

VEN PALDANO

Being a Brightonian who identifies as a Queer Trans Non-Binary Masculine presenting PoC, a descendant of the Windrush generation, lineage on both sides of my family that have been affected by colonialism and as an interdisciplinary architectural designer; it is incredibly inspiring to learn of an artist who has used the language of craft to explore their othered identity.

What I find fascinating about Rotimi Fani-Kayode's work is how it highlights their sheer bravery, the way they have pushed the status quo by using their privilege in terms of locational safety, to explore taboo subject matters so heavily engulfed in shame. The time period is mind blowing, the heavily curated images read like performance pieces one would expect of the current day and not thirty-five years ago.

This body of work is highly important to QTIPoC globally, as it gives hope and proof of our autonomy and sovereignty as individuals within the fabric of our smaller communities. It proves that we can be the bearer of the visibility spot-light that highlights our own narratives, we can unpack and deconstruct our existence ourselves in such a way that neoliberalism and pinkwashing may frown with curiosity but dare not appropriate the medium that breathes intersectionality and the depth of Rotimi's skill.



Inspired by Fani-Kayode's work, photographer Shonay worked with local LGBTIQ+ people of colour to create this series of photographs depicting Ven Paldano, KUCHENGA, and Méfi Diallo on the Palace Pier in the summer of 2019.

KUCHENGA

"Black men loving black men is the revolutionary act of the 1980s... Black men loving black men is a call to action; an acknowledgment of responsibility. We take care of our own kind when the night grows cold and silent. These days the nights are cold blooded and the silence echoes with complicity."

- Joseph Beam (1954-1988)

The scourge of AIDS snatched the lives of so many. At the end of the 1980s, the artistic landscape for black queer artists looked like Dresden the morning after the Allied bombings. Our glittering great towers who communicated our pasts to us and for us, were spirited away with sonorous howls leaving behind the dust of grief and gaseous loss. People so prodigious their work became immortal, but still, their physical absence mocked us. No matter how special, no matter how essential, in spite of how loved they were, they were gone. Alvin Ailey, Essex Hemphill, Marlon Riggs, Patrick Kelly, Rotimi Fani-Kayode...

Along with his contemporaries Rotimi's work was searingly precise and surged with an urgency. Fuelled as they were by the black arts movement of the preceding decades; they did not just dismiss the white gaze - they took the piss out of it. The sexual liberation in the bathhouses and bdsm sex clubs they frequented, unshackled them from the shame of their homosexuality, that society, via it's institutions, put so much effort into inculcating into them. Rotimi unveils the hypocrisy of western cis-heteronormativity and its impact on the psyche of the colonised. The hypersexualised black body bites back with an irreverence for propriety and pummels you with its own intellectual awareness of its agency and power. The oeuvre he left behind smirks at those who are so scared of the movement of decolonisation which started with our bodies, moved onto reclaim our land, endures as a project to free the mind and shall not stop until reparations have been claimed in full.

On October 31st 1987, the first National Black Gay Men's Conference "In This Our Lives" was held at the Hampden Community Centre in London. In a bleak time of repression, with their community under siege from a virus and an uncaring government, black gay men co-agulated with an as yet unforseen zeal and determination. From that well spring of grassroots activism we gained artistic leaders such as photographer Ajamu X and film and theatre maker Tophér Campell whose enterprise Rukus Federation Ltd. chronicling the lives of Black LGBT people in Britain is now housed at the London Metropolitan Archives. Their film 'The Homecoming' features the experiences of cruising and sex as a black gay man in Brixton. Such brazen art creation could only be possible with the pioneering work of Rotimi Fani-Kayode. Watching the depiction of black gay men in mainstream media from these times through to the television series 'Noah's Arc' and latterly with the sexual coupling of Pray Tell and Ricky played by Billy Porter and Dyllón Burnside respectively on the groundbreaking hit show 'POSE' we become aware of something quite particular. As black queer artists we create our work in communion with each other whether those beings are living or ancestral.

Rotimi created the space for us to view our work as classical. We care not for your canon. We have our own forged in ballroom, bedrooms and studios, on desks and out in the open air.

Whether private or public or both, it's quite glorious.