Art in America

REVIEWS Mar 1, 2018

Odili Donald Odita

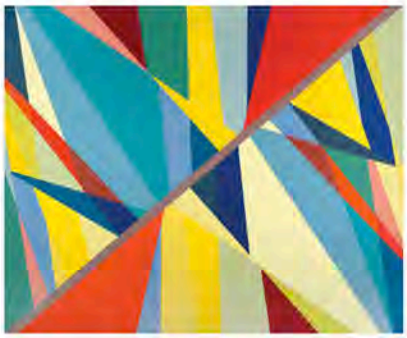
NEW YORK

at Jack Shainman

by Re'al Christian

Entering Jack Shainman Gallery's Twentieth Street location for Odili Donald Odita's recent exhibition, viewers were met with *The Other Side of the Wall* (2018), a beautiful large-scale painting on canvas. The work did, as its title suggested, appear a little at odds with the space, its kaleidoscopic pattern of hard-edge shapes standing in contrast to the gallery's plain white walls and concrete floors. Bold contrasts are in fact key to Odita's work, in which different-colored, angular forms are arranged in compositions defined by rhythm and tension.

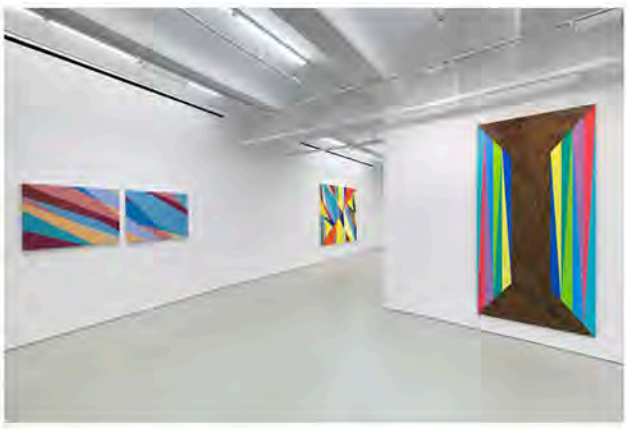
The show, titled "Third Sun," brought together fourteen new and recent paintings by the Nigerian-born, Philadelphia-based artist and demonstrated his singular abilities as a colorist and abstract thinker. His exploration of the expressive potential of color places him within the tradition of black abstract painters such as Alvin D. Loving, Howardena Pindell, Alma Thomas, Stanley Whitney, and William T. Williams. Yet his work bears an energy and complexity that are all his own.



Odili Donald Odita: *Great Divide*, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 74 by 901/4 inches; at Jack Shainman.

Especially striking are the ways in which Odita's colors seem to both complement and resist one another. In contrasting soft hues with hard lines and piercing dark shapes, the artist creates not only movement but ambiguous space into which his colors seem infinitely to extend. Ranging in scale from small to larger than life, the paintings in the main gallery produced an array of effects. In *Place* (2018), a rectangle of horizontal, angled shapes in a dark, muted palette energizes a background of brilliantly hued vertical wedges. *Great Divide* (2017) is bisected diagonally by a thin, gray band that essentially acts as a visual ellipsis in the brightly colored composition. In three paintings on wood—*Van Gogh's Trees* (2016), *Time Machine* (2016), and the show's title work (2017)—Odita has left large portions of the support exposed. The wood's texture offsets the flatness of the acrylic and adds dimension, while its natural hue serves as a foil for the bold paint.

Celebration and subjectivity are the themes Odita touts in a statement that accompanied the exhibition, and his works do have a euphoric, evocative quality. "It is my intention to utilize the idea of 'celebration' as a performative for freedom," he writes. Though Odita's paintings are not explicitly political, their offering of celebration as a form of resistance is particularly powerful given this nation's dire circumstances, as is his ability to show how color can reflect the complexity of identity and our attempts to place ourselves in a complicated world.



ART FORUM @ARTFORUM • + Follow

ODILI DONALD ODITA THIRD SUN

Odili Donald Odita is an abstract painter whose work explores color both in the figurative historical context and in the sociopolitical sense. Odita has said, “Color in itself has the possibility of mirroring...

Through Feb 10

at ***513 West 20th Street***

Odili Donald Odita is an abstract painter whose work explores color both in the figurative historical context and in the sociopolitical sense. Odita has said, “Color in itself has the possibility of mirroring the complexity of the world as much as it has the potential for being distinct. The organization and patterning in the paintings are of my own design. I continue to explore in the paintings a metaphoric ability to address the human condition through pattern, structure and design, as well as for its possibility to trigger memory. The colors I use are personal: they reflect the collection of visions from my travels locally and globally. This is also one of the hardest aspects of my work as I try to derive the colors intuitively, hand-mixing and coordinating them along the way. In my process, I cannot make a color twice – it can only appear to be the same. This aspect is important to me as it highlights the specificity of differences that exist in the world of people and things.” Odita goes on to express his desire to speak positively about Africa and its rich culture through his work.

In recent years, Odita has been commissioned to paint several large-scale wall installations including The United States Mission to the United Nations in New York (2011), the Savannah College of Art and Design (2012), New York Presbyterian Hospital (2012), New Orleans Museum of Art (2011), Kiasma, Helsinki (2011) and the George C. Young Federal Building and Courthouse in Orlando, Florida (2013).

Odita has had several solo exhibitions in museums and institutions across the globe including Savannah College of Art and Design; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco; Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston; Studio Museum in Harlem; Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia; Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita; and Princeton University.

Odita was born in 1966 in Enugu, Nigeria and lives and works in Philadelphia. He has been the recipient of a Penny McCall Foundation Grant in 1994, a Joan Mitchell Foundation grant in 2001, and a Louis Comfort Tiffany Grant in 2007. Also in 2007, his large installation Give Me Shelter was featured prominently in the 52nd Venice Biennale exhibition Think With The Senses, Feel With the Mind, curated by Robert Storr.

He has been represented at The Jack Shainman Gallery since 2006. Solo exhibitions at the gallery include Velocity of Change (2016), Body & Space (2010), Fusion (2006). He has curated an exhibition at the gallery titled The Color Line (2007) and a solo exhibition, This, That and the Other (2013).

ARTNEWS

EVENT HORIZON: ART HAPPENINGS AROUND NEW YORK

9 Art Events to Attend in New York City This Week

BY *The Editors of ARTnews* POSTED **01/02/18 1:21 PM**

Opening: Odili Donald Odita at Jack Shainman Gallery

At Prospect.4 in New Orleans, Odili Donald Odita is showing a flag he crafted hung up high. The patterning on its fabric looks something like an exploded prism, and in that it's a typical work for Odita, whose work looks at the role of color in our lives and the ways in which it can express aspects of African culture. (Odita hails from Nigeria and is currently based in Philadelphia.) For his latest show at Jack Shainman Gallery, Odita will debut new group of abstract paintings about celebrations. "Celebration is the force that can remind us of our success on this count," Odita writes in a statement, "and it can pave the way for future and further action in this regard."

Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 West 20th Street, 6–8 p.m.

Odili Donald Odita, *Photosynthetic*, 2017, acrylic on canvas.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY

ARTREPORT

The Language Of Painting By Artist Odita At Jack Shainman Gallery

By **Quincy Childs** - Jan 25, 2016

"Fissure," Odili Donald Odita Photo: Jack Shainman Gallery

Meet Odili Donald Odita, a tour de force in abstract painting as he explores color in a theory based, socio-historical context. Odita is known for his "showstoppers" that include installation art, photo-based pieces and a variety of other large scale media—all of which are displayed in his exhibition *The Velocity of Change* at Jack Shainman Gallery. In the following interview, Odita relays his own experiences as an artist and offers an inside look into his new show. All the while, he maintains a cogent theory of language and the necessity for change both in and beyond his art.

Quincy Childs: I am a Ludwig Wittgenstein fan myself, so I enjoyed your opening quote from Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus: "The limits of language are the limits of my world." Did you study the larger genre of modern critical theory or logic before reading him?

Odili Donald Odita: I first became interested in these considerations when I was in graduate school at Bennington College. In addition to Wittgenstein, we read *Art in the Age of Mechanical Production* by Walter Benjamin over and

over again. We discussed that relative to photography and appropriation art. As I was developing my own practice, I would read Benjamin's *Arcades Project* and Wittgenstein's *Theory of Color* because of how the comments on color were questions, which prompted me to think about color in different situations. This led me to question other structures, such as language, which Wittgenstein centers on mainly [in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophico*]. The quote encompasses the way I think about language, and more importantly, about art.

QC: Modern critical theory uses the tenant of binary language in feminist, queer and post colonialist theory – with the lattermost spearheaded by theoreticians such as Fanon, Saïd or Spivak. Did you reflect on these thinkers when creating this show?

ODO: I could say, in a trendy way, *that's so 1990's*! When I first moved to New York, I began writing for magazines like Okwui Enwezor's magazine *JOCAA* (Journal of Contemporary African Art) and realized that the debate to have was identity politics.

This was an exciting time. We were really *living* that moment of evolution towards political ideas of theory and post-colonialist, racial considerations. We would go to lectures by Henry Louis Gates Jr., Kwame Anthony Appiah, and bell hooks—running from one lecture to the next trying to communicate this idea of African contemporary art. It was a novel concept to people. The art world saw African art through a limited, traditional lens. A museum curator would present signs from a barber shop as contemporary African art because they really had no clue. It simply shows how even the most intellectual people work from what they know. To be informed is everything.

QC: Having studied both art and art theory, how have you seen ideation and conceptuality in art evolve during your lifetime?

ODO: I think art is always conceptual. What changes is the way in which we interpret a work's concept and purpose. We have a different way of looking at art from people outside of our culture and timeframe, outside of Western ideation and reference.

Otherwise, we are vulnerable to a certain *plateau* of understanding. We must consider the world around us critically and make a choice from what we have access to. If not, we are governed by what people tell us, by language itself. We must understand what is being told to us on all levels in order to discern the world around us from all perspectives.

AR: So in the process of questioning social norms and discovering their ambiguity you reach a sense of enlightenment. It is a sort of "sine qua non" to unlocking the unknown and moving beyond your own context into a personal freedom. Is this what you mean?

ODO: Considering language as an artist, I have evolved to understand the kind of domination that language has within our reality and I try to reflect that through my art. Although language is universal, its various definitions are as subjective as its dialects. The history thereof elucidates the charged consequences of linguistic foundation. How we are embedded with racism through our very tool of communication. It is liberating once you realize how the formation of language forms us. The nature of how we see how everything is subject to change and growth. There is a newfound freedom in our ideas.

AR: This emphasis on change and freedom reminds me of the titles in your show. Concepts of change such as* Chasm*,* Fissure*,* New World*,* Door to Revolution*—they recall images of precisely this premise. How does the prospect of change tie in with your new work?

ODO: This ties back to our notion of words and colors. One cannot define a form or color. It will always be in vain to say *red* is a certain, definable thing. The statement loses meaning in its declaration. But simply instating "red is," and stopping there, gives rise to new meanings. Because then red can be whatever you want it to be. You realize the creative potential of all things. Life does not end in words but actually preexists language and transcends ideas.

"Chasm," Odili Donald Odita Photo: Jack Shainman Gallery

QC: A feeling exists before the idea. How are feelings conveyed through your materials? The laminate wood you use is striking against vibrant acrylic. What is the significance of this pairing?

ODO: It evokes a kind of virtual reality, as I alluded to with Benjamin's *Art in the Age of Mechanical Production*. I became fascinated by this idea when I was working with Plexiglas and paint and the synonymous relationship between the two. The quasi-futurist mirroring of Plexiglas heightens the colors in the paint and creates this virtual effect for the viewer. There arises this visual phenomenon of seeing oneself and then the paint or seeing oneself switch between presence and absence.

With the laminate wood panels, a sense of rituality is important in the reference to wood and nature but also in the fact that there's a certain artifice to it because it is *laminate.* Like the Plexiglas, it is like a veneer, a surface, and refers to illusion. Here I am playing again with this idea of paint as a material. Paint as illusion—the illusionary versus natural aspects of the wood.

"First Light," Odili Donald Odita Photo: Jack Shainman Gallery

QC: How do you think your new work functions in your thematic timeline? Do you find it is a seamless evolution or a fluctuating process swayed by your context as an artist?

ODO: I think it's a little bit of all the above. Although it's taking from what already exists from past work and presenting it in a new context of architecture, body, and space.

My recent work with wall installations connects to the idea of installation itself and *re*connects to its historic trend. Over the past century people have come to see a painting as an individual object. Instead I want the body to consider its space, where we are aware of every step or get totally lost in the routine of movements without consciously thinking about it. It's all an experience, a situation for the body, and we can turn those experiences into art. Art helps us feel alert about our spaces and thus alert about experiences we have in the world.

AR: Do you believe your Nigerian roots influence your art?

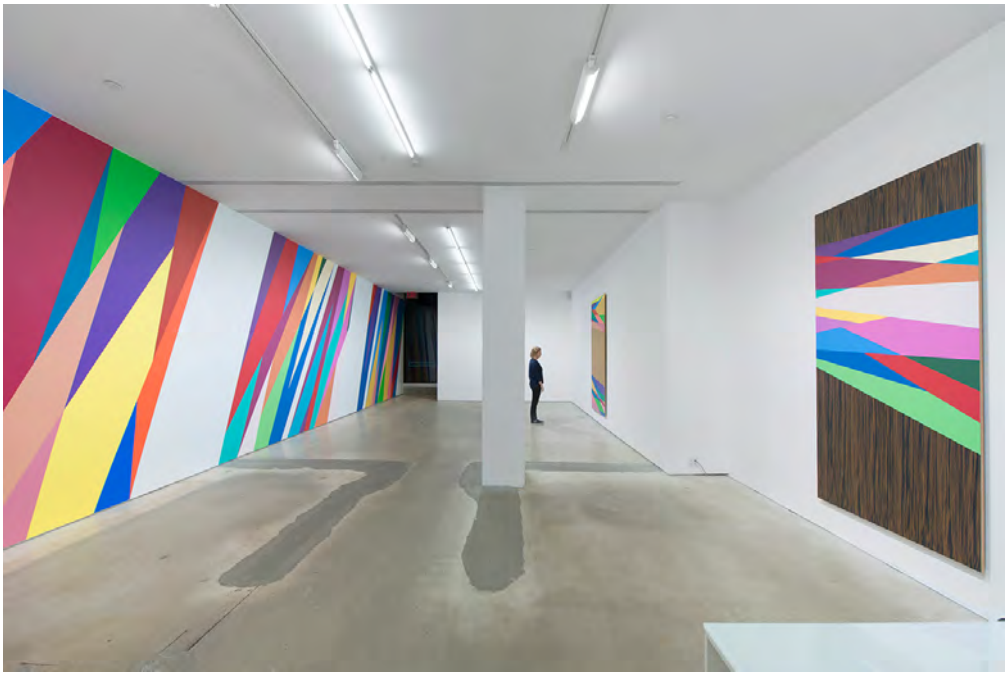
ODO: Absolutely. It informs my art and the way I think. It is just as informative as my access to minimalist art while I was at graduate school. It is very grounding for me and it helps to consider my reality as an artist. For instance, we can talk about the "death of painting" and I understand that as a Western notion. This gives me liberty. I'm more relaxed about painting because I can see it from many perspectives. From a modernist African point of reference, as with the notion of language, you must know the history and context of things in order to discern reality. Grasping the scope of history and context can help us understand the full space of action and agency we have. It gives us power.

This week is your last chance to catch Odili Donald Odita's exhibition *The Velocity of Change* at Jack Shainman Gallery, on view through January 30, 2016.

HYPERALLERGIC
GALLERIES

Painted Colors in Conflicted Motion

by **Robert C. Morgan** on January 21, 2016



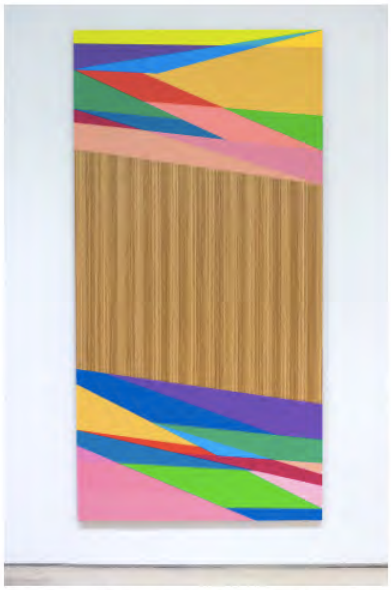
Installation view, 'Odili Donald Odita: The Velocity of Change' at Jack Shainman Gallery (all images © Odili Donald Odita, courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York) (click to enlarge)

Sometime in late 1997, at the former site of the New Museum, I was introduced to a seemingly dejected young painter named Odili Donald Odita. I say "dejected" because he claimed his career was going nowhere. I said something to the effect that maybe he was placing too much emphasis on his career rather than giving himself credit for the quality present in the paintings. The conversation continued. In the years that followed, things for Odita slowly began to change.

