely, artists utilize LEGO® as an expressive medium within the sociopolitical, cultural, and economic flows of the broader artworld.<sup>65</sup> Several artists are referenced within their research whose practice incorporates LEGO® including the work of Chinese born, Portugal-based, visual artist Ai Weiwei. Ai has used LEGO® in several of his large-scale portrait works and landscape works, notably, in his large-scale LEGO® portraits installation, *Trace*, 2017 (fig 5). Covering the floor in six large segments, *Trace* depicts 176

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<sup>61</sup> Taylor and Ingraham, *LEGOified: Building Blocks as Media*, 5.

<sup>62</sup> Taylor and Ingraham, *LEGOified: Building*, 9.

<sup>63</sup> Taylor and Ingraham, *LEGOified: Building*, 9.

<sup>64</sup> Taylor and Ingraham, *LEGOified: Building*, 9.

<sup>65</sup> Taylor and Ingraham, *LEGOified: Building*, 44.

portraits of contemporary and historically significant political prisoners based on online image sources. Because Ai's work was created from LEGO®, each of his portraits simulates its online source's pixelated imagery. Thus, LEGO® was a fitting material to add stoic gravitas to the portraits. At the time of the Trace installation at Alcatraz, Ai was detained by the Chinese government, thus unable to work through the installation or attend the exhibition. Another Ai installation, *Water Lillies#1*, 2023, is the artist's rendition on the famous Claude Monet triptych, completed in 1914 and 1926. Ai's decision to use LEGO® to render the image is specifically attached to the materiality of LEGO® and its ability to render imagery in a pixelated manner, allowing the artist to explore broader themes including depersonalization and digital contemporary technologies that he sees as central to modern life while also exemplifying imagery that represents his personal experiences of living in forced exile in China.<sup>66</sup>

Ai's calculated choice of LEGO® material for its attributes speak to the material's ability to convey meaning in a broader socio-cultural context. This is also evident in the work of Nimako's Afrofuturistic works. Many of Nimako's works present a vision of Black futures with a history, specifically for Black people. The artist has expressly stated that his goals include delivering a positive vision of Black people for Black people, particularly Black youth. This forethought is reflected in his decision to solely use black LEGO® material as his medium.

### ***Identity through Afrofuturism***

Ytasha Womack, a prominent Afrofuturist writer, defines Afrofuturism as the intersectionality of the future, technology, imagination, and liberation that is not merely the domain of artists, musicians, authors, and scholars.<sup>67</sup> Advances in digital technology have

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<sup>66</sup> Justin McGuirk, ed., *Ai Weiwei: Making Sense* (London: The Design Museum, 2023), 90.

<sup>67</sup> Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black SCI-FI and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013), 9.

democratized the genre, opening it to many who consider themselves Afrofuturists.<sup>68</sup> The term Afrofuturism was first used by cultural critic Mark Dery in his 1993 text “Black to the Future” in which he identified it as an emerging genre of speculative fiction that imagined Black futures while addressing African American socio-cultural concerns within the context of twentieth century technology-infused culture.<sup>69</sup> However, the genre can be traced back to literary works in the early 1900s by W.E.B. DuBois, the American civil rights activist and Pan-Africanist who developed science fictional prose that incorporated future-imagined technologies alongside metaphorically discussed issues of colonialism, racism, and the exploitation of Africa.<sup>70</sup> The current evolutionary development of the genre places it at the intersection between African diasporic culture and technology through its shared space with the literary arts, the visual and performance arts, and the internet, where Black identity influences the technology-laden practices.<sup>71</sup>

Technology is a pertinent attribute within the paradigm of Afrofuturism. As an identity marker, Afrofuturism allows artists to articulate a vision of self that engages with technologies in an active manner that is self-defined. This specific aspect of identity that addresses technology speaks to the mainstream culturally labeled fallacy that Black people did not engage with

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<sup>68</sup> Grace Gipson, “Creating and Imagining Black Futures through Afrofuturism,” in *#identity: Hashtagging Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Nation*, ed. Abigail De Kosnik and Keith P. Feldman (University of Michigan Press, 2019), 84.

<sup>69</sup> Mark Dery, ed., *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 180.

<sup>70</sup> Reynaldo Anderson, “Afrofuturism 2.0 and the Black Speculative Arts Movement: Notes on a Manifesto,” *Obsidian* 42, no. 1/2 (2016): 229.

<sup>71</sup> Cassandra L Jones, “The Data Thief, the Cyberflaneur, and Rhythm Science: Challenging Anti-Technological Blackness with the Metaphors of Afrofuturism,” *CLA Journal* 61, no. 4 (2018): 203.



technology, or what Cassandra Jones refers to as the stigma of Blackness as anti-technological, or there were no Black geeks.<sup>72</sup>

Afrofuturism also widens Black identity opportunities. As mentioned above, the genre sits at the intersection of the arts and humanities, as well as the technical and social sciences. Thus, the possibilities of imagining Black futures are uncapped. It is this opportunity for limitless identity creation through Black future states to which Myron T. Strong and K. Sean Chaplin attribute to the culturally embraced and popular success of the *Black Panther* movies.<sup>73</sup> The authors posit the first film's success on the expansive placement of Black identity in a manner not normally depicted in the visual and film arts for a wider, mainstream culture.<sup>74</sup> The expansive identity depictions were not just with key character roles, but with all roles through an almost all-Black cast with a historical past record and a present, as well as their future state being imagined and articulated.

The widened and limitless possibilities to explore identity through Afrofuturism sit at the crux of multimedia contemporary artist Wangechi Mutu's practice. Born in Nairobi, Kenya and living in New York City, New York, Mutu's Afrofuturistic works in collage and sculpture allows her to explore issues of feminist theory, race, and objectification of the Black female body through the creation of fantastical creatures of other worldly hybridity. Through her work, she envisions creatures who encapsulate Black female pasts, reconciled with the present stereotypes

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<sup>72</sup> Jones, "The Data Thief, the Cyberflaneur," 205.

<sup>73</sup> *Black Panther* is a Marvel Studios movie that became an international, cultural phenomenon based on a story that follows its main character T'Challa's ascension to the throne as king of Wakanda, following his father's death. The Kingdom of Wakanda is an isolated, technologically advanced African nation with futuristic visual imagery that represents technological advances made solely by Black African people. For more information about the movie, see the Marvel Studios website. <https://www.marvel.com/movies/black-panther>.

<sup>74</sup> Myron T. Strong and K. Sean Chaplin, "Afrofuturism and Black Panther," *Contexts* 18, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 58.

that these pasts created, while simultaneously illustrating Black female future states of hybridized beings. The artist cites her own evolving understanding of the history of representing women in Western art as attractive, which was an issue for her as Black women in the arts, as subject or creator, are still seen as exotic.<sup>75</sup> Mutu positions contemporary art as the domain that allows her to explore and grapple with terms like beauty and beautiful, which she notes were not discussed within academia at Cooper Union in New York where she worked on her Bachelor of Fine Arts.<sup>76</sup> Afrofuturism allows Mutu to investigate Black female identities while defining and redefining beauty within diasporic identities.

The previously discussed scholarship on Afrofuturism illustrates how it serves as a venue for Nimako to define and create Black identities that are not prevalent or authentically represented within art history or popular visual culture. Nimako creatively channels African diasporic cultural histories into a futuristic premise of how these cultures could have developed without colonial interference.

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<sup>75</sup> Charles Henry Rowell, ed., “Wangechi Mutu: Artist Statement,” *Callaloo: Art and Culture in the African Diaspora* 37, no. 4 (2014): 921.

<sup>76</sup> Rowell, ed., “Wangechi Mutu: Artist Statement,” 921.

## ***Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE, the Sculpture***

*Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* is the centerpiece of the installation series *Building Black Civilizations* by sculptural artist Ekow Nimako. *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* is a thirty-square-foot sculpture constructed of approximately one hundred thousand black LEGO® pieces (fig. 6). The sculpture depicts an imagined future version of the ancient capital city of the Empire of Ghana, Kumbi Saleh. Historically, Kumbi Saleh was believed to have been a densely populated, sprawling cosmopolitan city that housed the kingdom's royal family, the royal court, the elite of the society, artisans and craftspeople, and Muslim traders.<sup>77</sup> The city and region were known to be abundantly rich, hence its being referred to as the Land of Gold.<sup>78</sup> The richness of Kumbi Saleh is illustrated in a story shared by Nehemia Levtzion. According to Levtzion's narrative, a Muslim deputy of the region needed to depart to lead a northern jihad. The deputy divorced his wife, the daughter of a trader, because she was accustomed to the luxuries of the city, and the deputy believed she would not have been able to endure the hardships of the desert outside of the region.<sup>79</sup> The meticulous, intricate design and execution of *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* prompts the viewer to imagine the magnitude of riches that this medieval city had in its past by seeing the futuristic rendering of what it could have become.

*Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* is an architectural cityscape nestled within a rocky enclosed valley (fig. 6). Thus, viewers can approach the artwork as if they were approaching the gates of a monumental walled city from the medieval past. While the entire sculpture has a square base platform, the cityscape is circular within a walled enclosure. Nimako began by creating a base

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<sup>77</sup> Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana and Mali*, 24-26

<sup>78</sup> Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana and Mali*, 3.

<sup>79</sup> Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana and Mali*, 39

circular frame, constructed on his research on architectural history (fig. 7).<sup>80</sup> The artist notes that the idea of a circular city was appealing to him because he sees it as efficient and increasing mobility for the inhabitants as the sections are all equidistant from the center.<sup>81</sup>

Nimako most clearly expresses Afrofuturistic aesthetic design inside the city walls of *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*. He points out that his oeuvre is highly influenced by his lifelong interest in comic books and comic book characters.<sup>82</sup> He was particularly drawn to the mutant characters who were outcasts, which he identified with as a Black child and later as a Black man, given that Black people are often the most vulnerable in society.<sup>83</sup> The artist found it particularly problematic that the few characters who were Black or characters of color were generally mutants.<sup>84</sup> However, the aesthetics of his original conception of *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* were influenced by the *Black Panther* movie and the fictional Kingdom of Wakanda because these represented an African society that was untouched by colonialism and enslavement.<sup>85</sup> Images from the movie helped Nimako to envision what a futuristic society would look like.<sup>86</sup> Thus, the power of a futuristic vision of Black African peoples whose identity is not rooted in marginalization and discrimination allowed the artist to root his aesthetical design in unfettered imaginary visuals.

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<sup>80</sup> Ekow Nimako, "Picking Up the Pieces: Reimagining Black Civilizations with Ekow Nimako," Aga Khan Museum, January 30, 2020, Video Lecture, 41:48, <https://youtu.be/OCqrcoq3HYM?si=c-76ciuMuBHUKG2Z>.

<sup>81</sup> Nimako, "Picking up the Pieces," 42:25.

<sup>82</sup> Nimako, "Picking up the Pieces," 19:22.

<sup>83</sup> Nimako, "Picking up the Pieces," 20:44.

<sup>84</sup> Nimako, "Picking up the Pieces," 20:38.

<sup>85</sup> YouTube video 21:21-22:29.

<sup>86</sup> Nimako, "Picking up the Pieces," 23:28.

The major mode of transportation within *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* is water; the viewer can see the waterway from the city's entrance gate that welcomes visitors (fig. 8 and fig. 9).<sup>87</sup> Waterways within the city were not included in Nimako's initial plan. However, as he crafted his design sketches, this element became something that made sense.<sup>88</sup> Additionally, Nimako notes that including waterways gave him an opportunity to incorporate transparent Black LEGO® pieces (fig. 9), in contrast to the opaque Black bricks.<sup>89</sup> Prior to sculpting *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*, he had not considered the transparent black bricks as actually black. However, Nimako notes that the nature of working with LEGO® presents a recurring theme that the LEGO® material informs the art.<sup>90</sup> In this instance, the material medium allowed for fluidity in his building process, while still staying true to his aesthetic practice of solely using black LEGO® as an abstract identity marker. Incorporating the transparent black bricks allowed light to filter through the piece in a way that highlights the stark opacity of the dominant black bricks.

