



## Episode Transcription: “A Two-Way Conversation with Layo Bright”

### Jabari Owens-Bailey:

From Museum of Glass in Tacoma, Washington, this is *Frit City*. I'm Jabari Owens-Bailey, Curatorial Education Program Manager at Museum of Glass. Today we will be speaking with the artist Layo Bright about her work in the exhibition *A Two-Way Mirror* and also her recent residency at Museum of Glass. Welcome, Layo. I'd like to start this interview off just talking a little bit about your background.

### Layo Bright:

Sure. I am a Nigerian artist, sculptor, and I grew up in Lagos, which is the main big city in the southwest. It's also a port city, and I've lived there mostly all my life. I am mid-early-30s now, and I left Nigeria when I was 24 to pursue an MFA.

### Jabari Owens-Bailey:

So Nigeria is really just like a big part of your personal identity.

### Layo Bright:

Oh, yeah, for sure. I think being Nigerian, being Yoruba, being of a certain age point where we gained our independence in 1960, and that was when my parents were born or around when they were born. And looking at my life now, being a mid- or early-30s Nigerian woman, life is very different. My parents survived the military era. They survived all of the, well, more uncertainty than today. And now we're in the modern world of technology. And it's been interesting growing up in Lagos, shifting through those times, and then now moving to the US.

### Jabari Owens-Bailey:

So a lot of that finds its way into your work.

### Layo Bright:

Yeah, my background is what I go off with my work. That's who I am. That's what feels natural. And it's many things about that I question or tap into creatively. So, most of the design techniques I use in my work are based off Yoruba design techniques or culture, artifacts, or textiles, things that I have a personal affiliation with or curiosity about, and things I've seen. I tend to use those materials to recall histories and think about myself and different people in my community in proximity to that.



Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Yeah, I think that's important to have a practice that is centered on not only larger histories, but also personal history. So, with that in mind, I'm going to ask you the big question that anybody who worked at a glass museum would ask, which is how did you find glass?

Layo Bright:

I found glass by watching Netflix's *Blown Away*. Some people like that. Some people get, like, cringe about that because they're like, *Oh, you watch that show* and depending on your feelings about *Blown Away*... I thought it was great, and the fact that I'm here today is testament that it reached a new audience. For me, that's the point. I watched season one, and Deborah Czeresko won season one, and I loved their work. And then I met Deborah at a talk in New York after and recognized Deborah, like, *Oh my gosh, that's the winner of season one*. And a friend encouraged me to talk to Deborah, which I did, and was just fangirling, honestly, like, tripping. And Deborah was like, *Well, if you're so interested in glass, you should actually take a class at Urban Glass*. And I was like, *What is Urban Glass?* And then gave me the whole intro, and Devin Mathis, who is the executive director at Urban Glass, was right there and was like, *Oh, here's my card. Email me. I'll send you the scholarship link. You should apply*. Which I did. And, long story short, took a class in kiln casting, which is basically when you make a sculpture in clay – well, open-face kiln casting, I should say. So, you make a sculpture in clay, you pour, like, a mold mix over it, you turn it over, take out your clay, and put in crushed glass, and it melts in the kiln at a very high temperature. And when it comes out of the kiln, you break the mold, and *voilà*, you have your glass sculpture. And I loved the idea of glass as accessible, glass as something I can work with as a material because I could never fathom that before. I always just thought, oh, glass is like, I drink from it, or there's a bottle that's manufactured by a company, because that's the only way I grew up using it. You have these big companies that produce beer or Coke and Fanta, and that's what I thought of with glass. And then suddenly, it was this accessible medium to create artwork with, and I loved that idea so much, and I used my savings. I remember I was working for a gallery at the time, and I just like... You know what, COVID hit. Everybody was working from home. I was working from home. And my boss really hated that, the fact that he couldn't keep eyes on us, like, *Oh, what are you doing?* I'm like, *I'm working*. I did all my emails, but I bought a kiln, and I was casting most of the day, so I would check on my casting, reply



to my emails. It was awesome.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Your boss might end up hearing this interview and know that.

