



FONDATION  
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Collection of African Contemporary Art and of the Diaspora

## *Model 2* of the series *#0047bb* by Jamal Nxedlana



© Jamal Nxedlana

Jamal Nxedlana (Durban, South Africa, 1985)

*Model 2* of the series *#0047bb*

2022

Photograph, inkjet colour print

Edition of 6 copies and 2 artist's proofs

Copy 1/6

100 x 66,67 cm

FGA-ACAD-NXEDL-0002

### **Provenance**

Artist's studio

Galerie Foreign Agent, Lausanne, 2023

Bodies in sculptural poses alongside objects that symbolize mass consumption: these are the elements staged by Jamal Nxedlana in his series entitled *#0047bb*. The latter takes its name from the hexadecimal code of a specific color – cyan – that is used for the background of the immortalized scenes. The images indicate a meticulous eye for industrial design and a deep knowledge of photography and fashion, but also of fashion photography, the kind that knows how to enhance Black models.

### ***Intertwined materials***

Jamal Nxedlana's *Model 2* shows two bodies. One body sits on a white plastic chair – the same chair that is to be found on the improvised terraces of (almost) every African city. The second body rests lightly on the knee of the first. The four legs of the chair on which the bodies are superimposed emphasize the four human feet, all are crucial to the balance of this composition. A second chair is added to this ensemble, held in the air by the hands and arms of the two characters. It seems to blend with their bodies, thus forming a composite of plastic and flesh while the presence of light allows for contrast to form on their surface. The chair rests on their bodies, while their arms serve to hold the final sculptural form in place.

In an article titled "Plastiglomerate", researcher Kirsty Robertson highlights how humans and plastic now are forever bound into a common destiny. "[...] plastiglomerate [a conglomerate of sand and plastic of which all the world's beaches are now made of<sup>1</sup>] indexically unites the human with the currents of water; with the breaking down, over millennia, of stone into sand and fossils into oil; with the quick substration of that oil into fuel; and with the refining of that fuel into polycarbons—into plastic, into garbage. [...] [The plastiglomerate] shows the ontological inseparability of all matter [...]"<sup>2</sup>. This very inseparability is illustrated in *Model 2*, showing bodies intertwined with the plastic material, though here they are still visibly distinct. The composition makes a parallel between the object and the human bodies.

It is however a particular attention to the discipline of industrial design and its codes that inspired the artist to create this series. Its title evokes with precision the methodical references to color and the standardized codes that are attached to it. Jamal Nxedlana's works, numbered and sorted, are all titled *Model*. This protocol mirrors the way in which some designers title the production of objects – notably chairs – as series. Jamal Nxedlana's *models* – it is at all times difficult to determine whether they are to be defined as human models or objects – evoke the notions of seriality, repetition, mass production. They do not claim the individuality of their subject, quite to the contrary. While the objects seem here to highlight the human bodies's value, they simultaneously allude to

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<sup>1</sup> "Human action on the beach had created what Corcoran and Jazvac named "plastiglomerate," a sand-and-plastic conglomerate. Molten plastic had also in-filled many of the vesicles in the volcanic rock, becoming part of the land that would eventually be eroded back into sand." ROBERTSON, Kirsty, "Plastiglomerate", *e-flux Journal*, December 2016, n° 78 [online :] <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/78/82878/plastiglomerate/> (consulted on December 10, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

the current organization of the world, to a global economy whose balance is just as fake as that of the bodies staged in the images.

