

# LEFTLION

## Exhibition Review: Jimmy Roberts' *Akimbo* at Nottingham Contemporary

words: Alex Stubbs  
photos: Lewis Ronald

*Akimbo*, Guadeloupean-born artist Jimmy Robert's latest exhibition currently on view at Nottingham Contemporary, captures an important moment not only in the artist's career but also the social moment we are living in.



Install shot of Jimmy Robert: *Akimbo*, Nottingham Contemporary, 2020, credit Lewis Ronald

With work from across Robert's 20-year career to date on show, *Akimbo* is asking us in no uncertain terms to consider the defiant nature of the human body alongside more intimate and performative themes.

Certainly the curation of *Akimbo* resonates with a prevailing sense of careful consideration. Entering into the gallery, *Silk*, two portraits taken from the work of Belgian-Romanian artist Idel Ianchelevici, hang facing both away and towards the viewer. It's only when you walk around them that the exhibition begins to slowly unravel its multiplicity of perspectives; *Untitled (Agon)* maintains continuity with *Silk* in its use of stylistic elements of clean, flowing lines, yet builds upon this through the use of archival images and deconstruction of the original artwork. Here, Robert's affection towards both art history and black history is seen through the archival image of Arthur Mitchell, the first Black ballet dancer to appear in the New York City Ballet. Choreographer George Balanchine made the, at the time, controversial decision to pair Mitchell with the white ballerina Diana Adams in a production of *Agon*; a historical moment for black representation in a white-dominated cultural sphere, Robert's use of Mitchell's body is a beautifully constructed celebration of the black male body.

Leftlion, October 2020

# Tanya Leighton

*Untitled* (Plié II), 2020 displays Robert's body extended in pose and warped by the cylindrical construction of the print, asking us to consider our own gaze upon the artist. The pink ribbon cascading away from the work promises a performance that we do not get to see, heightening our awareness of the gaze and our position as spectator. Yet, whilst we are seeing Robert's body in the work, there remains a sense of uncertainty. "It is me and it is also not me," explains Robert. "[M]y body becomes a tool, an object that I am trying to sculpt just like images to get it to create forms." These forms arrive in the use of materials such as beech and oak wood in *Untitled* (Sebastien) (where Robert's half-brother Sebastien appears), or perhaps even in the pink ribbon of *Plie II* itself.

Robert thinks about whether he could ever achieve this materiality outside of his own body; that perhaps he could mould and warp the human form into something more than itself. "How do you read this 'material'; this 'matter'. Does this matter? If so why?" He is utterly conscious of his blackness; that he is, probably, the first black art professor at Berlin University of the Arts. He is also vitally aware of the work of other black artists. When I asked him about the work of Paul Mpagi Sepuya, whose works *Mirror Study for Grace* and *Darkroom Mirror* also appear in *Grace Before Jones* - the Contemporary's simultaneous exhibition - there is a profound sense of respect: "I really like this portrait and the work of Paul generally," he says, "[and] I have seen Paul's work evolve in the past few years and his relationship to photography and the camera - the gaze in particular - is becoming more and more complex."

“ It is the challenge Robert presents to the image, through his use of perspective and performance, that sets his work apart from his contemporaries

In *Brown Leatherette*, an exploration of the corporeality of the human form and arguably Robert's most recognised work, the gaze is explicitly interrogated. The title is coined from *Warm Leatherette*, a Grace Jones song Robert tells me he danced to several times and that he views as having "something celebratory about it, but also sexy and fetish and punk, making it hard to resist." Robert's connection to Grace Jones signifies an interesting confluence between the Contemporary's two exhibitions. The video itself is a recognition of Jones' influence on a young Robert; "When I first made the movie I wanted to respond to her influence as someone who raised questions around gender, post-colonialism and performance in an unprecedented manner... and make an analogy between the warmth of the body and its colour."

Indeed, the gaze is fundamental in Robert's work. "I continually want viewers to think about how they position themselves in relation to art works not only physically but also socially [and] emotionally," explains Robert. "The act of looking is a dynamic one and requires some work, and I want this act of interpreting to be made manifest when one also is no longer looking at things from the point of the view they are used to." For Robert, it is not just the artwork that requires interrogation, but the space in which the work is presented; "The wall itself needs to be questioned, the glass that separates you from the image but also how you stand in front of an image. All these things are not given, they are constructs that need challenging to maybe approach image-making in new terms."

It is the challenge Robert presents to the image, through his use of perspective and performance, that sets his work apart from his contemporaries. Yet, despite the success of his practice, distance is the one thing missing for Robert. "I am not sure I have the distance [from my work] yet and this show feels - despite the fact that works are from different periods - feels more like a solo show of works than something encompassing so many years." After all, a twenty-year career is an achievement in itself. "I guess what I am trying to say is that both the show and my perception of it do not make twenty years feel like a long time and it feels good to see them together in this space so carefully selected."

*Akimbo* will travel to France and then on to Italy, whilst Robert will present his show *Tobacco Flower* at the Glasgow International in 2021. For now, though, *Akimbo* remains impactful where it is, displaying Robert's work with a fresh outlook yet constantly reevaluating the parameters of performance in an engaging and thought-provoking manner.

*Jimmy Roberts: Akimbo is at Nottingham Contemporary until Sunday 3 January*