Since then I have had the occasion to view several exhibitions of his paintings in venues both domestic and foreign. In addition to four shows that Odita has had over the years at Jack Shainman Gallery, an early exhibition at the former Alexandre de Folin Gallery on West 20th Street stands out in my mind, as does his large site-specific wall installation at the entrance to the international exhibition at the 2007 Venice Biennale.

In each case, Odita has focused on diagonal, hard-edge color combinations, emphasizing color values and varying hues. His intention is not to illustrate color theory in his work, but

to harden the gesture in painting in a manner that gives it dynamic force. Color becomes the vehicle in his work, a prerequisite to form. In contrast to theory, Odita works from a more intuitive perspective in arranging colors without gradation, thus holding the surface flat while maintaining variable depths of spatial illusion. In doing so, his paintings — whether stretched on canvas, painted on pre-fab wood panels, or applied directly to the wall — suggest a kind of conflicted illusory motion intended to inflect emotion.



Odili Donald Odita, "Distant Relative" (2015), acrylic latex on panel, 96 x 48 inches (click to enlarge)

Odita's current show at Jack Shainman Gallery has several examples of this. In "Other World" (2015), Odita's extended color triangles move radically in opposition to one another. In "Distant Relative" (2015), the upper and lower sections of acrylic latex on a pre-fab door or tabletop appear interrupted by the manufactured design of the vertical space between them. And finally, in the show's namesake, "The Velocity of Change" (2015), which appears directly on the right wall as one enters the gallery, the intervals of white space between the clearly defined, occasionally fractured sets of colored wedges simultaneously pause and accentuate the rhythmic momentum within the mural.

While attending Bennington College, Odita was exposed to Color Field painting, in which the issue of emotion was generally displaced in relation to the formal structure embedded in the painting's surface. But his adaptation of sharp diagonals — an attribute of form mostly foreign to Color Field painters, other than Kenneth Noland's *Chevrons* (1963–64) — offered Odita the potential to grapple with emotional content through formal conflict. In his paintings, emotion arises in the clashing, congregated, dynamic thrusts, often framing intervals of whiteness or natural surface left open.

Odita's careful compositions are fundamental to the unpredictable manner in which his colors either conflict or coalesce with one another. The diagonals so familiar in his work do not always move the eye in a particular direction now, as they did at the outset of his career. More often than not, he willfully subverts his own placement of color spires, as shown in the four paintings mounted in the rear gallery at Shainman's 24th Street location. Each of these paintings is isolated on its own wall, contained within its own space. The spires are visually jarring, as if to perpetuate an element of anxiety. We don't contemplate the paintings so much as attempt to grasp the conflicting elements that energize their clamoring internal spaces. Two of the works, "The Door to Revolution" and "Chasm" (both 2015), possess a similar structure, in that they're both diagonally situated tripartite compositions. But the manner in which we see the vertically placed "Door to Revolution" is different from the way we see "Chasm," which is horizontal. The former offers a more typical urban reference, while the latter takes us into the crumbling, downgraded suburbs.

Installation view, 'Odili Donald Odita: The Velocity of Change' at Jack Shainman Gallery, with "The Door to Revolution" (2015) at left and "Chasm" (2015) at right (click to enlarge)

Each surface of the four paintings in the rear gallery is "cut" into three sections. By ordering the complexity of these distinct, intersecting color diagonals, the artist paradoxically unifies them. The optical ambiguities come to the surface and then recede again into chaos, shifting between order and disorder. Odita's surfaces act as windows that imply content, prompting a kind of seeing that provokes thought. The synaptic charge between the retina and cerebral cortex provokes content in relation to form. In the wedge-like spires of color that characterize Odita's paintings, we see subjects, not only by way of association with what exists in the visible world, but by way of feelings emanating from an unknown source.

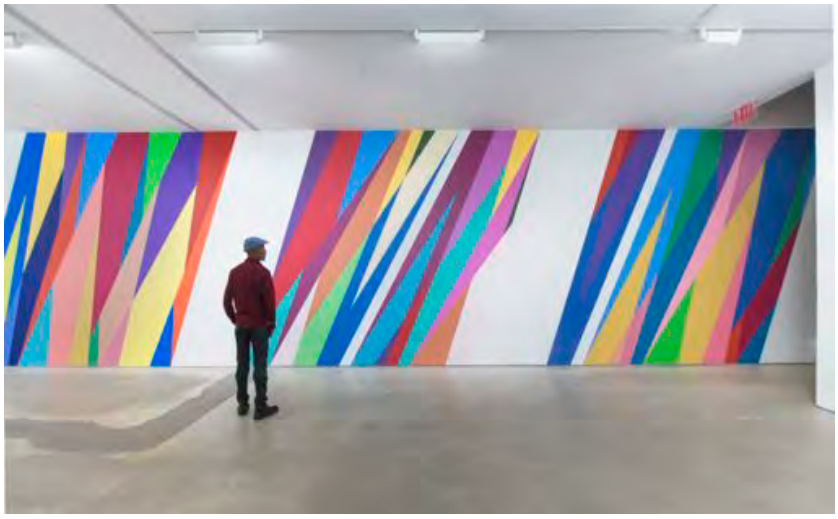
From Odita's perspective, the flat surface of his paintings further suggests a "ground of whiteness" that exists prior to the application of color. This paradigm points to the application of shapes and color as symbolic of identity. I have difficulty getting a perspective on this, but I am taken with Odita's exploration of human consciousness and the manner in which we perceive variations of color and feeling in the angular complexities he has given us.

Odili Donald Odita: The Velocity of Change *continues at Jack Shainman Gallery (524 W 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through January 30.*

the creators project

Politics in Bursts of Color

By Gabrielle Bruney — Dec 19 2015

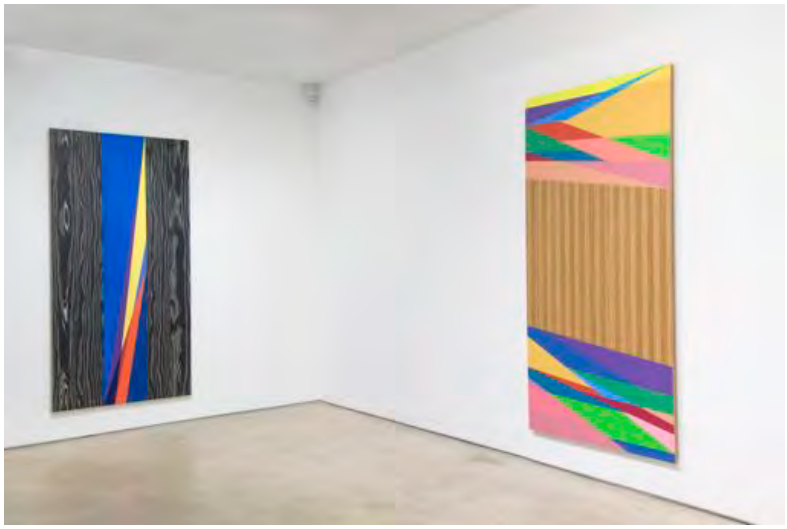


The Velocity of Change, 2015, acrylic latex wall paint, dimensions variable. ©Odili Donald Odita. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

It's hard to be political and yet completely abstract. Without language or recognizable imagery, anyone would struggle to convey a specific message. Yet Nigerian-American painter Odili Donald Odita embraces that struggle, and the result—an exhibition called The Velocity of Change, now on display at Jack Shainman Gallery—is striking, aesthetically mesmerizing and still politically timely.

Chasm, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 120 inches, ©Odili Donald Odita. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Odita problematizes language. It's a tool, that while useful, has been historically key in the implementation of all manner of oppression. "Inadvertently and otherwise," he writes, "we have also used language to terrorize, vilify, cannibalize, ostracize, persecute, and subjugate others who are not in the same space of authority—this done by those that hold power over language, through its force of command and condemnation." This recalls Audre Lorde's famous social justice dictum that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Since language—especially the Wester tongues—has too often been central in the master's toolkit, Odita communicates in another way: through color.



First Light, 2015, acrylic latex on panel, 96 x 48 inches and Distant Relative, 2015, acrylic latex on panel, 96 x 48 inches, ©Odili Donald Odita. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

"It has always been my intention since the beginning to make paintings as a space that exists before language," he continues. "I want to conjure from a space that is free and construct-less, with the intention of possibility in mind. I want to resist the binary; the faulty thinking that defines the experience of the Other in opposition to the "ground of whiteness." Odita tells The Creators Project that he "utilizes color as a challenge to perceived constructions in order to make way for new conditions of possibility in thought." "Color is physical," writes Odita, "and I want to engage it as I would the world—as real."

NEW YORK OBSERVER

THINGS TO DO

12 Things To Do in New York's Art World Before December 14

By Ryan Steadman • 12/09/15 3:18pm

Odili Donald Odita, *3rd Degree*, 2014. (Photo: Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

Opening: Odili Donald Odita "The Velocity of Change" Jack Shainman Gallery

The Nigerian-born Odita, who was a top-notch art critic before getting his props as a top-notch painter, is having his first NYC solo since 2013, and we're excited. He'll likely continue to provide his signature multicolored geometries that tend to explore "a metaphoric ability to address the human condition through pattern, structure and design, as well as for its possibility to trigger memory." Also on view is the exhibition "Of Context and Without" by Toyin Ojih Odutola at this gallery's 20th Street location. If you like good art the letter "O" then this is the place for you.

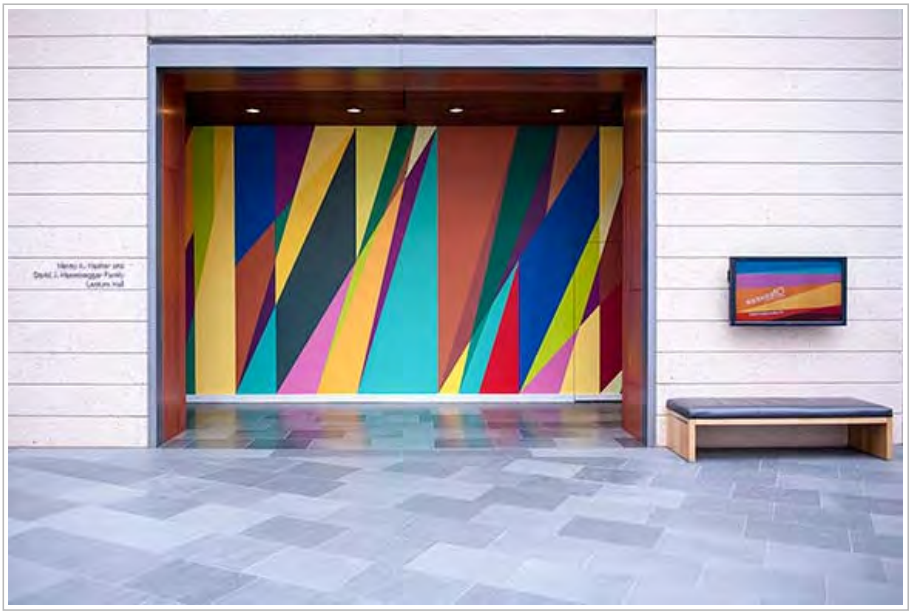
Jack Shainman Gallery, 524 West 24th Street, New York, 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

DukeTODAY

Nasher Mural Work Completed

August 24, 2015 |

DURHAM, NC -



Odili Donald Odita, Shadow and Light (for Julian Francis Abele), 2015. Acrylic latex paint on wall. Dimensions variable. Commissioned by the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

One mural is done, a second to be completed.

In celebration of its 10th anniversary, the Nasher Museum of Art commissioned two murals by Odili Donald Odita to celebrate the connection between the museum and the Duke and Durham communities. The first mural has been completed on a wall inside the museum, and the second one is being painted on an outside wall of the downtown YMCA.

In imagining the murals, Odita said he was inspired by the work of architect Julian Abele, an African-American who is credited with designing much of Duke's original West Campus, including its iconic Duke Chapel.

Both murals are made possible by the Office of the Vice Provost for the Arts and Council for the Arts Visiting Artist Program of Duke University; the Winifred Johnson Clive Foundation; and Elizabeth Hitchins Quigley and L. Matthew Quigley. Additional generous support is provided by Nasher Annual Fund donors.

Below, a detail from the Nasher mural.

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The Herald·Sun

Grit Award: Odili Donald Odita

Aug. 07, 2015 @ 02:57 PM

Odili Donald Odita was born in Nigeria in 1966 and grew up in Columbus, Ohio, but lately he's been immersing himself in Durham.

Odita is painting two murals that will celebrate the 10th anniversary of the opening of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. One will be in the Mary D.B.T. Semans Great Hall at the Nasher, the other on the Foster Street wall of the downtown YMCA.

"When I go to a site, I like to learn a lot about the history of the space, take in as much information as possible, only because it helps me to generate work out of that, generate ideas of what could be possible in the space," Odita told The Herald-Sun's Cliff Bellamy.

His research led to the title for the Nasher piece, "Shadow and Light (for Julian Francis Abele." Abele was the chief architect for most of the initial buildings on Duke's West Campus, including the chapel, but because he was an African American he neither visited the school nor received proper credit until the 1980s.

For paying close attention to Durham as he designed his work – and for the color and vibrancy we know his murals will bring – Odita is the winner of this week's Durham Grit Award.

The Herald·Sun

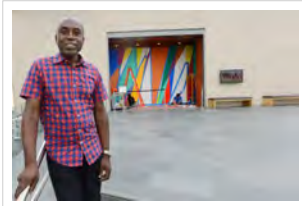
Color as an agent of change

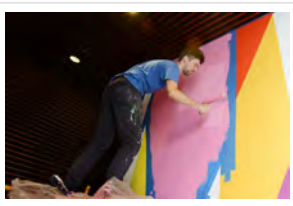
Nasher commissions two murals for 10th anniversary

Aug. 03, 2015 @ 04:48 PM

Cliff Bellamy

The Herald-Sun | Bernard Thomas Painting assistants Jenna Pirello (left) and Megan Bartley-Matthews work on the mural designed and supervised by artist Odili Donald Odita at the the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University.





DURHAM — Muralist and painter Odili Donald Odita writes about his work as a process of immersion. On his website, in a statement about a mural titled “Flow” that he created for the lobby of an art museum in Cincinnati, Odita tells how he observed the space at different times of day, observing the angles of outside buildings, the movement of people and cars, with sketchbook in hand.

Odita is now applying his process of immersion, as well as his ideas about the power of color, to create two murals that will mark the 10th anniversary of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. One will be on view in the Mary D.B.T. Semans Great Hall at the Nasher Museum, the other painted on the Foster Street wall of the downtown Durham YMCA on West Morgan Street. Both exhibits will go on view Oct. 4.

“When I go to a site, I like to learn a lot about the history of the space, take in as much information as possible, only because it helps me to generate work out of that, generate ideas of what could be possible in the space,” Odita said in an interview while he and his assistants were working on the Nasher mural. That process of historical immersion led to the title for the Nasher piece, “Shadow and Light (for Julian Francis Abele).”

While doing his research, Odita came across information about Abele, an African-American architect who designed most of Duke University. Abele was the first African-American to graduate from the architectural school at the University of Pennsylvania, and became chief designer for the Philadelphia-based Horace Trumbauer firm. Abele’s work designing private residences for the Dukes led to his being chosen to design Duke University, Odita said.

That connection between Abele and the university became known in 1986, when Susan Cook, Abele’s great-grandniece, was a student at Duke and wrote a letter to the student newspaper that Abele would have applauded students’ support for divestment from South African because of its apartheid policies. Abele was able to design the buildings at Duke “but because of the relations of the time he was not even able to step on campus,” Odita said. Despite the Jim Crow laws of the time, Cook realized “this is still a country where my great-grand uncle could build a campus like this. So stories like that… morally and spiritually, [were] influential for me when I was thinking about” the mural design for the Nasher, Odita said.

For the downtown YMCA piece, Odita said he has noticed the interesting contrast between old and newer architecture, and the change in the plant life in the area during his visits to Durham, all of which he will use in the design and colors of that mural.

Born in 1966 in Nigeria, Odita grew up in Columbus, Ohio. His many murals include works for the New Orleans Museum of Art and the Moss Arts Center at Virginia Tech, along with exhibits in Switzerland and South Africa.

In one of his artist statements, he says that color “can change minds.” He discussed how five people viewing the color green “see that green as they understand it together,” as a community, but “in different ways. … So it’s this back and forth of being able to identify it but at the same time it escapes identification …. I’m very interested in that openness and fluidity of what color is and how it can exist in that space,” he said.

When viewers approach these new murals, Odita wants them to bring their perspectives, but also consider “other options that are occurring in the work.” He explains: “Let’s say you can see the color blue and you see another blue and a third blue and then you have to say there are three blues, but they’re different. … That’s the first part of investigating the work.” Viewers then see those colors in relation to other colors, and in context of the size of the mural.

“If you can reflect those things you’ve considered to people or to society then you have, I believe, a really interesting way of looking at your world, where instead of just judging something by the cover you look deeper into what you’re looking at or interacting with and see how complicated something as simple as meeting another person can be,” he said.

