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38/SS21

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WALES BONNER

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VISTAS



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Her initial intention was to elevate Blackness within fashion, showing examples of elegance that were not on the spectrum of representation. With her latest collections, Grace Wales Bonner looks back to her Caribbean heritage—the British Jamaican community in London in the '70s and the early '80s origination of dancehall music in Jamaica—in search for beauty, nature, and spirituality.





VISTAS: WALES BONNER

PHOTOGRAPHY:  
MARC ASEKHAME

INTERVIEW:

RHEA DILLON

ALL CLOTHING:  
WALES BONNER

**RHEA DILLON** I’ve been thinking about the process of coming out of lockdown and wanted to ask: where do you start when it feels like there’s nowhere to start?

**GRACE WALES BONNER** I feel like there is always somewhere to start, because there’s always a sense of continuation, an ongoing story. It’s like a response to a call so I feel like there’s an ongoing dialogue with what’s come before, and that feels like the place to start in some way. It’s important to be able to go back into older sentiments, ideas, and feelings to reinforce those things. I’m in a much more comfortable space right now, where I feel confident to create deeper roots within the things I’ve expressed.

**RD** Fear has been a theme for a lot of people recently too. What do you do when you encounter fear?

**GWB** Being imaginative and playful can offer a sense of freedom from fear. If you feel stuck in a situation, the way to move forward isn’t to continue on the same route that you’re going. If I feel like I’m falling into a certain pattern or hitting a wall, then I completely reimagine the parameters, and almost dance into something else. Think about a different way of moving, or a different sense of perspective. You have to challenge yourself to work through certain obstacles.

**RD** Being supported by mentorship can also help. I know that Matches Fashion’s Innovators Program has supported you. What does mentorship mean to you?

**GWB** Mentorship is about speaking to the greatness of someone, or speaking to the potential of who someone can be. There are many different levels to it. I also have mentors that provide spiritual guidance for me.

**RD** How can mentorship play into supporting the communities in places we live?

**GWB** I’ve seen the role that mentors can play in giving people the confidence to develop their voice. That’s what I’ve learnt from some of my mentors like Ishmael Reed or Kahlil Joseph. A mentor affirms your perspective, and encourages you to go deeper. I think that’s a really important aspect of it. That connection is also able to connect you to a broader community, as community comes down to an individual level in a way. What can you do for the community? What can you offer on a one to one level? I think that in order to contribute, you also need to work on yourself, and within your circle of influence. It’s been really important for me to understand myself, my values, what I see as my purpose, and to try to shape these things in order for me to offer the best of myself to other people, and to the world. If individuals can be aligned in really doing what they’re meant to do, that can be really inspiring to other people. I think that the more that people are really aligned and creating in the way that’s meaningful to them then that’s really enriching the world in a huge way. I’ve had to think about this quite a lot over the

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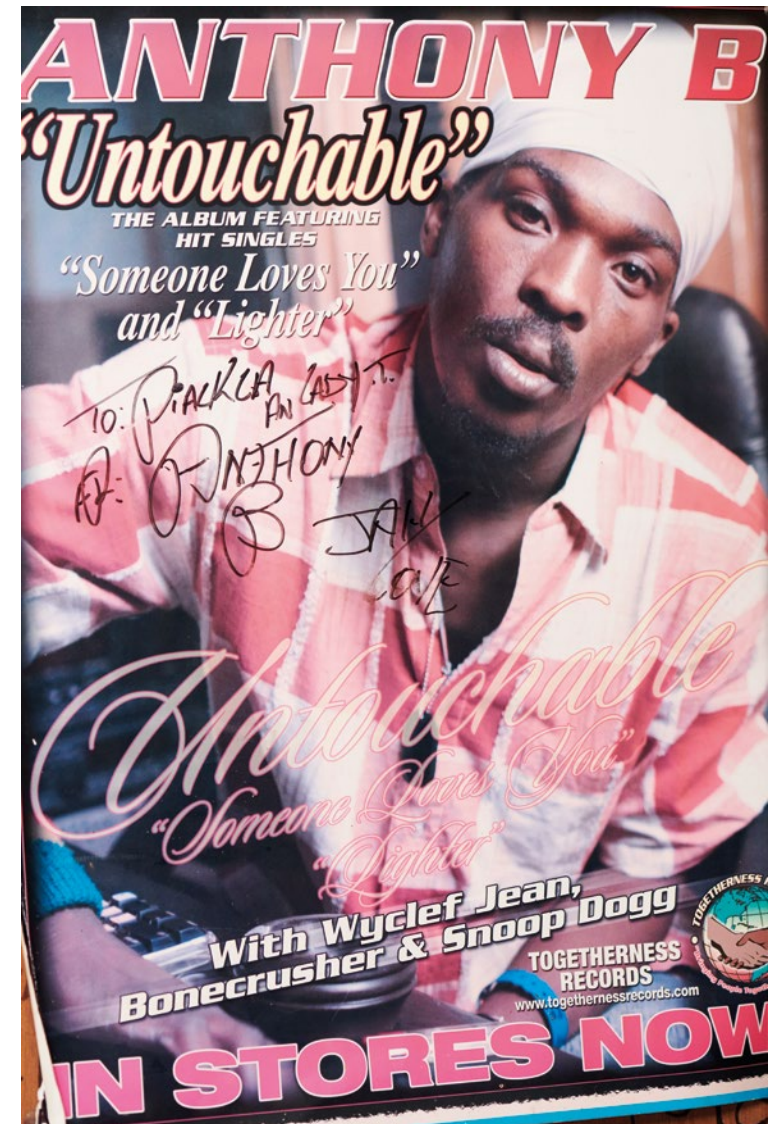








