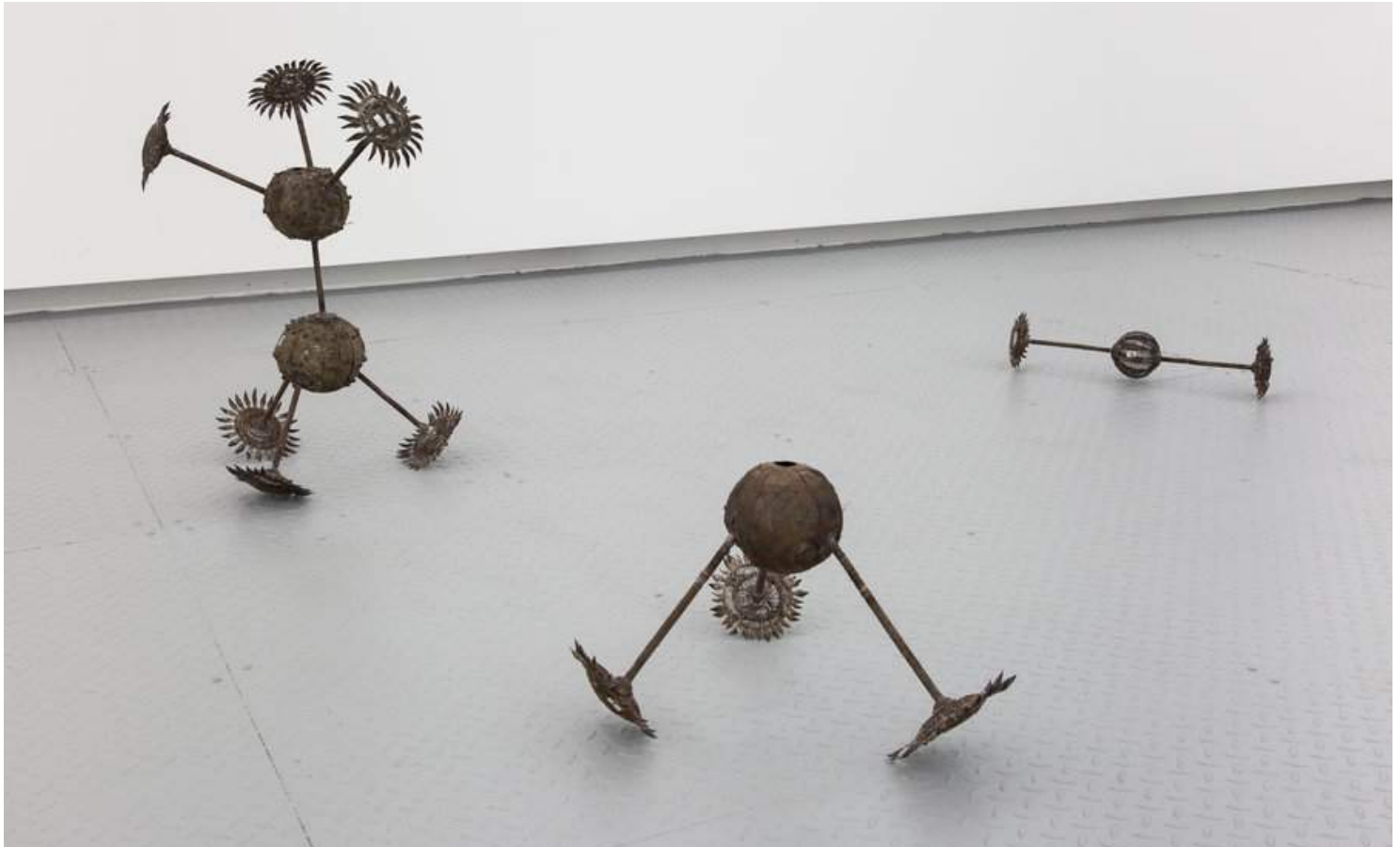


Connecting Ghanaian Artisans with Contemporary Artists, Start-up 'Crucible' Reimagines the Relationship Between Artist and Fabricators

By Loney Abrams

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Michael Assiff's work at Arsenal Contemporary. Image courtesy of the gallery and artist.



At a group show at New York's Arsenal Contemporary, Michael Assiff's copper sculptures mimic the molecular structures of so-called "greenhouse gases"—the atmospheric byproducts of industrialization (like the combustion of fossil fuels) that are largely responsible for warming the planet's surface temperature. But these structures (representing carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide) aren't exact replicas; their atoms have been replaced by flowers, or more specifically, sunflowers—a plant known to remove contaminants from the soil. These "remediation flowers" are a common subject for the New York-based artist, who has represented them before as relief wall works made with plastic (two of these works are also on view at Arsenal). But beyond the obvious relevance of these densely

referential works exhibited during an administration that flat out denies the scientific explanation of climate change, these works also tell a story about the global economic relationships embedded in artistic process—a story that's only legible once you learn of the unique process in which they were made.