### ***From Afrofuturism to Afrosurrealism***

Far off from the fantasy of a present or a future that would both be exempt of all alienation and from a dissociation between humanity and its environment, Jamal Nxedlana introduces, in his series #0047bb, a form of realism that addresses the question of the being and of the future of the human species. Nxedlana identifies his practice specifically as Afrosurrealism. In naming it as such, he somehow dissociates himself from the notion of Afrofuturism, a term that thinker Achille Mbembe defines as "a literary, aesthetic, and cultural movement that emerged within the diaspora during the second half of the twentieth century [and which] combines science fiction, techno-culture, magic realism, and non-European cosmologies".<sup>3</sup> According to Mbembe, Afrofuturism is not concerned with the notion of the human as "one who would know [...] how to speak about only in the future tense and who would always be coupled with the object, henceforth its double".<sup>4</sup> Despite the appearances, the entities – the chemical, human and plastic bodies – still seem separated here, while their porosity is not being denied. If our bodies now contain plastic, which we ingest through water in particular, our transformation does not take place in the same way as the characters in the novels of someone like Octavia Butler. Indeed, in the work of this leading figure in what is described as Afrofuturist literature, fantastic metamorphoses between humans and animals are at work. To the contrary, the fantastic narrative has given way to realism, and even more so to surrealism. In the 1970s, the writer Amiri Baraka defined the notion of Afrosurrealism (which he then specifically named "Afro-Surreal Expressionism") as "the ability to create a world which, although entirely different, is organically linked to a Black aesthetic in its contemporary dimension, its lived life".<sup>5</sup> Jamal Nxedlana does place the viewers of his photographs in front of bodies that are humbly dressed in white underwear and struggling with everyday objects that might at first seem trivial and banal. But he integrates them into the codes of industrial design, thus making us almost forget that our engagement with his images becomes similar to that which we would have with pure products of consumption. Yet, neither the chairs, nor the textiles (fig. 1), nor the photographic frames (fig. 2)

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<sup>3</sup> MBEMBE, Achille, «Afrofuturisme et devenir-nègre du monde» in *Politique Africaine*, 2014/4, n° 136, p. 125

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126

<sup>5</sup> "(...) Amiri Baraka puts forth a term for what he describes as Dumas's skill at creating an entirely different world organically connected to this one... the Black aesthetic in its actual contemporary and lived life." Introduction of *Ark of Bones and Other Stories*, Henry Dumas, 1974, by Amiri Baraka, cited in MILLER, D. Scot, "[Document] Afrosurreal Manifesto: Black Is the New black – a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Manifesto", *Black Camera*, Vol. 5, n° 1 (spring 2013), p. 114.



that in part hide these bodies and thus give them an anonymous and generic nature, are banal or trivialized. Nxedlana not only emphasizes how all these elements are intrinsically linked to human bodies, to their protection, their support, and their memory. What he also does is to highlight them as the plastic relics of a set of social issues inherited from successive colonial regimes in South Africa. The chairs are reminiscent of both the structures and the furniture present in working-class neighbourhoods. What comes to mind is thus also their obsolescence. The t-shirts invoke the cycles of fashion, the cheap Chinese clothes directly sold in the urban centres of Africa. More remotely, they equally are a reference to second-hand European clothes, sent on cargo ships to the continent and dumped on the African markets. The empty photographic frame – the future support for four images that will provide it with meaning – evokes the memory of loved ones. Like the one-piece chairs, it however symbolizes mass production and its propensity to suppress the dynamism of the objects and the bodies. "This production flattens lived experience and makes interactions less dynamic, less vital and less personal..."<sup>6</sup>, adds Nxedlana. If realism was to designate a literary and artistic tendency that would privilege the "exact" representation of the nature, of humans, and society, the prefix "sur-" has this very realism to take a step back or to its side. Beyond the sensitive and above all visible world, how can one witness the real?



Figure 1.- Jamal Nxedlana, *Model 1* of the series #0047bb, 2022, photograph, inkjet colour print, 100 x 66,7 cm, FGA-ACAD-NXEDL-0001

### **Contemporary Portraits of Black Lives**

Jamal Nxedlana was born in 1985 in Durban, growing up in the South Africa of the 1980s and 1990s, years that preceded and saw the end of the apartheid regime. However, the year 1991 did not repeal

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Jamal Nxedlana, January 2023.



Figure 2 - Jamal Nxedlana, *Model 4* of the series #0047bb, 2022, photograph, 100 x 66,7 cm, FGA-ACAD-NXEDL-0003

the omnipresence of white bodies in public representation, especially in advertising, within a society whose population was and is overwhelmingly Black.

