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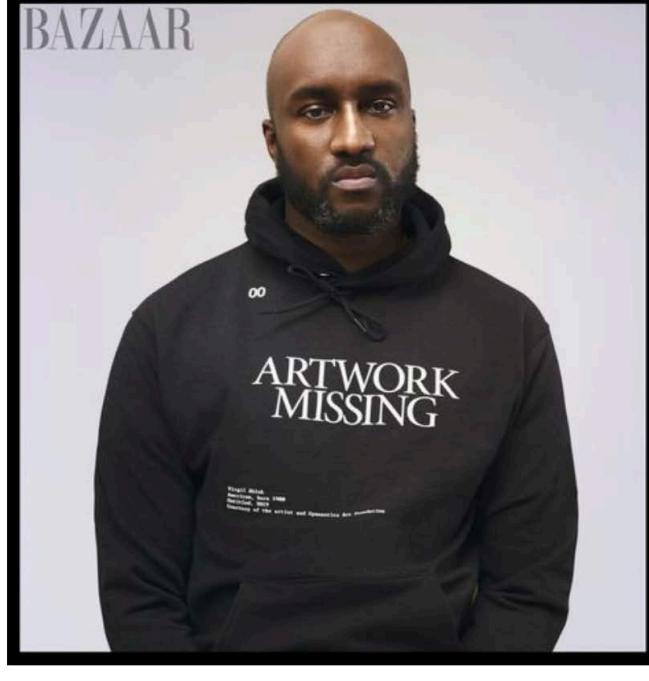
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# Virgil Abloh and Trinice McNally Join Forces for I Support Black Women Campaign

*The designer and the organizer talk reinventing spaces, the importance of being relentless, and building creative bridges.*

VIRGIL ABLOH PHOTOGRAPHED BY RAHIM FORTUNE; TRINICE MCNALLY PHOTOGRAPHED BY DEIRDRE LEWIS / MAR 26, 2021



Virgil Abloh and Trinice McNally

Virgil Abloh RAHIM FORTUNE; DEIRDRE LEWIS

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Last summer, on Juneteenth, one of Off-White founder Virgil Abloh's friends texted him a [video clip](#) of Trinice McNally, a Black queer feminist organizer. She was being interviewed on CNN at the Defend Black Women March in Washington, D.C., wearing a machete—a Caribbean symbol of resistance—strapped to her chest with an Off-White belt. Abloh DM'd her, initiating a friendship between McNally, who is the founding director of the [Center for Diversity, Inclusion & Multicultural Affairs](#) at the University of the District of Columbia, and the designer, who is also the artistic director of Louis Vuitton menswear.

Abloh is one of the world's most prolific collaborators, having designed album covers for Kanye West, Air Jordans for Nike, and furniture for Ikea, to name just a few of his myriad projects spanning fashion, music, art, architecture, and industrial design. But his partnership with McNally on an "I Support Black Women" c/o Trinice

virgil abloh trinice mcnally

McNally social media campaign launching during Women's History Month, and aims to uplift and center diverse Black women organizers contributing to social change, is more immediately personal. In late January, they connected by Zoom—Abloh was in Chicago, and McNally in Hyattsville, Maryland—to discuss how fashion can engage more productively with the movement for racial justice, the power of storytelling, and the vital importance of passing the mic.

**VIRGIL ABLOH:** Your interview on CNN was like a spoken-word piece. I'm very much a fan of art that appears in everyday life, not in a museum.

**TRINICE McNALLY:** I was asked about why I got involved as a co-organizer of the Defend Black Women March in Washington, D.C., as part of a Movement for Black Lives Day of Action. And I spoke about patriarchal violence because when we think of folks like Oluwatoyin Salau, a young Black girl who was murdered by a male acquaintance, and Breonna Taylor, people weren't making the connections between patriarchal violence and police

violence. I was wearing a machete on my Off-White belt because I believe aesthetics are important.