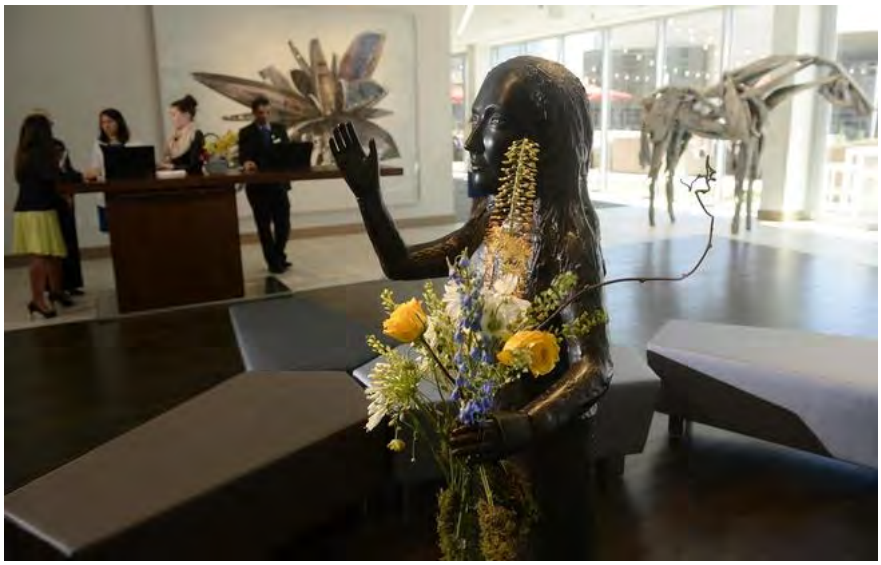
THE DENVER POST

BUSINESS

BUSINESS

At The Art hotel, the business plan borrows from the museum world

By Ray Mark Rinaldi , Denver Post Fine Art Critic



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The fourth-floor reception lobby at The Art hotel in Denver features Singer, a bronze sculpture with paper flowers by Kiki Smith, and a Deborah Butterfield bronze work, which stands in the background at right. (Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post)

The difference between an art museum and an art hotel is that museums are all about teaching. Their job is to build an appreciation of the role that painting and sculpture play in shaping cultural identity.

An art hotel just wants to knock your socks off.

And so it goes at the new, ankle-shaking inn, known simply as The Art, which opened this week in Denver's Golden Triangle (http://www.denverpost.com/denver/ci_27010886/golden-triangle-neighborhood-denver-hopes-build-early-success) neighborhood.

Guests enter under a canopy of 20,000 glittering, flittering LED lights installed by artist Leo Villareal (http://thebaylights.org/) into the ceiling of the porte-cochère. They smack eye-first into a brilliant blue-and-red, billboard-size drawing by 20th century icon Sol Lewitt.

They turn toward the elevators and painter Odili Donald Odita (http://www.jackshainman.com/artists/odili-donald-odita/)'s triptych of zig-zag lines in greens and yellows. They're tugged toward Mary Erhin's giant nuggets of shimmering gold, made from

The Denver Post

treated leather, that hang on a nearby wall.

Of course, a hotel needs more to its business plan than decorative objects by Kiki Smith, Frank Gehry, Claes Oldenburg and Ed Rushka and The Art does have 165 comfortably appointed rooms for rent. It also has handsome conference areas and a high-end restaurant (http://blogs.denverpost.com/theden/2015/05/05/art-hotels-fire-lounge-terrace-a-sneak-peek/) and bar, complete with an outdoor terrace, meant to appeal to folks who want to spend less than a night in the place.

The building also has two full floors of leasable office space and a prime location, next to the Denver Art Museum and across the street from the Colorado History Center. Both institutions draw considerable out-of-town crowds for both their collections the scores of private meetings and weddings for which they make themselves available.

"We just though it would be nice to have something that really fit into the neighborhood there, but also served a real purpose," said Lanny Martin (http://blogs.denverpost.com/style/tag/lanny-martin/), who partnered in the venture with developer Corporex.

Corporex brought expertise and capital to the table, but Martin brought art. The businessman and philanthropist chairs DAM's board of trustees and is one of Denver's most active collectors. Many of the hotel's pieces,including the splashy Vance Kirkland painting in one of the conference rooms, are on loan from him.

The hotel is the final piece in a four-block section of the city's cultural district that has been in development for 20 years and now includes the Denver Public Library, the art and history museums and the Ralph. L. Carr Colorado Judicial Center (http://www.denverpost.com/ci_23733655/denver-carr-judicial-centers-art-designed-be-inclusive). The hotel site was originally slated for high-rise condominiums with a design to compliment architect Daniel Libeskind's (http://libeskind.com/) scheme for DAM, which went up in 2006.


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Artwork also adorns the Fire Restaurant on the fourth floor of The Art. (Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post)

The recent economic recession and the city's complicated construction-defects liabilities laws made the condo idea untenable to investors.

For a decade, the lot sat empty as developers hatched various plans to exploit an awkward-shaped, triangular parcel that stretches nearly a block along Broadway, yet is only about 100-feet wide at its deepest point, on the corner of West 12th Avenue.

The new building is a mix of modern and post-modern styles and was designed by architect Guadalupe Cantu, from Davis Partnership, which was the local design partner for Libeskind's DAM project. Cantu worked for Libeskind during DAM's construction and he decided to stay in Denver, ultimately joining Davis' team.

Cantu did have the advantage of knowing what art his new building would house, so in addition to framing views of the local architecture and natural scenery, he designed spaces that allow viewers to stand back and appreciate the decorative aspects. On every floor, for example, the elevators open to a wall bearing a unique work from a single artist. There's Din Q. Le's photo on 8, Clark Richert's painting on 5.

The building competes well with the art, not an easy task. Unlike a museum exhibit that flows in a rhythm of works, big and small, bright and contemplative, the permanent show at The Art seems to be on a steady sensory incline.

That's no accident. The pieces were selected and put in their places by Dianne Vanderlip, the former, long-time curator of modern and contemporary art at DAM, who consulted on the hotel. Vanderlip, widely respected in the exhibition world, knows well how to make the most of the visual tools at hand.

"I wanted everyone who came into the hotel to find something, or maybe some things, that they would be absolutely mad for," she said.

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INTERVIEW

Odili Donald Odita, Homeland, 2015, Acrylic on canvas, 225 x 275cm, © Odili Donald Odita, Courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town/Johannesburg. Photo: Mario Todeschini

TENSION THROUGH PATTERNS

In conversation with artist Odili Donald Odita

by Stefanie Jason

With a career that expands over two decades, Odili Donald Odita's abstract paintings burst with tension and colourful patterns. They convey messages dealing with the politics of identity such as displacement and discrimination. From being an African in America to police brutality in the US, the Nigerian-born, Philadelphia-based visual artist caught up with our author Stefani Jason to talk about how these scenarios play out in his body of work, Third Degree of Separation, currently on at Stevenson Gallery in Cape Town

Stefanie Jason: Your work in the past and your current exhibition touches a lot on identity. Would you mind exploring this with me?

Odili Donald Odita: I grew up understanding myself as an African through my parents. And then I came to understand that there's a certain sense of shame that the African has to carry in the world. A shame that deals with technology, history and its connection to the slave trade, and so on. And there's the reality that if I'm coming from Africa, I might not necessarily be a direct product of the slave experience, which is connected to the African American experience. So there's that division and contention. For me that's part of the things I'm thinking of now.

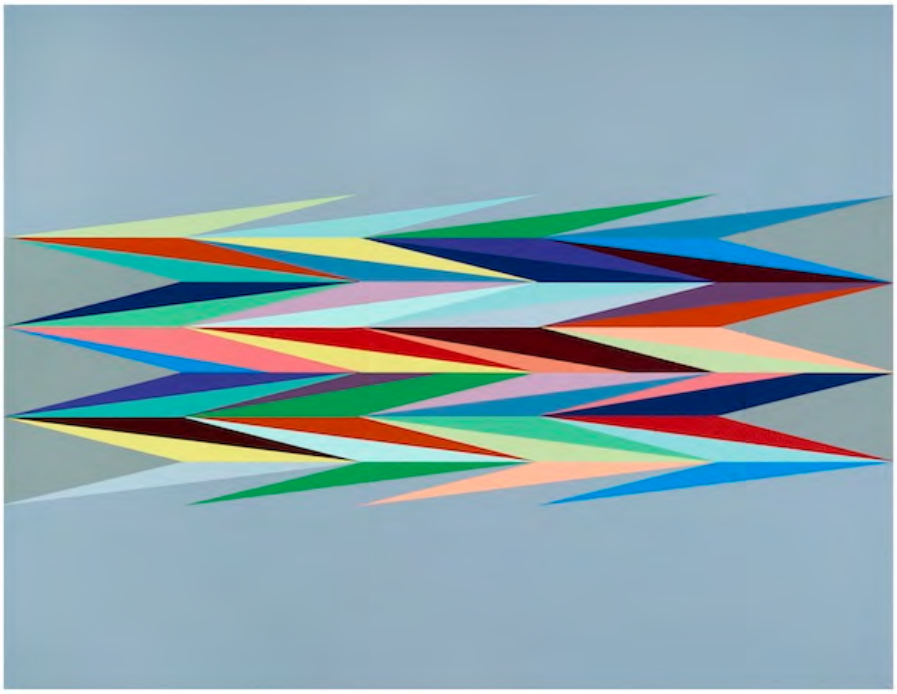
SJ: Third Degree of Separation is made up of intricately designed pieces of work. How long did it take you to create the body of work?

ODO: That work probably took a year to make. If you date the work, you can see that the pieces go from early 2014 through to March 2015.

SJ: During that time there was a lot of turmoil in America, from Ferguson-related protests to the Eric Garner incident, and more. Did any of this affect your work?

PLACE /
STEVENSON
Stevenson is a contemporary art gallery with locations in Cape Town and...

ODO: Absolutely. It's important what has happened, and that people are able to stand up to that type of police brutality. For too long there have been people who are accepting of this police violence because the justification is that there is a reason for it. But in most cases it is abuse of force or overuse of force; force that does not need to be used to that degree.



Odili Donald Odita, Surface Charge 4, 2014, Acrylic on canvas, 51.2 x 66.7cm © Odili Donald Odita. Courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town/Johannesburg. Photo: Mario Todeschini

SJ: And how have your thoughts on these issues translated into abstract work such as your own?

ODO: It's funny because I always find that there's an issue with defining the translation; as if one is equal to one. It's really bizarre to even think of that kind of translation because music is not painting and snow is not water. Even if snow originally comes from water, there's an ingredient that transforms water into snow. So you have these situations, where bodies become victims of fists, blood becomes the result of the strike, and then you have paint on canvas. And I'm channelling these real situations and thinking in my terminology, which deals with lines and colours and forms and shapes, issues of contrast, friction and tension with these materials. And I try to create a space that conveys what I'm thinking. Usually people want a simplistic representation of these situations for their satisfaction and one has to put much greater effort into thinking them through, thinking about how these issues can transform themselves.

SJ: Bomb magazine compares your paintings to modal jazz, and in a video interview, you say that "music is a means to structure the [your] work conceptually". How does music shape your paintings and what kind of music does?

ODO: I love music. I sometimes think of myself as a failed musician who became a painter. For me, music is something that is not only intellectual but emotional. It's something that I respond to in that way. When I was a kid in college, I was really into punk rock. But I grew up listening to all sorts of music; my mother would sometimes listen to country music and a lot of classical music. And my father listened to a lot of highlife, early Afro-beat and juju. And I listened to the radio quite a lot. It was how I got through living in the suburbs of Columbus, Ohio, because it was really boring. I later grew into rap music, hip hop, new wave and punk rock.

SJ: And how do you relate to music?

ODO: I have this relationship to music which is something like a freeing experience. It's helped me escape some of the doldrums of suburbia. And music, through punk rock, helped motivate my sense of political agency and being able to use myself as an agent for change.

SJ: It's strange that you speak of punk rock. Because, like your body of work, punk rock gives off a sense of anarchy or chaos, despite its traces of harmony.

ODO: Absolutely. These relationships come through [in my painting], such as tension and space, notions of being peripheral to centrality and so forth. Going back to music, I understood that I could use it to understand cultural moments and specificities, and to understand the notion of what an artist is and how artists try to make change in society. So when it came to music, I would listen to the way the singer would sing, the phrasing of the

song, the breaks, the musicality. From Miles Davis to Iggy Pop and King Sunny Adé, the music I was listening to was very specific; it was from the 1960s and 70s, and it spread across the world.

SJ: So when you were working on Third Degree of Separation, what were you listening to?

ODO: Everything [laughs].

SJ: And was there any person or one thing that sparked the creation of Third Degree of Separation?

ODO: I was on a panel at the Guild Hall Center for the Visual and Performing Arts in East Hampton, New York, and I was there to give a lecture alongside other panelists. We were speaking about our work and everything just dawned on me as I was talking about my experience as an African in America. Despite having stressed my Africanness [on the panel], I also wanted to concern myself with the Americanness in my life. My father is an art historian and started the art history programme of African art at the Ohio State University. He was one of the original Zaria Rebels [formerly known as the Zaria Art Society of Nigeria, so I grew up with this strong connection to African and Nigerian art. But I was also educated in the States – I had teachers outside of my father's teaching at home. So with my painting, I wanted to acknowledge all of this. Also, my wife is Swiss, so I have this European consideration that I bring into my work.

SJ: So I guess you were faced with yourself at this time.

ODO: Yes. It was really interesting. Because I was asking myself things like, what position does my voice have within an African American landscape? Is it taken as equal or as tertiary? I was thinking a lot about my voice: is it a First World voice, a Second or a Third World voice? And what voice do I connect to? Is my Nigerian voice relevant and how is it relevant in America?

Odili Donald Odita, Accelerator, 2014, Acrylic on canvas, 127 x 152.5cm © Odili Donald Odita. Courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town/Johannesburg. Photo: Mario Todeschini

SJ: Your use of patterns, space and colour in your art is bold and emits emotion. Regarding your patterns, do you have a vocabulary for them? Do you repeat the same kind of patterns? Or is each pattern unique?

ODO: The pattern for me really comes into play in the structuring of the painting. I'm taking one pattern from one situation and I combine it with another from another situation to make a third situation. I'd say that my patterns for my paintings began in 1998. I have several books with hundreds of pages of patterns. I organise them all by date and the majority of them have not been used. These patterns are the basis of food for thought for me. They could've meant something when I originally made them but it often happens that I come back to them years later and use them in my paintings, which might change their meaning.

SJ: You explore the theory of third spaces in this body of work and your artwork evokes a mashup of SMPTE colour bars (TV stripes) and West African prints. Would you consider incorporating digital spaces of art creation?

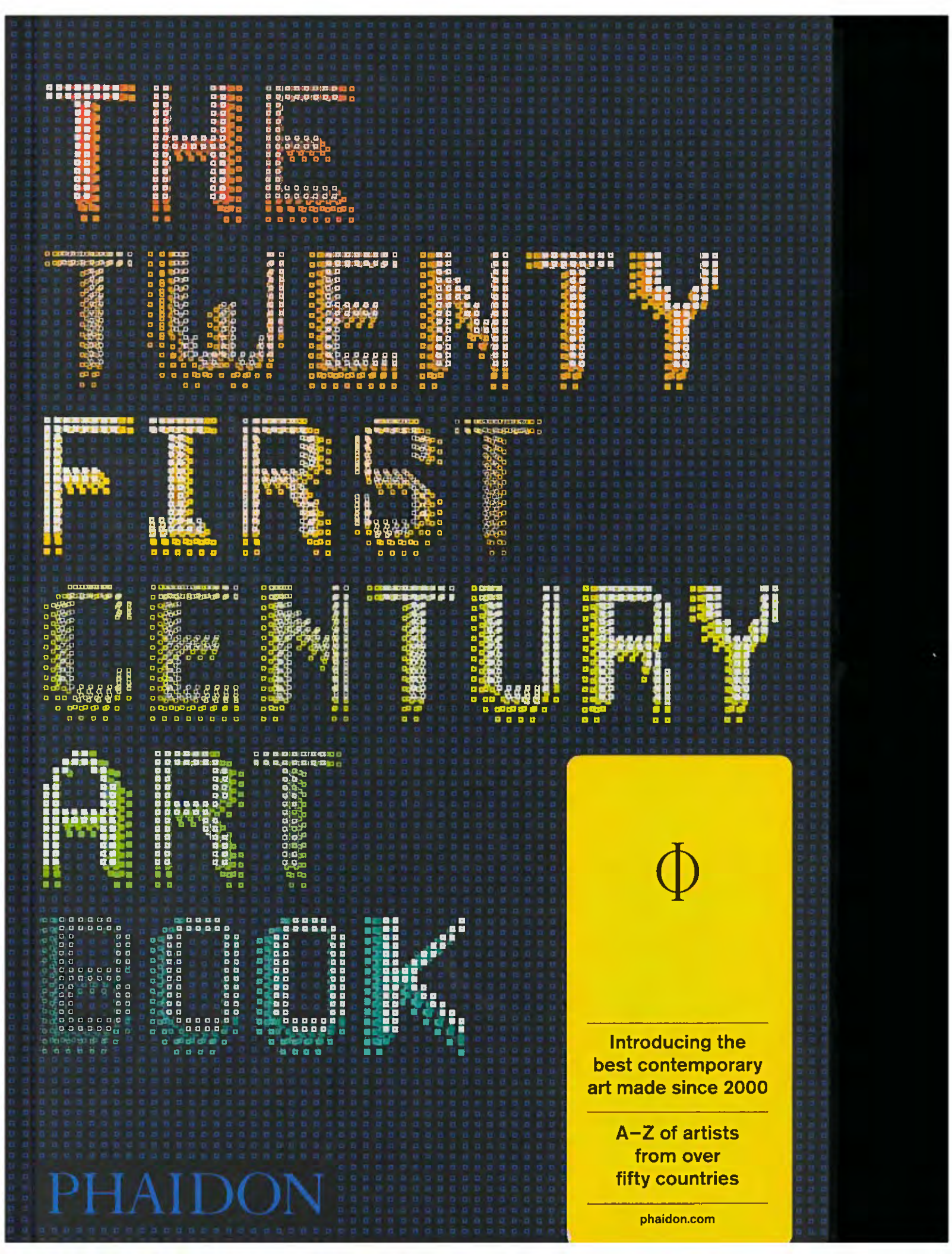
ODO: I can't escape the fact that my painting is made by my hand, and my body is part of that experience as much as mind. And that's the reality I want to maintain with my work. I know that there's a lot of my work online, but you really have to stand in front my paintings to feel the physicality of them.