There are two faces at the entrance gates of *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*, like the Lamassu monumental sculptures of ancient Assyrian walled cities. Nimako refers to them as ancestral faces and cites a scene from one of the *Lord of the Rings* movies as part of his inspiration.<sup>91</sup> Each ancestral face is surrounded by longer, rectangular LEGO® bricks of differing sizes (fig. 8). He uses these bricks to render a rocky effect of the walls surrounding the entire city. This is a good juxtaposition to the ancestral faces, which have a smooth, serene appearance. Nimako cites the African masks decorating his current and childhood residences in Canada as his inspiration for

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<sup>87</sup> Nimako, "Picking up the Pieces," 43:12.

<sup>88</sup> Nimako, "Picking up the Pieces," 43:43.

<sup>89</sup> Nimako, "Picking up the Pieces," 43:54.

<sup>90</sup> Nimako, "Picking up the Pieces," 48:26.

<sup>91</sup> Nimako, "Picking up the Pieces," 45:20.

the ancestral faces.<sup>92</sup> The mask-like faces are frontal and symmetrical, and they appear to have been constructed on a vertical axis. From this perspective, the masks appear to follow suit with most traditional African sculptural carving practices. Nimako positions these masks at an angle that leads the viewer into the city through the entryway.

Each mask is different. One mask is reminiscent of an African mask (fig. 10) with similar features of the Dan cultures of Western Africa. This face has a more ovular shape with distinctive, open almond shaped eyes (fig. 10). The open eyes reflect the denotation in Dan cultures of a male representation.<sup>93</sup> The bridge of the nose, while flat, has a slightly convex protrusion (fig. 10). The nostrils are formed from two bricks that resemble a fourth of a circle each, in which the right angle sits on top of the lips (fig. 10). The nose leads the viewer's eye to the mouth, a very prominent feature of this face. The mouth is formed by joining several rectangular bricks with a slight curve to create the ovular effect of full, parted lips that deliver a slightly opened mouth image (fig. 11). The overall impression of this mask is reminiscent of traditional wood-carved African masks. The mask evokes strength through peaceful and knowledgeable imagery.

The second ancestral mask on the opposite side of the city entrance has a different visage than the first. This mask reflects more futuristic and science fiction elements (fig. 12). The eyes appear to be created from angular, recessed space with an upward slant, pointing out of the face. This gives the mask a less human, more humanoid effect. The recessed eye sockets meet at the nose, which is made of multiple smaller rectangular bricks with one flat, protruding brick at the top center to create the bridge. This differs from the facing mask in that the angularity of the

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<sup>92</sup> Nimako, "Picking up the Pieces," 46:10.

<sup>93</sup> Robert J. Koenig, *The SMA African Art Museum Guide to Collections* (Moonachie: Galvanic Printing and Plate Co, Inc. 2011), 7.

protruding bridged nose creates a harsher, mechanical effect in line with futuristic characteristics. This mask has higher, angular cheeks that sit flat on the face, giving the face a broad structure that implies physical strength. The nose ends just above the top lip of the mouth, which is less pronounced than the first mask. However, while the lips are less defined than the first mask, they are distinctly chiseled into angular points that support the less human visage of the face. The mouth appears to be open with the corners turned down in a sharp point (fig. 13). This stylistic choice also supports the more mechanical, futuristic rendering of this mask.

Nimako's inclusion of the two different mask archetypes provides a physical entry point into the sculptural city and sets the tone for the imagined experience of being in Kumbi Saleh of the future. One mask provides the viewer with historically connected context of the African cultures of the past. The opposite mask prepares the viewer for an experience of projecting the imagination into the future by providing a vision of a futuristic gatekeeper who protects the peace of the utopia. Nimako states that he did not originally think of building a utopic city; however, upon completion, he received commentary on the design, and he realized that the creation of an imagined utopia untouched by western intervention was a driving force in his designing and building.<sup>94</sup> The masks are also an appropriate image to ground the work, given the common use of masks in many African cultures. While there are differences among African cultures who incorporate masks and masquerade into cultural practice, masks across African cultures are commonly used in ceremonial and symbolic representation.<sup>95</sup> Masks depict spiritual forces that mark major aspects of social and individual significance. Additionally, ceremonial masks have played symbolic roles within the society and represent behavioral expectations of

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<sup>94</sup> Nimako, "Picking up the Pieces," 39:51.

<sup>95</sup> Rev. Thomas E. Hayden, *African Sculpture from the Collection of the Society of African Missions* (Moonachie: Galvanic Printing and Plate Co, Inc. 1980), 6.

society members.<sup>96</sup> Positioning masks as the first entrée into *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* foreshadows what is to come.

There is a rectangular archway between the two masks at the main entrance that leads the eye into the city. The first of two Adinkra symbols incorporated into the sculpture sits on top of the archway (fig.14). Adinkra are visual symbols that originated in West Africa, specifically attributed to the Kingdom of Ashanti of the Akan ethnic group in what is present-day Ghana (fig. 14).<sup>97</sup> The Adinkra symbols as well as Adinkra cloth and the Adinkra alphabet each have a specific meaning and are utilized in various ways within traditional and contemporary works to represent significant ideas of spirituality and guidance.<sup>98</sup> This Adinkra symbol above the archway appears to be Ohene Adwa, the king's stool, which represents authority and leadership (fig. 14).<sup>99</sup>

Passing the archway and the Ohene Adwa symbol leads across a walkway, walled on each side with a bridge that crosses one of several canals within the city (fig. 15). The magnitude of the details of the LEGO® buildings within the city become extremely obvious at this point. Closely inspecting the individual LEGO® structures reveals the densely populated metropolis of futuristic buildings that the artist describes when he refers to the influence that images of

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<sup>96</sup> Hayden, *African Sculpture from the Collection*, 6.

<sup>97</sup> Nakia Duncan, *Wisdom Without Words: Adinkra Symbols, A Modern Guide*. (Middletown: Wisdom Without Words, 2023), 21-27.

<sup>98</sup> K Zauditu-Selassie, "Every Goodbye Ain't Gone: Using Adinkra Symbols to Frame Critical Agneda in African Diasporic Literature." *CLA Journal* 54, no. 3 (March 2011): 299.

<sup>99</sup> Duncan, *Wisdom Without Words*, 251-252. Ohene Adwa is one of eight symbols within the leadership cluster of Adinkra symbols. Symbols within this cluster all begin with the Ohene prefix and offer a variety of interpretations on the importance and responsibility of ruling, protecting, and guiding. The symbols within this group represent the attributes, roles, and ideas that a leader should possess. The Ohene Adwa symbol represented by the king's stool illustrates the combining of the state and the chieftaincy, serving as the physical representation of the king's sacred authority of rule. Ohene Adwa embodies respect for traditional law and the value of supporting the king's authority. It also represents the king's role in maintaining harmony, while making decisions for the greater good of the community.



Wakanda from the *Black Panther* movie had on his conception and ideation process.<sup>100</sup> The structures range in significant variation of geometric design. There are several angular buildings with pyramidal rooftops (fig. 16, top right). Several of the buildings mimic high rise buildings in which the viewer can conjure images of bustling, urban metropolis cities with thousands of residents (fig. 16, center). There are many rounded structures; however, they range in a wide variety of styles with some being circular and others being cylindrical. There are also low, garden style edifices with flat, square tops interspersed among the higher structures (fig. 16). It is notable that the structures differ across the sections of the work. Each section is bordered by canals and sits adjacent to the inner walls of the city center (fig. 17). The structures are clustered together between the canals, represented by transparent black LEGO®, that meander throughout the city in angular patterns. Each section is connected to the other via bridges that cross the canals (fig. 16). Nimako noted that there was an element of imagination at play as he was building the city layout; however, the LEGO® material dictated much of his design choices.<sup>101</sup> While he did sketch out a plan for how the city would look, he did not create a blueprint that mapped out the functions of each section of the *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*. However, the artist notes that he envisioned different functions as he was building, such as a section of the futuristic city being the arts district.<sup>102</sup> He also says that some of the design choices and elements are attached to his imagining that he lived in the Afrofuturistic city that he was building, and he mentioned the joy that this imagining brought him.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Nimako, "Picking up the Pieces," 21:21.

<sup>101</sup> Nimako, "Picking up the Pieces," 48:33.

<sup>102</sup> Nimako, "Picking up the Pieces," 37:59.

<sup>103</sup> Nimako, "Picking up the Pieces," 48:53.

When viewing *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* from above, the viewer can see that the sections of building, canals, and walkways lead to the city center, anchored by a large tower structure that Nimako refers to as the central spire.<sup>104</sup> This is the tallest and broadest structure of the city. This central spire structure also holds the second Adinkra symbol incorporated into the work, Gye Wáni, the symbol of enjoyment and celebration (fig. 8 and fig. 17).<sup>105</sup> Nimako specifically included Gye Wáni to indicate that this utopic city was a place where inhabitants are members of a magical realm, free of conflict and full of enjoyment and prosperity.<sup>106</sup> The artist envisioned the people of this futuristic city as a united group whose identity was comingled in the pursuit of common happiness and prosperity.<sup>107</sup> Incorporating Ghanaian symbolic references that were developed centuries ago in West Africa is the link that binds Kumbi Saleh, the medieval city, to *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*, the sculpture. The medieval city Kumbi Saleh holds an identity of prosperity within its history. Nimako successfully married this historic identity with an Afrofuturistic identity of prosperity through *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*. The artist's science fictional city looks one thousand years forward and speculates about the possibilities of Black identities in the future.

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<sup>104</sup> Nimako, "Picking up the Pieces," 38:53.

<sup>105</sup> Duncan, *Wisdom Without Words*, 137-138.

<sup>106</sup> Nimako, "Picking up the Pieces," 40:09.

<sup>107</sup> Nimako, "Picking up the Pieces," 40:24.

### ***Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE in Context***

A thorough understanding of Nimako's *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* is aided by an appreciation of the significance of the ancient Ghanaian city and its historical implication. Historians of Africa identify the Empire of Ghana as a medieval economic power that lasted from the sixth through the twelfth century CE. The Empire of Ghana was not located where the current country of Ghana sits in West Africa. Historians have geographically located the Empire of Ghana in the Sahara region where present-day southern Mauritania and Mali are located. The modern country of Ghana was named by its first president as an honor to the medieval empire.

The Empire of Ghana was the first major agrarian nation to develop in this region. Because the inhabitants did not have a formal system of writing, much is unknown about the empire and its history. However, there are informational records about the empire based on the writings of Arabs who conducted trade in the region.<sup>108</sup> These records span multiple centuries, beginning with the seventh century, but these writing are fragmented. The more extensive, firsthand written accounts come from Arab writers from the twelfth through the sixteenth centuries. The recorded history indicates that the Empire of Ghana enjoyed a complex society that was characterized by a division of labor system, high wealth, and extensive trans-Saharan trade across and beyond the region. It was the abundance of trade of gold, iron, copper, ivory, and enslaved people as well as easy access to the Niger River, that created the complex society and the massive wealth of its kings, who resided in Kumbi Saleh. For this reason, Arab traders would refer to the Empire of Ghana as the Land of Gold.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Joseph Ki-Zerbo and DjiBril Tamsir Niane, eds. *UNESCO General History of Africa, Vol. IV Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century*. (UNESCO: Paris,1997), 4-5.

<sup>109</sup> Ki-Zerbo and Niane, *UNESCO General History of Africa*, 246-247.

Archeological research has determined that Kumbi Saleh was most likely the capitol of the medieval Empire of Ghana. The city was a densely populated urban area with two- to three-story dwellings positioned close together on narrow streets. The first floor of these dwellings was used for storing merchandise as many wealthy Muslim traders lived in the city.<sup>110</sup> The city also supported fifteen to twenty thousand people, determined by excavation of pottery and remains of a palace and mosque, which is significant given the climate, terrain, and scarcity of water accessed from wells dug in the sand.<sup>111</sup> Additionally, excavation of the region produced a significant number of glass beads in Kumbi Saleh and neighboring city Gao Saney. Because glass was not produced in this region but imported through trade, this places the region, including Kumbi Saleh, as one of the most important economic trans-Saharan trade centers in West Africa from the eighth to the tenth century.<sup>112</sup> Given the historical significance of Kumbi Saleh, it is understandable that Nimako chose this medieval Ghanaian economic powerhouse as the subject of his Afrofuturistic monumental sculpture.

*Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* was born of Nimako's learning about the history of the original, medieval Empire of Ghana from the text, *Royal Kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay: Life in Medieval Africa*, which was given to him by a friend several years before the *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time* exhibition at the Aga Khan Museum. This was during a period when the artist notes his personal Black consciousness was awakening.<sup>113</sup> He discussed that he was digging deeper into his own cultural histories and who he was within the realm of the Black

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<sup>110</sup> Nehemia Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana and Mali* (London: Methuen, 1973), 23-24.

<sup>111</sup> Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana and Mali*, 24.

<sup>112</sup> Shoichiro Takezawa and Mamadou Cisse, "Discovery of the Earliest Royal Palace in Gao and Its Implications for the History of West Africa," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 52, no. 208 (2012): 825.

<sup>113</sup> Nimako, "Picking up the Pieces," 10:19.

African diaspora. He cites this book as a significant influence on the creation of his *Building Black Civilizations* sculptural series as well as *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*.<sup>114</sup> Additionally, Nimako's works in *Building Black Civilizations* were his creative response to the Aga Khan Museum exhibition, *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time*. *Building Black Civilizations* was not included in the *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time* at the Block Museum of Art, or the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art.<sup>115</sup>

Nimako uses his practice within Afrofuturism as a platform to establish Black identities from history and project them into the future. *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* is an architectural representation of the identities of buried histories of peoples of the medieval Empire of Ghana. Additionally, black LEGO® abstractly symbolizes the presence of missing identities and histories of diasporic people not adequately represented in art history. Through meticulous architectural rendering and the artist's imagination, the monumental sculpture creates a Black diasporic identity of the plausibility of what the uninterrupted history of the Empire of Ghana and its capitol, Kumbi Saleh, could have become in the future. The artist cites his interest in the Afrofuturism genre and the realm of Black imagination as the motivation for this creation.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Nimako, "Picking up the Pieces," 10:19.

<sup>115</sup> While *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time* originated at the Block Museum of Art in Evanston Illinois, the exhibition traveled to The Smithsonian Institute National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C. and the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, Canada. Ekow Nimako's works referenced in this research were specifically created for the exhibition At the Aga Khan Museum.

<sup>116</sup> Nimako, "Picking up the Pieces," 52:23.

### ***Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE through the Perspective of Colonialism and De-colonialism***

Within many contemporary Black African diasporic artworks, identity is intricately entwined with responses to colonial legacies. These legacies foster a dynamic dialogue that reflects both the enduring impact of colonialism and the continually evolving quest for de-colonialized identity definitions. *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* and other works from Nimako's *Building Black Civilizations* signify Black diasporic identity creation by presenting Black underrecognized and underrepresented identities in a simultaneous historical and futuristic context. His works set forth a challenge to the historical record created by colonialism and a challenge to imagining humans in the future.

Nimako continually states that he works within the speculative realm and uses his work to create identities through speculative storytelling.<sup>117</sup> The stories that the artist fabricates provide a contextual backdrop for his sculptures that create Black heroic identities similar to those found in mythology, fables, and popular legends. Yet these stories are seldom associated with Black figures as the legacies of colonialism underscore or purge Black African stories of heroism from the historical record. Grace Gibson notes that Afrofuturistic narratives and artworks often illustrate Black individuals creating identity through building communities, innovating new technologies, rewriting dominant narratives, and escaping oppression.<sup>118</sup>

Three sculptures within *Building Black Civilizations* exemplify Nimako's use of historic stories of heroism told through futuristic images to create Black diasporic identities. The artist wrote a short character sketch for this triptych called "Narratives of Resistance" (fig 18). This

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<sup>117</sup> Ekow Nimako, "Ekow Nimako – Building Black Civilizations: Journeys of 2,000 Ships," Dunlop Art Gallery, October 24, 2022, exhibition discussion video, 1:59 to 2:18, <https://youtu.be/aoZwJ41RfSM?si=SnwOIG-nbBM0PApR>.

<sup>118</sup> Gibson, "Creating and Imagining Black," 91.

narrative tells of a legend of a young Black girl who escapes slavery within the Sahara Dessert to become a powerful queen, known as the Bandit Queen of a tribe of female warriors. This fierce warrior tribe included her twin daughter generals, Princesses Aisha and Ezzy. While they were known for raids of terror, the tribe freed other Black female slaves, took from the rich, and shared with the poor.<sup>119</sup> Through this narrative, Nimako reimagined the legend of Robin Hood, which he states was one of his favorite childhood stories. Using this story of heroism, the artist created a non-traditional narrative to create a heroic identity for a young Black girl who finds her purpose through saving and helping her Black community from the ravages of slavery.

The triptych depicts warriors in imposing combatant poses. Nimako describes these warriors as monuments.<sup>120</sup> Thus, the viewer should imagine that these are monuments inside *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE. The Bandit Queen of Walatah* sits at the center of the narrative (fig. 18). Of the three, this sculpture is the most commanding and is the largest at approximately twelve to fifteen inches high. Positioned on a platform where she is straddling a building structure nestled among a rocky landscape, *The Bandit Queen of Walatah* has long, muscular legs, sculpted from various sized, angular LEGO® bricks. The building that she straddles resembles one of several historical mosques of the medieval period that have been reconstructed several times and survive today, such as The Great Friday Mosque of Djenné in present day Mali, Africa. The Great Friday Mosque is constructed of traditional adobe and mud with a wooden plank scaffolding.<sup>121</sup> Due to the humid climate and the rainy seasons, these traditional structures need constant replastering (fig. 20). However, Nimako reimagines the traditional architecture. The mosque's futuristic structure is transformed into an impenetrable fortress by the gleaming black LEGO®.

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<sup>119</sup> Nimako, "Picking up the Pieces," 31:51-34:37.

<sup>120</sup> Nimako, "Picking up the Pieces," 31:21.

<sup>121</sup> Frank Willett, *African Art* (New York: Thaes and Hudson, Inc., 2003), 118-119.

*The Bandit Queen of Walatah*'s torso also uses angular bricks to give the impression that the warrior is wearing protective battle armor. As with the legs, the arms also use angular LEGO® bricks that render a chiseled, muscular effect. One arm holds a bow, standing ready for battle. To add to the imagery that this figure holds a position of power, Nimako has also incorporated an arm and hand gesture often seen in Early Empire Roman statuary, in which the emperor or the army general holds his arm and hand out-stretched to command the attention of his subjects (fig. 21) The monumental figure's face is a futuristic, mask-like visage with long, angular, narrow, recessed slits for eyes that point downward. The recessed eyes meet at a point, reminiscent of a bird beak, which gives the figure a razor-sharp impression. There are two horns that protrude from the face right above the eye openings that are reminiscent of horns on a Frafra funerary ritual wicker helmet (fig. 22). The Frafra of northern Ghana incorporate a wicker helmet with horns in funerary rituals; the helmet can only be worn by a male who is considered an especially fierce warrior and hunter.<sup>122</sup> The head also has a single, winged protrusion that sits in the center of the forehead. This is also suggestive of the Frafra funerary helmet that has a hole in the top for inserting a stick or a bundle of reeds with attached sheep fur. This embellishment is also worn by males old enough to hunt and signifies their ability and value to the culture.<sup>123</sup>

The entire figure has a futuristic look and, due to its muscular stance, a domineeringly male appearance. However, Nimako has also incorporated a contemporary hairstyle, very common among Black women across the diaspora who have thick, kinky, natural hair. The sculpture wears afro puffs, which is a hairstyle achieved by pulling the hair into ponytails, but allowing the hair to naturally spread into small, round shaped puff balls (fig. 23). In this instance,

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<sup>122</sup> Fred T Smith, "Symbols of Conflict and Integration in Frafra Funerals." *African Arts* 21, no. 1 (November 1987): 50.

<sup>123</sup> Smith, "Symbols of Conflict and Integration," 50.



the artist has used the sculpture to create a legendary, heroic figure rooted in the historical past of medieval Sahara culture using traditional ornamental elements from Ghanaian culture. Nimako also makes connections to the present through contemporary visual references. This figure simultaneously belongs to the future through her futuristic countenance, created from black LEGO® to design the severe battle attire.

*The Bandit Queen of Walatah: Princess Aisha* is a second sculpture of the triptych in “Narratives of Resistance” (fig. 24), which stands at approximately twelve inches high. This sculpture also stands on a rocky platform built of black LEGO® with a small structure behind her. This structure is a temple with a dome and steeple-shaped minaret, similar to those built as sacred Muslim funerary sites in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (fig. 25). Nimako’s reimagined futuristic dome and minaret of black LEGO® transform the architecture into a simple but stately design with a beacon at its central focal point.

The legs are composed of narrow, rectangular black LEGO® bricks. The legs widen as they proceed up the length of the body, creating the image of strong, muscular thighs that meet at a strong chiseled torso with a narrow waist. The black LEGO® bricks that have been used to sculpt the body give it the appearance of being armor clad. This figure is in an active warrior pose in which she has raised her arms to pull an arrow through the bow that she holds. The body is less broad than *The Bandit Queen of Walatah*, appearing to be smaller in stature. However, this figure has a svelte physique that renders a graceful, lithe impression where the viewer can imagine her swift movements during battle. Similar to *The Bandit Queen of Walatah*, the *Bandit Queen of Walatah: Princess Aisha* sculpture also has a futuristic, mask-like face with narrow, recessed eye slits and a single, wing ornament on the forehead. The narrow, angular, recessed eyes also meet in a bird beak-like point those revels in speed and fantasy. *The Bandit Queen of*

*Walatah: Princess Aisha* also has the contemporary, Black afro puffs hairstyle that reflects current natural, Black hairstyles that celebrate elements of Black culture that have traditionally been marginalized.

The final sculpture of the triptych is *The Bandit Queen of Walatah: Princess Ezzy* (fig. 26) which stands at approximately ten to twelve inches high. This warrior is in an active kneeling pose, positioned to shoot her cocked arrow from her bow. This figure also sits on a platform in which the LEGO® imitates a rocky landscape. There is a small mosque-like building behind *The Bandit Queen of Walatah: Princess Ezzy*. The position of the figure in front of the mosque gives the impression that she is protecting the building. The building's architecture resembles a mosque with columns and a vaulted entryway, similar to the *Dome of the Rock* in Jerusalem (fig. 27). The architecture of the mosque includes open windows on each side, a flat roof, and a shiny black dome. There is a steeple-style minaret, and the viewer can imagine hearing the centuries-old Islamic call to prayer.

Similar to the other monumental figures, the artist has used angular shaped LEGO® bricks to give the figure a chiseled, muscular physique. The LEGO® chosen for the calves makes the figure have strong, toned muscles. She also has additional knee armor, which signifies that she shifts to this kneeling pose often during battle. Nimako also chose LEGO® of varying angles to create toned arms that adroitly pull the tight bow and arrow back, ready for release. Like her mother and sister, *The Bandit Queen of Walatah: Princess Ezzy* wears a similar bird-like mask with narrow, recessed eye slits and a single wing ornament protruding from the forehead. The artist gave *The Bandit Queen of Walatah: Princess Ezzy* a hairstyle that reflects styles of contemporary, Black diasporic men and women. The figure's hair cascades from the back of her

head like present-day dreadlocks (fig. 28). Dreadlocks are a natural hairstyle in which the hair is allowed to grow, uncombed until the hair matts, or locks, into long rope-like coils.<sup>124</sup>

As discussed in Nimako's "Narratives of Resistance" series within *Building Black Civilizations*, the three *The Bandit Queen of Walatah* sculptures are examples of the artist using his practice to create identities for Black diasporic peoples. The artist uses speculative fiction as a device to reimagine Black people's pasts and legendary, heroic futures that colonialism and subsequent de-colonialized legacies have rendered underrepresented.