Layo Bright:

Exactly. Yeah. Killing two birds with one stone. And I think that period of reflection and just uninterrupted attention to the medium allowed me to feel like I can bring my own narratives to this.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Yeah, I think that's really interesting to bring your own personal narrative and history to the material. And, like you were just saying, it's something that we all have a utilitarian association with. Whether that's, like, things we drink out of or products we buy, in one way or another, that filters into our aesthetic of glass. I think it's really interesting that you came at it that way. I know that just looking at your work, a lot of it seems to be about womanhood. Can you speak to that role, and maybe the reason why that's important to you and why that comes across in your work?

Layo Bright:

Yeah. Most of my subjects and people I talk about are women in my work. I didn't set out to do that, I should say. It more just came about from conversations with my mom during COVID. The first works I ever made in glass were about... Well, actually, that's not true. The first work I ever, ever made in glass was a bunch of bananas. I don't know why that was what I made in the class. And the first portrait I ever made was a self-portrait. But the first serious piece I made, that was me fusing and casting and bringing the leaves in, was of my mom. So, that was my first resolved body of work about her. And we were talking a lot during COVID. My mom is a pharmacist, and she's such an extrovert. She's always checking in and sending long WhatsApp messages. And, oh my goodness, I didn't know how much I needed that till COVID. Usually I found it like, *Oh, Mom, seriously?* But during COVID there was this need to connect, and she was always there, and I suddenly really deeply appreciated her care, her attention, stuff that in a busy world, I'll just be like, *Oh, Mom*. And then in COVID, with isolation, I was like, *I need this*. And we would talk so much, and we talked about things we'd never talked about before. There was just so much time all of a sudden, which is weird, because it's the same amount of time. It's the same 24 hours. But



suddenly, we all were, like, laser focused on our families and our communities, and being isolated at home. And for me, that really made me also laser focused on her. And then we had conversations, and she would just talk about how invisible she felt at times. And we reflected on coming from Nigeria in a very patriarchal society where if you don't have a husband and kids, you're seen as nobody. So, we talked about that a lot, and her concerns for me, and I was like, *I'm fine*, and I am not a conventional person in that sense. And I just reflected on that. I wanted to make work about her. And then it was about my grandmother, and then about my sister, and then me, and then all of us in conversation with one another. And I do enjoy highlighting women's stories. I think there's so much that is perceived about women and the sense of fragility and all uncertainty about what they can do or achieve that I push against a lot in my work, and suddenly I wanted to center all the work and portraits about women and highlighting them and their stories. So, in my figurative work, it's mostly women I know, friends, family, people I'm inspired by, and people whose stories I want to share.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Yeah. This idea of origin kind of comes across to me a lot in your work, and we think about our parents as also part of our origins. That really plays into that. So, I think it's just really interesting that you were casting your mom's face. Did you take a life mold of her?

Layo Bright:

I did. So, the last time I was home, prior to making the body of work in 2020, I did take a life mold of her face. And she was so excited. I thought she would freak out, because it's a vulnerable process to just be there for 30 minutes. If someone's claustrophobic, they can't handle that. Even I, doing mine, having someone do mine, I was freaking out, but she was so calm. She was, like, humming and smiling. And I kept that mold for a while before then using it for the glass works because my prior works were, like, plaster cast, and they didn't involve glass at all. So, I thought I'd use it for that, which I also have done. But it was when I reflected on the glass and our conversations, I was like, Wait, why don't I just make work about her?

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Yeah. Was it a rubber mold?

Layo Bright:



Yeah, it was silicone. The skin safe, green one. That skin safe... what's it called? What's that mold thing called?

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Was it, like, Smooth-On?

Layo Bright:

Smooth-On! Yeah. How could I use it so much? Smooth-On. And I put Vaseline on her eyebrows so I wouldn't pull them out, and then did the plaster wrap to make it solid and make it a proper mold. And I took it in my suitcase from Nigeria and kept it for, like, six months before I ended up making the glassworks.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Wow. So, you were committed to the idea, like, not only in having the mold, but also traveling with it and just having it sitting around for a while.

Layo Bright:

I mean, might as well. I didn't know what was right, what was wrong. I didn't know the rules. I was just like, I'm going to try, and if it doesn't work, then I'll know, but it worked out.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Yeah. I think it's just so powerful looking at the pieces from the *Adebisi* series, and they're on view at Museum of glass in *A Two-Way Mirror*. So, when I saw those pieces, it just spoke to me in a way, and I was interpreting all of the foliage around the face to be a gele. And then, after I talked to you, I found out they were plants that were actually from Nigeria. And so, it's just so interesting, like, how that origin comes across in the work. Is there a reason why the plants that grow in your home country, or even specifically in the region that your family is from, why that's so important to be included in your work?

