

Engaging Art History with a Bald Eagle and a Telfar Bag Folasade Ologundudu

If you were to stand in front of Derrick Adams's *Getting the Bag* (2024) and tell me what you see, the first things you might mention are a male figure and a large eagle. Linger a little longer, and you might point out a tepee on a mountaintop in the upper right corner of the painting, with circles of smoke billowing down the mountainside. Cast your glance lower and you might make mention of the widely celebrated, critically acclaimed Telfar bag—a *telfie*, as it's called by the *girlies* who know—hanging precariously from the mouth of the giant red-lipped eagle. While it's one of the smallest objects in the painting, its commanding presence and renowned logo loom large in pop culture. The mere object, with its cult-like following, is elevated from ordinary to icon. As in much of Adams's work, the object—in this case a bag—and what it symbolizes speak specifically to Black people. "I make work that makes Black people smile when they come into a space, because I put things in my work that are not meant to explain. They are signals, and the signals connect to the people who know them," he admits. The *telfie*, a cultural attaché of the moment, represents style, taste, and a certain *je ne sais quoi*, if you will, of the culturally attuned, socially aware consumer—or at least one who hopes to be. Like other items that permeate and invade popular culture, the Telfar bag is, in a word, aspirational. Made of vegan leather, it undoubtedly says something more about the carrier than mere fashion sense.

To admit that I've never seen a Telfar bag quite like the one in Adams's painting wouldn't be an exaggeration. Nor would it be to say I've never seen an eagle with a brightly rouged lip. "He's in *drag*," Adams tells me, laughing heartily on a call as we discuss his latest body of work exploring Black Americana through the signs and cultural symbols of America's vicious and violent past, our precarious present, his reflections on the beautiful complexities of Black American life, and the limitless imagination of our futures. The humor and playfulness that Adams has in spades add a liveliness to his work, immediately drawing you in. *Drag*—the theater slang describes a performative style of men dressing in women's clothes—brings a flurry of images to mind, each one as provocative as the next. A voguing scene from the 1990 cult-classic documentary *Paris Is Burning*; viral-worthy TV moments from *RuPaul's Drag Race*; memories of exceedingly late-night queer parties I meandered into in Bushwick.

The bag and its cultural significance illustrate not only Adams's considerations of art history in connection to the contemporary, but also his investigations of consumerism in American culture. It's a theme he's unearthed time and time again in his decades-long practice. "Consumerism is basically the foundation of America," he states. "I'm interested in how consumerism becomes part of a cultural aesthetic and the way it creates a level of identity forming the way you're perceived based on the things you consume."

Homing in on two foundational elements coalescing in the painting, the bald eagle and the Telfar bag, to uncover the meaning, we journey back several millennia. To an ancient story from one of the oldest written works in existence. To this day, it is widely studied throughout high schools and on college campuses for its complexity and eloquence.

Homer's *Iliad* tells a tale, as most epics do, of good and evil. On the surface, the *Iliad* and Adams's *Getting the Bag* couldn't be more dissimilar. For starters, the first is a poem, set during the last year of the Trojan War. In it we meet the young and handsome Ganymede, abducted by Zeus, who transforms into an eagle and swoops down to earth before wrenching the boy away to Mount Olympus to serve as his cupbearer. Ganymede's reward for a life of bondage and servitude? Immortality. Many academics and artists alike have focused on the perversions of this abduction. Adams, however, charts a discrete course, finding more interest in what the boy represents than in his bodily possession: youth culture, progression, and promise—words we might associate with Telfar Clemens's eponymous brand.

In drawing parallels between Adams's modern-day practice, which spans performance art, painting, sculpture, collage, drawing, and video, and the *Iliad*, we meet giant figures along the way: exceptional painters who changed the face of art history. Rembrandt and Robert Rauschenberg, born centuries apart but both intrigued by Homer's literary masterpiece, created seminal works of art to engage its complex mythology.

In Adams's richly layered painting, which references Rauschenberg, Rembrandt, and Homer, a marked cheekiness adorns his contemporary rendition. Imbued with humor, the painting strips away overtly theoretical concerns that might engage an art historian and brings ancient symbols from art history to the fore through a modern lens. To be fair, when have you ever seen an eagle in drag? Or a Telfar bag in a painting? "I add little things in because I want to make the viewer curious about what I'm thinking," Adams notes. "It's like an eye wink or a fist bump."