"It's something I've always wanted to rectify," he confides.<sup>7</sup>

It is in the context of these notorious tensions and contradictions that Nxedlana initiates his artistic practice. At the very same time, a generation of emerging designers share the same concern about the violent discrepancies that are experienced in society. The very place where the artist sources the material for his photoshoots, including for his collaboration with the artists of the band FAKA (fig. 3), is Johannesburg's Small Street Mall. A place where "cheap Chinese fashion goes to be resurrected in the limitless fountains of poor Black youth »<sup>8</sup>, as described by a fashion editor.

"I find my supply on Small Street when I'm developing characters and when I'm interested in exploring and navigating identity and, of course, society and cul-

ture," Nxedlana explains. "I find my supply on Small Street when I'm developing characters and when I'm interested in exploring and navigating identity and, of course, society and culture," he explains. Clothes and all the gamut of what they reflect: the globalized market, the cheap Chinese

<sup>7</sup> SMYTH, Diane, "The New Black Vanguard: Photography between Art and Fashion", *1854*, 05.12.2019 [online:] <https://www.1854.photography/2019/12/the-new-black-vanguard/> (consulted on January 20, 2023),

<sup>8</sup> BONGELA, Millisuthando, "FAKA by Jamal Nxedlana", *Aperture*, summer 2019, n° 235, p. 108.



retail factories, the luxury of the Parisian Fashion Week runways, the second and third hand stores, the flea markets. All of this is put into perspective in his images. "For most of my work (in the series such as *Dangerous Body*, *Third Body*, and *#0047bb*), I find the clothes in Dunusa, where all the second-hand supply coming from the West is sold," he adds. "A lot of the clothing is donated from Europe, America and Canada, essentially from the West. For me, they're being dumped here essentially, it's waste. So, using this clothing, also speaks to some of those politics and some of the relationships that we have with the West. But also, how we can take these things and create beautiful things out of them."<sup>9</sup>

The artist works in and with the world of fashion as many Black models pose for him. However, photography, a technique developed by white European technicians with white models as their subject, contains many biases at the heart of its settings. If the black colour absorbs more light than white and light colours, it is nevertheless white skins that have served as the preferred "standard" for the settings of photography. "By considering light skin as the norm and other skin tones as in need of special corrective care, photography has changed the way we interact with each other without us realizing it"<sup>10</sup>, explains researcher Sara Lewis in an article titled "The Racial Bias Built Into Photography", published in *The New York Times* in 2019. In Nxedlana's photographs, by contrast, the special work and attention paid to Black skin captures the details and contrasts of the skin tone, the complexity and plasticity of its rendering. This very attention makes the commodification of race a most pressing societal issue.



Figure 3 – Jamal Nxedlana, *FAKA Portrait*, 2019, Photograph, inkjet print, 127 x 83,3 cm, courtesy of the artist © Jamal Nxedlana

Olivia Fahmy  
Curator of the collection African Contemporary Art and of the Diaspora  
January 2023

<sup>9</sup> EMBLING, Damon, "Meet Jamal Nxedlana – the South African artist using creativity to bring down barriers", *euronews.culture*, 28.10.2022 [online:] <https://www.euronews.com/culture/2022/10/27/meet-jamal-nxedlana-the-south-african-artist-using-creativity-to-bring-down-barriers> (consulted on January 20, 2023)

<sup>10</sup> LEWIS, Sara, "The Racial Bias Built Into Photography", *The New York Times*, 25.04.2019 [online:] <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/25/lens/sarah-lewis-racial-bias-photography.html> (consulted on January 20, 2023).



Figure 4 - Jamal Nxedlana, *Portrait No. 2*, of the series *The suspension of culture in the colonial present*, 2019, Photography, inkjet print, 55.4 x 37 cm, © Jamal Nxedlana, courtesy of the artist



Figure 5 - Jamal Nxedlana, *Bee Diamondhead*, 2017, Photography, inkjet print © Jamal Nxedlana, courtesy of the artist



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