Layo Bright:

Yes, it's important to be included because it makes me think of healing. I wanted a protective barrier, I think, of some kind around the figure. You think of a portrait, and I think of, when you're taking a photo, you try to frame, whether it's the body or the face, within the photo frame.



Jabari Owens-Bailey:  
Right.

Layo Bright:

And I was trying to think of that sculpturally. *Okay, there's a face, but what do I frame it in?* I wanted to think of something to encapsulate that, and I just kept thinking, *Well, what would go with this?* and leaves and nature kept coming to mind. And at the time, I didn't see anything like it, honestly. I was just like, it makes sense to me. I'm going to try it. And I don't think I set about a coherent idea. The first time I did it. I was just, like, scrolling through images of different leaves that are attached to medicinal use in the southwest of Nigeria. And I was, you know, I use a lot of the Ife head. Like, the lines. I know we'll talk about that later, but it's these incised lines on the face of these artifacts that were discovered in Ife. And they had lines from the forehead to the chin. And I was like, well, if I'm talking about Ife, why don't I look at plants in Ife? So, I just looked up plants in Ife, and I came across this research document by a Nigerian botanist talking about medicinal uses in southwest by women who use it to cure their young or use it for various ailments. And I was, *Hmm, talking about women.* There's, like, women and herbs and medicinal use and then –

Jabari Owens-Bailey:  
Women as healers.

Layo Bright:

Yeah, exactly. And I love that phrase, women as healers. And I looked up the plants, and some of them look very generic in the leaves, honestly. But the uses from a headache to skin diseases to infertility cures, or supposed cures, and tummy aches, like, fever. And I just kept thinking about how to bring that in the work. So, the leaves came in in that way, and I used it to frame the face. And I really was drawn to the simplicity of it and also this generic-looking leaf that actually holds power and actually has a use. And that's how they started out. And it's basically taken over as part of the visual language I employ in my works, like an adornment of leaves or now, most recently, flowers that have medicinal uses but also act as frames for the portraits and kind of protect the figure in a way.



Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Yeah, I think about that, that's such an interesting thing, to have these leaves protect the figure, and probably, to a certain extent, they're protecting you as the person who is away from home. You're using the aesthetic from your home kind of in your new life.

Layo Bright:

Yeah, exactly. I mean, there are things that I use in my work as design, but I think of as the present but also absent. It's not like I draw lines on my face to identify myself, but it's a way of recalling that history and feeling connected, and feeling like no matter where I am or no matter where all these people are, we're all connected. And there is this thread that runs through. It's also this sense of *never forget*. I like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, book, *The Thing Around Your Neck*. There's one story about the woman in diaspora. I can't remember her name, but she wakes up in... She keeps having dreams, and she wakes up in a sweat one night, and she recalls her grandmother and a night, or her grandmother telling her something when she was a kid, to never forget. And then she suddenly remembered out of nowhere, and she started carrying that with her, like, *I cannot forget myself. I cannot forget who I am*. And there's a sense of that like this. When I made these works... I mean, hindsight is 20/20, but when I made these works, I felt a deep sense of loss and dislocation to home. I was going through finishing Parsons, but also feeling extremely lonely. And my parents were like, *Come home. Come home*. And I was like, *No, I don't want to*. Because the art scene there is not something I feel is prepared for what I have, but I do want to feel close to home. So a lot of the work I made was because I didn't see it around me, and I wanted to feel that connection. And now people are like, *Oh, did you make work because you're trying to make work about Nigeria, Africa?* And I'm like, *No, I just made work about what I needed to have around me*. I mean, my audience was first myself before it was anybody else, and a lot of the work is responsive to that.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Yeah. And the work is centering on you and your lived experience, too. I think a lot of times in art schools they can ask questions about certain things that seem obvious. Well, we'll not go on too much of a tangent about that.

Layo Bright:

That can be a whole conversation.



Jabari Owens-Bailey:

That can be a whole conversation that maybe you and I will later on. So, before we started the podcast, we were talking about your background as a lawyer. You went to school and studied to become a lawyer and took the bar. And we talked a little bit about that. How was it to pivot from that to being a full-time artist?