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**VA:** I saw a combination of aesthetic and message, both well chosen. I wanted to be like, “I see you.” Your Instagram was private, but I didn’t let that deter me.

**TM:** When I saw your DM, I was like, “Yo, is this a real account?” Pretty soon we were homies.

**VA:** One of the first things we talked about is how fashion comes from Africa.

**TM:** It’s our duty to be fly. We get that from our people. I felt like I understood why you created Off-White. Another thing we have in common is our personal experience of Black migration and our focus on education. You’re Ghanaian; I’m Jamaican. I was born in London and came to Miami undocumented as a baby. My grandparents were part of the Windrush generation, folks from the West Indies and the Continent who migrated to the U.K. in the late ’40s and early ’50s for better work opportunities.



**It’s our duty to be fly. We get that from our people.**

*–Trinice McNally–*

**VA:** My cousins are all in London or Chicago—I grew up on the South Side. That’s where my dad landed from Accra to make a better life for our family. I was able to go to college and get a graduate degree in architecture. So since I’ve been fortunate enough to have had that opportunity, I launched the Virgil Abloh “Post Modern” Scholarship Fund, to give merit-based scholarships to other Black students.

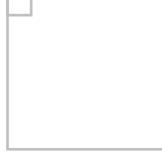
**TM:** I still hear my grandparents saying, “You must become something.” They worked their fingers to the bone. I founded the Center for Diversity, Inclusion & Multicultural Affairs at the University of the District of Columbia, one of the nation’s oldest HBCU’s. It serves as a social-justice hub on campus. We make sure that LGBTQ folks, first-generation-college folks, formerly incarcerated folks, international students, and folks on DACA or TPS or who are undocumented with no status at all have a place where they can grow intellectually. It’s important that HBCU’s are centered and talked about. I went to Bethune-Cookman University, and it really transformed my ideas around what it means to do service and who you are supposed to be in the world.

**VA:** In 2020, everyone was politicized. But some people were for, like, a week. Some people were for a day. Since you've been organizing for a minute, what do you see as the difference between being an activist and an organizer?

**TM:** George Floyd and Breonna Taylor activated a lot of people. Activists go out and activate based on reactionary things. Someone is killed, so you go out and protest in the streets. But organizing is about more than picket signs; it's about direct action and making an intervention to stop business as usual. My friend Charlene Carruthers, author of *Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements*, says, "You're not organizing if you're doing it alone." Who are you organizing—yourself? Organizers are in political alignment with other folks who they are accountable to, and they mobilize people. Ask yourself, "What kind of people have I moved? What has shifted as a result of my work?"

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**VA:** George Floyd was murdered in the middle of the street—we've all seen that image more times than we can count—and when I'm driving my car in Chicago, there's zero difference between him and I.

**TM:** Mm-hmm. They don't care that you're Virgil Abloh.

**VA:** And so the urgency is that: How do we actually make change versus the image of change? To me, it's through conversations.

**TM:** You have to talk to people. You have to canvass. You have to talk to your community members. You have to talk to your dad and your granddad. I love talking to people who don't share beliefs with me because that helps me sharpen my organizing.

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COURTESY OF "I SUPPORT BLACK WOMEN" C/O TRINICE MCNALLY

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**VA:** Networks need to expand. I own my space, and I try to use fashion to build bridges so that there's an evolution happening with the resources at hand. When the protests for racial justice started, everyone wanted their quote. They want every notable figure to all of a sudden be able to get in front of a microphone and speak on larger issues than are in their own canon. There's no way that as someone who's known for making clothes and DJ'ing that I could have the same knowledge you do from working in the community.

But combined together we can both learn from each other and spread messages to millions of people. I want to see the adjacency increase between those who have a platform and those doing the work. I have more than five million followers on Instagram, and the Off-White brand account has 11 million. I look at that as an opportunity to create politicizing moments so that the general population sees the world in a different way and asks, "How can I correct the wrongs that contribute to systemic racism?"