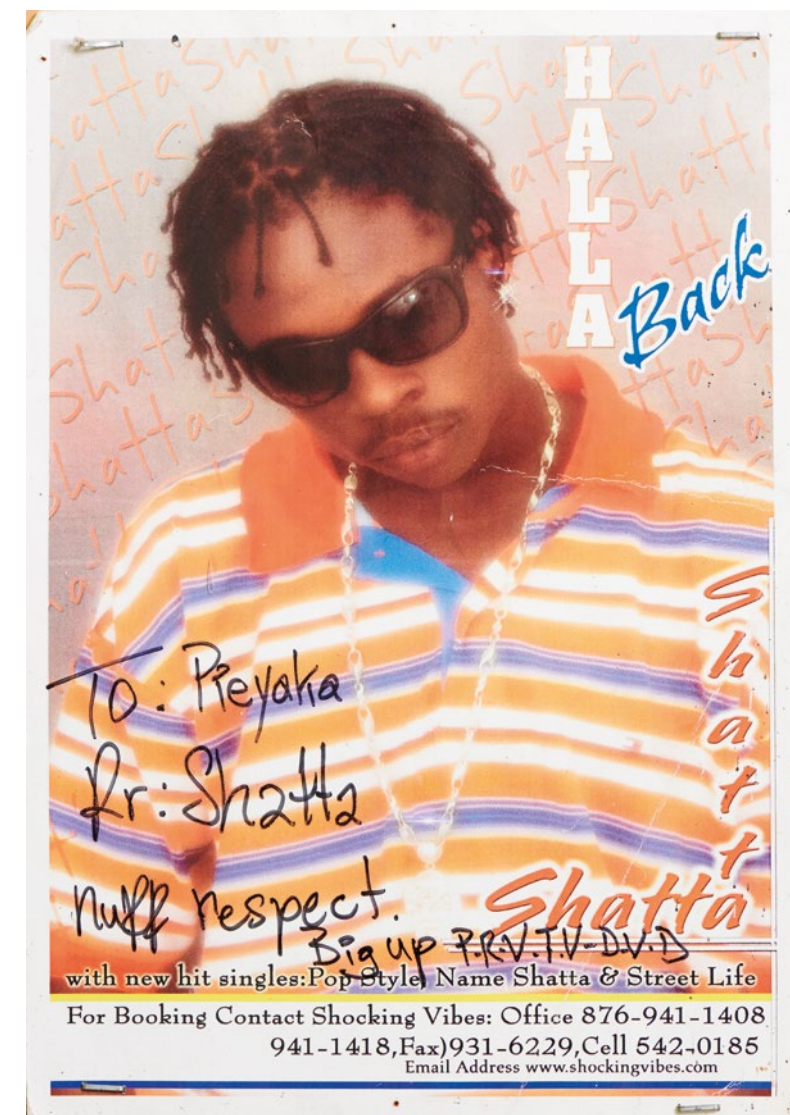


























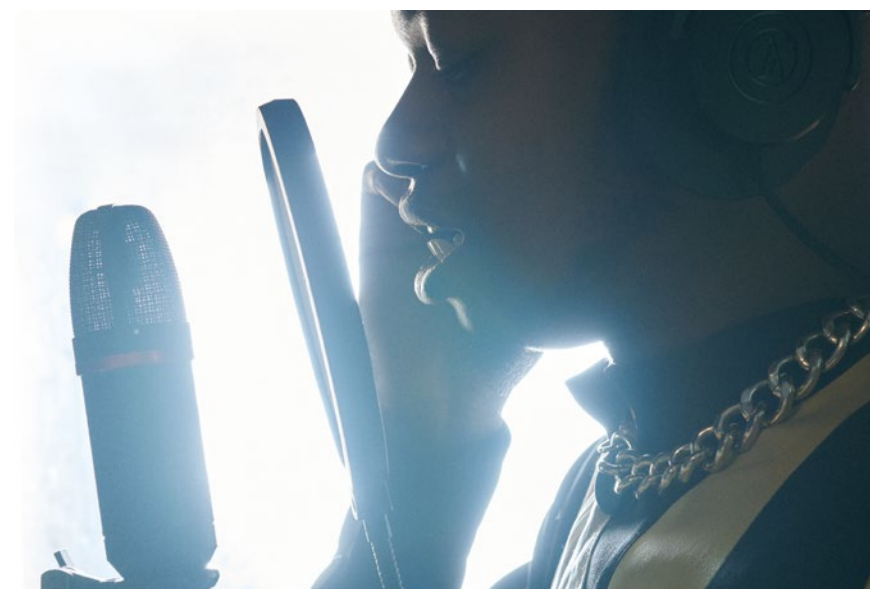