Layo Bright:

I think it didn't feel like going into a big leap of faith because I think I come across people that are like, *That's so brave. You took the leap of faith.* And I was like, it didn't feel like a leap of faith or being pushed off a cliff. It just felt like one step at a time. And I did know I did not want to be a lawyer. I mean, unfortunately, I was good at it because I do tend to advocate for what I want. And I feel like most people are like, *Oh, you can speak so well,* and I do... Can carry an argument. I can carry a good argument and I can study it. I can study all the cases. And I did quite well in law school and for my law degree, it's interesting because I went to Babcock University, and that's in Ogun State, which is about a three hour drive out from Lagos. And when I applied, it was too late. Like, when I applied, the law program had started. So, they were running a special program for students that came in at the time where if you get a certain grade, you then get pushed through to the next year of law to join them. But if you don't, you just do the international law and diplomacy course. So, I did the exam and passed. And unfortunately, my dad was like, super excited because they let me pick and I called him and he's like, *I have a lawyer in the family!* And I was like, Oh God, I guess I'm going to be a lawyer. So, I should have been a diplomat, I guess, if I would have stayed in international law and diplomacy. And by the time I did law school, I felt indebted to my parents. I felt like they really wanted a lawyer in the family. I felt like there was a lot of pressure on me to do that. So, even though I had been doing my art throughout... I was that kid or teenager on campus that started an art club because I wanted people to be able to let go after a long day of lectures. I was the only one that had an easel. I bought, like, a huge sketch pad. And at the end of the day, when people are carrying their books to study in class, I'm carrying my easel and my sketch pad, and they're like, *This girl is a weirdo. What are you even doing here? Why are you...* Like, so many people want to be in this law program, and I always had those two parts of my brain. So, yeah, going into law school, I knew I wanted to be an artist. I'd been doing it on my own for years, and my parents were like, *Well, you can be a lawyer artist. You can be a lawyer that draws in your spare time.* And I always found that notion very. I found it like a cop out. Like, the easy way out. Like, oh, just like, yeah, don't fully go for it. Just live





this life, and you can still draw on the side. And I really resisted that in many ways. So, I applied, after I passed the bar, passed law school, everything, I applied to Parsons for a master's in fine art. I didn't apply for a BFA because I was like, I can't do a BFA at this point. If I have to start from that point, do four years and then do two years of master's, I would give up. Like, I can't. So, I applied for a master's at Parsons and at the Royal College of Art in London, and I got into both. And I don't know why. I really don't. I felt like maybe my statement was really good. I don't know. I was very passionate and enthusiastic, but it was risky. I did fear what a life as an artist would be like. A life as a lawyer is very comfortable and attracts a certain income and certainty. And there's something about me that hated the notion of certainty in life and a safe, easy path. I just had to know. I was too curious. So, after applying, I got a partial scholarship to go to Parsons. And I was like, I think this is it. I think this is what I've been looking for. It may not be a certain path, but there's a level of freedom. There's a level of *I can experiment and find myself* that I just couldn't imagine in law. I really couldn't.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Yeah. What strikes me so much in that story is the investment that you, the small investments that you make in yourself. Like the investment in you buying a kiln, you buying that easel. So, despite what's going on around you, you're still investing in the future of this enterprise, of you being an artist. So, it's just something that's just native to you.

Layo Bright:

I guess so. I always had people tell me I was crazy and that things would never work. And there was a point where I believed that, there was a point where I was afraid, but there was also a point where I went, like, I'm going to bet on myself and I'm going to try, and I don't need to know tomorrow. I don't need to know ten years from now. I just need to know what steps I am going to take and take it from there. So, I did have many fears. And honestly, till I left Nigeria, nobody, except maybe my dad, partially, believed in me. Most people are like, *Okay, we'll see you in two years when you're done with this program, and you're done getting all this steam off of being an artist. Yeah, see you in Lagos.* And I was like, *I don't need you to know me. I know me more than anybody will. And I believe in myself.* I had to believe in myself where many people actually didn't. And it was hurtful. It was very much a letdown that if only you could see, I'm serious about this and I need to do this. It is a life calling. Not really just flimsy, *Oh, let*



*me just try this out.* And even if it was, it's, like, everybody should see what they want to do. We have different seasons of life and things we want to try. Why not? Why not have that freedom?