**TM:** It's not even a question that the fashion industry should be centering Black people. And I think it's important to work directly with grassroots organizers and not just grass tops—not just your NAACP's, but Black folks with radical leftist politics. And that's why I really appreciated your Louis Vuitton Fall 2021 menswear show. Seeing stylist Ibrahim Kamara all up and through Louis Vuitton, hearing Saul Williams speak a litany of Black icons and Black possibilities, down to Orisha. I practice African traditional religion. I'm an Ifá devotee, and I'm getting ready to initiate in Nigeria. Hearing Obatala, Ogun, and all of these deities that I spend my time with in that context, I was just like, "Yo, I see what Virgil's trying to do."

**VA:** I hope to lead by the example of sharing space. And not just on social media. I have this theory that last year, starting with the fires in Australia, the news cycle just went from one tragic event to the next, and then social media amplified it. I feel like our generation feels helpless under these constant waves of new news. And what we're teaching them is to be performative, just to say stuff so that they don't lose any clout with their friends.



I hope to lead by the example of sharing space. And not just on social media.

## *Virgil Abloh*

**TM:** People feel like they have to be on Instagram posting everything. But if your organizing is only central to the Internet, you're not organizing.

**VA:** As a kid, I was going to the hood screen printer to make T-shirts, but I wanted to be in the pages of the magazines you saw at the grocery store. If you go to my photo-shoot sets, the young photographers, the stylists, these are all people from the diaspora and the Continent. The whole goal is to get a beautiful image and a new story. These stories need to be told. And I think that with our partnership, as it grows, we're using the fashion side of things to gather people round.

**TM:** I'm really excited about our first project together, an "I Support Black Women" T-shirt and social media portrait series that centers Black women and non-binary folks. We're raising money to help the advocacy group Black Women Radicals build a physical space for its School for Black Feminist Politics in Washington, D.C. And we're also asking Kennedi Carter to photograph 10 organizers—from Black Feminist Future founder Paris Hatcher and Solutions Not Punishment Collaborative executive director Toni Michelle-Williams to Black LGBTQ+ Migrant Project consultant Tiara T Gendi and Black Girls Handgames Project cofounder OnRaé LaTeal—and have them talk about their work and how they're creating change.

**VA:** It's more than just a product. It's sort of peeling back those facades that you get from all brands and letting people inside.

**TM:** We were talking about how you design, and something that really stuck with me is you were like, "I don't really finish anything."

**VA:** Not even half. Eight percent.

**TM:** To me, that spoke to the idea of wholeness, not perfection.

**VA:** That's where soul comes from. That's where Miles Davis or J Dilla can play on or off beat. That's where Basquiat can paint, and it looks different.

**TM:** You're so moved by it.

**VA:** When we think about perfection, we're striving for an ideal that was projected on us, and then those shortcomings keep us oppressed. I think in terms of art and our identity, in terms of how Blackness exudes, whether it's music, whether it's painting, whether it's fashion, knowing that the freedom is within us to strive for wholeness, not perfection, that starts to empower.

**TM:** Wholeness matters.

On McNally: Good American for 11 Honoré bodysuit, Givenchy skirt, Yam hoop and bracelet (bottom left), Angie Marei cuff bracelet (top left), Off White c/o Virgil Abloh paper-clip bracelet (top right), Benneton belt.