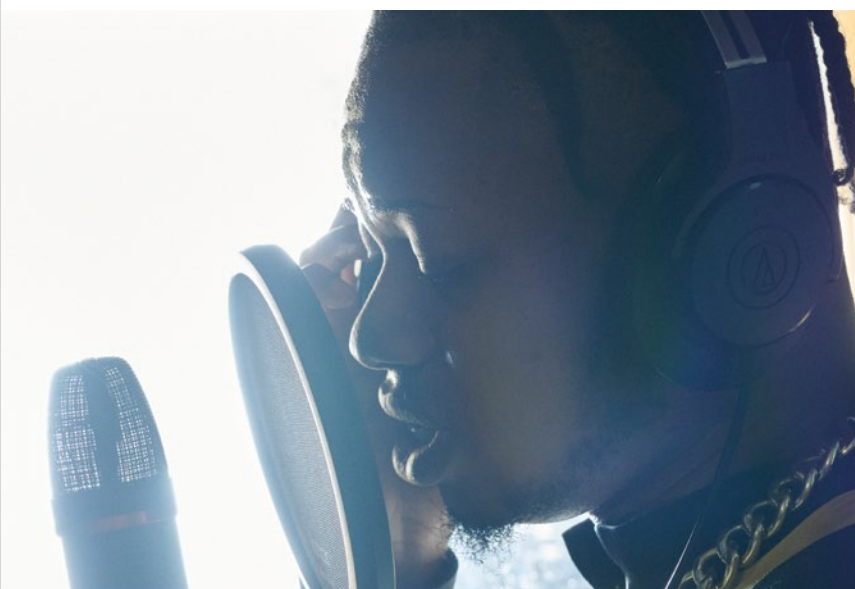
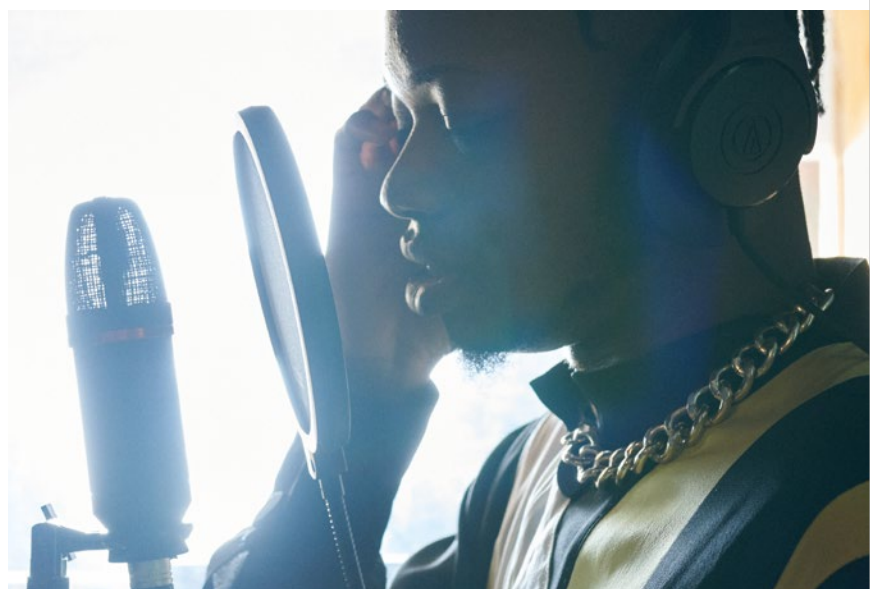
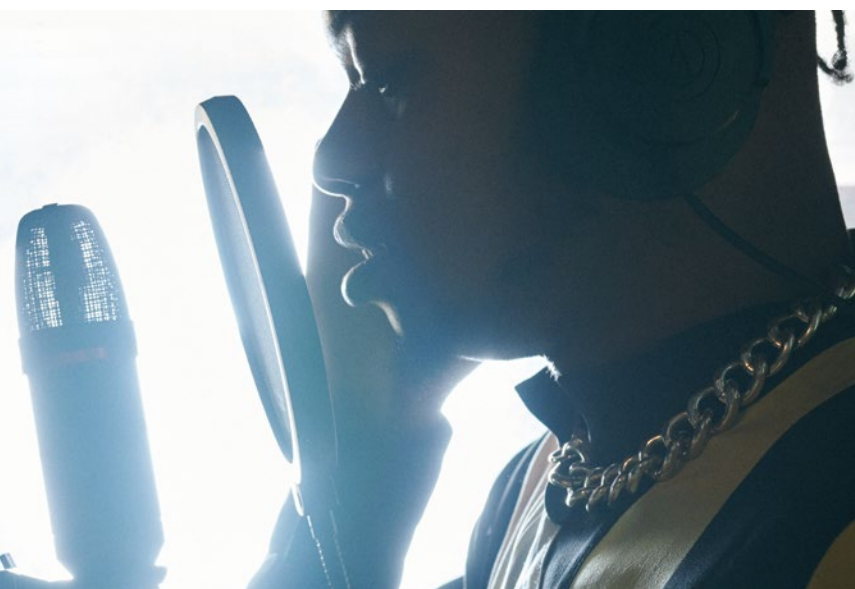