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Yeah. Well, I think that idea of having a life path is something that's really important, and the different ways we can find out about that. It even relates to your work. The fact that your work is so much about that idea of the Ori, right? And that kind of determines your life path, if I'm not mistaken. Can you talk about that and how that factors into your work?

Layo Bright:

Yeah, I mean, the Ori basically translates to head in Yoruba, and it is basically the seat of your soul, if I'm correct, and guides your life path. It is how you journey through life. Your Ori is like your guide. And I grew up in a very Christian home, I should say. My mom would be very pissed if she heard this because she's very strict Anglican. But I always felt a connection to traditional beliefs and systems and faith. And although I don't practice, I do love the stories and the ideas that are at the core. And as a maker sculptor, I was always interested in the lfe heads and the fact that they're all heads. They're all Oris that were discovered... I think it's so powerful that they made those so long ago, like centuries ago, and they knew the importance of carrying one's history and that sense of understanding into the craft itself. And I think that's something I'm invested in, like, taking that and bringing it into the craft of my work, taking all these inspirations and letting them guide the work I'm literally making. I think most people found it unusual that I made heads a lot in my work. And I'm like, you need to know where this is coming from. This is coming from this history and this connection I feel to the idea of the Ori and a life path and a guiding one, and the eyes being the seat of the soul and using that to then lead the body and lead the rest. So that's where the Ori comes into my work, and most of my portraits are based on that, or feature mostly that.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Yeah. I think that that is a powerful idea to bring to things. It's your own culture, it's your own history, your ancestral history that comes across in your work, in a medium that maybe your ancestors had no idea or could dream about these ideas being represented in. So, it's like, how do you take something that is from the past and make



it contemporary? I really admire that, and I admire how you also tackle contemporary issues. Particularly, I'm thinking of the *Dawn* piece that's in the exhibition, *A Two-Way Mirror*, and how that the bust is rendered after Breonna Taylor. Could you speak to that?

Layo Bright:

Yeah. So, I will say it's not meant to be in her likeness. It's just meant to be a responsive work to that event itself. I didn't set out to make work about that initially. I was just trying not to respond. But I guess, as an artist, at some point, depending on what is happening, your inclination is to talk about it or respond in some way or kind of think of your own proximity to it, which is what happened to me. And I remember feeling so much fear at the time of her killing, because I was in an artist's residency in Long Island City, very far from home, but also far from any sense of friends or community. And COVID lockdown was in place, so I couldn't even travel home if I wanted. Nigeria was considered an at-risk country. I didn't even know what was happening back home, I was afraid for everyone. And then with Breonna Taylor's killing in her home, which should have been the safest place to be, in bed, sleeping... I'm like, I couldn't sleep. I couldn't sleep for, like, weeks. I would wake up in sweats and just... I mean, you can't tell what would get to you because there have been so many killings of Black people at the hands of police and other people, and there's been so much injustice. But that one just really unnerved me in a way that I just couldn't process. And with the difficulty sleeping, I just wanted to make work about what I was thinking through, or work that I felt could get me through another day. So, making work, one, distracted me from feeling so much fear. I didn't leave the house. I didn't leave the residency for anything, for groceries, nothing. I ordered everything. And I barely left my room, for a matter of fact, unless I was using the restroom or cooking. I was afraid. And that work kind of gave me a sense of feeling like I could make it through the next day. Like, *Okay, I can wake up and sculpt this piece. I can wake up and render this part or make the color.* And as I started making it, I started feeling some kind of hope again that maybe I'll sleep and wake up the next day. Because I started to imagine how much fear other people were in, of uncertainty. It was a very uncertain time with COVID and also with her killing and so many others. It just felt like, *What is going on?* So, with making the work, I wanted it in glass, because I felt like glass has this ability to be transparent and let light through, but also it can be opalescent and reject light from passing through it. And I wanted it to mimic the dawn because I felt like... I would wake up in the night and force my eyes closed. Until it was dawn, I didn't feel safe.