Nimako also uses the works within *Building Black Civilizations* to illustrate identity through architecture. Identity and architecture are closely entwined in several ways. Humans' creation of architectural spaces is both practical and complex, incorporating cultural expression and symbolic references based in historical and social contexts.<sup>125</sup> Thus, architecture and architectural elements tell stories about the past and the evolution of a location. This evolution includes the social, economic, and political influences of different cultures that impact the community's development. Zohreh Torabi and Sara Brahman refer to this as architectural

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<sup>124</sup> Dreadlocks, known as locs, hold religious, cultural, and spiritual significance and have gained popularity in contemporary fashion, music, and beauty. Evolving techniques and products are used to create these rope-like strands, with historical evidence tracing back to 1500BC in Hindu texts depicting Lord Shiva wearing "Jaṭā," similar to dreadlocks, and their prevalence across various ancient cultures, symbolizing spiritual journeys in Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. Additionally, dreadlocks have been a cultural symbol worldwide, associated with shamanism in pre-Columbian America, Oceania, and Africa, often representing strength for warriors and chiefs. The widespread acceptance of dreadlocks owes much to the Rastafari Movement, largely popularized through reggae music, advocating natural hair growth as a way of being closer to God and identifying with aspects of Biblical text references. Originating in the 1930s in response to colonialism and slavery, the Rastafari Movement rebelled against cultural suppression, as wearing dreadlocks was historically a bold act for slaves, subject to brutal punishment. Even today, discrimination against people of color wearing dreadlocks persists in workplaces, schools, and sports, exemplified by firings, school expulsions, and performance restrictions imposed on athletes. Despite these controversies, for many within the Black African diaspora, dreadlock hairstyles represent physical and psychological liberation, cultural identity, or elements of a spiritual journey.

<sup>125</sup> Zohreh Torabi and Sara Brahman, "Effective Factors in Shaping the Identity of Architecture," *Middle-East Journal of Scientific Research* 15, (January 2013): 108.

identity, which is an identity that acts like a certificate for an individual's homeland and reveals the thoughts of its people.<sup>126</sup>

It is important for the viewer to remember that the works of *Building Black Civilizations*, including *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*, are rooted in the artist considering and imagining what would these great African kingdoms have become without the influences of colonialism and enslavement.<sup>127</sup> What is understood from research in architectural identity is that colonialism and de-colonialism had a profound impact on African architectural identity. Malathe Hamid, Laura Hanks, and Wang Qi conducted a case study on the city of Khartoum, Sudan, to better understand architectural identity, or the lack of it. Khartoum, Sudan is a postcolonial city that has yet to develop an architectural identity, despite achieving independence in 1956.<sup>128</sup> The researchers found that Khartoum experienced and continues to experience a loss of architectural identity for several reasons. For example, imposed colonial styles which represented colonial identities do not represent local Sudanese identities. Also, infrastructure built by foreign investors during colonialism and post-colonialism (once Khartoum discovered its oil resources) serves the foreign investors but not the local Sudanese people.<sup>129</sup> These influences have led to a loss of architectural identity because foreign architectural styles and neglect or sometimes destruction of styles native to the people, purpose, and landscape erode the traditional buildings' value. The buildings and the people are displaced by virtue of being disconnected from their heritage and historical knowledge. Post-colonial cities such as Khartoum did not have protectors

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<sup>126</sup> Torabi and Brahman, *Effective Factors in Shaping*,” 106.

<sup>127</sup> Nimako, “Picking Up the Pieces,” 22:22 to 22:35.

<sup>128</sup> Malathe Hamid, Laura Hanks and Wang Qi, “Is It Possible to Define Architectural Identity More Objectively?,” in *Cities' Vocabularies: The Influences and Formations*, ed. Mourad Amer (Cham: Springer, 2021), 112.

<sup>129</sup> Hamid, Hanks and Qi, “Is It Possible to Define,” 113.

from the unfortunate legacies of colonialization and de-colonialization. Thus, Nimako has built an architectural identity certificate through *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* for the futuristic Black inhabitants that is authentically for the Black diasporic.

Each sculpture of Nimako's "Narratives of Resistance" triptych focuses on a futuristic monumental figure and the story of that figure. However, the monumental figures are always protecting an edifice in the background. *Building Black Civilizations* is focused on building identities within communities as well as the identity connected to the physicality of the actual buildings that connects to the human story.<sup>130</sup> Every work within the series is grounded in identity and the various ways that pre-colonial Black identities are intertwined with architecture.

"Narratives of Resistance" illustrates three Afrofuturistic heroines protecting three buildings of Kumbi Saleh's medieval past. These heroines are representatives of Black diasporic identities who build Black futures and protect futuristic Black communities. Each building represents traditional architecture of medieval Ghana. Thus, through *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*, the viewer visually experiences medieval architecture in an imagined future that has not been touched, architecturally, by the cultural displacement and loss of identity that is often the legacy of colonialism and de-colonialism. The architectural identity of *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* has been created and protected by the legacy of heroic Black women in an imagined future who escaped oppression and battle slavery to safeguard the identity of their Black community.

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<sup>130</sup> Nimako, "Picking up the Pieces," 30:59 to 31:45.

### ***Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE through the Perspective of Materiality***

*Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* is a significant example of how contemporary, Black diasporic artists use non-traditional materials to embed identity within their practice through the materiality of their works. Ekow Nimako uses the materiality of black LEGO® in *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* and all the additional sculptures in *Building Black Civilizations* to illustrate Black diasporic identity narratives. These narratives interweave cultural heritage, personal histories, and innovative Afrofuturistic forms that tap into the language of aesthetics and create meaning and connections for the viewer. The artist has openly and consistently stated that his choice in black LEGO® is attached to his desire to purport connected meaning to Blackness and Black identity. This is because of his experience as a Black child playing with LEGO® when there were fewer options for Black representation. He also notes that there are still fewer representations of Black narratives available for children among LEGO® sets, as the material was not designed to speak about Black experience or support Black cultural production.<sup>131</sup>

It is for this reason that the artist strives to change the narrative by solely using black LEGO®. The specificity of black LEGO® in Nimako's practice is significant as the color black carries a direct message to the viewer of his works. Black LEGO® signifies the presence of Black people, and it embodies a sense of Blackness in the past, present, and future that is often absent from the historical record. According to the artist, he is motivated to solely use black LEGO® because black is an identifier. There is no misinterpretation of the identity of the faces, creatures, or children when using black LEGO®. This intentional identity creation can never be

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<sup>131</sup> Nimako, "Building Black Civilizations: Journey," 00:25 to 00:37.

erased or denied.<sup>132</sup> The artist also notes that the use of all black LEGO® strips away what can be discerned as playful and adds an elevated amount of sophistication to his works which heightens the viewer's experience of the message.<sup>133</sup>

The use of color to embed meaning within artworks is a stylistic device that has existed and continues to be used by artists throughout centuries, across periods and genres. Artists' color choices are often as much for aesthetic reasons as they are for cultural reasons. It is along this same reasoning that the color of the materials that contemporary Black artists choose is often connected to diasporic cultural references that are very specific to Black African diasporic experiences. Peter Erickson examined several works by Kerry James Marshall who creates large scale figurative works to articulate the lived experiences of Black culture. Marshall's signature within his practice is the use of distinct variations of black paint that serves as a referent to Black communal identity and self-identity.<sup>134</sup> Marshall's abstract use of black paint allows him to engage in an act of self-portraiture without completely revealing himself.<sup>135</sup> Marshall's stylistic use of the heavily modulated tones of black paint center Blackness and Black people as the subject in the forefront. Simultaneously, Marshall's use of black tones also places Blackness and Black people as neutral characters without obvious dimension. This is Marshall's reflection on the realities of the lived Black experience.

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<sup>132</sup> Stephani Maari Booker, "Interview: Ekow Nimako's Afrofuturistic Architecture," Brick Architect, Tom Alphin, June 19, 2021, accessed November 6, 2023, <https://brickarchitect.com/2021/interview-ekow-nimakos-afrofuturistic-architecture/>.

<sup>133</sup> Ekow Nimako, "Caravans of Gold: Fragments in Time #CaravansofGoldTO," Aga Khan Museum, October 28, 2019, video interview, 04:53 to 05:07, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C7XrB6hB6Gc&list=PLrpxU3fu2HVgvDCh-cUxP1LdNdWQ-K6I7&index=9>.

<sup>134</sup> Peter Erickson, "Posing the Black Painter Kerry James Marshall's Portraits of Artists Self-Portraits," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 38-39, (2016): 40.

<sup>135</sup> Erickson, "Posing the Black Painter," 40.

Kara Walker's 2014 monumental sculptural installation, *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, pays homage to underrepresented and unknown identities of people affected by slavery and oppression of underpaid workers (fig. 20).<sup>136</sup> The public installation was held in the Domino Sugar Refining Plant in Brooklyn, New York in 2014, prior to the refinery's demolition. The installation included a monumental sphinx sculpture of a white, polyurethane block frame, coated in white sugar that depicted the stereotypical Antebellum South Mammy archetype, while also incorporating contemporary references of Black, female sexuality from pop culture. Smaller sculptures included young male attendants surrounding the sphinx and made of sculpted brown, amber, and black molasses (fig. 29). *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* explores the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality by creating a narrative that incorporates historical and contemporary references, using sugar and molasses as the primary material for the installation. Through her extensive research about sugar and its global histories, Walker became fascinated about the need to have refined sugar and underlining meaning that she interpreted of turning sugar from brown to white.<sup>137</sup> For Walker, the properties of sugar – including the white color and powdery, micro-granularity that resulted from the refining process – were charged with meaning about slavery and becoming American.<sup>138</sup> The color of sugar's material element was significant as raw, unrefined sugar is brown, but refining is a highly involved chemical, trans-figurative process of the material to turn it into the highly desired white color. The refining process and the resulting white color for Walker represented what it means to be American. It also represented an opportunity to use the white material and its pre-refined dark brown material to question the

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<sup>136</sup> Kara Walker and Kara Rooney, "Kara Walker in Conversation with Kara Rooney 2014," in *Materiality*, ed. Petra Lange-Berndt (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2015), 57.

<sup>137</sup> Walker and Rooney, "Kara Walker in Conversation," 57.

<sup>138</sup> Walker and Rooney, "Kara Walker in Conversation," 57.



desire to be refined and what is lost in the refining process.<sup>139</sup> White sugar as a material represented the quest for the construct of whiteness in American society that Walker interprets as authority and an ideal of mastery over continents, people, bodies, ecology and other cultural aspects that do not adhere to the ideals of whiteness.<sup>140</sup> In this example, the white-colored materiality of sugar had an impact on the meaning of Walker's work because behind the white materiality of sugar lays deeper meanings of oppression.

In this example of Kara Walker's work, color is the conduit for giving a voice to a voiceless group of people whose identities are obscured and unknown. The materiality of black LEGO® achieves this same goal of agency within *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*. The individual black LEGO® pieces used in the work by themselves are considered a common child's toy. However, once the artist repurposes the material as a medium used in his fine art sculpture, the material follows the concept of materiality, which says that the creation of the artwork changes the meaning of the material.<sup>141</sup> The black LEGO® of *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* represents Black identities of a productive, ideal society that are not represented in history. Viewers encounter edifices within a walled city in which they can imagine the people who constructed the city living, working, and playing in those structures and spaces. The use of black is a continual reminder that the identities of these people are Black identities. Thus, if the viewer is imagining that they are meandering the streets of futuristic Kumbi Saleh, they are walking streets designed by Black engineers, constructed by Black construction workers, and managed by Black general contractors, using technologies innovated by Black researchers. Nimako referenced that while he was building sections and edifices within *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*, he imagined himself living

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<sup>139</sup> Walker and Rooney, "Kara Walker in Conversation," 58.

<sup>140</sup> Walker and Rooney, "Kara Walker in Conversation," 58.