SJ: What are you currently working on?

ODO: I'm working on several wall installation projects. One for Yale University and two for the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University.

Odili Donald Odita, Third Degree of Separation, March 5 – April 11, 2015, STEVENSON, Cape Town.

Stefanie Jason lives in Johannesburg and is an arts and culture writer for South African publication Mail & Guardian. Her writing focus is on visual arts in the country and music.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Odita Odili Donald

Give Me Shelter, 2007

Odita moved from his native Nigeria to the United States with his parents when he was only six months old, and so grew up in a country in which his specifically African identity was subsumed within a more general categorization of 'blackness'. Throughout his formative years as an artist he was acutely aware of how inseparable all areas of culture are from their geography and history. Perversely, perhaps, Odita was drawn to Hard-edge Abstraction – a genre of painting that, in America at least, had once aspired to empty itself of such cultural content and traditional associations. Odita's dynamic compositions openly allude to African textiles and decoration through their improvised and irregular patterns and vibrant palette. Paintings such as *Give Me Shelter* – which is applied directly to the wall of a given space – also evoke the distant open landscapes of Africa.

Kelly, Scheibitz, Shahbazi

Odili Donald Odita. b Enugu, Nigeria, 1966. **Give Me Shelter.** 2007. Acrylic latex wall paint, coloured pigment on wall. **h6 x w18 x l18 m. h7 ft 9 1/8 in x w59 ft 3 in x l59 ft.** Installation view, Italian Pavilion, *52nd Venice Biennale*, 2007

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The New York Times | http://nyti.ms/ZDWgrR

N.Y. / REGION

A New York Subway Line That Doubles as an Art Gallery

OCT. 15, 2014

Building Blocks

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

For a picturesque ride, few railroads in New York rival Amtrak's Empire line along the Hudson River.

The West End line on the D train, between Sunset Park and Coney Island in Brooklyn, would not seem to be among them.

What it lacks in scenery, however, it makes up in art. Twelve of the 14 stations between 36th Street and the Stillwell Avenue terminus now offer some kind of visual delight: mosaic proletarians, cast bronze bees and a 20-foot-long translucent hot dog. (You'll never guess where.)

The works were commissioned by the Arts and Design program of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which is typically allotted 0.5 to 1 percent of a rehabilitation budget for subway and commuter rail stations.

After an $88 million refurbishing of seven stations on the West End line, completed in 2012, D trains in southwestern Brooklyn travel through one of the greatest concentrations of public artwork in the subway system.

"I really, really liked the idea that they would be seen by people who do not or cannot frequent art galleries and museums, or who can't afford to buy an expensive piece of art," said the artist Portia Munson, whose brilliant floral mandalas have transformed the Fort Hamilton Parkway station.

The Arts and Design program has earned the right to call itself a museum, but it's a museum in which one gallery can be 15 minutes away from the next. On the West End line, by contrast, you can hop on and off the train, covering a lot of artistic ground in not much time.

And this is a good moment to take stock of Arts and Design (known until recently as Arts for Transit), as it approaches its 30th anniversary.

For one thing, the largest single artwork ever commissioned under the program, "Sky Reflector-Net," by James Carpenter Design Associates, Grimshaw Architects and Arup, is to go on view this fall when the new Fulton Center opens in Lower Manhattan.

The net — a 79-foot-high tapering, truncated cone of reflective aluminum diamonds set in a stainless-steel tracery — also appears on the cover of "New York's Underground Art Museum: M.T.A. Arts and Design," by Sandra Bloodworth and William Ayres, which is to be published this month. The catalog updates "Along the Way: M.T.A. Arts for Transit," from 2006, with many new projects.

Arts and Design has also reached the point of being established firmly enough to provoke a parody. Last month, three illicit sculptures were added to the "Life Underground" groupings by Tom Otterness in the 14th Street station of the Eighth Avenue line. They imitated his style, a blend of whimsy and biting commentary on corruption and greed.

The figures showed a man pointing a gun at a dog, and a distant bystander. A freelance creative director who took credit for the installation, Andrew Tider, said the reference was to Mr. Otterness having made a film in the 1970s in which he shot a dog. Mr. Tider said Mr. Otterness should have included himself in the "Life Underground" tableaux. (Mr. Otterness had apologized years earlier for what he called an "indefensible act.")

The figures were removed almost immediately.

No such controversy seems imaginable among the latest additions to the West End line, a distant successor of the Brooklyn, Bath and West End Railroad. On the platforms of six elevated stations, windscreen panels of laminated glass display lovely translucent imagery.

“These projects are like little jewels,” said Ms. Bloodworth, the director of Arts and Design. Officials have taken something of a gamble using glass. “We have to trust, as we have, that the higher nature of the citizenry will come out when they see these beautiful works,” Ms. Bloodworth said.

In case your D train is delayed, these works repay study. Some, like Odili Donald Odita’s “Kaleidoscope” at 20th Avenue and Amy Cheng’s “Rediscovery” at 25th Avenue, are large-scale abstractions that can be appreciated from a passing train.

At the other end of the spectrum is the intricacy of Daniel Zeller’s “Internal Connectivity” at Bay 50th Street. His scaleless abstractions can be read as topographic maps or as tissue samples under an electron microscope.

Ms. Munson straddles the spectrum with “Gardens of Fort Hamilton Parkway Station.” Her symmetrical arrangements of flowers, florets, petals and weeds can be appreciated from inches away or from across the tracks. At that distance, they look like stained glass, especially “July Mandala Garden,” a rose window formed of a four-leaf clover, a sunflower, blue dayflowers, red zinnia petals, yellow coreopsis, globe thistles and daisy petals.

Though she lives in the Catskills, Ms. Munson comes to the city with some frequency. On one visit, she was describing the nature of her artwork to an acquaintance who was pleased to tell her after a few minutes, “You know, it sounds a lot like this amazing subway station in Brooklyn.”

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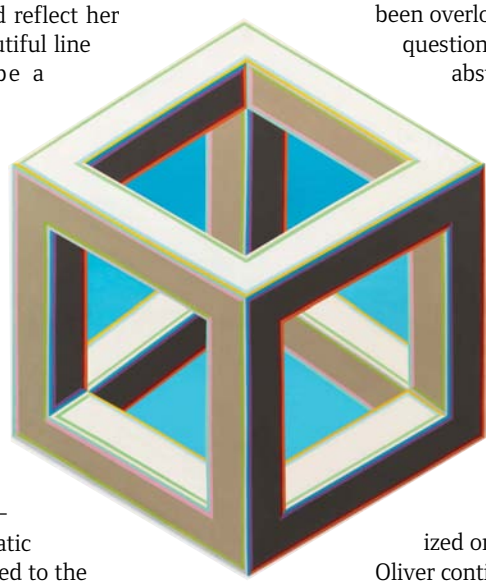
Black Abstraction: Not a Contradiction

Long marginalized by their community and overlooked by the art market, African American abstractionists are finally coming into the spotlight

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS

"Donald Judd didn't have to explain himself. Why do I have to?" asks Jennie C. Jones, an African American abstract painter who has grappled with the issue of how her work can or should reflect her race. "Fred Sandback can make this beautiful line and not have to have it literally be a metaphor for his cultural identity."

Jones, 45, sidestepped the debates around multiculturalism that were raging when she was in school in the 1980s and gravitated toward Minimalism. Yet over the last decade, she has forged a conceptual link in her work between the histories of abstraction and of modern jazz in America—"black guys in the 1950s taking jazz into the concert hall and making it this bluesy hybrid with Bach," as she puts it.



In her recent show at Sikkema Jenkins in New York, an atonal sound environment accompanied her monochromatic paintings that had acoustic panels attached to the canvases. Strips of fluorescent color painted on the edges of the canvases bounced off the white walls and created a sense of movement, rhythm, and vibration. "This art and music juncture," she says, "gave me the permission to point to something in the room that said, 'I didn't fall out of the sky.'"

The contributions of African American artists to the inventions of abstract painting have historically been overlooked, or else fraught with the kind of questions faced by Jones. "Generations of black abstract painters never seem to be celebrated," says Valerie Cassel Oliver, senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, where she recently organized "Black in the Abstract," a two-part exhibition that focused on the history of African American painters working in abstraction. She placed younger artists, including Jones, Shinique Smith, and Angel Otero, in dialogue with members of the older generation, such as Felrath Hines, Alma Thomas, and Romare Bearden, who were producing seminal works in the 1960s.

"You find these artists being marginalized on both ends of the spectrum," Cassel Oliver continues. "There was this manifesto with the Black Arts Movement that you did work that reflected the beauty of that community in no uncertain terms," she says, referring to a group that coalesced

Hilarie M. Sheets is an ARTnews *contributing editor.*

©ESTATE OF AL LOVING/COURTESY GARTH GREENAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

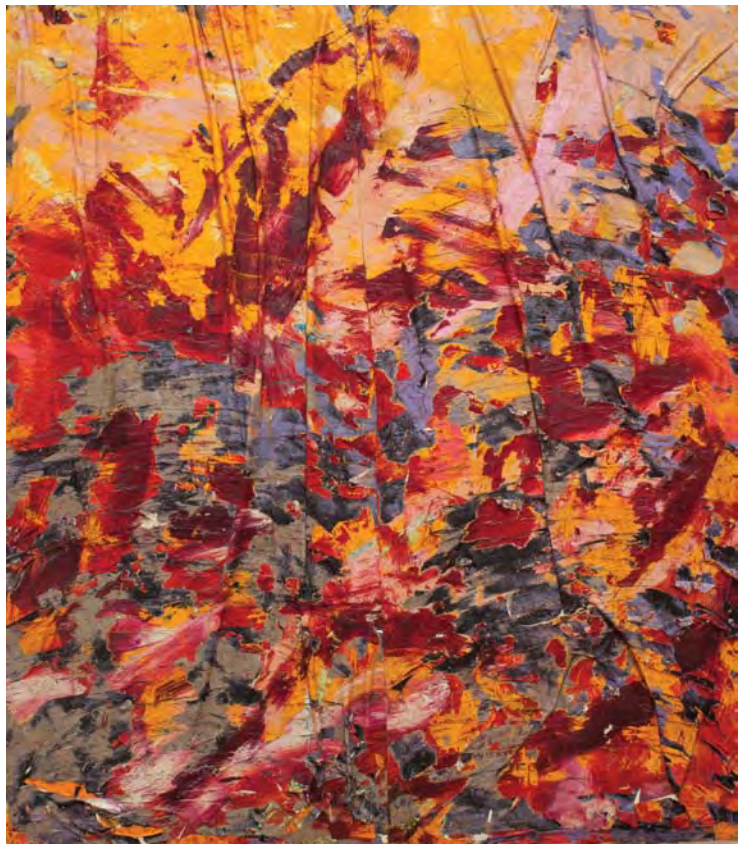
OPPOSITE Al Loving, *Untitled*, 1969. The illusionary cube is the signature image in his early abstractions. ABOVE Odili Donald Odita, *Firewall*, 2013. The Nigerian-born Odili's zigzagging shards of vibrant color suggest colliding cultures and emotions.

©ODILI DONALD ODITA/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

in the 1960s to promote social and political engagement in art and literature. "Oftentimes abstract painting is not as celebrated as more figurative work by the black community. From the mainstream art world, it's just the sense of not being preoccupied with what black artists are doing, period."

The 1960 canvas *Strange Land*, included in the Houston show, would be unrecognizable to most viewers as a work by Bearden. It wasn't until 1964, when he started making collages inspired by the

rituals and rhythms of African American life, that he achieved acclaim. Bearden and his contemporary Jacob Lawrence, whose subject matter was similar, were the most renowned African American artists of their time. Their sensitive portrayals of black families were the kind of works many thought were needed and that they expected from black artists. Yet Bearden, in his 1946 essay "The Negro Artist's Dilemma," bristled at the tendency to critique work by blacks on "sociological rather than esthetic" merits. His extensive experimentation with Abstract Expressionism from 1952 to 1964 has gone virtually unnoticed. The first exhibition devoted to this lost decade of his work is being prepared by the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, New York.



Angel Otero, *Everything and Nothing*, 2011. An innovator with materials, he collaged oil-paint skins on canvas for this work.

"It took a lot of integrity and a lot of courage for an African American artist to be an abstractionist in the 1950s, '60s, '70s even," says Michael Rosenfeld, who organized "Beyond the Spectrum: Abstraction in African American Art, 1950–1975" at his Chelsea gallery earlier this year. The show brought together what Rosenfeld calls the first-generation African American abstract artists—Charles Alston, Harold Cousins, Beauford Delaney, Norman Lewis, Alma Thomas, and Hale Woodruff—and the second generation, including Frank Bowling, Edward Clark, Melvin Edwards, Sam Gilliam, Richard Hunt, Al Loving, Howardena Pindell, William T. Williams, and Jack Whitten.

Rosenfeld points out that Norman Lewis (1909–79) participated in the landmark symposium organized in 1950 by Robert Motherwell and Lewis's friend Ad Reinhardt and held at Studio 35 in New York, where the artists present debated what to call the new art movement. (Abstract Exressionism was the term that eventually prevailed.) Yet Lewis is routinely omitted from the narrative of this defining moment in American art. The first comprehensive overview of his career opens in November 2015 at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia.

Alma Thomas was picked up by the Martha Jackson Gallery in the 1960s and was the first African American woman to have an exhibition at the Whitney Museum in 1972. Yet she is not well known today.

"The African American Abstract Expressionists are part of the same movement as their white counterparts," says Rosenfeld, "delving within themselves and trying to express something universal."

While all these artists resisted the pressure to paint images that told stories of black experience, most were very politically engaged. "Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties," on view at the Brooklyn Museum through July 6, includes works by several committed abstractionists who found ways to meld their art and activism.

The 80-year-old Sam Gilliam, known for his ravishing color-field canvases that he sometimes drapes sculpturally on the wall, painted a monumental canvas stained and splattered all over with hot pinks and reds, titled *Red April* (1970), in direct response to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968.

Lewis's *Untitled (Alabama)* from 1967 shows a crowd of abstracted angular figures in white packed into a bladelike shape slicing through a black field. The artist always disavowed overt narrative content in his work, but the visual suggestion of hooded Klansmen together with the title clearly alludes to the civil rights movement.

"Lewis became a beacon for the next generation, moving into an abstract space and saying, 'I don't have to put that burden of representation on my work,'" says Kellie Jones, cocurator of "Witness" and associate professor of art history and archeology at Columbia University. "Somebody like Jack Whitten makes the same decision."

The Brooklyn show includes Whitten's *Birmingham 1964*, in which a newspaper photograph of a confrontation in Birmingham is partially revealed under layers of stocking mesh and black oil paint, like a wound that can't be covered over. The

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND KAVI GUPTA GALLERY, CHICAGO

COURTESY THE ESTATE OF NANETTE BEARDEN AND DC MOORE GALLERY, NEW YORK

***Strange Land*, 1960, would be unrecognizable to most viewers as a painting by Romare Bearden.**

TOP Howardena Pindell, *Untitled #18* (detail), 1977. A memory of discrimination in childhood played a role in her work. ABOVE Shinique Smith, *Kaleidoscope*, 2013.

74-year-old artist, who grew up in Alabama and moved to New York in 1960 as an art student, revered the Abstract Expressionists, many of whom he met at the Cedar Tavern. While Whitten said he felt pressure to make work about the civil rights movement in the 1960s—and wanted to do so—he made a decisive leap into abstraction in 1970.