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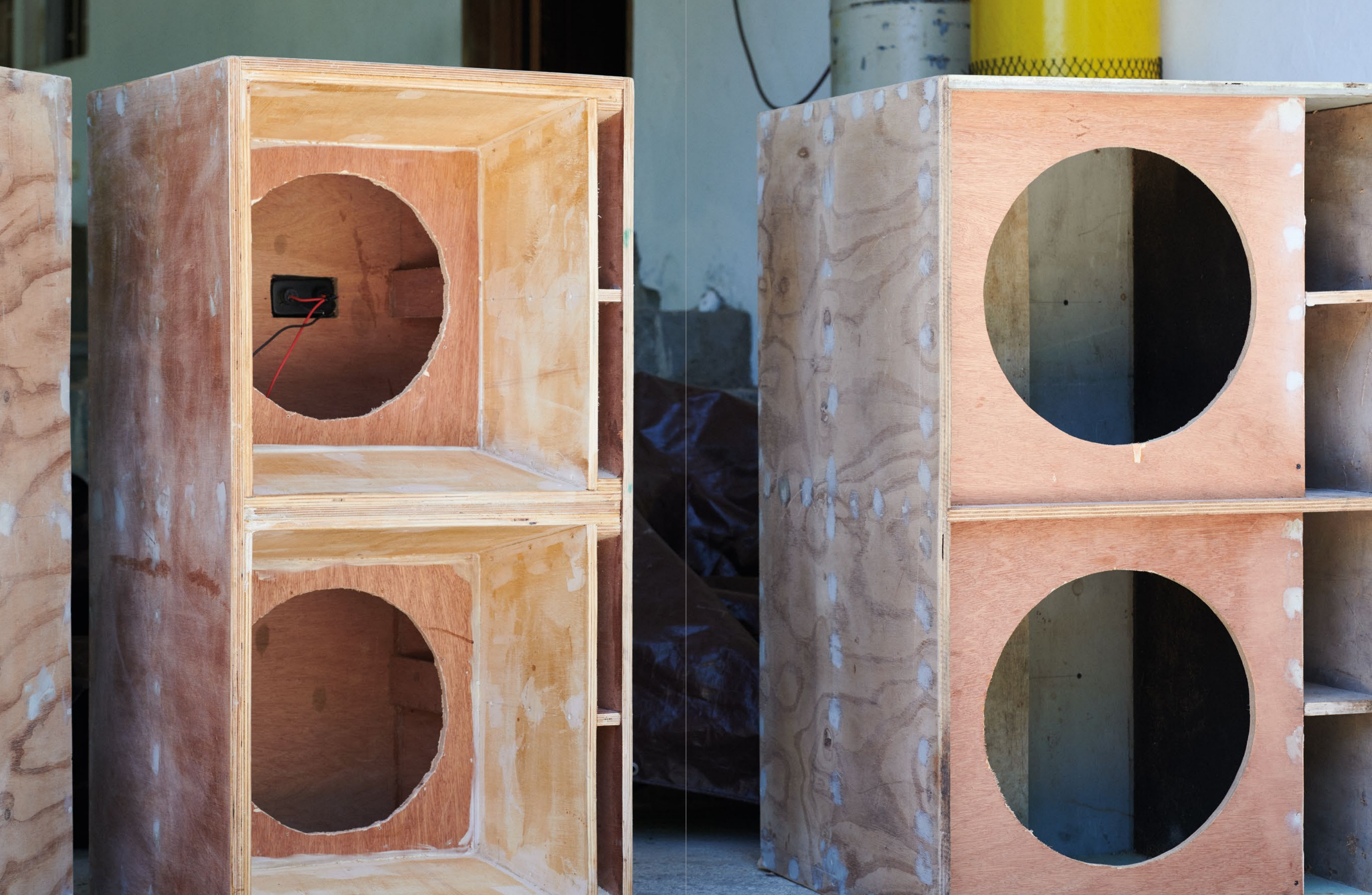