Assiff's sculptures in the process of being fabricated in Ghana. Image via Crucible.

Not too far from Arsenal, in an apartment on the 11th floor of a Greenwich Village building, is Alyssa Davis Gallery. The eponymous owner of the space is a crucial component to this story. In the summer of 2012, Davis traveled Ghana on a trip spearheaded by her grandfather, who took some of his students from Providence College under a sanitation grant. There she visited the city of Kumasi,

known for its metal work, and briefly met a man named Ahmed Iddrisu with connections to metal workers in the Ashanti Region, who she kept in touch with on Facebook for the next couple of years. In 2014, as an undergraduate student at Cooper Union, she returned again on fellowship to meet more fabricators: a coffin maker, a seamstress, a traditional witch doctor, and again, Iddrisu. Realizing the unique methods and techniques these craftspeople used, she set out to introduce the opportunity for skilled craftsmen and women to collaborate, materially, with international contemporary artists. Two years later, in 2016, the beta testing phase of Crucible began.

Essentially, Crucible is a prototype for a system that connects contemporary artists with fabricators of rare craft who would otherwise have no connection to the art world. For Davis, it's crucial that the fabricators use techniques that are unique to the region or otherwise unknown to mainstream industry. (Iddrisu, for example, works with a fabricator who uses copper tubing recycled from refrigerators to make intricate filigree pieces, as well as metalworkers who cast objects using molds made out of dirt, manure, and straw.) And in addition to connecting artists and fabricators, Crucible acts as an archive that could potentially preserve undocumented methods. (Davis has saved hundreds, if not thousands, of pictures, drawings, and text conversations documenting the collaboration processes.) "The idea that something completely off grid with the potential threat of being destroyed and lost forever, can be introduced to a system that could keep it alive, is what's interesting to me," Davis tells Artspace.



An image shared between Iddrisu, Assiff, and Davis via Whatsapp, showing Assiff's rendering and Iddrisu's progress.

So far Crucible has produced two projects: the first was with fashion designer Victor Barragan; Assiff's copper flower sculptures are the second and most recent. Though he's supportive of the project, he had concerns initially about his involvement. "When Alyssa approached me to do a project with Crucible I was at the time working on a show that was dealing with these issues of climate change, displacement, and the role of globalization in all of this," Assiff tells Artspace. "I was initially hesitant, but after airing my concerns I came to the idea that doing this project with Crucible could be a way to directly engage my art-making practice with the very material, financial, and ethical concerns of globalization. It seemed like a huge learning opportunity." Because the project uses labor overseas that is likely cheaper than that of U.S. producers, the risk of exploitation is obviously a legitimate concern—a concern that Davis has had at the forefront of her mind. "I wanted to make sure this project didn't fall into the white savior category, which is why I didn't try to get funds through a non-profit model." Instead, Davis presents Crucible as a for-profit business in order for it to be sustainable and autonomous, without her necessary involvement. "I also want to be mindful that we're not

replacing work for a local community,” Davis says. “Having been to Ahmed’s studio, I knew that they were struggling to find enough work to keep them afloat, so the hope is that if we offer them more business, not only are we not taking away from the needs of the community, we’re also supporting them to be able to expand and hire more people.”

Iddrisu sets his own production prices, which Davis says are probably above what he’d normally make from local clients, since he recognizes that he can charge slightly more for foreigners. And he’s paid in full before shipping the work. “Alyssa has helped me a lot financially,” says Iddrisu over the phone. Iddrisu also mentions he’s optimistic about continuing to make money from this one particular project, referring to an offer extended by Assiff atypical of a fabricator-artist relationship. “I offered a cut because I wanted to share profits from the sales on top of the fabrication fee,” Assiff tells Artspace. “I liked the idea of an artist being able to give stake (or a share) in their performance in the art market and not just at the point of production.” Artists themselves can’t rely on this kind of “royalty” kick back when, say, their work sells on the secondary market—so to most, the idea that a fabricator would get a percentage of their client’s profits might seem unfathomable. This profit-share model is not a necessary component of Crucible (Assiff came up with this offer on his own); but the close relationship between artist and fabricator that Crucible allows makes experiments like this possible, and illustrates that status-quo economies are ripe for reinterpretation.