Fashion Editor: Anatolli Smith; Hair: Tashana Miles at the Chair Beauty Loft for The Chair Beauty; Makeup: Kuma

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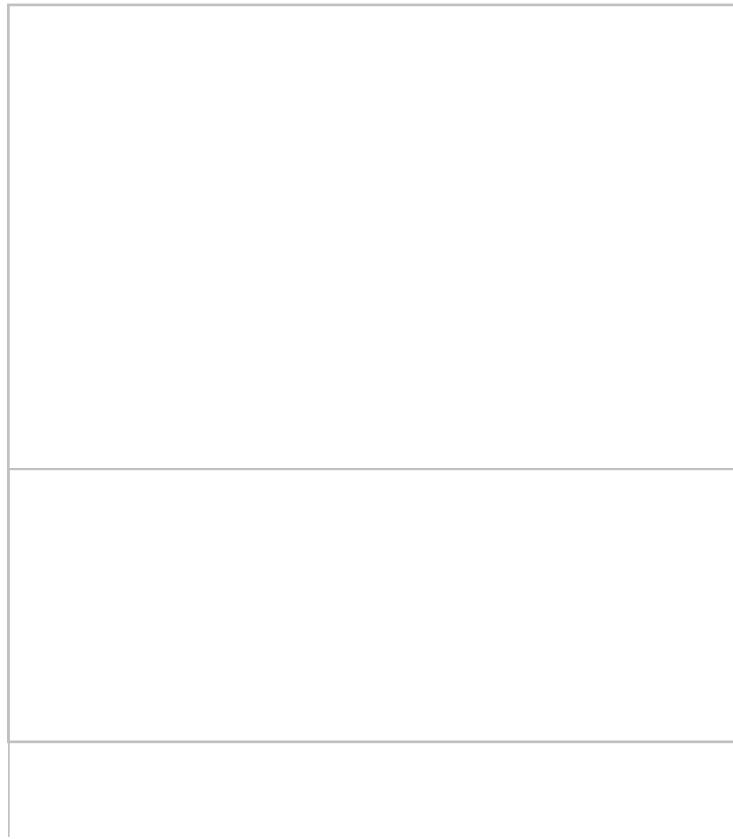


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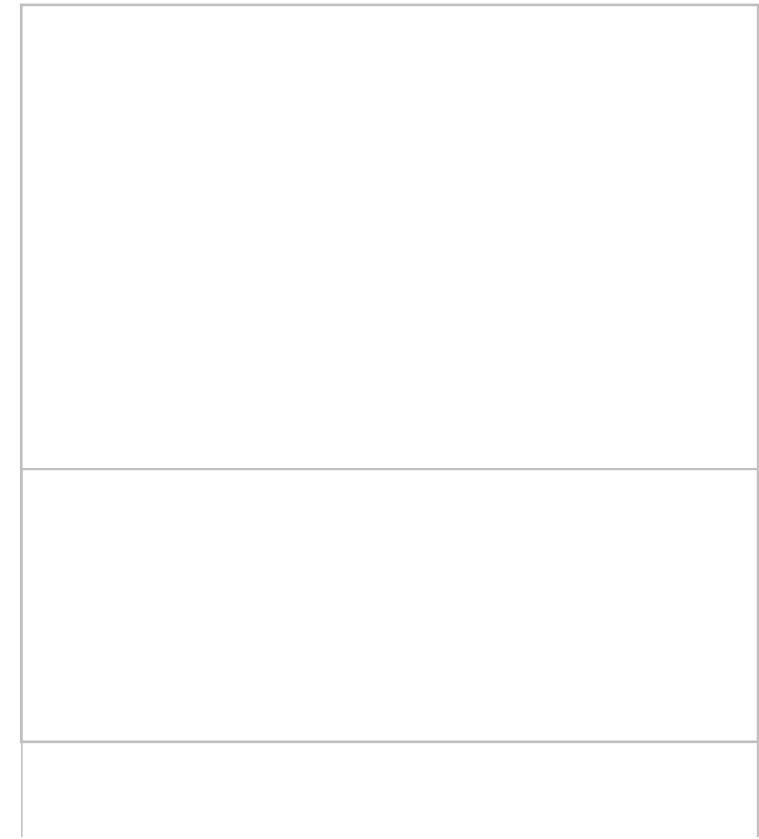
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