"If I was going to get around Bill de Kooning, first of all I had to go faster than he, and second of all I had to do something much larger than he," says Whitten, who created a 12-foot-wide tool he called the "developer" to drag paint in a single gesture across the entire picture plane. (This was a decade before Gerhard Richter began his heralded abstract paintings using a similar technique.) Whitten, who shows at Alexander Gray Associates in New York, will be the subject of a major retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego in September.

As a graduate student at Yale in the mid-1960s

Howardena Pindell, 71, also found inspiration in the work of the older generation of abstractionists—namely Ad Reinhardt's paintings of close-value colors and Larry Poons's Op art canvases of circles

TOP: ©HOWARDENA PINDELL/COURTESY GARTH GREENAN GALLERY, NEW YORK; BOTTOM: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JAMES COHAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

Alma Thomas, *Untitled*, 1968. She was the first black woman to exhibit at the Whitney Museum.

COURTESY JUNE KELLY GALLERY, NEW YORK

and ovals. Throughout the '70s, Pindell experimented with color, surface, and texture. She cut out hundreds of tiny paper dots with a standard hole puncher, collaged them onto cut-and-quilted canvases, and smothered them in layers of acrylic, dye, sequins, glitter, and powder. One of them, the pale, luminous *Untitled #20: Dutch Wives, Circled and Squared* (1978), was included in "Black in the Abstract."

"I remember going with my abstract work to the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the director at the time said to me, 'Go downtown and show with the white boys,'" says Pindell, adding that William T. Williams and Al Loving met with the same kind of response. "We were basically considered traitors because we didn't do specifically didactic work."

Pindell, who just had an exhibition at Garth Greenan in New York, says her conscious intention was to explore the esthetic possibilities of the circle when she started on those works. Then she was

startled by a childhood memory that came back to her. On a car ride through Kentucky in the 1950s, she and her father, who lived in Philadelphia, stopped at a root-beer stand and were served mugs with red circles on the bottom.

"I asked my father, 'What is this red circle?'" she recalls. "He said, 'That's because we're black and we cannot use the same utensils as the whites.' I realized that's really the origin of my being driven to try to change the circle in my mind, trying to take the sting out of that."

Odili Donald Odita, 48, says that he feels indebted to the persistence of the older generation of black abstract artists who asserted personal freedom in the face of an art market that rewarded cultural and political stereotypes. In the early 1990s, as a young artist out of graduate school at Bennington College in Vermont, where he studied the work of mainstream abstract painters such as Helen Frankenthaler and Kenneth Noland, Odita got a job at Kenkeleba House in New York, owned by the painter Joe Overstreet, who collected and showed work by African American artists. Stunned that he had never heard of these artists, Odita began a project to interview abstract painters from the 1970s and 1980s, such as Pindell, Loving, Edward Clark, Frank Bowling, and Stanley Whitney. Odita's research grew into a series of talks he has given at universities over the years.

"Any kind of formal invention in the work of black artists was seen as, if not second rate, then something done the second time around," says Odita, noting that Clark laid claim to making the first shaped painting—before Frank Stella—and that the king-making art critic Clement Greenberg regularly visited Bowling's studio but never took the opportunity to write one word in support of his work. "In the competition of the avant garde in modern art, these older-generation African Americans felt disenfranchised and marginalized in the race to advance art."

Odita didn't want his own work subsumed under the standard narrative of Stella and Noland, and all this information helped him navigate his path as an abstract artist. Because his family fled the civil war in Nigeria when he was a baby and settled in Ohio, he grew up with the duality of African traditions at home and American pop culture in school. In 1999, he started making geometric paintings in which shards of vibrant colors zigzag and abut in compositions that suggest colliding cultures and emotions.

"I wanted people to identify the trope of Africa with this structure and color and see the patterns of one world and another world pushing into the space

ABOVE LEFT Charles Alston, *Troubadour*, ca. 1955. LEFT Frank Bowling, *Tony's Anvil*, 1975. They are among the early black abstractionists now receiving attention after years of relative neglect.

TOP: COURTESY MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY LLC, NEW YORK ; BOTTOM: COURTESY MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY LLC, NEW YORK AND SPANIERMAN MODERN, NEW YORK

COURTESY ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK/MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART SAN DIEGO

Jack Whitten, *Chinese Sincerity*, 1975. He made a leap from politically engaged work into abstraction.

of the painting," Odita says. He draws on the palette and designs of African textiles, TV test patterns, the Nigerian landscape, and suburban wallpaper in his work, which he shows at Jack Shainman in New York. "If it's successful, it doesn't end in that trope. Then people start engaging with other things that are occurring—texture, color, the dynamic of the composition, light, what the space creates, how it relates to your body and mind," he says.

James Little, 60, also has an affinity for color, design, and structure in his hard-edge abstract paintings that are strongly influenced by jazz. "I've figured out ways of suggesting movement, rhythm, speed, and how to shift color," says Little, pointing out that de Kooning and Piet Mondrian were also responding directly to jazz. "I felt that abstraction, coming from my background, which was a very segregated upbringing in Tennessee, reflected for me the best expression of self-determination and optimism and freedom. I've had to do an uphill battle in a lot of ways in the art world on both sides, amongst the blacks and whites, but I've just really stuck with what I believe in." His canvas *Juju Boogie Woogie* (2013) was included in "Black in the Abstract."

June Kelly, whose gallery represents Little, has noticed a positive shift in the art world at large toward black abstract painters. "There's a wonderful group of collectors who are more receptive to the work of black abstract painters now," says Kelly. "As they read more and look, they see the need to open up their collections. The writings and exhibitions of black historians and curators such as David Driskell, Kellie Jones, Richard J. Powell, Lowery Stokes Sims, Judith Wilson, and Valerie Cassel Oliver are making a difference."

Jennie C. Jones is thrilled by the large number of black collectors who are now interested in her work. She credits, in part, Studio Museum director Thelma Golden, who has organized such shows as "Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction 1964–1980" in 2006.

"Over the last 20 years, she has been really educating black collectors to step away from focusing on the WPA era," says Jones, who will have a solo show at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston in October. "I have black collectors today who say, 'I've always been in love with Russian Constructivism, and now I feel I can have something close to that but reframed in a new context.'" ■

Double-Consciousness Raising

"My passion has really been in exhibitions uncovering those things that are in plain sight," says **Valerie Cassel Oliver,** who has been a curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH) since 2000.

In addition to her most recent exhibition, which looks at the neglected history of African American painters working in abstraction, she has established the lineage of black artists marginalized in other areas, with exhibitions such as "Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art Since 1970" (2005), "Cinema Remixed & Reloaded: Black Women Artists and the Moving Image Since 1970" (2007), and "Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art" (2012). She has also organized broad thematic shows such as "Splat Boom Pow! The Influence of Cartoons in Contemporary Art" (2003) and "Hand+Made: The Performative Impulse in Art and Craft" (2010).

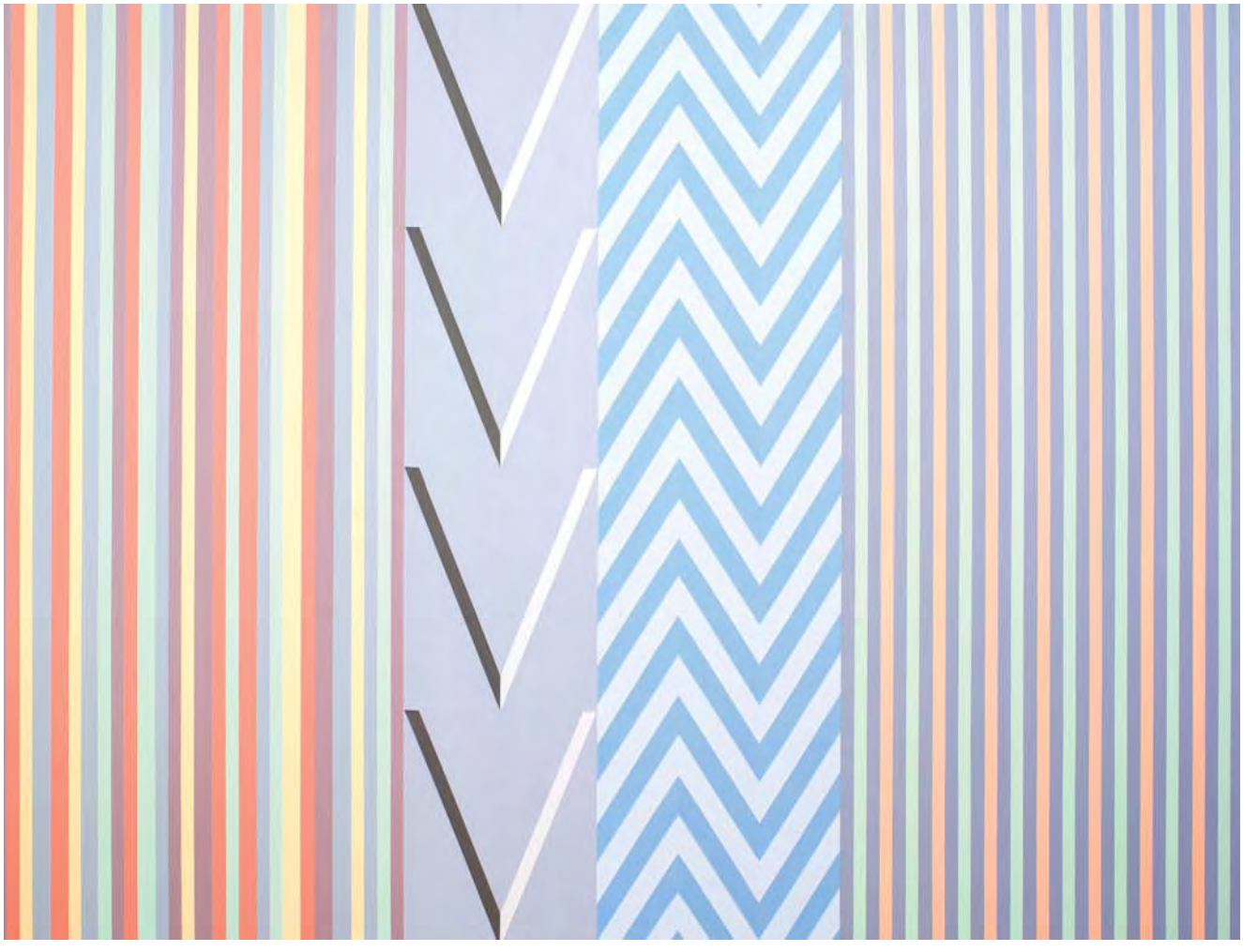
For Cassel Oliver, who is 51 and a native Houstonian, the Contemporary Arts Museum was a formative place. "The world was very small in Houston when I was growing up and the CAMH provided a worldview that was much more expansive than what existed for me at that time," she says. She remembers first coming to the museum as a teenager and being exposed to Andy Warhol and Joseph Beuys.

As an undergraduate at the University of Texas at Austin, Cassel Oliver studied communications. She went on to get her master's degree in art history at Howard University in 1992. Throughout graduate school and after, she worked at the National Endowment for the Arts, during the height of the controversy over public funding for the arts. In 1996, she became director of the Visiting Artists Program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Cassel Oliver was a cocurator of the 2000 Whitney Biennial in New York before taking the job in Houston.

"Since the museum was very open to my vision, here was a golden opportunity to expand the history and to talk about the evolution of various genres and where black artists fit within those spectrums," says Cassel Oliver, who in 2011 received the Driskell Prize for her contribution to the field of African American art and art history. "There are more younger artists now in art schools, trying to find their own legacies and not seeing themselves reflected. They are not the first ones doing this type of work. It's basically shedding light on what is right in front of you." ***— H.M.S.***

Valerie Cassel Oliver's aim is to expand the history of black artists.

ERIC HESTER



LEFT Norman Lewis, *Untitled*, 1966. He played an important role in the establishment of Abstract Expressionism. BELOW James Little, *Juju Boogie Woogie*, 2013.

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Firewall, a 2013 painting by Odili Donald Odita.

Violet, the daughter of Chloe and Jonny Buckland, in the family's Manhattan apartment.

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Reach, 2010.

ODILI DONALD ODITA

This Nigerian-born painter, inspired by sources ranging from African textiles to TV test patterns, creates vivid mashups of color and geometry. BY HILARIE SHEETS

In the abstract paintings of Odili Donald Odita, shards of individual colors zigzag, angle, and zoom across canvases and large-scale wall installations. Their shifting rhythms and patterns, which can employ as many as 30 vibrant hues, might suggest colliding forces or cultures, overlapping currents or horizons, emotions of dissonance or elation. "You see a duality in my work—the patterns of one world and another world pushing into the space of the painting," says Odita, who is interested in how abstract language can simultaneously address social, political, and psychological content.

Odita was six months old when his family fled Nigeria at the onset of the civil war in 1967 and landed in the American Midwest. His father, an art historian and painter, taught at Ohio State University in Columbus and kept African traditions alive in their cloistered home. Odita felt isolated in his adopted country, where people of color are often labeled merely "black," a term he finds vague and inaccurate. In his work, he never repeats the same tone from one painting to the next and thinks of each color as being as unique and distinct as an individual.

His geometric compositions are informed by sources ranging from African textiles and the landscape of Nigeria—he first returned for a visit at age 10—to TV test patterns, screen savers, midcentury wallpaper, and music. "For me, color is the closest thing to sound," says Odita, who strives to create the same kind of emotional intensity in his paintings that music can evoke. His tastes include jazz, bluegrass, Scottish bagpipes, and indie rock.

"The way he works with color and space is very dynamic," says Robert Storr, dean of the Yale School of Art, who taught Odita at Bennington College in Vermont, where the artist received his MFA in 1990. "His palette is full of tonal nuances that you don't find in ▷


The Gate, 2013.


Four States, 2008.


Point of Return, 2010.

the mainstream modernist tradition. If you know something about color in African painting, you'll recognize bits and pieces of it."

After seeing a wall painting in the artist's 2006 show at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York, Storr gave Odita his first opportunity to work on a monumental scale when he curated the 52nd International Exhibition at the 2007 Venice Biennale. In an enormous hallway in the Italian Pavilion, Odita painted long horizontal bands of color that jostled and converged at the corners of the walls, creating a sense of crossroads. "I realized these wall paintings could be in dialogue with the architecture," Odita says. "The piece changed as you moved around it."


Give Me Shelter, an installation at the 2007 Venice Biennale.


Scan the image above to view more of the artist's work

The success of that work was followed by installations at the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati later that year. Odita has since worked in settings outside the art world, completing a monumental wall painting at New York–Presbyterian Hospital in Manhattan in 2012 and the George C. Young Federal Building and Courthouse in Orlando, Florida, in 2013. A piece for P.S. 340 in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood will be completed in 2015. "My work has become very civic-minded," says Odita. He adds that murals in such quotidian settings can offer windows to infinite horizons.

Now based in Philadelphia, where he teaches at Temple University's Tyler School of Art, Odita continually finds other expatriates from places of unrest whose experiences of diaspora echo his own. "I like to hear cultural stories similar to mine to get a sense of how people have learned to adapt to new places," he says. "There's still oppression, but I believe in a human utopia. We can be better than we were yesterday. This is part of what I think of every time I make art." ■

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take it from a collector

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO BUYING ART

BY JEAN M. MCLEAN - PHOTOS BY CARY NORTON

ALTHOUGH BIRMINGHAM IS BLESSED with artists, crafters and experts on historic collectibles ranging from arrowheads to appliques, many residents aren't sure how to acquire and display art in their own homes.

So they fill bare walls with mass-produced paintings that match the sofa.

Those who treasure art don't necessarily disapprove. They merely say those owners might be missing something. Handmade objects can tell multiple stories—from how-where-why they were crafted to how-where-why they were acquired.

Art doesn't have to match the sofa, they say. It merely has to enrich someone's life.

That's why art collecting needn't be an intimidating process, says Dan Bynum, a contemporary Alabama artist who is also an Alabama Power communications specialist. Since Bynum's professional responsibilities extend to the utility's Alabama art collection inventory and biannual art shows, his colleagues often seek his advice for filling their own empty walls.

Juried events like those hosted at Alabama Power's Birmingham headquarters provide purchasing and learning opportunities, says Bynum. He advises friends not to be intimidated, but to rely on what they like, taking time to learn not only about the work, but the artist behind it.

"It's so subjective as to what is good and bad art. But if it talks to you or brings back a memory, then that's when you pop on it. That's when you buy that piece. The piece should speak to you. You may be far off-base from what the artist was communicating, but you see something that strikes a chord in you."

From pottery to paintings, blankets to baskets, sculptures to switch plates, Birmingham's juried shows, galleries, museums, festivals, studios and sidewalks offer wide-ranging opportunities for anyone who wants to own something that's not mass produced.