In Adams's newest work, we chart history, across time and space. We find similarities in disparate works, interpreted by artists who recontextualized art historical movements through materiality and form. Rembrandt's 1635 *The Abduction of Ganymede* shows us a baby boy, writhing in agony, his exposed buttocks flashing at the viewer, as an eagle in flight clenches him tightly in his beak. Rauschenberg's chaotic abstraction, on the other hand, couldn't be more different. To grasp the hidden meaning and coded language brimming in Adams's painting, we begin by investigating Rauschenberg's *Canyon* (1959). In this mixed-media work we confront a complex three-dimensional collage that includes photographs, pieces of wood, a mirror, a pillow, and a taxidermied stuffed bald eagle, which a friend of the artist famously found on the street near Carnegie Hall. Combining the unlikely, Rauschenberg raised everyday objects he would find scattered across New York City to the level of fine art. The twisted pillow hanging by a thick cord affixed to the large canvas, just below the eagle, symbolizes Ganymede's butt. In Adams's painting, the Telfar bag—a stand in for the pillow in Rauschenberg's work—and the eagle symbolize something altogether different. Rather than attempting to re-create a work that inspires him, Adams opts to create his works based on feelings, driven by a strong intuition. "When I was working on the painting and trying to figure out what I was going to put in the eagle's mouth, I thought about desire," he says, sharing that in his neighborhood of Bed-Stuy and among his nieces and nephews who've asked him for a Telfar, he hears people often talk

about the bag. He sees the bags—in dozens of colors, from lime green to gold to fuchsia—on everyone, from the young to the very old, orbiting around him in his neighborhood.

It's through the coded language Adams has developed, with equal parts sophistication and humor, that his creative genius shines. For the past two decades, the artist has developed several bodies of work unearthing concerns of artistic formalism and fortitude, while engaging in rigorous conversations on Black life and culture. He deconstructs and reexamines American consumerism and culture through stunningly layered figurative paintings and complex collages. His formal approach brings forth remnants of Cubism and brings the sophistication of African sculpture home to roost in a flutter of bright colors and shapes.

Depending on who you are, and where you come from, there are unspoken codes and symbols to uncover. A dialogue takes hold through the shape, color, and composition of Adams's canvases, encouraging you to linger a bit more, as hidden metaphors are unearthed, slowly revealed, layer by layer. The language is one you might not understand unless the vernacular is familiar to you. It's a singular language that Black people understand better than others, and it's no wonder, because Adams is talking directly to us, whether through men, women, and children lounged in swimming pools in his acclaimed *Floater* series, or mannequins with a plethora of wigs outfitting a display window of any beauty supply store in a Black neighborhood in his *Beauty World* series.

Coming to the end by way of the beginning, we journey back to the painting, where I reflect on the formalism present in Adams's work. The tension between color and composition. His deft use of both to elicit visceral emotions. In the painting we see a male figure whose gaze is turned away from the viewer as he peers out toward the edge of the painting, looking left. Adorned in a western-style checked shirt, he is a Lone Ranger in a desolate but fertile land, overtaken by colonialists, symbolized in the tepee's smoke signals warning of danger. His face and hands vary in hues of brown and beige. To see this figure—a Black male—holding an eagle, an apex predator, its feathers clutched beneath his hands, elicits stirring emotions about power, agency, and freedom. The juxtaposition of the Black male, historically considered America's greatest threat, holding, having dominion over a bald eagle, America's foremost symbol of power and freedom, riddles with contrast.

Adams's oeuvre invites viewers to draw their own conclusions. As the saying goes, you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink. The same is true in Adams's tapestries of hidden meaning and playful references. Viewers are free to draw their own conclusions. What words come to mind? What feelings are evoked? To bring these questions to the fore is to confront the very nature of art to implore each of us toward deeper self-reflection, a coming together of ourselves, and a better understanding of the world we inhabit.

ABOUT FOLASADE OLOGUNDUDU

Folasade Ologundudu is an independent producer, writer, curator, and multidisciplinary artist based in New York. Her practice seeks to uncover ideas related to the universal human condition through text-based work, photography, and film. She has written art criticism, profiles, interviews, and essays for ArtForum, ARTnews, Cultured Magazine, Sculpture Magazine, and Frieze, among other publications. Ologundudu is also the founder of Light Work, a creative media platform rooted at the intersection of art, education, and culture. Through her podcast, *Everything Is Connected*, she holds conversations with artists, curators, and entrepreneurs deeply rooted in visual arts and community building.