

# Sight Unseen



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Q+A

## **Studio Anansi's Latest Collaboration with CB2 Materializes the Unlimited Possibility of Black Futures**

by Abigail Glasgow

Evan Jerry was, in his own words, on a quest to explore the relationship between contemporary design and Black culture when he founded Studio Anansi in 2018. Now five years into the artist's practice, he has launched the Black in Design Collective, a collection of works curated in partnership with, and for sale at, CB2 that brings together 11 Black artists from Los Angeles to Lagos, including Jerry himself.

With an assortment of clay busts, oak benches, woven vases, brass mirrors, and travertine side tables, each piece has a story: Jean-Marc Bullett's console table, La Traversée, takes its name from the French word for Black people's forced movement and enslavement across the Atlantic Sea in the 1700s; Lani Adeoye's curtains draw from the Yoruba people of Nigeria, featuring Adire, a traditional hand-painted cloth; Tavia Forbes' and Monet Masters' Cornrows area rug represents the pride and history surrounding Black women's hair; Luam Melake's dining chair reflects on the symbol of the barbershop, what the artist deems "a stand-in for an entire community, a social space, and a ritual that's a part of the Black experience"; and Jerry's concrete dining table speaks to the item's foundational role in bringing Black families together in cultural celebration.

The range of pieces respond to Studio Anansi's initial question around the project: How do you see the future of design if Blackness was included? The result makes tangible the heterogeneity of Black culture — spanning centuries, materials, objects, and themes. It calls to mind a quote from the introduction to Kimberly Drew's and Jenna Wortham's *Black Futures*: "Blackness is infinite... We are in a continuum of those who came before and those who will come after."

This week, I sat down with Jerry to learn more about the impetus behind the project and how design can interrogate the breadth and depth of Black narratives.



Chair by Axel Mert, rug by Forbes Masters, side table by Jerome Byron



Bench by Studio Anansi, mirror by Lani Adeoye of Studio Lani



Bench by Studio Anansi

Tell me more about how you came up with the idea for this collection with CB2.

The studio was conceived as a way to incorporate Black-centered storytelling with design. Because that was not of focus — I did not see a lot of this [intersection] at the time. I was almost on this quest to understand how Black cultural references exist or can be incorporated within design. I was approached by CB2 in 2018. We had an ongoing relationship, and they had expressed their interest in working toward more diversity and equitability. So, in 2020, when everything was happening in the world with Black Lives Matter, I approached them with this project connecting Black designers in a way that showcases their talents and works.

How did you select the 10 designers who are in this collection?

The approach was always to have global representation, not just a North American or Western viewpoint. I was searching for what other people were doing in other parts of the world, and there were designers I was already following. But every selected designer already had a very strong point of view, no matter where they were in their career.

Through these various viewpoints, you're demonstrating the breadth of Black storytelling with designers. It's not homogeneous.

That is exactly the point of the project. We often hear "Blackness" and "Black identity." But what is that? It's so many different things, and that's what I love about what the designers showcase. Some delve into more historic areas, some take tactical approaches, others are more about material. My work, for example, is about connectivity and family.

What is design's role in illustrating the diversity of Black culture?

What comes to mind is accessibility. Everything we participate in in our world is design. And it's either thought of inclusively and responsibly and respectfully or it's not. Particularly at a certain level, design is meant only for those who can afford it. So I think design's role in our future is to be purposeful in its inclusivity, especially with Black storytelling. With this project, I was very mindful not to interfere with how individuals related to their Black identity through design. This project allowed for space, which I don't think we often have. And then we don't fall into any trope of what we think Black design is, or what it means to be Black in design. We're presenting something that is authentic to how we live today as contemporary Black designers. The question we posed to the designers for this project was: How do you see the future of design if Blackness was included?



Table by Studio Anansi, chair by Luam Melake, light by Axel Mert



Console by Jerome Byron, bust by Sandra Githinji, planter by Studio Anansi

What is your response to that?

My work often looks very different. I think oftentimes the design world wants to [label], like 'oh you're into Brutalist forms, that's your thing.' When, no, I was into Brutalism because I lived in London and was taking in all this architecture. But then I moved to rural Canada and now am in a very natural environment. So what I'm experiencing here is reflected in my work. The navigation and movement of Black people — many of these designers might live in New York now, but they're from, say, Nigeria. I think a Black future perspective is not limited to anything. I think it has a global, broad representation and permission to allow itself to be influenced by everything.

A future where you don't have to pigeonhole yourself. What does it mean for this to be filtered through a company like CB2?

I was very interested in doing this with CB2 because of the accessibility for a broader audience —people who are not necessarily industry followers or design enthusiasts. Designers like Jerome Byron, whose amazing work exists in a more niche sector of carpenter workshop galleries, can reach the most people possible.

You mentioned this quest for Black culture's representation in design. What are some examples you've discovered or created yourself, in this collection or otherwise?

I did a project exploring Africa in the 1950s and 60s and modern architecture's role at a time when Africa was having this surge of independence. Through that research, it was like looking at modernism. I learned that Black culture is already embedded in a lot of what we see as Eurocentric design. These standards, like Picasso and Bauhaus, were influenced by African forms and motifs; and I think there's a deconstruction of that. There's nothing wrong with influence. I think it's fantastic to be influenced by other things people create. But moving forward, what I hope to see with this project and others is that we reference what we're inspired by and we give credit to what we're inspired by.



Couch by Axel Mert, coffee table and light by Sandra Githinji Studio, rug by Forbes Masters



Lamp by Sandra Githinji Studio

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Historically, we’re not very good at giving credit. There’s a line between inspiration and exploitation. And the work you’re doing is creating larger discussions around that line, around equity, and more.

Narrative and storytelling were the key factors in this project. The storytelling of the pieces, of the designers, of the global reach. And sure, not everybody’s going to see it right away. But some might. Some might have a piece in their home and convey that story to someone else. Then, there’s an educational process where people who may have not been exposed now understand this exists. And if that even happens with a handful of people, that is beautiful.