Until there was light outside, I didn't feel like, *Okay, it's going to be okay*. So, the piece is titled *Dawn* after that, because I felt like with each light of the dawn and with each hue of the light, I could feel some sense of, *Okay, yeah, the next day is here, and I'm here. I'm present. I am still here*. And make it through the next one, and then the next one, and then the next one. So, that's also why it's an addition piece that has different hues to it. So, the piece in the *Two-Way Mirror* show you curated is *Dawn Gold-Topaz*, and that has hues of orange and yellow in it, and it's an iridescent, and it goes from that color to clear. So, it kind of shows the fade of light. I also have blues and purples and browns in the series, just to mimic the different colors of the dawn that I took pictures of at the time.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Wow. That's amazing. I'm also just struck by – and you spoke on this earlier in this conversation – the incised lines in that particular sculpture. And that one, to me, more so than the other ones in *A Two-Way Mirror*, take on many of the characteristics of the lfe heads. So, it's almost like you're putting those marks there to protect.

Layo Bright:

I'm putting those marks there to kind of identify and protect, and kind of think through this gesture of mark making. Tribal marks are very important in African culture, and I think it showed an affinity, it showed, like, a connection to the continent that I keep thinking about in the work. I really like the idea of what lines connect us. At what points do we connect as community or in history? And that's another reason why I use the lines in my work for all my portraits, as many as I can. I think of it in that way, like, one, the craftsmanship of the lfe heads. But also, in modern days, we don't have tribal marks, and it's a dying culture. But I think of it as connected to African history and legacy, and in that way is what I use it for. And that piece also had the leaves as a collar of protection around the neck. So, instead of a conventional neck, it was like leaves that made this bark or collar, which is half tree, half nature elements. And then it had a head wrap in it. I like to think of the history of head tie, not just in West Africa, but also in black history, like around the world. Covering one's head has either been a willing act or one that was forced by law, and in any circumstance, it has been used as a way of challenging and resisting, and adornment, which I think is radical. I think Black women adorning their head is always a sign of being radical in a way of resisting anything that projects on them. I think of covering one's head as a way of, also, in my culture, being celebratory, or being a way of showing one's femininity and just not



caring about being limited or feeling restricted. So, for me, it's many layers of that history, of that fashion, and how it's been used by Black women to resist forces against them.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Wow. When I asked that question, I wasn't prepared for how involved the answer is, and I think it comes across, and there is just a richness to everything that surrounds your busts, or your heads, or your masks. There is just something that is more than just right there. Even if you look at them and don't necessarily understand the context, you understand that it's more than just a rendering of a person and that comes across. I want to briefly talk about your residency, because at the recording of this podcast, you have just finished your residency at Museum of Glass, and while you were there, you were able to make... Well, I'll let you tell what you're making, more so than me.

Layo Bright:

Today is the last day of a five-day residency at the Museum of Glass, where I get to work with the incredible Hot Shop Team in fabricating new work based on sketches I've sent them, and we've been in discussion for months. But basically, I worked mainly on a glass fountain in this residency, which consists of, I think, four bowls of varying sizes and five columns, all produced by the Hot Shop Team, who have been incredible. And it's made from extra dense black glass. It has leaves around each column. Again, leaves recurring as a motif in my work as a way of referring to notions of healing and nurturing and nature. And the shape of it is quite spherical. So, even though the bowls are usual, standard, bowl-looking, the actual columns are shaped to reference gourds and calabashes that are used... At least when I went home recently, I kept occurring or coming into contact with them, whether for food or, again, medicinal use. I'm very interested in the shape itself, lending form to nature in that way. So, the Team worked with me to produce that and I also made a series of flowers, many of which are native to Nigeria, that will adorn the fountain. So, yeah, that's the main piece we did. And the fountain, for me, this is the second fountain I'm ever making. I'm very interested in water, its significance in Yoruba culture and religion as well, and spirituality. But water in general, also referencing life, water being this flow in terms of where we come from, where we're going. We're constantly in flow throughout our lives, and I see it as a continuous cycle, but most especially referencing in my work, this cycle of generations and women and what passes from one generation to another. In many ways, it's unending. In many ways, you're thinking through the cycle of life and mortality and



death, but also joy and renewal and ways of becoming anew. I think water can be terrifying, in terms of many disasters, but it can also be life, and we need water. We are sustained by water. And in many ways, I think of all those meanings in my work tied into this, also, narrative storytelling that maybe connects it more than my story. I think it's one of those works that made that many people come to, and they've either seen a fountain, or they drank water [laughs], or they need to drink water. We all have a connection with water, and I like that it references so much.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Yeah. And you and I were discussing that famous Fela song, "Water."

