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CULTURE QUAKE



COURTESY TOLU COKER AND OG STUDIOS

Nigerian-British designer Tolu Coker explores identity, community, and lived experience through fashion, film, and rich visual narratives.

By Claire Butwinick



LEFT: The finale of Coker's sophomore collection, *Juvenile Consciousness*, included a sheer dress made of deadstock fabric, accessorized with a Nigerian-inspired headpiece fashioned from discarded belt buckles, bolts, and old jewelry.

BELOW: Coker with her models for *Juvenile Consciousness*.

OPPOSITE: A model wears a piece from Coker's genderless collection *Replica* on set for the designer's 2018 fashion film, *A Seat on the Throne* with O.G Studios for *Vogue Italia*.



FOR LONDON-BASED DESIGNER TOLU COKER, FASHION DOESN'T START OR END WITH AESTHETICS.

Instead, it's a portal to socially conscious storytelling. Since 2018, she has captivated the fashion world with her breakout eponymous clothing label, expressing her African diasporic identity through youthful yet politically aware collections. At the same time, Coker has asserted black visibility in other media, creating commissioned illustrations for the Tate Modern, celebrating African beauty and the Black Panther movement in a series of collages for H&M and Loewe, and challenging Eurocentric viewpoints with her in-depth documentaries and fashion films. And at 26, she's just getting started. "I think about the way in which narratives are written,

who controls narratives, and what they're trying to portray—not just in fashion but in society in general," she tells GRAY. "Identity and narrative are things that I'm always questioning in my work."

A recent graduate of London's celebrated Central Saint Martins fashion school, Coker first sparked international buzz with her 2017 premier collection, *Replica*, an intimate exploration of her African heritage and British upbringing. Her creative process was groundbreaking: rather than ruminate introspectively in sketchbooks and mood boards, Coker spent a year filming the lives of four African-diaspora youths in London and Paris, whose experiences then influenced her designs. Asked why she employed this unconventional method, Coker replies

with another question: "Fashion is such an identifying tool for us, so why doesn't it reflect real people's stories more?"

Comprising seven genderless looks, the collection included leather jackets hand-painted with faces from her muses's family photos, hip-hop-inspired patchwork denim overalls, bedazzled boomboxes, and an upcycled sheer lace gown with an illustration of one of the muses, Ayishat, adorning the back of its detachable train. The recipient of the coveted *Vogue* Talents Award, *Replica* was embraced by celebrities such as Rihanna and Rita Ora and appeared in a film for *Vogue Italia* that Coker codirected.

Storytelling also guided Coker's 2018 sophomore collection, *Juvenile Consciousness*, but this time, she dove into her »



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own family history, particularly that of Kayode Coker, her Nigerian-born father, a British Black Panther in the 1960s who documented the movement in photos, diary entries, and memorabilia. “People always think about the Black Panthers as a political movement, but I grew up knowing it as a community movement,” she says. “The American sector of the Black Panthers started out in soup kitchens. It was about feeding the community before it was about disrupting the establishment, which subjugated these communities and marginalized them.” Honoring her father’s legacy, she adapted his photographs into illustrations on



“*Replica* isn’t going to represent every single person,” says Coker. “But through the documentary, I saw people’s very distinct differences, but also so many similarities. Even though that collection was designed around four real people, many people messaged me after the show saying, ‘I really connected with that and I could see it in the clothing.’”

deadstock leather jackets, pairing them with denim crop tops and wide-legged pants, which were upcycled from old jeans supplied by Coker’s neighbors and friends. Each look was accompanied by intricate handmade Nigerian tribal-inspired headpieces constructed from broken buckles, bolts, and old earrings sourced from Japanese factories.

With each collection, Coker designs wearable protests that promote holistic black representation in a culture that all too often fails to portray people of color with accuracy or depth. Her work not only creates space for marginalized groups, but also holds up fashion as a mechanism for social change. Last fall, Coker put the power of fashion activism to the test when she teamed up with African fabric manufacturer Vlisco to design graduation outfits for members of the City of Joy, an organization in the Democratic Republic of the Congo that empowers women who have survived gender violence. “Through that project, in our small way, we were actually changing the world,” she says.

This year, Coker and her brother, Ada Coker, are creating a film project in Nigeria, titled *Masqueraded Memoirs*, which she hopes will inform her next collection. At the same time, she is earning her postgraduate certification at Central Saint Martins and lecturing other, younger students to help diversify the fashion industry and hold the door open for emerging black designers in the process. “When you build leaders around yourself, you build a legacy,” she says. “You build something that outlives you.” ✱