<sup>141</sup> Lange-Berndt, *Materiality*, 17.

there and the various functions of the city sections. He envisioned Black lived experiences created by Black people in roles that identified them as keepers and creators of this futuristic utopia. The materiality of black LEGO® acts as a constant identity reminder for the viewer's experience of *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*. It explores the profound interplay between cultural heritage and imaginative storytelling while simultaneously proposing a vision of Black innovation and Black future states of being and identity. The convergence of identity, black LEGO® materiality, and the creative expressions within *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* showcases a dynamic narrative of Black identities that interweaves history, personal stories, and innovative artistic forms within possible Black futures. With this in mind, Taylor and Ingraham note that the properties of LEGO® materiality are not just attributes; once they are used within an artwork, they become histories.<sup>142</sup>

Thus far, the discussion about identity has focused on the outward identities that Nimako creates for others within the diaspora using his works. However, the LEGO® material also allows Nimako to define his own identity as a specific type sculpture artist. Nimako notes that there is a level of personal satisfaction derived from the physical experience of working with LEGO and hearing the click of the bricks when finding the just right piece.<sup>143</sup> Additionally, the artist views his practice as a fine arts practice, which differentiates his work from other LEGO® builders, or AFOL, Adult Fans of Lego. Taylor and Ingraham note that artists who work with LEGO® differ from AFOL in that they engage with the materiality of LEGO® from a perspective of repurposing consumer materials into art forms with a similar amount of irony and satire that reflects the ready-mades from Marcel Duchamp, Dada, or Pop Art.<sup>144</sup> The material

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<sup>142</sup> Taylor and Ingraham, *LEGOified: Building Blocks as Media*, 124.

<sup>143</sup> Nimako, "Picking Up the Pieces," 49:18 to 50:13.

<sup>144</sup> Taylor and Ingraham, *LEGOified: Building Blocks as Media*, 55.

nature of contemporary LEGO®-based arts infuse measures of contradiction by challenging the viewer to consider their material relationships to everyday objects through the works' physical forms of imitation.<sup>145</sup> With this in mind, one could surmise that fine arts sculptors such as Nimako define themselves as artists working in a new, contemporary genre.

Taylor and Ingraham reference other artists, such as the New York City-based sculptor Nathan Sawaya who also aligns himself and his practice with the fine arts. In 2013, Sawaya partnered with New York City-based fine arts photographer Dean West. The works of the two artists were merged in a show called *In Pieces*.<sup>146</sup> *Hotel*, 2013, (fig. 30), *Large Cloud*, 2013 (fig. 31) and *Small Cloud*, 2013 (fig. 32) are examples from the artists' collaborative series. With *In Pieces*, the artists merge photographic montages with LEGO® sculptures that capture listless subjects placed within landscapes of contemporary North America. Each photograph depicts an ordinary narrative that includes mundane objects made of LEGO® bricks sculpted by Sawaya to stand in for the object's photographic representation. The figures in each situation are disassociated from their surroundings, referenced by their eyes staring into a void and their artificial postures. The authors cite these lonely scenes as similar to those in Edward Hopper paintings.<sup>147</sup> The artists draw attention to the similarities among plastic bricks and pixels of digital photography; just as the digital image is composed of thousands of pixels, each LEGO® sculpture is constructed of hundreds of LEGO® pieces or tangible pixels that form the greater part.<sup>148</sup> Through the material aspects of LEGO® and its textural comparison to photographic

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<sup>145</sup> Taylor and Ingraham, *LEGOified: Building Blocks as Media*, 58.

<sup>146</sup> *In Pieces* includes multiple works in the collaborative series between Nathan Sawaya and Dean West. The 2013 exhibition was held at Openhouse Gallery in New York City, New York. The gallery has since closed. For the full visual reference of their collaborative effort, refer to Nathan Sawaya's website: <http://www.nathansawaya.com/in-pieces.html>.

<sup>147</sup> Taylor and Ingraham, *LEGOified: Building Blocks as Media*, 43-44.

<sup>148</sup> Taylor and Ingraham, *LEGOified: Building Blocks as Media*, 44.

pixelation, the artists ask the viewer to discern what objects are real and what objects are artificial representations of objects. The artists also use LEGO® materiality within these works to develop a critique on social interactions in our contemporary world, asking the same questions of authenticity.<sup>149</sup> Taylor and Ingraham note that in Sawaya’s collaboration with Dean to create these multimedia works, there is a self-contradictory aspect often seen in contemporary art. This is the playful contrast between the materiality of the medium and the questions asked of the viewer through complex social constructs addressed by the works.<sup>150</sup> The significance of Sawaya and Dean’s collaboration is that the materiality of the pixelation quality of LEGO® allowed the artists to attached greater conceptualized meaning around societal concerns, thus setting them apart from AFOL.

Returning to Nimako’s practice, his use of the materiality of LEGO® transcends the medium as a common child’s toy. He uses the materiality of LEGO® to serve as a mode of creative expression that simultaneously contains messages of social justice and reckoning of Black diasporic histories. As a contemporary artist using LEGO®, Nimako uses its materiality to support his quest to push boundaries that create – and more importantly deliver – narratives of Blackness in ways that are unique within sculpting.<sup>151</sup> In this respect, the materiality of LEGO® as a non-traditional sculpting medium offers Nimako an opportunity to create an identity for himself as a fine arts sculptor that uses unconventional materials to challenge historical narratives and create future narratives in novel, thought-provoking ways.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Taylor and Ingraham, *LEGOified: Building Blocks as Media*, 44-46.

<sup>150</sup> Taylor and Ingraham, *LEGOified: Building Blocks as Media*, 59.

<sup>151</sup> Nimako, “Building Black Civilizations: Journey of 2,000 Ships,” 00:37 to 00:45.

<sup>152</sup> Another aspect of LEGO® materiality relates to its plastic composition and the environmental and economic impact on society. LEGO® bricks, mainly composed of ABS plastic derived from petroleum, contribute to plastic production, energy consumption, and carbon emissions. The packaging, usually consisting of plastic and

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cardboard, generates waste, and the global distribution of LEGO® products adds to energy consumption and emissions during transportation. To address the unflattering reviews of the product's lack of sustainability, LEGO® has expressed its commitment to sustainability, aiming to shift to sustainable materials entirely for their products and packaging in the future, already introducing plant-based materials for some LEGO® pieces. They promote reuse through initiatives like LEGO® Replay, where used bricks are donated, cleaned, sorted, and redistributed to children in need, as its durability allows for long-term use and passing down through generations. However, this also leads to prolonged persistence of discarded LEGO® pieces in the environment. While this discussion is outside of parameters of this research investigation, it is important to address the plastic's impact and the LEGO® corporation's response to the impact that its product has on society. For more detailed discussion of the environmental and economic impact of LEGO® see Chapter Five of Taylor and Ingraham's text, *LEGOified: Building Blocks as Media*. Also see the LEGO® corporate website for information on the Zero Waste to Landfill target by 2025, <https://www.lego.com/en-us/sustainability/environment>.

### ***Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE through the Perspective of Afrofuturism***

*Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* offers viewers an opportunity to see the abstract idea of identity and Afrofuturism merge in a tangible work of art. The sculpture presents a visual narrative that defines Black identities by capturing the essence of Afrofuturism's elements of technological advancement and Black cultural heritage. The sculpture also helps viewers create Black identities in the future by providing a thought-provoking gateway into a futuristic realm where the intersections of new innovations and traditions are limitless and created by Black people. The artist achieves this by attaching the sculpture and the works within *Building Black Civilizations* to imagined narratives that center Black bodies and Black histories. Nimako points out that this idea of addressing untold and under-told stories was always at the front of the creative process for *Building Black Civilizations* and *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*.<sup>153</sup> The sculpture represents forward motion and technological advancement of Black people as it challenges the myth of Africa as a lost continent, devoid of history and people capable of significant contributions. Thus, an analysis of identity within *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* from the perspective of Afrofuturism allows viewers to appreciate the sculpture without the limits of past and present realities of Black experiences but through the speculative narratives of future possibilities.

Analyzing identity within *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* from the perspective of Afrofuturism allows viewers to examine the sculpture through the various themes that sit within the cultural aesthetic genre. Afrofuturism crosses multiple areas of the arts and combines history, science fiction, and fantasy, allowing for multiple readings. One reading is from a feminist framework. Afrofuturism engages feminism as a means of reclaiming histories of female prosperity as well

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<sup>153</sup> Nimako, "Picking Up the Pieces," 09:35 to 10:10.

as defining identities based on female agency. Nimako uses *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* to manifest female agency through speculative narratives that he creates to embed meaning within the work.

An important narrative of *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* is the story of resistance from oppression and protecting Black bodies and Black dwellings. “Narratives of Resistance,” the triptych of sculptures of female warriors protecting dwellings within *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*, physically sits outside of *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* in the museum exhibition space. However, the viewer must imagine them as monumental statues inside the city walls such as the marble or bronze monumental sculptures that dress urban landscapes today. These monuments are an ode to three fictitious female heroines: The Bandit Queen, Princess Aisha, and Princess Ezzy. The fact that these warriors are female is a significant identity marker that Nimako infused within the work. They could have easily been depicted as the stereotypical male warrior archetypes, whose wit, strength, and tenacity save the destitute and oppressed. However, the artist assigned the gender identity of these characters to be female. This is a significant aspect of the series. Nimako’s decision to design these figures as female speaks to one of the dominant themes of Afrofuturism.

Black feminist thought is a central tenet within Afrofuturism because the genre addresses equality by amplifying marginalized voices and extending agency to marginalized people.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Susana M Morris, “Black Girls Are from the Future: Afrofuturist Feminism in Octavia E. Butler’s ‘Fledgling.’” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 2012): 153-154. Morris’s work seeks to consider a synthesis of Afrofuturism and Black feminist thought as Afrofuturist feminism which Afrofuturist feminism reflects the shared central tenets of the two and reflect a tradition in which people of African descent and transgressive, feminist practices from across the African diaspora are key to a continuing, broad-minded futures. Morris aligns Afrofuturism and Black feminist thought according to common centralities that Black futurist knowledge and cultural production are vitally important in the resistance to tyranny. Her research in the speculative arts delves into Black feminist thought seeking to separate dominance from power as Blacks assert their agency, similarly within Afrofuturism which seeks to liberate the possibilities that open when Blackness is linked to future states. Morris contends that the movement toward a liberated voices lead by Black female agency is not about simply replacing the dominant voice with the voice of the disregarded. Liberation presents a power sharing coalition, offering methodologies that offer a different future from the hegemony of present structures. She argues that recognizing

“Narratives of Resistance” tells the story of one woman, the Bandit Queen, who is empowered by her own tenacity to challenge the existing power structure of slavery across the Sahara. She finds her agency through her escape from slavery and uses this self-possession to instill a sense of social justice into her two daughters, Princess Aisha and Princess Ezzy. The Bandit Queen further deploys her desire for righteousness by creating a regimen of one hundred female warriors who free other enslaved girls, rob and plunder from the rich, and give to the poor.<sup>155</sup>

It is noteworthy that the figures within this triptych are not petite or traditionally feminine. Nimako has selected LEGO® material that allows him to depict the warriors as muscular, stout, and brawny. His choice of material to sculpt these female figures challenges traditional patriarchal structures by ascribing what could be considered male physical stature to women. Sculpting the figures with muscular physicality creates an identity that does not limit the women’s abilities within their roles of protector and liberator of the oppressed. The women are armed with bows and arrows while exuding the stealth command of space-age warriors protected by hi-tech armor. Feminism within Afrofuturism gives the artist the creative license to reimagine female identity in ways that challenge historical female representations and honor women who carry multiple identities. This is particularly valuable when reviewing historical representations of Black diasporic women in Western culture. Black women in Western art have most often been relegated to imagery of one-dimensional archetypes such as the Mammy, the over-sexed “Hottentot Venus,” or the maid.<sup>156</sup> Through Afrofuturism, Nimako has presented the identities of

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Afrofuturist feminism offers a critical understanding of fact versus historical opinion and clarifies the work of Black speculative fiction in meaningful ways.

<sup>155</sup> Nimako, “Picking Up the Pieces,” 32:14 to 33:00.

<sup>156</sup> Lisa E. Farrington, “Reinventing Herself: The Black Female Nude,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 24, no. 2 (Autumn 2003-Winter 2004): 18.



these three figures as equal and diverse images of femininity sit at the center of the narrative and coexist without restraints.

*Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* gives the viewer permission to dream about imaginary future states. This element of speculation is a substantial aspect of Afrofuturism. Therefore, an analysis of identity within *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* through the perspective of Afrofuturism allows the viewer to examine the sculpture without the limits of time. Viewers experience an unencumbered opportunity to reach back into Black diasporic pasts while simultaneously engaging diasporic contemporary experiences to speculate on diasporic future states. This is a complex undertaking. The viewer would need to be aware of underrepresented facts about African history and culture before and after the Black Atlantic.<sup>157</sup> This point is valuable because, as stated by Gilroy, the Black Atlantic is the largest forced dispersal of African peoples that created the global Black diaspora. The viewer also needs to understand or at least recognize the contemporary experiences of members of the African diaspora and be mindful that these experiences may differ from those of the dominant cultures of Western society. The viewer must also acknowledge that current narratives are told from the perspective of dominant cultures. Finally, the viewer would have to approach the work with an open mind that imagines unsurpassed advances made by Black diasporic peoples. *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* provides a roadmap for the viewer to achieve this by offering visually rich imagery of African histories seen through speculative futuristic narratives. Each individual element of *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* represents an identity and a narrative of a black person in the future.

Creating identities in the future is grounded in Afrofuturism's aesthetic that synthesizes aspects of science fiction, technology, and Black diasporic heritage to create alternative

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<sup>157</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity*, 15-16.

narratives of Black futures. *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* can be seen as a visual historical manifesto of African diasporic narratives because it is a futuristic city that has reached its utopic point of progress based on three thousand years of ingenuity of Black African people.

*Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* illustrates a future one thousand year ahead where Black people have had agency to create their own identities uninterrupted by colonialism. These self-created identities allow them to become innovative, technologically advanced individuals who protect their culture and enjoy a peaceful, productive life rooted in equality and social justice. This tale is counter to traditional modern and contemporary science fiction narratives. Popular storylines in film, visual arts, and literature often negate the existence of Blacks in the future or portray them in a racialized manner.<sup>158</sup> Physical descriptors of *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* – such as its black, gleaming surfaces, its smooth polished monuments, and its highly stylized and uniquely individual architecture – highlight its position as a work of Afrofuturism. In addition, *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*, through these physical elements, delivers Nimako’s goal of centering Black identities and confirms their existence in the future as creators of technologically sophisticated architecture.

Other contemporary diasporic artists use their practice to express identity that centers Black people within Western society narratives and confirms their existence in the future. The 2018 simple text-based installation *There Are Black People in the Future* by artist Alisha B. Wormsley is a powerful and provocative statement (fig. 33). The graphic work, originally installed in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was part of a community public art project intended to counter a local sense of oppression from policing, displacement from gentrification, and erasure

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<sup>158</sup> Jacqueline Ellis, Jason D Martinek, and Sonya Donaldson, “Understanding the Past, Imagining the Future: Teaching Speculative Fiction and Afrofuturism,” *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy* 28, no. 1 (2018): 116.

of Black bodies.<sup>159</sup> The work has since become a part of an Art-Work-in-Residence Program taking place nationally and internationally. It is a work and a project of critical memory intervention. By using Wormsley's Afrofuturistic work, the program seeks to be a catalyst for change, supporting individuals affected by oppression and promoting positive change in racialized communities.

The construct of erasure is an important point to elevate. Erasure of Black bodies has historical specificity. Belinda Deneen Wallace and Jesse W. Schwartz position erasure as a longstanding practice in American history that has resulted in the present-day reckoning of racial tensions and violence nationwide.<sup>160</sup> The reckoning takes the form of movements such as Black Lives Matter in which the authors connect to the idea of "truthtelling," or the ability of Afrofuturism to tell transformative stories that generate redefined and reimagined Black lives by making hegemonic frameworks visible.<sup>161</sup> The authors also cite the 1619 Project as another example of societal reckoning that reveals the heightened level of extreme discomfort with confronting the past histories of enslavement. These attacks of truth-tellers, such as journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones signal a patterned commitment to erasure of any material evidence of slavery as a national trend.<sup>162</sup> Additionally, Wallace and Schwartz point to Afrofuturism's ability to apply a "truthtelling" perspective to societal reckoning events such as the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection in which imagery of historical racial terror and the visible surfacing of unapologetic white supremacy are what the authors call a "televised revolution."<sup>163</sup> These events and many

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<sup>159</sup> Belinda Deneen Wallace, and Jesse W. Schwartz, "Afrofuturism: Race, Erasure, and COVID," *The Radical Teacher*, no. 122 (Spring 2022): 2.

<sup>160</sup> Wallace and Schwartz, "Afrofuturism: Race, Erasure and COVID," 4.

<sup>161</sup> Wallace and Schwartz, "Afrofuturism: Race, Erasure and COVID," 3.

<sup>162</sup> Wallace and Schwartz, "Afrofuturism: Race, Erasure and COVID," 3.

<sup>163</sup> Wallace and Schwartz, "Afrofuturism: Race, Erasure and COVID," 6.

others compel citizens to ask what is meant when we say “America.”<sup>164</sup> Afrofuturism counteracts erasure because it is an immersive artform that is action oriented and proffers future-forward thinking. This places Black bodies at the center of this thought.

Nimako’s *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* centers Black identities in a similar way as *There Are Black People in The Future*. Through the perspective of Afrofuturism, both contemporary works assert a proclamation of Black future states. Both works employ agency, which is a consistent theme within Afrofuturism. Agency serves as the tool that empowers individuals of the African diaspora by positioning them as central figures in a future world. It allows them to reclaim their identities and personal autonomy. *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* stands apart from works like *There Are Black People in The Future* because it does not only state Black presence in the future, but it visually and vividly illustrates the result of Black presence in the future using nontraditional materials. *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* as a monumental Afrofuturistic sculpture is unique within the genre because it challenges archetypes and stereotypes. It positions Black futures and illustrates Black resilience. *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* and the other works in the *Building Black Civilizations* series aid the viewer to make the intangible of the speculative arts tangible.

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<sup>164</sup> Wallace and Schwartz, “Afrofuturism: Race, Erasure and COVID,” 2.

## Conclusion

An examination of *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* by sculptural artist Ekow Nimako propels the viewer into fantastical time travel. Its Afrofuturistic imagery illustrates a vision of Black diasporic pasts, present, and futures simultaneously to get to the crux of how artists of the African diaspora often unconventionally merge various genres with abstraction to define or create their personal and cultural identities using non-traditional materials. The history of evolving African diasporic identity serves as the perspective to analyze Nimako's work. To uncover the artist's distinctive voice within the spectrum of African diasporic artists, this research delves into Nimako's work, using the perspective of colonialism and de-colonialism, materiality, and Afrofuturism, with a particular focus on Nimako's sculptural practice and *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*.

*Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*, which sits at the centerpiece of the installation series "Building Black Civilizations," serves as a tangible probe into identity within Afrofuturism. The monumental sculpture presents a visual narrative that combines elements of technological advancement and Black cultural heritage. The sculpture challenges stereotypes and myths about Africa, portraying a futuristic city where Black people have agency in creating their identities, free from the constraints of colonialism and its marginalizing effects. Through Afrofuturism, the artist weaves speculative narratives that engage themes such as feminism, resistance to oppression, and the reimagining of Black people as highly technologically advanced individuals. The accompanying triptych, "Narratives of Resistance," features female warriors whose presence challenges traditional representations of women in art and highlights the strength and agency of Black women.

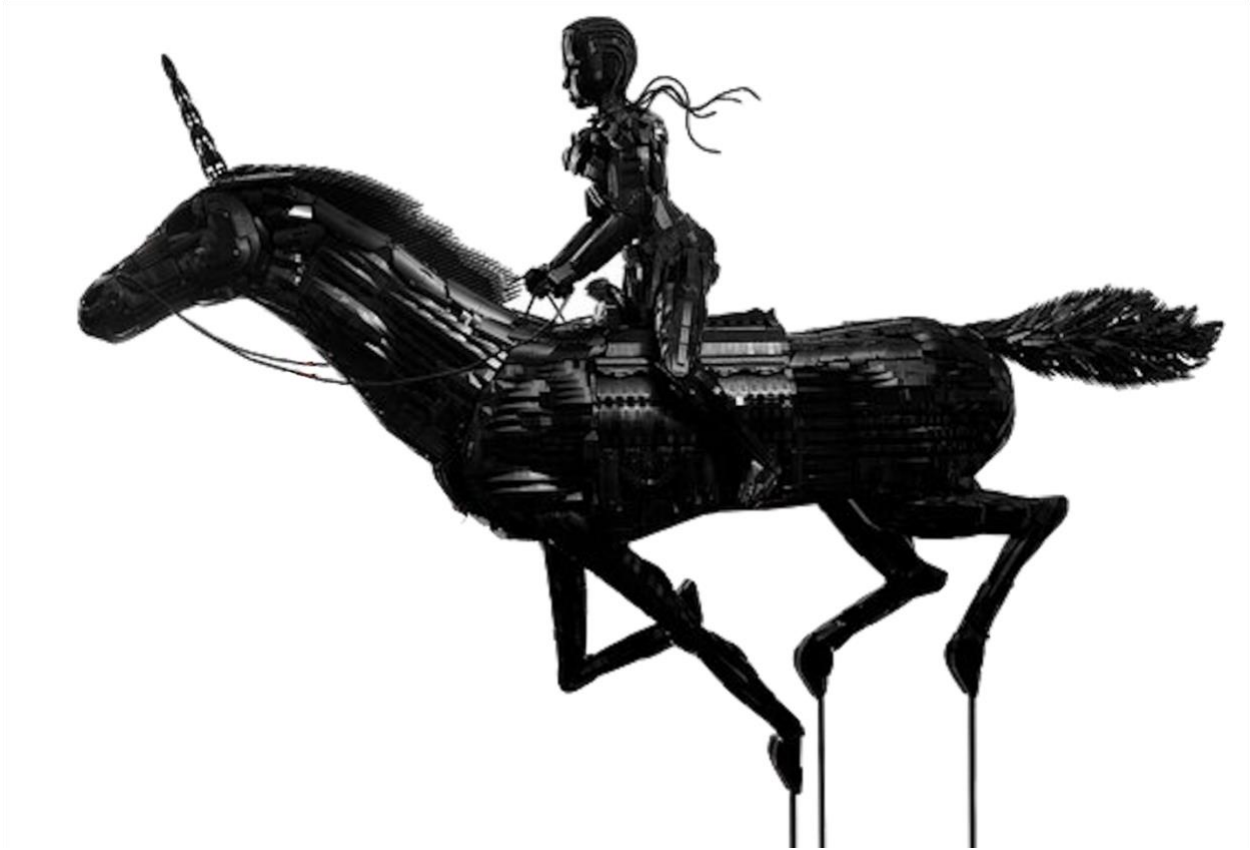
Nimako's unconventional merging of genres and use of LEGO®, a non-traditional fine arts sculpting material, serve as a distinctive expression of personal and cultural identity within the Black African diaspora. The deliberate use of black LEGO® material in Nimako's work adds layers of meaning, symbolizing the presence of Black people and making a powerful statement in history and science fiction. *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* presents a challenge to art history's authority in determining what qualifies as art in the realm of Fine Arts, marking it as a genuinely contemporary piece. The sculpture not only asserts the presence of Black people in the future but vividly illustrates the outcome of their agency, resilience, and innovation. In contrast to other contemporary works like *There Are Black People in the Future*, *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE* goes beyond making statements about Black presence; it visually and palpably represents the result of Black agency in shaping a future rooted in equality and social justice.

Because this thesis offers a novel perspective on viewing and analyzing works from contemporary Black diasporic artists, it fills a void in current scholarly discussions. This research provides a framework for further study and connections to the historical influences that have led to the evolution of identity expression in diasporic works. While Black diasporic art is an extensively researched topic, it is still a niche area of the art history discipline. Additionally, Nimako's work has not been covered from a scholarly perspective, even though the artist exhibits internationally and has works held in the collection of a chief museum of diasporic and Islamic art, the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, Canada. Therefore, this investigation provides a substantial contribution to the art history discipline as it adds a fresh perspective on the effects of colonialism and de-colonialism, materiality, and Afrofuturism on contemporary works.