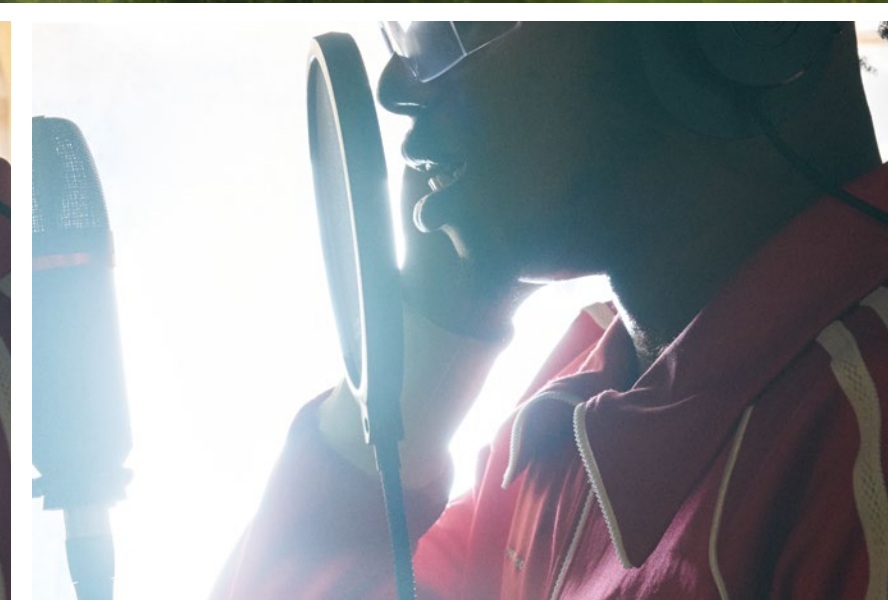
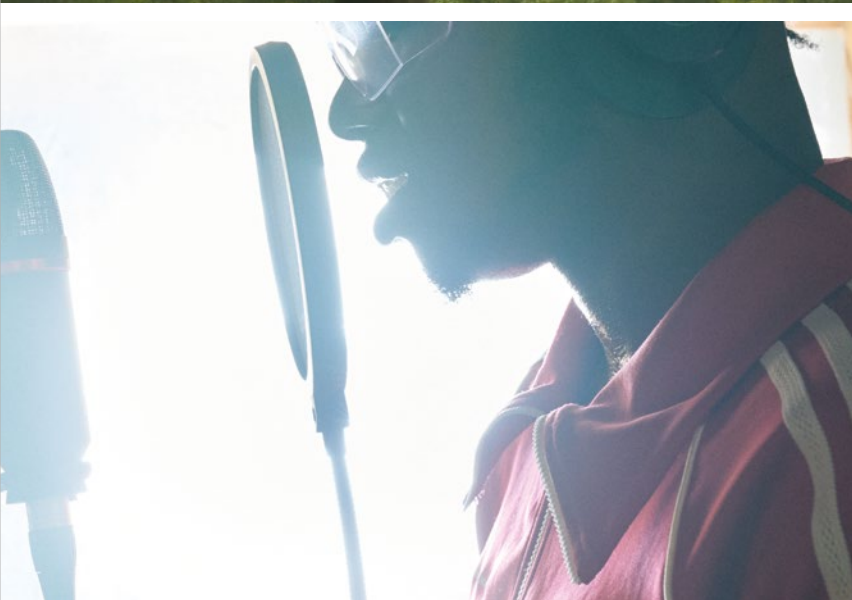
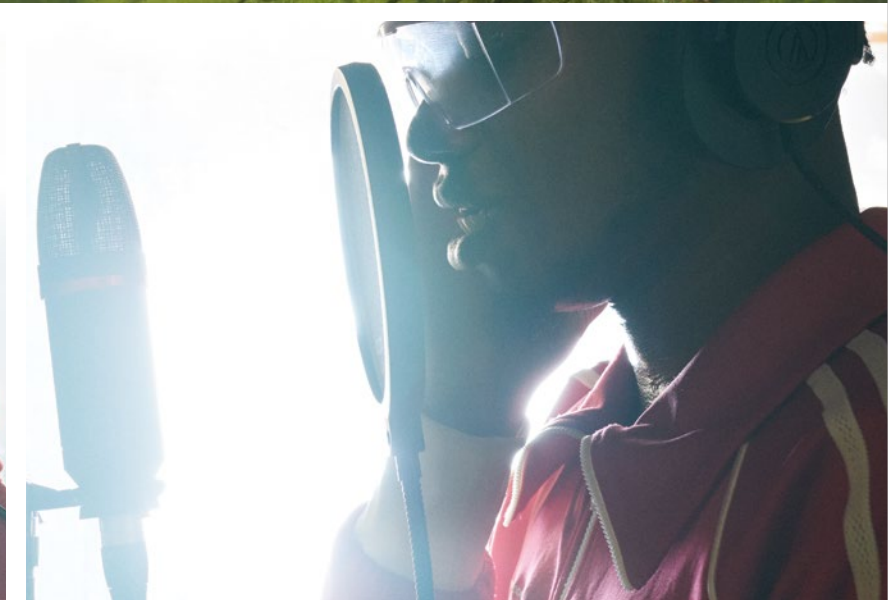