Ultimately, Iddrisu and Assiff produced something that neither of them would have been able to have done without the other. They were in close communication via the app Whatsapp, with support from Davis’ colleague Aran Simi in New York, throughout the entire process. Ahmed had never produced an object this large and three-dimensional before working with Assiff, and Assiff was able to produce an art object using a technique he (or any other artist) could not have done on his own. “I learned a lot from working with Alyssa and Michael,” says Iddrisu. “They showed me a lot of drawings and notes, and I learned how to do new techniques.” Since working on the Crucible project, Iddrisu says he has applied those techniques to projects he’s done with local clients, which has helped his business grow.

Aug 24, 2017, 7:29 PM



Aug 24, 2017, 7:29 PM

I know this is hard to see but we have them all organized now

Aug 24, 2017, 7:30 PM

We can go thru each one to get the new stem lengths

Aug 24, 2017, 7:30 PM

Before the sun sets in an hour if possible 🤔

A screenshot of a What's App conversation.

For Assiff—an artist who typically makes all of his own labor-intensive, handcrafted work (as opposed to outsourcing production)—working with Iddrisu wasn't a business decision. Instead, he viewed it as a way to make work that engages with the nature of globalization and cultural production. "It seemed especially relevant to site production of the greenhouse gas sculptures in West Africa where the effects of globalization can be seen most starkly; a place where state actors such as China have captured huge swaths of the mining and extraction sector, and where seemingly philanthropic initiatives by Bill Gates and associated NGOs have paved the way for "Modern" industrial farming practices such as GMOs, pesticide use, and terminator seed technology." The pieces currently on view at the group show at Arsenal were first debuted in Assiff's solo show in September at Valentin gallery in Paris. The exhibition's title, "Pier 1," references both the "naval point of exit and entry at the heart of both commerce and mass migration" and the store Pier 1 Imports, which sells cheap furniture and decor. Along with the copper flower/molecule sculptures, the exhibition presented bedazzled and sequined pillows depicting trade routes and invasive flowers, stacked bistro tables and chairs one might find in a suburban Italian restaurant, and murals representing destroyed and at-risk World

Heritage Sites in Palmyra in pho-fresco style typical of “ethnic” eateries in the US.

Writes Mohammad Salemy the press release: “What motivates immigrant petit-entrepreneurs to decorate their hole in the wall with bright and colorful posters of historical monuments from their home country? The answer to this question might have less to do with ethnic pride and cultural preservation and more with a desire to lower the high price of subsistence in the free marketplace of geopolitical displacement... It is customary to imagine that it was only after modernity and the dawn of international trade that the global south began to mass produce its cultural artifacts for western consumption but in fact anthropology shows that the history of trafficking exotic objects to the west stretches back much further to the arrival of first Europeans in the Americas and Africa. It didn't take the natives very long to discover that they could capitalize on their culture and customs and build a cottage industry around the Europeans' interest.” The works in this show, including the flowers, are intentionally decorative, bridging the gaps between the environmental crisis and the ubiquitous consumption of imported décor and extractive global capitalism.



Installation image of "Pier 1" at Valentin. Image courtesy of the gallery and artist, via Art Viewer.

Seen within the context of this exhibition, the works Assiff created with Crucible can almost be understood as the antithesis to an import. “Bright and colorful posters of historical monuments from [an ethnic restaurant owner’s] home country” represents a specific culture in the most generic of ways. Its content is culturally specific (as much as a postcard can be culturally specific) but its form is not; most likely produced in a factory far from it’s reference point, its materiality is truly global. For Assiff’s work, the relationship between content and form is flipped. The content (remedial sunflowers and greenhouse gas molecules) isn’t born out of Ghanaian culture, yet its form (copper filigree) is specific to the place in which it was produced.



Michael Assiff, *Greenhouse Gas (Sulphur Hexafluoride)*, 2017. Image courtesy of Valentin and the artist, via Art Viewer.

Assiff’s collaboration with Crucible, along with the project that preceded it, are case studies for a system that doesn’t exist yet, and its future depends on potential funding. But what Crucible has done in the meantime is open up the conversation around artistic process. The art world (and culture at large) seems to fetishize an outdated understanding of it, perhaps a vestige from the cult of Abstract Expressionism and action painting. But the truth is artists (at least some of them) regularly outsource production—whether to hire assistants to stretch and prime canvases, welders to fabricate armatures,

publishers to print images... the list is infinite. Like everything else, the present-day artist is situated within a complex system of commerce. Art objects are unique in that they're one of a kind, but they're also likely amalgamations of objects, materials, and substances mass produced elsewhere along a global chain of supply. As we become more educated about where our food, our shoes, and our coffee comes from, Crucible reminds us that art's relationship to global production isn't absent from the equation—and that some of the truly most interesting "artistic processes" might not come from artists alone, but in material collaboration with off-grid rare craft fabricators around the globe.

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