Future iterations of this research could investigate other works in the *Building Black Civilizations* series that the artist created after his work around *Caravans of Gold*, *Fragments in*

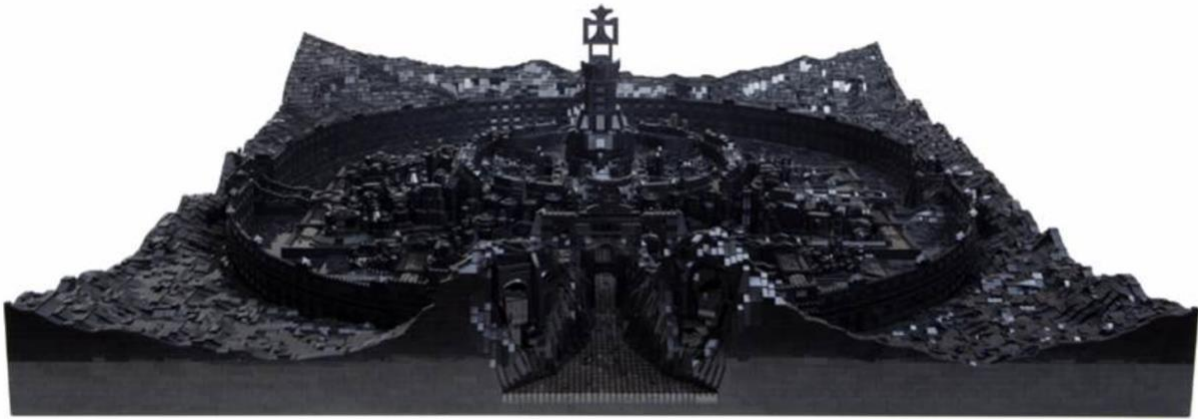
*Time* for the Aga Khan Museum. This could include studying *Building Black Civilizations: Journey of 2000 Ships*, which continues Nimako's speculative reimagining of the medieval African kingdoms whose histories are unrecorded. This second installment of the series includes several works that use the materiality of LEGO® to bring to fruition the legend of Mansa Abu Bakr II, a twelfth century Mali ruler. Studying these works could produce scholarship on the artist's continued use of non-traditional materials and speculative storytelling to infuse meaning in the work while simultaneously examining Black diasporic under told histories.

## Illustrations



**Figure 1:** *Cavalier Noir*, 2018, Ekow Nimako, Location unknown, LEGO®.





**Figure 2:** *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*, 2018, 30'x30', Ekow Nimako, Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, Canada, LEGO®.



**Figure 3:** *Untitled*, 2009, 101 × 112 × 11in, El Anatsui, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington DC, printed aluminum, copper wire.

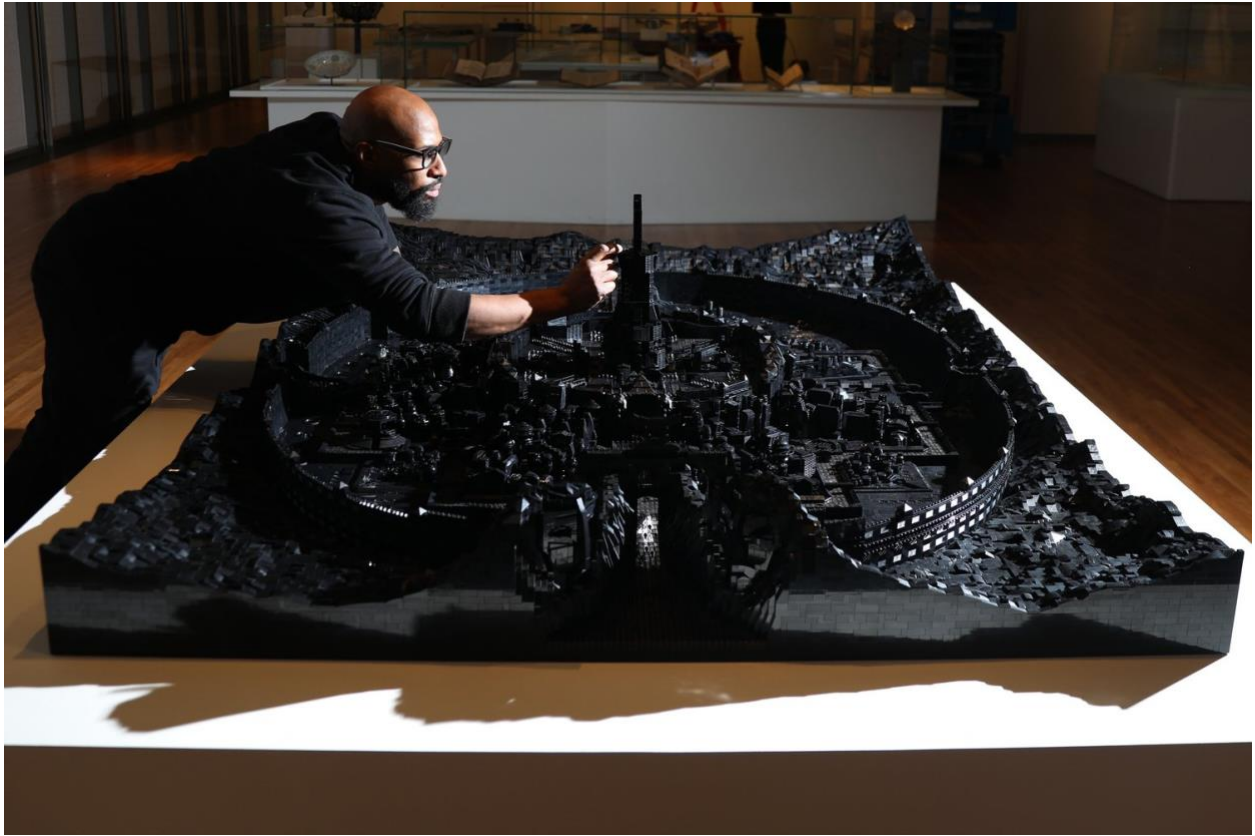


**Figure 4:** *Caged Brain*, 1990, Tyree Guyton, Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit, Michigan, mixed media.



**Figure 5:** *Trace* 2014-2017, Ai Weiwei, Unknown current location, LEGO®, photograph of exhibition view, Smithsonian Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.

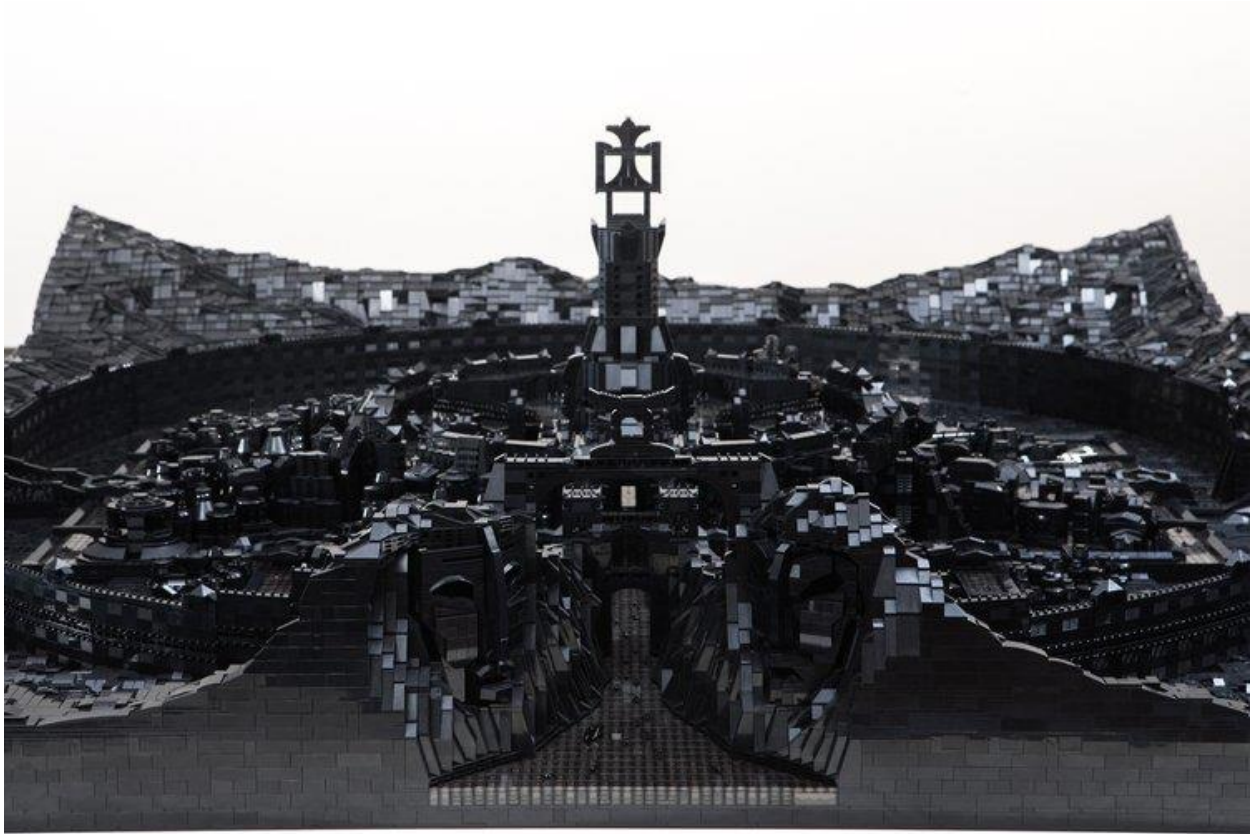




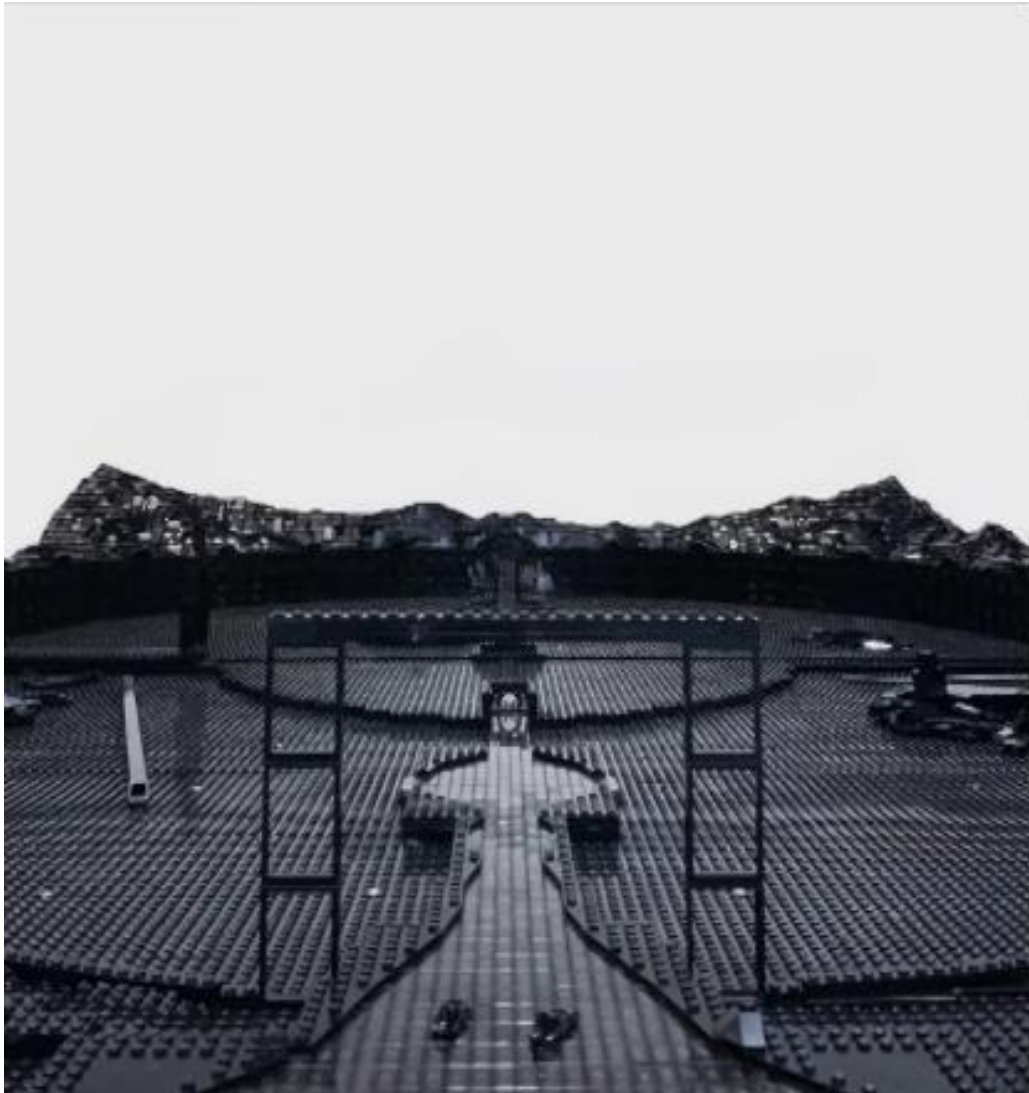
**Figure 6:** *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE 30'x30'*, 2018, Ekow Nimako, Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, Canada and the artist, Ekow Nimako, LEGO®.