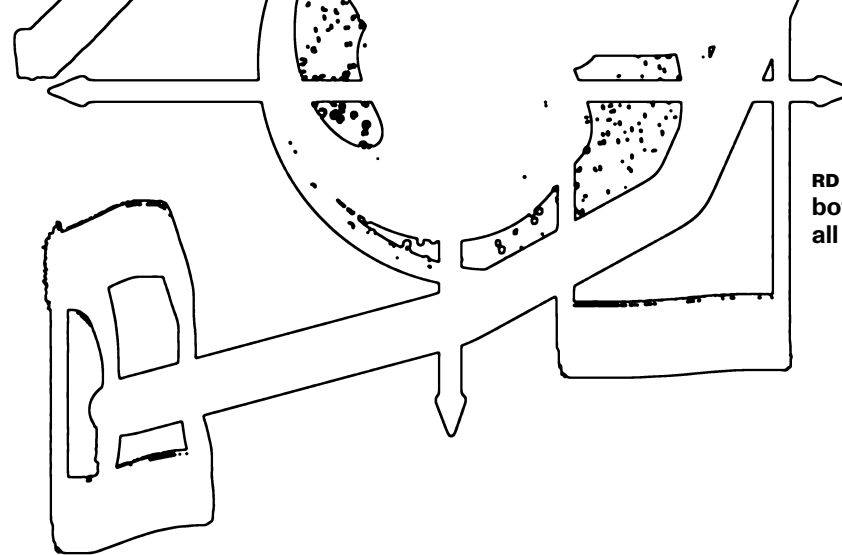












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last year. How can I be of most value? But self-inquiry can happen in many different ways. For me it's not necessarily about being reactive. It's a very continuous thing that I can, or have offered.

**RD** Is there a set of principles that you apply to your practices: both as designer and curator? And if so, have they changed at all since 2014?

**GWB** I have personal values and rational values that have some relation to each other. I don't think that my values have changed, though maybe the wording of them has changed slightly. For my professional values, it's more about an approach or a way of working. It's important to the culture of Wales Bonner. If anything, this year has reinforced my values. I've doubled-down on exactly what I'm about. So there wasn't necessarily a shift or a reaction. There was a crisis, but then the reflection on that was to understand who we are on a deeper level. At Wales Bonner, we're always being guided by research. That's a grounding point. We want to communicate elegance and beauty. That's timeless. We seek continuous refinement by trying to improve things, and question them. All of these things are active. That's just how I am professionally. I show up asking questions, trying to improve, refine, and reinforce things.