OPPOSITE: Collector Margaret Alexander commissioned Birmingham-based artist Amy Pleasant to paint on large storage doors in her home's foyer. **TOP:** Annie Butrus painted the three-panel piece "Spring," part of a larger installation about the seasons. **LEFT:** In 2011, Alexander commissioned Nigerian-born artist Odili Donald Odita to create this acrylic-on-canvas painting. Odita's work has also appeared in collections around the world, including a wall painting in the United Nations Annex.

"What you live with might be different from what you admire. The more exhibits you see, the more your style and taste develop. You find what you like and don't like."

—Dan Bynum

The good news, Bynum says, is that those pieces aren't always expensive.

"Student art shows are a great outlet," says Bynum of first-buyer venues ranging from the Alabama School of Fine Arts to local universities. "Those are great places for the new collector to jump into the arena and buy art."

Some media—including photography and some folk art—may be affordable even when crafted by established artists.

Bynum also suggests visiting local events such as those organized by Eileen Kunzman, founder and director of Fine Art Services, which produces Magic City Art Connection (April 25-27) and Moss Rock Festival, held each November. Such venues not only offer a wide variety of art media, but opportunities to meet artists and ask questions about pieces or processes, Kunzman says.

"There is always a story, some point of motivation. The artist is all about sharing everything they know. They love that."

A buyer learning the how-why of collage construction through an artist conversation at an open air show still might not purchase the piece. But that buyer will better understand collage art. And that understanding will influence what the buyer eventually decides to take home.

"What you live with might be different from what you admire," Bynum says. "The more exhibits you see, the more your style and taste develop. You find what you like and don't like."

"I think a person becomes interested and they start having this enthusiasm and they almost treat this thing that they're feeling like it's a treasure hunt," says Kunzman of the process of discovery. "They have a deep curiosity about something, about how beautiful it is."

Many collectors start with vacation purchases, since those works evoke happy memories. Others find a specific artist they admire. If they can't afford that artist's finished piece, they might buy a charcoal sketch that served as an

RIGHT: Dan Bynum's mixed-media collages "Romeo and Junior Miss" and "Imaginary Friend." **OPPOSITE:** Eileen Kunzman of Fine Arts Services displays a variety of art in her home.

TOP AND LOWER LEFT: Margaret Alexander collects wooden hand-painted carvings from Oaxaca, Mexico. Her love for these figurines has led her to travel to Oaxaca. **BOTTOM:** A custom piece by local artist Amy Pleasant.

"outline" while the work was in process.

Accomplished potters might sell slightly flawed cast-offs at a discount. For some owners, those flaws add to their value.

"And you can buy etchings that are hand pulled and numbered," says Bynum of affordable options. "Most artists will keep a low edition number. That's a great way to get an original piece."

Some collectors seek handmade clocks or fountain pens, Kunzman says. The more an owner learns about his or her passion and those who created those objects, the more joy those items bring. For the true collector, art enrichment is not about profitable resale, but about the stories each item evokes, from grandma's wool quilt to an oil of a Lake Martin sunrise.

"Art, for me, is just about that moment of creation," says Kunzman. "And it could be anything—from the most beautiful car to the design of a shoelace or the fork you use every day. Art is everywhere. It's not relegated purely to a painting. If, in fact, you begin to see life as an art form and creativity as something that has touched everyone's life, then approaching a painting becomes less formidable." ■

one collector's process

MARGARET ALEXANDER SAYS her No.-1 rule for acquiring art is to "collect what I absolutely love."

But there is more to this Birmingham collector's appreciation than emotional attachment. She explains her approach to the process.

"Currently my husband and I are collecting contemporary art. Twenty years ago we were collecting wooden hand-painted carvings from Oaxaca, Mexico. I was introduced to the carvings by a friend. They were bright, colorful, fanciful and happy. I loved them immediately and bought one. Every time I visited my friend we would go to the gallery and buy a carving."

Like other serious collectors, Alexander's art appreciation extended to the artists and their processes. She began studying books on Oaxaca or alebrijes Mexican folk art. She met an author of one of those books at an Atlanta exhibition.

Alexander learned to choose designs by originating carvers, rather than artists copying others' successful designs. She started making a wish list of items. Eventually she approached the owner of the New Orleans gallery she frequented, asking him to acquire specific items on her list.

"Next I asked the New Orleans gallery owner if I could go with him to Oaxaca on his next buying trip. We were there for five days in the pueblos. This led to even more purchases, and I was able to meet every one of the carvers I had collected. It was so much fun."

Although Alexander's initial efforts at collecting Oaxacan figures were influenced by her work experience in art galleries, she says collectors need not be professionals to assemble their own treasure troves.

Here are Margaret Alexander's tips:

Collect what you love.

Learn about the art and the market.

Buy the biggest piece you can afford.

Buy the best of the lot available. ("Not all handmade objects made by one artist are equal," she says.)

Buy promptly. ("It will not be duplicated again in the same way.")

Budget monthly for upcoming purchases—or work out a payment plan with the gallery.

Art collection is a lifelong pursuit for those, like Alexander, who appreciate handmade objects and the stories they tell.

"Collecting is a process that is absolutely fun, interesting and challenging all along the way."

TOP: Margaret Alexander and her husband currently collect contemporary art. Their passions have changed with the years, but her No.-1 rule is to collect what she loves.

whitewall

ODILI DONALD ODITA'S MESMERIZING PAINTINGS

By Sola Agustsson | October 24, 2013

Nigerian-born artist **Odili Donald Odita's** third solo exhibition at the **Jack Shainman Gallery** is entirely stunning. The paintings at first appear abstract, perhaps referencing Picasso's early abstract paintings, but in reality are careful studies in color and light refraction. *Sister Midnight* is theoretically an interpretation of a veil falling. *Plane Shifter* articulates the refraction of sunlight through a stream. Many of his paintings are abstracted Nigerian landscapes, kaleidoscopic visions of remembered mountains and rivers obscured by time and space.

Agustsson, Sola. "Odili Donald Odita's Mesmerizing Paintings." *Whitewall*, 24 October 2013. Online. < http://whitewallmag.com/all/art/odili-donald-oditas-mesmerizing-paintings?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=odili-donald-oditas-mesmerizing-paintings>

His color sensibility is akin to a mathematician's. The painter meticulously maps out each painting's angular design and chromatic scheme. Inspired by the vibrant textiles of his home country Nigeria, Odita fuses these patterns with elements of Western modernity. The splintering effect of his designs speaks to the idea of the "other" and parallels the displacement he felt growing up in Midwestern America. Odita's family fled Nigeria just before the start of the Biafran war in 1967. The fragmented nature of his paintings visually represents the postcolonial existence, which lacks a definite center.

Says Odita: "Rather than work in institutionally grounded aesthetic systems where the containment of color occurs because of assumed and prejudiced notions of color as aberrant, abject and superficial, it has always been my intention to work without the ‚fear of color,' which is in itself a censoring, limiting and debilitating condition."

Each of his large-scale works, including a mural in the entrance of the gallery, is mesmerizing. Though the arrangement of the colors and shapes are exacting, they are sometimes intentionally irregular, making the patterns even more compelling.

Odita has been commissioned to produce many murals, including one outside **New York Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medical Center** in 2012. Previously a drab grey wall sat across from the patient's rooms (which was so oppressive that nurses avoided putting patients in that room), Odita's new mural now brightens visits.

Odita also is interested in music and says he explores this medium to understand the human condition. He has had solo exhibitions at the **Yerba Buena Center**, **The Studio Museum in Harlem**, and the **Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia**. He lives and works in Philadelphia.

"This, That and the Other" is on view at the Jack Shainman Gallery through November 16.

Agustsson, Sola. "Odili Donald Odita's Mesmerizing Paintings." *Whitewall*, 24 October 2013. Online. < http://whitewallmag.com/all/art/odili-donald-oditas-mesmerizing-paintings?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=odili-donald-oditas-mesmerizing-paintings>

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Odili Donald Odita

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Odili Donald Odita, *X-Ray*, 2013, gouache on paper, collage, 14 3/4 x 12 1/2".

Odili Donald Odita is well known for large-scale, hardedge abstract paintings of syncopated shards of high-volume color. But for two decades, a different, more intimate body of work has woven through this output like a contrapuntal melody. For "Grey," his first solo show in this relatively new gallery—which is already carving out a niche with its smart program in an unlikely southern city—Odita debuts nineteen small works on paper that have been made over the past ten years.

Several abstractions here evoke a Minimalist vocabulary that—unlike Odita's sprawling paintings—mostly cleave to a modernist grid and employ a palette of primary colors. A single horizontal bar of saffron yellow against the white ground of *Sword* (all works cited, 2013) distills Mondrian into a meditative object. Meanwhile, the stacked black bars in*Daylight* invite the memory of Judd's stacked boxes. But by altering the dimensions and color of the uppermost bar, Odita adds a directional vector and thus introduces the element of time. Some of the paintings are loose and expressionistic, such as *X-Ray*, with its central panel of rib-like marks over a solid red background. The rest of the show offers figurative works, many showing decorated faces naively drawn or clipped from news media. Emitting less vibratory energy than the abstract works, these latter pieces nevertheless touch on themes of cultural distance prevalent throughout Odita's oeuvre.

One of the most important aspects of these small works is the great light they shed on Odita's major paintings (not on view). The figurative works inoculate against claims that his work aims for a bland universalism. What's more, the abstract works demonstrate how a heightened perception can produce narrative associations and experiential depth from the simplest artistic gestures.

— Cinqué Hicks

The New York Times

City Room

HEALTH AND HOSPITALS | OCTOBER 25, 2012, 1:33PM

Nobody Goes to the Hospital for the View, but...

by RANDY LEONARD

Librado Romero/The New York Times

A wall outside New-York Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medical Center in Manhattan was recently painted, much to the delight of patients and hospital workers who used to see a blank industrial wall outside their windows.

Being a hospital patient is usually not a pleasant experience. For some patients at New-York Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medical Center, stays were not enhanced by the view out the window: a bland white industrial wall.

The drab barrier – erected in 2010 a stone's throw from patient rooms on the fourth and fifth floors to hide newer mechanical systems – presented such a dismal sight that nurses would avoid putting patients in those rooms. Whenever space became available, they would move patients from the west side, with the view of the plain wall, to the coveted east side, where light

Leonard, Randy. "Nobody Goes to the Hospital for the View, but." *The New York Times*, 26 October 2012: A29, illustrated.

bounces off the waves of the East River and a steady stream of boat traffic passes Roosevelt Island.

But much to the delight of patients and the hospital staff, workers recently removed scaffolding in front of the wall to reveal a mural of dazzling color.

“I just think the lines are beautiful,” said Michelle Miller, a patient, as she sat in a chair with a view out her fifth-story window. “They were finishing it yesterday, when I was moved into the room. I thought it was gorgeous.”

The 5,000-square-foot abstract painting is a vibrant series of vertical diamond and chevron shapes of blue, purple, green, and ocher – created byOdili Donald Odita, a well-known artist with a worldwide following.
“I’m a huge modern art fan,” said Ms. Miller, 42. “I see a lot of different things in it.”

The crenulated greens and blues are like earth and water, she said, adding that she saw people interacting and shapes that reminded her of a celestial being.

“When you’re in the hospital you have work to do, I mean getting well is your work,” said Ms. Miller, who was being treated for alcohol withdrawal. She added that a positive environment “helps expedite your improvement.”

Hospital workers agreed that having natural light and pleasing aesthetic surroundings was an important part of caring for patients. “It just makes such a difference,” said Caroline Olivetti, a nurse in the cardiac unit on the hospital’s fourth floor.

She said she went around opening curtains to give patients a view of the hospital’s newest artwork. “We don’t mind putting people over here now,” she said.

“I like it, and it’s beautiful,” said Alma Mercado, 79, a Brooklyn resident who was rushed to the hospital after having a heart attack. “It’s so bright.”

Ms. Mercado is big on color, pointing out a patterned purple blouse hanging in the closet in her room on the cardiac unit. Her nails were freshly coated in a greenish blue.

Ever since the wall went up, hospital officials had been wondering how to make it more appealing; they even considered projecting an image of the East River onto it. In the end, they settled on a painting and commissioned Mr. Odita to do the work.

Mr. Odita said he was challenged by the responsibility of painting the mural, given its location. “It was almost daunting to think of doing something at that scale and at an institution of that importance,” said Mr. Odita, in a recent telephone interview from Cape Town, where he was setting up a gallery exhibition. “I knew the comparison would always be the East River. I wanted to have and include nature without illustrating it.”

Mr. Odita, who was born in Nigeria and raised in Ohio, said his mural, “Time and Time,” took about two months to complete. His work has been featured in exhibitions in America, Africa and Europe.

Leonard, Randy. “Nobody Goes to the Hospital for the View, but.” *The New York Times*, 26 October 2012: A29, illustrated.

Realizing that the mural would be visible by people from the infant nursery on the seventh floor to the elderly in the cardiac unit, Mr. Odita wanted it to represent the cycle of life, and give solace to viewers by helping them see their place in that cycle.

He knew that unlike gallery browsers, patients would face his painting for hours and even days. He hoped someone staring at the complex shards might "allow the color to open up other ideas of possibilities or considerations of what might be going on in their life," he said.

Ms. Miller said gazing at the mural gave her encouragement.

"It's inspirational for me," she said. "It makes me feel like I want to get out of these cream-colored walls and go back to life."

Librado Romero/The New York Times

The wall had been bare for years and some patients complained that staring at it was not good for their mood.

A version of this article appears in print on 10/26/2012, on page A29 of the NewYork edition with the headline: At Hospital, Color Is Added To Patients' View.

Leonard, Randy. "Nobody Goes to the Hospital for the View, but." *The New York Times*, 26 October 2012: A29, illustrated.

ARTFORUM
APRIL 2013

Odili Donald Odita

BETA PICTORIS GALLERY / MAUS CONTEMPORARY
2411 Second Avenue North
March 15–April 19

Odili Donald Odita, *X-Ray*, 2013, gouache on paper, collage, 14 3/4 x 12 1/2".

Odili Donald Odita is well known for large-scale, hardedge abstract paintings of syncopated shards of high-volume color. But for two decades, a different, more intimate body of work has woven through this output like a contrapuntal melody. For "Grey," his first solo show in this relatively new gallery—which is already carving out a niche with its smart program in an unlikely southern city—Odita debuts nineteen small works on paper that have been made over the past ten years.

Several abstractions here evoke a Minimalist vocabulary that—unlike Odita's sprawling paintings—mostly cleave to a modernist grid and employ a palette of primary colors. A single horizontal bar of saffron yellow against the white ground of *Sword* (all works cited, 2013) distills Mondrian into a meditative object. Meanwhile, the stacked black bars in*Daylight* invite the memory of Judd's stacked boxes. But by altering the dimensions and color of the uppermost bar, Odita adds a directional vector and thus introduces the element of time. Some of the paintings are loose and expressionistic, such as *X-Ray*, with its central panel of rib-like marks over a solid red background. The rest of the show offers figurative works, many showing decorated faces naively drawn or clipped from news media. Emitting less vibratory energy than the abstract works, these latter pieces nevertheless touch on themes of cultural distance prevalent throughout Odita's oeuvre.

One of the most important aspects of these small works is the great light they shed on Odita's major paintings (not on view). The figurative works inoculate against claims that his work aims for a bland universalism. What's more, the abstract works demonstrate how a heightened perception can produce narrative associations and experiential depth from the simplest artistic gestures.

— Cinqué Hicks

KIASMA

GEORGES ADÉAGBO
EIJA-LIISA AHTILA
ARDMORE CERAMIC ART
BRETT BAILEY
SAMMY BALOJI
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LAURA HORELLI
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MICHAEL MacGARRY
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NANDIPHA MNTAMBO
BAUDOUIN MOUANDA
OTOBONG NKANGA
KETTLY NOËL
KATARIINA NUMMINEN
ODILI DONALD ODITA
EMEKA OGBOH
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MARY SIBANDE
BARTHÉLÉMY TOGUO

ART=

ODILI DONALD ODITA

Nigeria / USA

ODILI DONALD ODITAN HAASTATTELU

Arja Miller

INTERVIEW WITH ODILI DONALD ODITA

ARJA MILLER
Intendentti, Nykytaiteen museo Kiasma
Chief Curator, Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma

ARJA MILLER Kun vierailit Kiasmassa toukokuussa 2010 suunnittelemassa ARS 11 -näyttelyyn tulevaa seinämaalaustasi, tutkit tarkkaan arkkitehtuurin muotokieltä ja sen hienovaraisia yksityiskohtia. Huomiosi kiinnittyi esimerkiksi toistuviin kolmiomaisiin ja purjeenkaltaisiin muotoihin. Otit valokuvia ja piirsit paljon luonnoksia. Tämä taitaa olla melkoisen laaja kysymys, mutta voisitko kuvailla varhaisista piirroksista seinämaalauksen lopulliseen ideaan johtavaa prosessiasi?

