

Evan Jerry's Works Celebrate the Present and Future of Black Design

The new collection of the Studio Anansi founder was recently unveiled in Brooklyn

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Omo Vessel by Evan Jerry

Evan Jerry, the founder of Studio Anansi—so named after a word that pays homage to a prominent figure of West African and Caribbean folklore—has always been drawn to the cultures' rich oral tradition of storytelling. Recently, he debuted nine interior design sculptures that celebrate Black culture and craft at Love House in Brooklyn. The response, he says, has been fantastic. Currently based in London, the Canadian designer has always explored the African diaspora in his work. "My work is a reference of navigating the world through the lens of blackness. It's about celebration and preservation of Black culture."

Jerry, who has visited Asia and Mexico and lived in Finland and the United States, says that his personal travels have also been a big influence in his work. During his debut at London Design Week in 2018, he showcased a Tulum collection of ceramic tiles in dusty rose, inspired by Mayan designs. His new portfolio of design pieces is more textural and chiseled, and expands on African influences either through its material, form, or both. The pieces also take inspiration from London and Brutalist architecture. “How I identify with Black culture is through my eyes—it’s going to be different for each person,” he says.

The nine decorative and functional objects on display in Brooklyn include a limited-edition bowl, platter, and stool. “I intend for this collection to be a process—the beginning of a process of exploring more contemporary identification of Black culture through design.” It took Jerry over a year of visiting museums that have African art objects to find the essence of the culture, to create something that was both historic yet contemporary. The collection was initially slated to be released in February. “And then the pandemic hit, and everything happened with George Floyd and the [Black Lives Matter] movement and I was a little concerned about releasing the work because it might sound like I was cashing in on [it],” he said.



Yaa Container by Evan Jerry

Now that the pieces are here, it is clear that one of the most striking interior design objects are his Yaa containers. They are made from African iroko wood with natural pigments and an oiled finish. “These are objects that clearly speak to the diaspora and the craft from Africa but are more contemporary forms than objects like milk bowls that you find in art galleries and museums,” he says. Designed as a metaphor for the Black experience, the containers are hand-turned and undergo a specialized burning process that results in an appearance that is both fluid and static.

They are also time-intensive. "Wood is a live material," he says. "You need a temperature-controlled room to make sure that it doesn't do anything funny like warp." The wood improves over time, and in this aspect, it is kinetic, not static. Jerry uses his hands to rub the natural pigments on them to make sure he gets the right complexion and tone, and each polished piece takes about three months from start to finish.

The Kojo vessel pair, made exclusively for Love House, is constructed with African wenge wood with a waxed finish. The Omo Totem Vessel, made out of European oak with a charred waxed finish, is symbolic in its simple formal structure, but with a texture that shows deep workmanship and craft. "This is a kind of reference to the strong body of blackness and Black people. The wood is charred, and then it's scraped away and waxed and that's how it gets its luminescent quality: through a kind of a violent process, something beautiful comes out of it." With so many African crafts commercialized and marketed, Jerry says that he did not want to just add a bunch of bold colors and prints, very traditional silhouettes or a wild jungle feel, which would make the objects look kitschy. He says that there is a big void in the design world for authentic voices telling stories about the Black experience. "What I am trying to achieve is to bring African cultural references into the contemporary design aesthetic without looking clichéd.

As beautiful as many African-inspired design objects are, they mostly speak to the past. What I'm interested in is how we speak to a present and future of this design."