**RD** What are some of your personal principles?

**GWB** What's most important to me is the aesthetics of spirituality, and experience. But I see that as one thing. Beauty, nature, spirituality—all beings, surroundings, and environments have a spiritual significance. The second thing that's very important to me is research into Black cultural practice. That's quite timeless. Lastly, I'm interested in the idea of legacy, a professional legacy, to create something lasting and timeless that can also exist beyond me. But the idea of legacy is also about connecting to the past as well.

**RD** I can see that type of thinking in the spaces you create for your work whether in an exhibition or runway context and I use space rather than event because I feel that you have such a conscious thought around environments. In addition, over the years, you've been developing a glossary of Wales Bonner terms. I'd say that devotion is part of that, shrine is part of that, language is part of that, the aesthetic is part of that. I'd go as far to say that each space that, and I'm thinking specifically about the Devotional Sound projects in both London and New York, you almost create a shrine in the space that's being held. So how do you go about making sure that that space is a shrine for others to enter?

**GWB** That's a beautiful question. I'm also glad I shared my values with you because it is quite personal, but I hope they illustrate what I meant when I say that the way that I can contribute is if what I create could be in line with who I am.

I think it goes back to experience. I see experience, beauty, and spirituality as one thing. So, naturally, I create immersive experiences that have sensory elements. Sound is a very important element to me. I can hear the sound of that world. I can see what it looks like; feel the rhythm and textures of it. My research process is all about inhabiting an environment. It may be based around a character, but then what environment do they inhabit? There are these different strands: musical, literary, visual so I think in a multisensory way. And that shrine, as you described it, is an environment for those ideas to exist in. It can also be fleeting. These spaces might only last for a few hours. But I think it's another way of also experiencing research in an active state. And I think it makes me think about the exhibition, "A Time for New Dreams" that we did in 2019 at the Serpentine Gallery. We're always thinking about the form of a shrine, but as if it's a portal into another world, time, or space. It's a way of engaging on a different level with people thinking about those spaces, the attention to those spaces to transport us, but it's also created through a collective intention and activation. It's like everyone made that space. We worked together. It's a collaborative act to create that kind of environment.

**RD** I think you have a really exciting way of collaborating with the ancestors and the younger generation. How do you make space for other people's mindsets in your collaborative practice?

**GWB** It's in part a call and response, or an exchange. I like

**"Research into Black cultural practice is very important to me, as is the idea of legacy, to create something lasting and timeless that can also exist beyond me."**

















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having conversations with people, and I always come back to this idea of multiplicity of perspectives. It's like understanding a space, a mood, or a world that is constructed through fragments and different references. Maybe I romanticize some of these worlds as they're fictional in a way. But they're always grounded in reality. So much of my work is inspired by things that already exist, so it's natural for me to have conversations with the people that created those works. Dialogue just expands a way of looking at something and enlarges what it is. I guess that's something that has been natural for me. It helped me to level up, because speaking to these people I admired puts me outside of my comfort zone.

**RD** I remember when we were in your studio and you just came off the phone after confirming with Ishmael Reed. And I was like, "Sorry did you say Ishmael Reed?" We were both like, "Yeah this is big!" It's interesting to think about it as putting yourself out of your comfort zone. I think that that is definitely something I look to do. When it's someone that you respect, you can only step up to engage and embrace their level of thinking.

**GWB** Exactly. In terms of letting other people into my practice, I think I'm a step behind in the sense that I don't consider my practice to be about myself. It's about an idea and perspectives around an idea. So there's someone that will be able to understand that idea and interpret it musically, through movement or through literature. It's for the good of the idea that there are multiple perspectives. So there's a singularity, but not a singular perspective. I want to create a luxury brand that comes from a Black cultural perspective, which from where I stand is not a singular identity. It can't be that.

**RD** I think that the brand has a point of intrigue. It's always intrigued by what's happening and by what has happened. I think about how you collaborate recurrently with people, and you foster friendships and relationships through that. What goes through your mind when you see the end results of these exchanges? Is it ever surprising or frustrating?

**GWB** I'm pretty particular, so if I want to work with someone, and we want to work with each other, then we have a conversation about the work. I'm not controlling though. But it's not a coincidence if I end up working with someone. There's common ground there.