Layo Bright:

No get enemy.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

No get enemy. I think in the song, he says, if water kills your child, water, you're still going to use.

Layo Bright:

Yes.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

It's so much a part of who we are as humans.

Layo Bright:

There's no doing without it.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

There's no doing without it. Right. So, most of the fountain is black glass. Why was that an aesthetic choice for you?

Layo Bright

I have always had a soft spot for black glass. I think that's some of the first glass I ever used. And on *Blown Away*, I can't remember which season, but someone made a hand in black glass, and the judges, when they were judging it, were like, *I wouldn't use that color. I think I would have used, like, a brighter color.* I can't remember what it was, but



I was like, *Seriously, are they lost on the meaning of this, and how messed up that sounds and is?* Right? But it also made me be like, I love that I can use black glass to resist those notions of what is acceptable in the world of glass as well. I kind of like that because black is this color that people either really love or they stay away from, like, *Why would you make that in black glass?* So, the first few masks I made in the *Adebisi* series were all black. I was like, *Nope, gonna make them all in black.* And, of course, really, really, truly love Fred Wilson's work. I mean, that was some of the first work I saw in glass when I googled "glass art." I was like, oh my gosh, blown away. And I have one of his catalogs from an exhibition about the black chandeliers and the black mirrors, and I just fell in love with it. I think black is beautiful. As corny as it sounds, black is always beautiful.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Nothing corny about that.

Layo Bright:

Someone, I had a gallerist – I know they will never listen to this – but I had a gallerist reach out to me about one of my paintings, and they wanted to show it, and they're like, *We know black is beautiful, but could you do this in other colors?* And I was like, the nerve. Seriously.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

I wanted the tea.

Layo Bright:

It'll be what it is, and it's going to be black, so deal with it, for real. But, yeah, I love the deepness, even formally, like, the deepness of black. There's a point where you use black, and it's like a mirror. When I stood in front of the parts they finished, it was, like, reflecting my likeness, and I could just imagine water dripping down that, and people standing in front of it and seeing themselves in it. I just thought it was aesthetically beautiful, and with rippling water on it, it would even accentuate the piece more.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Yeah, and you know that Fred Wilson allusion you made, so much of the history of contemporary black people working in glass, I think about Fred Wilson as just being



one of those pioneers. And even the fact that we have one of those mirrors in the exhibition and what that means, it's amazing.

Layo Bright:

Look, I was like, I can't believe my work is in that context. I'm rubbing my forehead right now. It's unreal. But, yeah, it would be a dream to meet him. I'll just leave it at that. But his work...

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Me too. That's a dream for me, too. That's a dream for me, too.

Layo Bright:

You need to!

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Make that happen? Yeah.

Layo Bright:

You're like, *I curated your work into this show.*

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Listen, I still want to make it happen. I don't know how we're going to make that happen, Layo, but we will.

Layo Bright:

Oh, we need to. Yeah, I'll be there. I'll tag along.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Absolutely. Absolutely. One other thing I wanted to talk about is this theme of migration that's in your work, and that's found not only in the *Adebisi* series, but also – and these aren't part of *A Two-Way Mirror* – but that you have all of these works around the textile bags, particularly ones that are called the “Ghana Must Go.” We had a conversation earlier today about that. And can you just talk about migration and how that plays into just the things that you talk about in your work?





Layo Bright:

Yeah, I mean, migration is one of the central themes that runs through all my work, whether it's the figurative portraits or my more abstract paintings. Migration is the story of humankind. Let's start with that. Whether willing or forced migration, I feel like, starting from Africa, everybody's had an affiliation with the continent or connection to the continent. Human beings come from Africa. And then you take that to looking at forced migration of African peoples to different parts of the world. You look at modern migration of people moving, like myself, willingly to other parts of the world, or because of global warming and climate change. There's many reasons migration will forever be part of the story of humanity.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

War right now is a big catalyst for migration. So many parts of the world are dealing with immigrants that are a byproduct of wars. I think that this is something that is such a human story.