ODILI DONALD ODITA Minulle on tärkeää tutustua installaatiopaikkaan etukäteen, koska haluan saada tuntuman tilasta. Haluan yksinkertaisesti nähdä ja tuntea niitä asioita, joita valokuva ei välttämättä pysty välittämään. Tarkoitan esimerkiksi huoneen nurkassa olevan elementin muotoa tai sitä, miten valo suodattuu tilaan aamukymmeneltä verrattuna siihen, miltä valo näyttää tilassa kahdelta iltapäivällä. Lisäksi minulle on tärkeää olla tietoinen tilassa ilmenevistä suhteista, sekä tilan ja sen viereisten tilojen välisistä suhteista. Toisaalta haluan tietää miten tilaa käytetään ja miten ihmiset kulkevat sen poikki. Tämä auttaa minua määrittelemään idean seinämaalaukseen, joka tilaan tulee.

AM Ehdotit maalauksellesi kahta eri tilaa Kiasmassa. Päädyit lopulta 5. kerroksen Panoraamaan, josta avautuu valtava lasiseinä pohjoiseen päin. Sisä- ja ulkopuolen vuorovaikutus hallitsee tilaa. Oliko tämä yksi syistä, joiden perusteella valitsit Panoraaman?

ODO Olin kiinnostunut kahdesta tilasta Kiasmassa teokselleni eli sisääntuloaulasta ja Panoraamasta. Kumpikin on ulkoasultaan ja mittakaavaltaan hyvin voimakas, mutta päädyin kuitenkin lopulta Panoraamaan. Minulle se on ikään kuin koko rakennuksen prototyyppi. Sen muotoilu toistaa rakennuksen ydinolemusta, se on kuin eräänlainen rakennuksen muodon selkäranka. Panoraaman mittakaava ja muoto ovat ainutlaatuisia ja siksi valitsin sen tilaksi, jonka kanssa haluan kommunikoida.

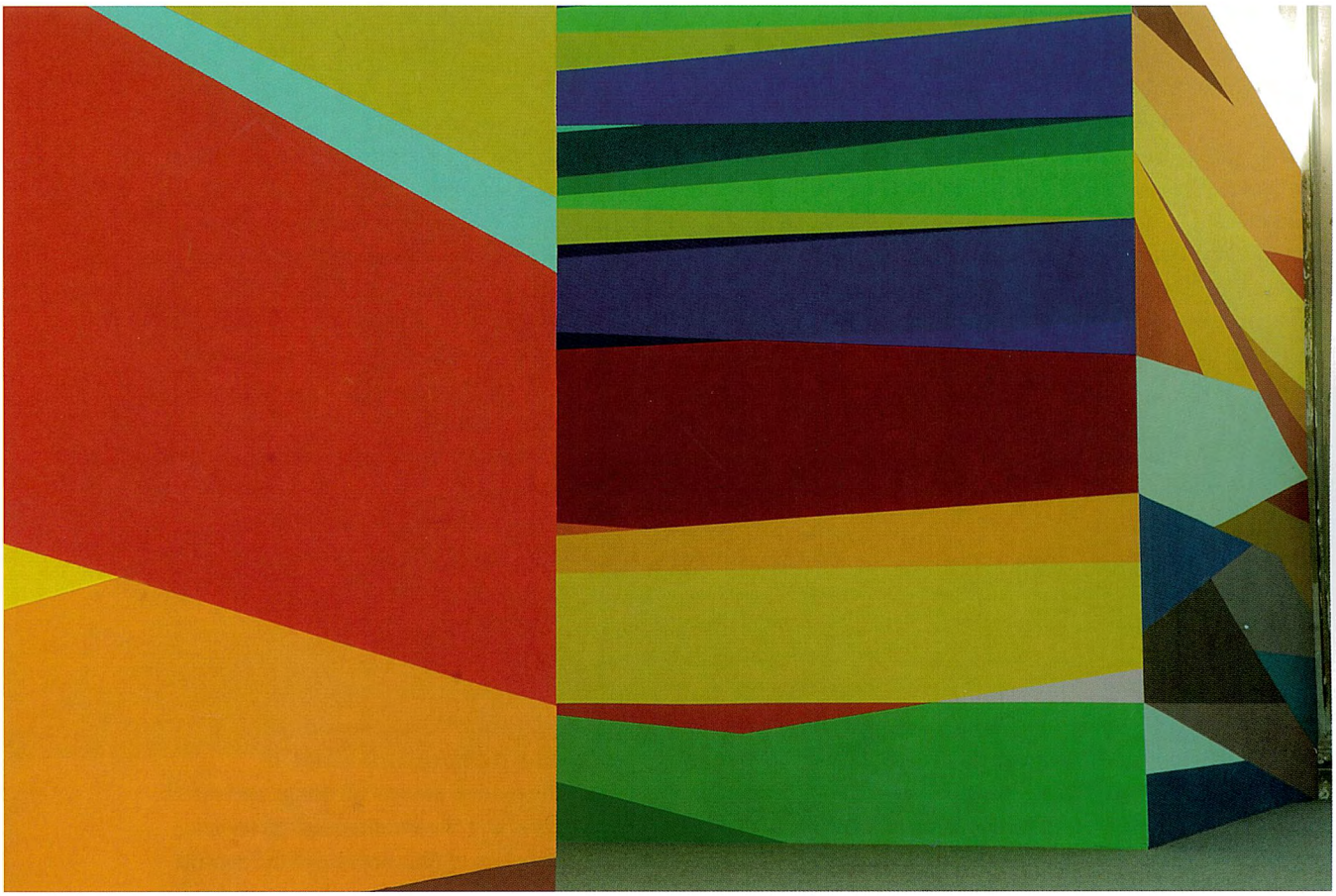
AM: Missä määrin teoksesi yleensä kommentoivat niitä ympäröivää arkkitehtuuria? Eräs Steven Hollin, Kiasman arkkitehdin, lähtökohdista oli ajatus zenmäisestä rauhasta ja hiljaisuudesta. Voisiko ajatella,

ARJA MILLER When you visited Kiasma in May 2010 to plan your wall painting for the ARS 11 exhibition, you carefully studied the forms of the building and observed its subtle details and paid attention to, for example, the triangle and a sail-like forms that are repeating in the architecture. You took lots of photos and drew a number of sketches on site. I know this is a very big question but could you describe your process from these first drawings to the final ideas for the wall painting?

ODILI DONALD ODITA With every installation project I work on, I like to visit the site personally to get a feeling for the space. Simply, to see and feel things that can't necessarily be captured in a photograph. It could be the shape of an element in the corner of room, or the way that light filters into a space at 10:00 AM versus 2:00 PM. I also like to become aware of relationships that occur within a space, and of relationships between spaces connected or adjacent from one another. There is also the knowledge of how a space is used, and how people actually travel through it. This all helps me to configure an idea for a wall painting within a given space.

AM You made two suggestions about the location of your work in Kiasma. In the end, you preferred the 5th floor Panorama space, which has huge windows looking northward. The space is dominated by the interaction of what is outside and what is inside. Was this one of the factors why you chose the Panorama as your location?

ODO There were two spaces that I was very interested in working on at the Kiasma – the lobby entry way and the Panorama space. Both have very significant power in their appearance and scale, but in choosing between the two, I decided to engage the Panorama space. I see the Panorama space as a blueprint for the entire building. The formation of this space echoes the building's inner core – it is a skeleton, of sorts, for how the entire building exists as a form. The scale and shape of the Panorama is unique and specific, and as such,



Give Me Shelter
2007
52nd Venice Biennale
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY with the support of the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art, New York
Photographs : Giovanni Pancino

että käyttämäsi värit ikään kuin räjäyttävät hiljaiseen tilaan äänen?

ODO Minulle Panoraaman tila ei ole hiljainen pyhättö. Tilassa on toki hiljaisuutta mutta minusta ajatus hiljaisuudesta tulee konkreettiseksi vasta kun ajattelen rakennusta kokonaisuudessaan. Se on kuin tuulen ja valon ympäröimä valtava laiva. Tämän laivamaisen rakennuksen voidaan nähdä olevan jatkuvassa virtuaalisessa liikkeessä näihin elementteihin nähden, kuin valtava kiertyvä kiila, joka leikkaa ilmaa ja valoa.

AM Minusta teoksesi ja tapasi käyttää värejä sallivat jollain lailla välittömän kokemisen, ne kommunikoivat tässä suhteessa kuten musiikki. Intuitiivisesti koettuna ne ikään kuin synnyttävät soinnin. Onko tällainen musiikillinen kielikuva sinulle ymmärrettävä? Onko musiikki tärkeää sinulle ja prosessillesi?

ODO Musiikki on prosessilleni taiteilijana erittäin tärkeää. Kuuntelen musiikkia työhuoneellani kun työskentelen, haen innoitusta sen muodosta ja muokkaan sitä teoksiini sopivaksi. Kuvataiteen lailla musiikki auttaa minua ymmärtämään ympäröivän maailman järjestelmiä. On mielenkiintoista nähdä millaisia suhteita ilmenee kun työni nähdään yhdessä uuden Musiikkitalon kanssa.[1]

AM ARS 11 -näyttelyn lähtökohta on ollut Afrikka nykytaiteessa mutta sen teemat ovat globaaleja, ne koskevat meitä kaikkia. Muisti, muistikuvat, erilaisten historioiden ja aikakerrostumien samanaikainen läsnäolo ovat näyttelyn keskeisiä teemoja. Olemme kuraattoriryhmässä keskustelleet myös ARS 11 -teosten yhteydestä käsitteeseen *muistin esittäminen*. Miten suhteuttaisit oman työsi tähän lähestymistapaan vai onko sillä sinulle merkitystä?

ODO Pidän paljon kuraattoriryhmänne esiin nostamista ideoista ARS 11 -näyttelyn yhteydessä. Sitä paitsi, muistin esittämisen implikaatiot ovat todella kiinnostavia. Ihan kuin siinä viitattaisiin tapaan "näytellä historiaa" tai johonkin, joka on lähellä "historiallisen elävöittämisen" käsitettä. On tärkeää miettiä, miten voisimme siirtää historiatietoisuutemme nykykontekstiin. Olen aina ollut sitä mieltä, että perinne voi säilyä elävänä vain jos se muuntaa itseään niin, että se on olemassa nykyisyydessä.

AM Sanot taiteilijan lausumassasi että "Tutkin teoksissani maalauksen metaforista kykyä käsitellä ihmisyyttä toistuvien mallien, rakenteen ja muodonanit became the space that I wanted to communicate with.

AM In general, how much do your works comment on the existing architecture? In Kiasma, one of the starting points for Steven Holl was the idea of zen-like peace and silence. Can we play with the idea that your colours will bring a sound explosion of a sort to this silence?

ODO I do not see the space as a silent sanctuary. There is silence, but for me this notion becomes activated when contemplating the building as an entirety. For me, the building is a great ship surrounded by the elements of wind and light. This building as ship could be in a continuous, virtual movement within these elements, or in action as a great, contorting wedge cutting through the air and light.

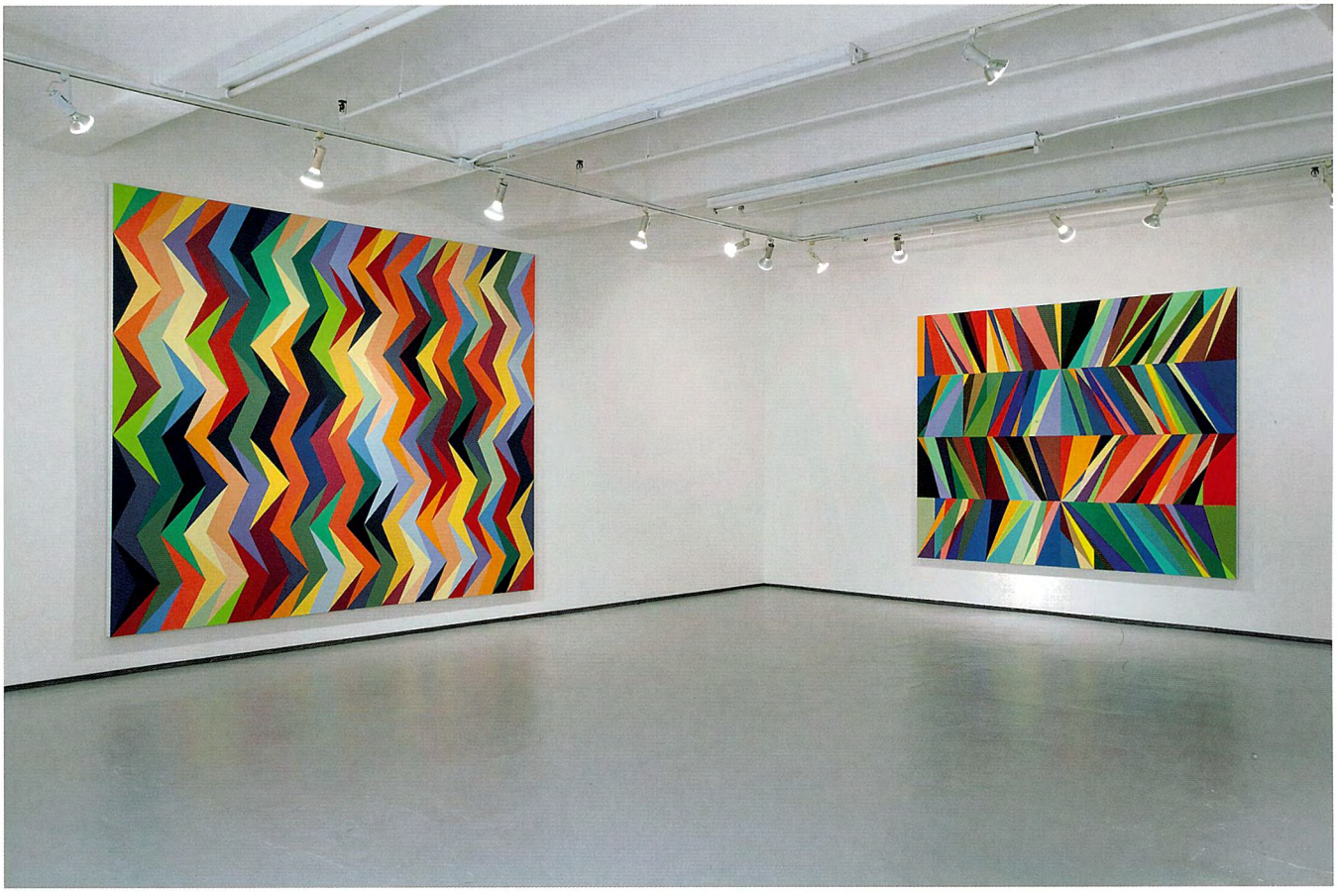
AM Personally, I feel that your works and your way of using colour allow the viewer to experience them in the same way than music, somehow directly. There is something intuitive in the way they communicate, something that just sounds. Do you recognize this musical metaphor? Is music something important to you and for your process?

ODO Music is very important to my process as artist. From spending time in my studio listening to music while I work, to gaining inspiration from its form, and making the subsequent translation into my work. Music, like art, helps me to understand the system of things that are around myself in the world. I think it will be interesting to see what relationships do exist when my work is seen alongside the new music hall.[1]

AM The premise of the ARS 11 exhibition is Africa in contemporary art, but the themes are global, things that affect us all. Memory, recollection and the simultaneous presence of different histories and layers of time are one of the central themes in the exhibition. Just lately we have discussed the concept of 'performing memory' in our curatorial group of ARS 11 exhibition. How do you relate your work in this kind of approach, or do you?

ODO I very much like the ideas your curatorial group has in place for the ARS 11 exhibition. Also, the implications of what you say in, "performing memory", are very interesting to me. It is as if you are implying a means of 'acting out history,' or something close to the notion of 're-enactments.' What I think is valuable to consider is how we can put our awareness of history into the present. I have always believed that tradition, for example, stays alive only when it transforms itself to exist within the present.

AM In your artist statement you say that "I continue to explore in the paintings a metaphoric ability to address the human condition through pattern, structure and design, as well as for its possibility to trigger memory". Could you talk about this a little more?



Näkymä installaatiosta
Installation shot

Free Form
2010
Courtesy of the artist and
Jack Shainman Gallery, NY

The Mother Ship
2010
Courtesy of the artist and
Jack Shainman Gallery, NY

Lost
2010
Courtesy of the artist and
Jack Shainman Gallery, NY

1
Kiasman vieressä oleva Musiikkitalo avataan vuoden 2011 aikana ja se näkyy Panoraamasta, ja päinvastoin.
The new music hall will open during 2011 next to Kiasma and will be visible right from the Panorama space, and vice versa

non kautta sekä sen kykyä synnyttää muistoja". Voisitko kertoa tästä lähemmin?

ODO Minusta on kiinnostavaa tarkastella teoksiani järjestelmänä, joka on rinnakkainen humanistiselle ja sosiaaliselle todellisuudelle. Esteettisiin tekijöihin rinnastuvien asioiden sosiaalisten ja poliittisten implikaatioiden pohtiminen on minusta inspiroivaa.