**RD** There's already shared principles, which is why you're even engaging with them in the first place.

**GWB** Yeah, I think so. But I think that people have maybe surprised or challenged me. It's really good. Say myself and a collaborator have the same body of research; they could interpret it in some way that I could never imagine. That's what's really exciting! Then it becomes bigger than I even thought it could be. That's really magical. I remember Elysia Crampton, who worked on some soundscapes for the show previously. We had these conversations around the research and what she delivered was unbelievable, like so surprising to me, but so exhilarating, so exciting! Letting someone run with something is a form of mutual respect.

**RD** You've always been engaged with film. Watching them all together recently, I noticed there's a constant reference to water. It's almost always at the beginning or journeying through the films. Could you expand on your reference to water as a landing, which is also a point of journeying?

**GWB** There's a spiritual dimension to it as an element. Another aspect is that the water that connects us displaces us as well. These threads will also continue in other things that I work on. I think that's what's exciting to me right now. I'm really appreciative that you see these things. The way that these threads show up and build—I can elaborate on them over time. There was a film I made in 2010 or something on Lake Bosumtwi in Ghana. It was just me filming the lake.

**RD** Thinking about that video and how that was captured, when I see a lot of the imagery that comes out of the collaborations that we've spoken about, or even just from the studio, I always think of Tina Campt's *Listening to Images*, where she explores through photography but specifically the discarded documentation images of the Black diaspora, including passport photos and that kind

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of documentation. What was your desire to place the mundane into a format of beauty?

**GWB** It's about the gaze and about the distance from the camera that feels quite observational. Those scenes or beauty are present whether you're looking at it or not. These things are happening whether there's a spotlight on them or not. I think that relates somehow to the strands of beauty that I connect with and why I got into fashion. When I first started creating, the initial intention was to elevate the location of Blackness within fashion. There are these multiple examples of beauty, sophistication, elegance, refinement, intellectualism, and a spectrum of representation and it just wasn't being shown within fashion. I wanted to show these things that are so familiar to us.

**RD** And natural to us.  
**GWB** Exactly. There was a need to proliferate certain images to begin with. They were always there, but might not have had the platform to be shown as much as you see other things.

**RD** What is your definition of beauty? Or, when you think of beauty, who do you return to? I think about Simone White or Derek Walcott's poems. I think poetry has a lot of possession of 'beauty' in both a traditional and gutting sense.

**GWB** There's a connection to poetry and romance. It's an elegant sense of grace. It's the way you move and carry yourself so it's very gestural as well. It makes me think about the Harlem Renaissance. It's an interwoven connection between music, image, and poetry.

**RD** After your SS21 collection Essence—ending the trilogy exploring Britain and the Caribbean as a diasporic journey—which Marc Asekhome captured beautifully in the pictures shot in Jamaica for this issue of KALEIDOSCOPE, where are we going next?

**GWB** There are certain things that I come back to, music being one of them, and portraiture being another. I think, "how can I create something that looks like a sound?" It's really hard. So that's something that I come back to—how do you represent music visually? Portraiture and documentation is one way of trying to connect them. I think that's all I'll say at the moment.

**RD** Lastly, what book are you currently reading? And then what was the last film that you watched?

**GWB** I'm reading this book called *Ka*, by Roberto Colasso. It's fiction that describes the Vedas through different passages of time. It's beautiful because your understanding of the universe changes as you go through these different time periods that the scriptures were written in. It's been exciting, but also intense. And I watched a documentary about Don Cherry quite recently, which was really good as well. 🙏

**Grace Wales Bonner** (British, b. 1992) is a London-based fashion designer and founder of the eponymous brand, **Wales Bonner**.

**Rhea Dillon** is an artist, writer, and poet based in London.

ALL CLOTHING: WALES BONNER SS21 'ESSENCE'

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARC ASEKHAME  
DOP: MARIO MORRIS, JASON KNIGHT  
STYLING BY DANIEL OBASI  
STYLING ASSISTANT: KADEEM RODGERS

MAKEUP: ERIKA NEUMANN  
HAIR: NATRICIA BERNARD  
PRODUCTION: RUFF KUTT  
PRODUCTION, IZZY STEVEN, RYAN CHRISTIE

MODELS:  
SHANIKA JOHNSON, SASKIA HARRIS, JEROME PHILLIPS, RUSHANE CHAMBERS, JOAN WILSON, CA\_VOY, DELROY SMITH POLO, DEANDRE JOHNSON, BLACK\_BOY\_876

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