**Figure 7:** *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*, 2018, 30'x30', Ekow Nimako, LEGO®. Detail of frame and base.



**Figure 8:** *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE 2018*, 30'x30', Ekow Nimako, LEGO®.  
Detail of the Opening Gateway, Masks, and Gye Wani Symbol at the city center.



**Figure 9:** *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*, 2018, 30'x30', Ekow Nimako, LEGO®. Detail of waterway at entry using black transparent LEGO®, frame and base.





**Figure 10:** *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*, 2018, 30'x30', Ekow Nimako, LEGO®. Detail of left mask.



**Figure 11:** *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*, 2018, 30'x30', Ekow Nimako, LEGO®. Left Mask Detail, LEGO®.



**Figure 12:** *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*, 2018, 30'x30', Ekow Nimako, LEGO®. Right Mask Detail.



**Figure 13:** *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*, 2018, 30'x30', Ekow Nimako, LEGO®. Right Mask Mouth Detail.



**Figure 14:** *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*, 2018, 30'x30', Ekow Nimako, LEGO®. Opening Gateway and Ohene Adwa Symbol, LEGO®.



**Figure 15:** *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*, 2018, 30'x30', Ekow Nimako, LEGO®.  
Opening Gateway and Ohene Adwa Symbol, LEGO®.  
Courtesy of the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, Canada





**Figure 16:** *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*, 2018, 30'x30', Ekow Nimako, LEGO®. Detail of individual structures and the canal-waterway system.



**Figure 17:** *Kumbi Saleh 3020 CE*, 2018, 30'x30', Ekow Nimako, LEGO®.  
Detail of City view, canal system, and Gye Wani Symbol.  
Courtesy of the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, Canada



**NARRATIVES OF RESISTANCE:  
THE BANDIT QUEEN OF WALATAH**



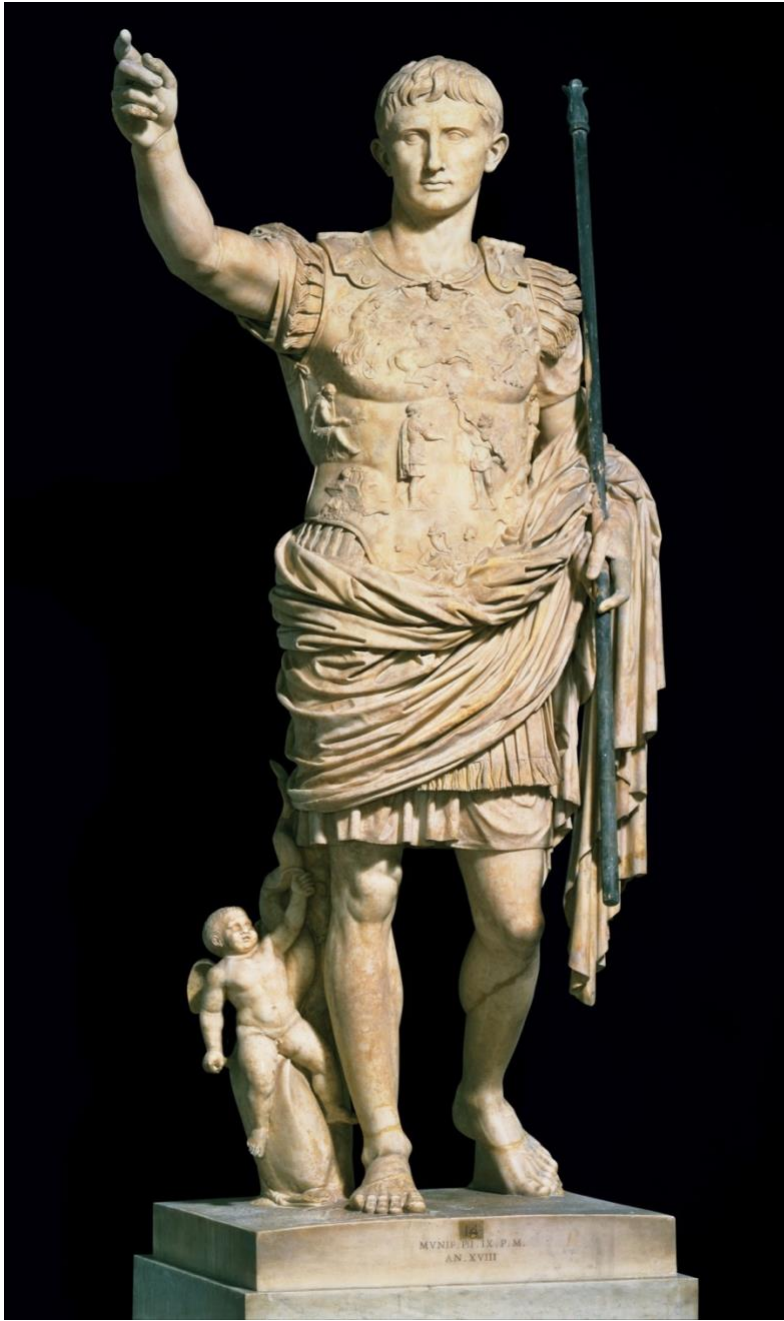
**Figure 18:** *Narratives of Resistance* Triptych 2018, Ekow Nimako, Location unknown, LEGO®.



**Figure 19:** *The Bandit Queen of Walatah*, 2018, Ekow Nimako, location unknown, exact dimensions unknown, LEGO®.



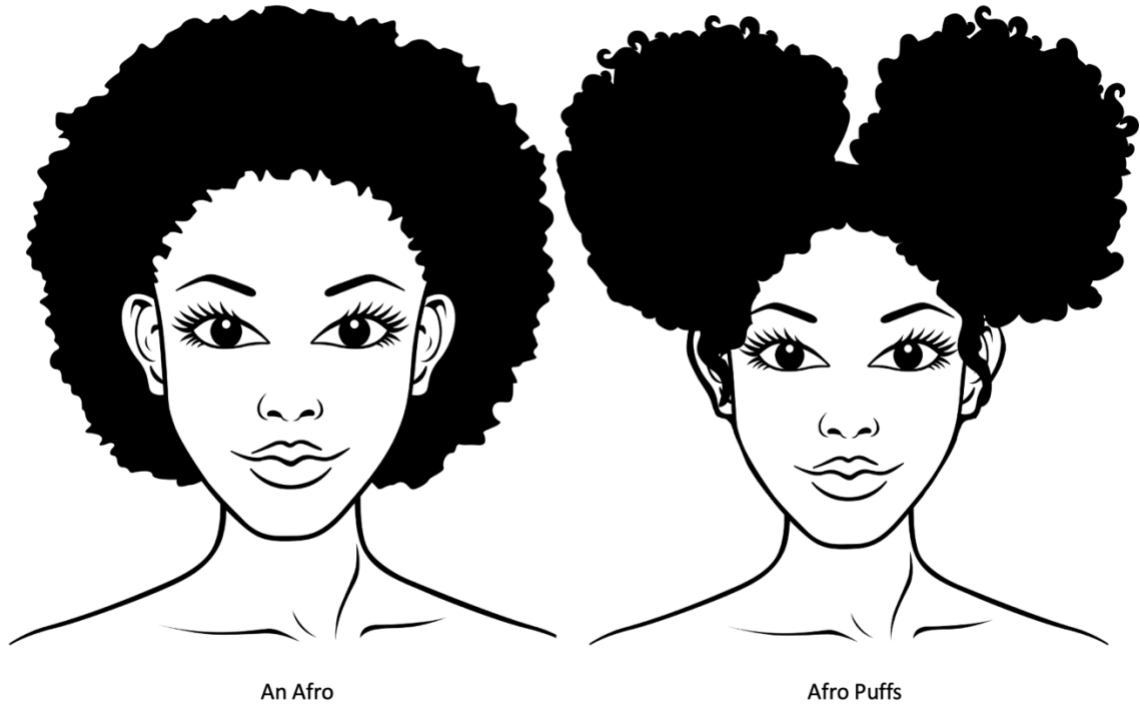
**Figure 20:** *Great Friday Mosque*, Jenné, Mali, 13<sup>th</sup> Century CE, adobe brick and wood.



**Figure 21:** *Portrait of Augustus as General*, ca. 20 BCE, Vatican Museums, marble.



**Figure 22:** A hunter-warrior wearing the Nugo Illa Helmet, 1987, location unknown, photograph by Fred. T Smith.



**Figure 23:** Afro Puffs





**Figure 24:** *The Bandit Queen of Walatah: Princess Aisha*, 2018, Ekow Nimako, location unknown, exact dimensions unknown, LEGO®.



**Figure 25:** *Shah-I Zinda Funerary Complex*, Samarkand, Uzbekistan, ceramic tiles and clay bricks, late 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century.





**Figure 26:** *The Bandit Queen of Walatah: Princess Ezzy*, 2018, Ekow Nimako, location unknown, exact dimensions unknown, LEGO®.



**Figure 27:** *Dome of the Rock*, Jerusalem, Islamic, 691–692 CE, stone, mosaic tile.



**Figure 28:** Example of a dreadlock hairstyle.

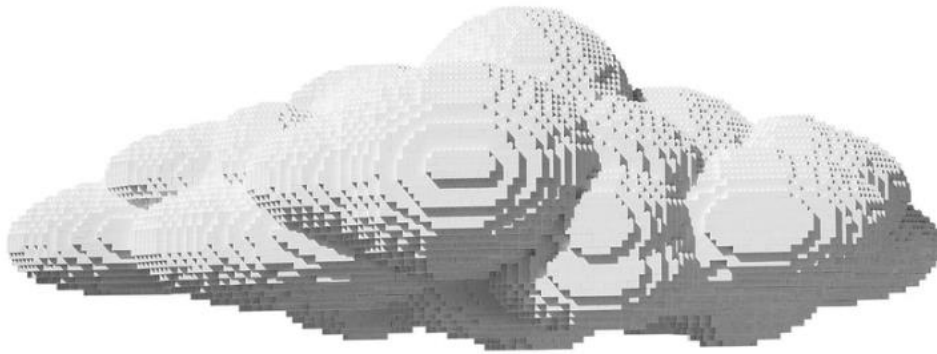


**Figure 29:** *A Subtlety*, Domino Sugar Refinery, Kara Walker, 2014, sugar, acrylic foam base.



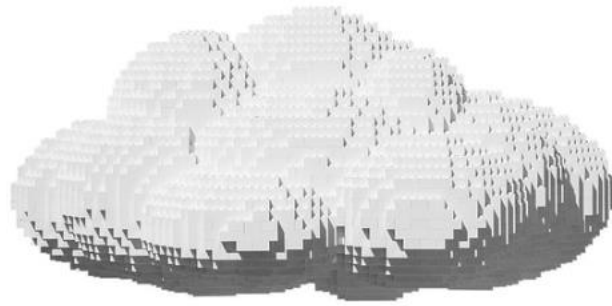


**Figure 30:** *Hotel*, 2012, Nathan Sawaya, Location unknown, digital print.



"Large Cloud." Plastic bricks. 20 x 22 x 47 inches

**Figure 31:** *Large Cloud*, 2012, Nathan, Sawaya Location unknown, LEGO®.



"Small Cloud." Plastic bricks. 14 x 21 x 14 inches.

**Figure 32:** *Small Cloud*, 2012, Nathan Sawaya, Location Unknown, LEGO®.



**Figure 33:** *There Are Black People In The Future*, 2018, Alisha B Wormsley, billboard, dismantled.



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