Layo Bright:

Yeah, it's a story that we've moved from the beginning of time, whether because of the weather or for food or for opportunities. And now you look at the world today, and it's just ever more present that it will be an issue going forward. People are displaced, as you've said. Even in Nigeria, we have Boko Haram in the north that has displaced so many people who've moved to the south and the east or to neighboring countries. You look at Sudan. There's so much happening in the world. And for me, as a Nigerian, I think of that as an ever-present. I think know we have different things that have happened in the country, but most predominantly that I reference is the history of the "Ghana Must Go" bag, which is... Basically, in the 1980s, the president, Shehu Shagari, ordered a decree where any undocumented immigrants had to leave the country with immediate effect, which mostly applied to, predominantly, Ghanaians at the time. I mean, there were some other West Africans, but it was mainly Ghanaians that had come to Nigeria to participate in the oil boom that had happened. And I think this was 1983, if I'm correct, but basically, there was a forced military and forced, kind of, search and deportation of about 2 million Ghanaians. And you can imagine having to uproot your life in a week or, like, immediately. What does one do? And they put their belongings in these checkered plaid looking bags that we had many of them coming in from China at the time. They're very cheap, they're durable, take up a lot of space. You flatten them and they just disappear. And most of them use these bags out of necessity and out of having to leave on such short notice and needing stuff to put



their bags and luggage in. So, Nigerians started calling the bag “Ghana Must Go” bags because of how prevalent it was that mostly these deported migrants were using them. And it became part of our history that I didn't know about till I actually started my MFA at Parsons. And I was like, what, mid-twenties? And it's like, I used to go to the market and be like, Oh, give me “*Ghana Must Go*” bag. *Give me this*. And it's like, I had no idea that our history was, of naming the bag, that was so messed up. And in the course of my research at Parsons, I realized that it's not only in Nigeria that that's happened. I was talking with you earlier about Dan Halter, who is a Zimbabwean artist, and he talks about the bag from the standpoint of many Zimbabweans going to South Africa for opportunities, and the bag started being called “Zimbabwe bag” because of how many migrants were moving in with the bag. In Germany, it's called *Türkenkoffer*, which means “Turkish suitcase,” apparently. I don't know about all parts of the world, but in the UK, in some parts, it's called “Bangladeshi bag,” and in many parts of New York, it's known as “Chinatown tote bag.” So, I find that really weird how this has become a misnomer for migrant communities in different societies, where it kind of classifies a community of migrants...

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

As the other.

Layo Bright:

Yeah, as the other. I'm really interested in that, how this textile has become known in that way. Some people always ask me, *Is this a fashion reference to how Louis Vuitton has taken this fabric and made bags out of it that cost thousands of dollars?* I'm like, well, class is part of it, just not that kind of conversation.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

That's a conversation you're less interested in, but it's still a conversation.

Layo Bright:

It's still one that's implicated in it. But definitely class comes into it, this sense of movement and migration. And I think the bag has become this way of, or has become associated with migrant communities in a way that I'm interested in highlighting those conversations.



Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Yeah. Well, Layo, I want to just thank you for coming here and talking to us about everything from fountains to portraiture to migration. All of that is a testament to how rich and layered your work is. So, I think that those are all important conversations, and I love the fact that we were able to bring those conversations to Museum of Glass as part of *A Two-Way Mirror*. Thank you so much for your involvement in that. Thank you so much for coming out and doing your residency. And I just wanted to ask you if there's anything else that you would like to state about your work or your residency or anything like that.

Layo Bright:

Just, I guess, thanking you. But really, this has been such a once in a lifetime thing. I'm really grateful that you included my work in this important exhibition that I'm sure will reach many places and touch many people. I think you created such an important conversation that I think you will see how this unfolds. But it's really started something that I'm really glad to be a part of. So thank you for including me in the exhibition and just having the understanding of the works, and also having me at the museum. This has been such a great opportunity to work with some of the best in the field, which is a great, rare opportunity. So, I'm so happy. I'm so thankful. Thank you for inviting me and making this possible.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Absolutely. So, with that being said, this concludes this episode of *Frit City*: "A Two-Way Conversation." It is a production of Museum of Glass, hosted by Jabari Owens-Bailey. Produced by Susan Warner, Elisabeth Emerson, and Jabari Owens-Bailey. Recorded and edited by On Purpose Recordings. Original music composed by Quentin Merada. Copyright 2023. Thank you so much for listening.