On esimerkiksi uskomatonta, miten läntinen kulttuuri käsittelee toisaalta "värillisiä" normin ulkopuolisena sosiaalisena joukkona ja toisaalta se, miten sosiaalisissa ja julkisissa konteksteissa väriä käsitellään joskus niin varovaisesti, että syntyy vaikutelma kromofobiasta eli väripelosta.

AM Käsitteletkö maalauksissasi, muiden aiheiden ohella toki, omaa afrikkalaisuuttasi ja nigerialaisia juuriasi?

ODO Kyllä käsittelen, mutta se on minulle itsestään selvää. Erityinen kulttuurinen ja paikallinen kokemukseni on kerryttänyt tietoa, ja nämä kokemukset liittyvät osittain siihen, kuka minä olen ja mitä haluan teoksillani välittää. Haluan kuitenkin muistuttaa, että olemme kaikki aina enemmän kuin lähtökohtamme.

AM ARS 11 -näyttelyssä on useita erilaisia kehon representaatioita. Haluaisinkin tuoda esiin teostesi kokemisen fyysisyyden. Seinämaalauksesi haastavat katsojan näkemään tilan uudella tavalla, oman ruumiillisen kokemuksen kautta.

ODO Toivon, että katsojat saavat installaatioistani uusia tilakokemuksia, että he kykenisivät tunnistamaan tutun ja hyväksymään vieraan. Katsoja lopulta itse päättää miten hän haluaa suhtautua luotuun tilaan, mutta toivon, että kykenen tekemään siitä tarpeeksi kiinnostavaa katsojalle, jotta hän näkisi itsensä ja ympäristönsä uudella ja erilaisella tavalla.

Käännös: Erik Miller

ODO I like to think of my work as a system running parallel with to humanist and social realities. I get inspiration when considering the social and political implication of things that can run parallel with aesthetic considerations. For example, there are incredible parallels in how western culture engages, on one hand, 'people of color' as a social body outside the norm; and on another hand, color, when in actual use in a social or public context, is often times handled with a reservation that borders on chromophobia, or a fear of color.

AM Can I simply ask do you reflect on, among other things of course, also your state of being African, or having Nigerian roots in your paintings?

ODO Yes, I do, but this goes without saying – it is who I am. I have specific experiences of culture and place, and I have knowledge gained from these specific experiences that underscore a part of who I am, and what I want to convey in my work. And I must add that we are always more than where we begin.

AM In the ARS 11 exhibition there will be many different representations of body. Related to your work, I would like to point out the physical nature in experiencing your work. Your wall paintings challenge the viewer to see the space in a new way, through his/her own bodily experience.

ODO I hope for the viewer to come to a new experience of space through my installations – to be able to recognize the familiar, and accept the unfamiliar. The viewer will ultimately decide how they will engage the space created, but I hope to make it interest enough for the viewer to possibly see themselves and their surrounding in a new and different way.

Interview between Odili Donald Odita and Robert Hobbs. *Africa and Abstraction*. June 14-17, 2012: pp. 29-41, illustrated.

ODILI DONALD ODITA INTERVIEWED BY ROBERT HOBBS

RH: Early on in your development you embraced conceptual art and such conceptually oriented practices as the one Félix Gonzalez-Torres originated. Traditionally colour has been regarded as antithetical to conceptual art and, in fact, was almost entirely abandoned by conceptual artists in the 1960s and 70s for sub-aesthetic propositions made with typing paper, printed words, typescript and grainy photographs, causing some critics to mistakenly believe that this art totally dispensed with so-called objects in favour of ideas. Given this circumstance, how do you explain endorsing colour in your conceptually oriented practice? What convinced you to return to painting in 1998 after rejecting it for explorations of identity through multi-media based installations, digitally manipulated images and photo-based art, and after having moved away from painting by opting to work as a critic and curator?

ODO: Colour has become for me a way to explore perception while locating it as a construct within a social/cultural space. I am interested in looking at colour as a parallel to 'peoples of colour', for example, by basically taking the formal construct, colour, as a means for addressing this and other social circumstances. My return to painting was a 'why not' situation. Through my work as an independent curator and critic in the 1990s, I was able to visit studios around the world and in the process gain great insight into the working methods of many artists. Ultimately, it did not make sense not to paint. During the time when I did not paint, I was working with photo-based methods and employing the ideas and properties of painting anyway. I thought like a painter, even when making the photo-based work, so it made even more sense to go back to painting and confront its limitations as positive, rather than as negative.

Perhaps colour is the single most difficult aspect of art to describe. In your writings about your work and also in a number of your recorded conversations, you provide a schematic to your overall programme, consisting of a basic armature of black-and-white values, which you in turn nuance with colour. You equate both black and white as well as the many hues you employ in your work (numbering oftentimes in the dozens and sometimes even more than a hundred) with a range of social, historical and psychological ideas. My question to you is: even though you might have strong social, political, cultural and personal associations with certain colours, how can you be sure viewers will react in the same way? Or will your own personal resonances create special intensities capable of engaging viewers, but leaving them free to interpret the range of hues according to their own experiences?

Yes, I agree, and I do believe I work through your latter point. There is no way I can play music, let's say, and expect everyone to dance. I have to believe I create enough of a situation for the viewer to enter the work through a particular and defined doorway. It might be in the colour schemata, or in the overall design of the patterns within the work. Essentially, I do think I

play with some stereotypical aspects of what one might think of African patterning, place and authenticity, as well as address my own sense of origin and the foundations of my own intellectual inquiry.

Does colour in your work function ideologically, universally and poetically, the latter taking the form of metaphor or metonymy, for example?

I believe colour in my work does all the things you describe and possibly more. I do not think that colour can be 'controlled'. Rather, I wish to play with its relativity, as I believe there is freedom in this for myself, as well as for the viewer in what can be imagined.

A related question regarding colour: can it function both as a transcendent element and contradictorily as a concrete device in your art?

Yes to both. It is not that I want to have my cake and eat it too, but I believe colour is a force of its own, which I try to direct through my vision of it.

In 2007 you completed the mural *Equalizer* for the Studio Museum in Harlem. When you described the completed work, you provided a specific allegory for it based on different sets of tonalities for each wall, thus transforming the work into a contemporary yet abstract history cycle connecting it to the African diaspora. Would you briefly recount the cycle you had in mind and would you please explain how colour works on a number of different and perhaps even contradictory levels in it?

This point you bring up is what I like about colour – its contradictory nature. As a colour can be cool or warm, depending on its condition, this can also be said of a person. For example, does a person see a partially filled glass of water as half empty or half full? My ideas behind the *Equalizer* installation were specific to the venue where the work was installed (The Studio Museum in Harlem) and the understandings I have as a Nigerian about my relationship to race and history in America. I wanted to tell a story about my own personal journey to America, as much as one about the great crossing of people of African descent from Africa to America during the age of slave trade in America. The piece was formatted like a comic book or an illuminated manuscript on many levels for me. The title of the piece makes popular cultural references to 1970s 'Blaxploitation' films, as well as action-drama TV shows at that time. Each wall in the installation comprises a page in the story I wanted to convey. I also wanted the viewer to see the entire work from the centre of the room. The cycle starts with the red wall – the great explosion/exodus, then it moves to the ocean, treacherous waters, before advancing to a cold mountainous landscape juxtaposed against a more luscious one – home? – that sits beside it. The last wall suggests the contemporary world present in a continuous struggle to find an integration of figure and ground and a balancing of the figure within the space. I adjusted the colours in this last wall so that they could picture this dilemma and convey in addition the possibility of coexisting figurative elements (the brown tonalities within the ground). This same wall painting was partly inspired by Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles*, in as much as I believe that in his later work he was trying to interject figures, or figural elements, within his volcanic and frenzied painterly grounds.

Ever since the French Orphist painter Robert Delaunay and the American Synchromists Morgan Russell and Stanton Macdonald-Wright attempted in the first decades of the 20th century to create a viable alternative art to Cubism by predicating painting on a structure comprised of colour, there have been a number of ongoing attempts to understand this most unwieldy artistic component. Subsequently, such artists as the Bauhaus professor Josef Albers and the mid-century American Colour Field painters Morris Louis, Helen Frankenthaler and Kenneth Noland took up this challenge and made important contributions to this tradition. As a painter coming into maturity in the late 20th and early 21st century, how have you picked up this tradition and what exact contributions do you feel you have made to the understanding of colour's structuring capacity? In some of the notes you have shared with me, you included several references to your concise and poignant interrogative, 'What holds colour?' Perhaps this self-directed inquiry provides a clue to the structural and formative role colour plays in your art.

What you are asking is interesting to me. I believe that colour can hold the condition of humanity within it, and not just describe things. For instance, [curator] Ann Temkin's exhibition *Color Chart* [at the Museum of Modern Art, New York] was troubling to me at first because I felt it reduced colour to serving as only a materialist insertion or description after the fact, but after speaking with her about it, I learned that she was using this notion of colour as a starting place to exploring how color expands beyond this point. And yes, I understand the history and use of colour as a spiritual device and as a means for recalling or realising the sublime, all of which may now be worn out and devoid of meaning currently. But I also see colour, as Byron Kim and Glenn Ligon have seen it, as a means to address race through cultural and social relatedness. I am interested in colour's specificity and its difference, that is, the situation where colours can appear close to one another and yet still remain distinct. In addition, I look at colour's interaction with respect to the nature of people and things: I can say that colour's ongoing and subtly metaphoric situation is a quality that continues to hold my intellectual interests. So I can answer this by saying that when I look at colour, I am utilising specific constructs or notions of social classifications and social identifications, as much as memory and experience, to guide my colour decisions.

"I also see colour, as Byron Kim and Glenn Ligon have seen it, as a means to address race through cultural and social relatedness. I am interested in colour's specificity and its difference, that is, the situation where colours can appear close to one another and yet still remain distinct."

You often refer to the physicality of colour and the role of the black body signified in the work as well as the situation of a range of bodies becoming physically self-aware when standing before your paintings. Would you say this aspect of your art develops out of Robert Morris' circa 1960s emphasis on Merleau-Pontian phenomenology and its capacity to project itself outward to viewers' actual space, including that of their own

bodies, thereby replacing art's traditional mimeticism and transcendence with a resolute objectivity and intransigent actuality? Does colour serve as a phenomenological tool in your work?

I am not familiar with Robert Morris' notions that come from Merleau-Pontian theories, but I do believe in colour that is working as a phenomenological tool. For me, colour does incorporate the ability to create awareness and catalyse memory on many different levels. Colour is not only a mental tool, but also exists as a physical one: colour can affect my body as a maker, as well as those observers of my work who are able to appreciate it.

Another phenomenologically related question: when discussing the ways colour operates in your art – a tremendously difficult task for any artist working primarily with hue – you invoke its ability to create distinct cultural frames, referencing, in your words, "particular histories and societal lines". Your language makes me think of Martin Heidegger and his emphasis on the impossibility of knowing anything in itself, even simple tools like hammers, and the necessity of approaching all objects through the specific lenses of time and space, two terms often mentioned in your conversations and writing. While these references would place you and your work clearly in a Heideggerian perspective, you also have cited an alternative route for colour in the form of your prose poem, which I really like, the most relevant stanza being: "Colour does what it wants/ It misbehaves/ But most of all, / Colour can change our minds." How do you reconcile this basic contradiction, and how do you think your work handles it? Would David Batchelor's neologism 'chromophobia' pertain to your goal to awaken people to the potential danger inherent in a semiotics predicated on hue?

"Colour can exist within a structural framework, which gives it a context and direction (as line does with colour), but what colour does and how it moves also has a lot to do with its own conditions and properties – its mass, space, chromatic intensity and its value, for example."

During the summer of 2009 I was in Williamstown, MA, and spent some time on a farm by a rolling stream watching the water undulate and move over a rock-bed beneath it. For me this rock-bed, like a drawing, was structure and armature. Additionally, the water was like colour, moving this way and that in a flow based not only on the structure of the rock-bed beneath it, but also on its own condition of what it was, as well as what it could become with other forces such as the wind and sun that beat down on it. Like this, colour can exist within a structural framework, which gives it a context and direction (as line does with colour), but what colour does and how it moves also has a lot to do with its own conditions and properties – its mass, space, chromatic intensity and its value, for example.

Batchelor's theories are another way that I see colour working in the West, and this is an additionally important point for me to make in my colour investigations. I wish to investigate what we take for granted concerning colour, as much as its ability to design and define our lives and the world we live in.

As an example, what would people do if they encountered their doctor or dentist, ready to perform a life-threatening operation, wearing a harlequin-coloured or tie-dyed outfit? If conscious, would you still remain on the operating table? How can a colour affect or change our minds about a profession or an action? The idea that colour can be alarming outside of a given context can make us question the essential nature of the context at hand. And then, what about 'persons of colour'? How do our concepts of colour enter into play here, and where do we stand in relation to these notions? It is only colour, yes, but our minds can be affected by what the colours are and in the ways we see these colours perform.

Colour is notoriously unruly, as you have noted, because one hue changes its character when seen next to others. Since you view yourself as a postmodern artist and your work as open to the world outside it, how do you think your work responds to the environments framing and housing it?

Colour has the potential for being distinct, in as much as it can mirror the complexities of the world we live in. It can be specific, and it can describe so much through itself. It does not have to be relegated to only one thing or another. It can be used in so many ways. I want to create situations through drawing for colour to move as it wishes, and to depict a world of potential in this way.

Over the years, you have articulated your desire to be seen as an African artist and have contributed to the magazine *Nka*, which art historian and curator Okwui Enwezor primarily initiated in order to promote African art. Since you are the son of the expatriate Nigerian painter and art historian Okechukwu Emmanuel Odita, who was a member of the Zaria Society, focusing on images of Nigerian nationalism in the early 1960s, and a long-term faculty member at Ohio State University in Columbus where you were brought up, why do you insist on an African identity for yourself as opposed to a global one for example? Or even a Nigerian-American one? Or, more simply, a Nigerian one? What makes your work 'African' as opposed to these other identities? Is this a particularly empowering perspective based on an intellectual movement that has enabled you to create the challenging and beautiful works you have made? Can we consider the African identity inherently global in the sense of opposing internationalism by emphasising permeability in national and even geographic boundaries, thereby resulting in the paradoxical development of a heightened reliance on local and regional characteristics?

I see myself as an African in the way I was raised, and in the belief system I was brought up in through my parentage. I think of myself, specifically, as a Nigerian-American. I am also a human being in the world. I can locate myself within the world, but I do not want to lock myself down within it. I know my experiences can be the same or different from others, regardless of birthplace or cultural origin. I have experiences that are real to me, and I make a distinction toward Africanness based on how my experiences have been established.

I believe that African identity can also be experienced as a local and global phenomenon, whether as an African, a visitor to this continent, or someone well versed in the reality of Africa itself.

I see African identity as a construct that can be understood as much as lived through. There are many 'Africas', which I believe is a positive notion, but it is interesting me to that it still exists as a contested zone, used in denoting the idea of authenticity as a power and a control.

A related question: in the 1960s the American group of African-American artists known as AFRICOBRA wanted to essentialise and demarcate race in terms of specific sets of formal characteristics, most particularly colour. While some members of this small group, active even today, create representational work, others are abstract artists. How does your focus on colour differ from the AFRICOBRA approach?

There was a time where I thought I was making paintings with 'African colours' or with the colour of 'Africa'. This is now for me the most ridiculous notion that I can think of because I have to ask myself, 'What is African colour?' I do not know what 'African colour' is. I own neither Africa nor the idea of what it is. I know I can only try to recall and create a situation that makes my memory present, or that gives me a feeling of this place and space. Colour cannot constitute an exacting description; rather it exists for me as metaphor and allusion. I like the idea of making associations through implication, not literal depictions.

Often in conversation you mention the importance of African fabrics for your work as well as an African colour sense, but you have not specified exactly what kind of fabrics. Are you interested in only locally produced ones? Or have you also embraced the colours found on the many Dutch-wax printed cottons so popular in various West Coast African countries, textiles particularly important to the art of Yinka Shonibare, for example?

I am most interested in Kuba cloth, as well as in Mbuti pygmy bark cloth, both from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I also love Ewe cloth from Ghana, Bamileke Ndop cloth from Cameroon, and traditional strip-woven cloth from Nigeria. My interest in these textiles stems from the great systems of patterning and the many opportunities for chance variations that occur within the structuring of these designs. The same thing goes for caftans, as well as Persian and Afghan rugs. The patterning, the use of colour and the spaces created in these items are truly breathtaking, and the foundations of these creations are indeed wonders to ponder for intellectual inquiry as much as for aesthetic thought.

Finally, a very personal question: having taught a graduate art history seminar on colour, which was enormously frustrating because the subject seemed continuously to escape clear and precise definitions, even when I took the class through the basics of Albers' famous colour course, I would like to know how you teach colour to painters. Do you subscribe to traditional colour theories such as Goethe's, Wittgenstein's or Albers', or, since you yourself work intuitively, have you developed your own pedagogy and theory for conducting this course?

I like to introduce assignments at the beginning of my colour course that cover the basic, essential elements of colour. Early on, I also like to discuss colour in terms of the social as well as the historical.

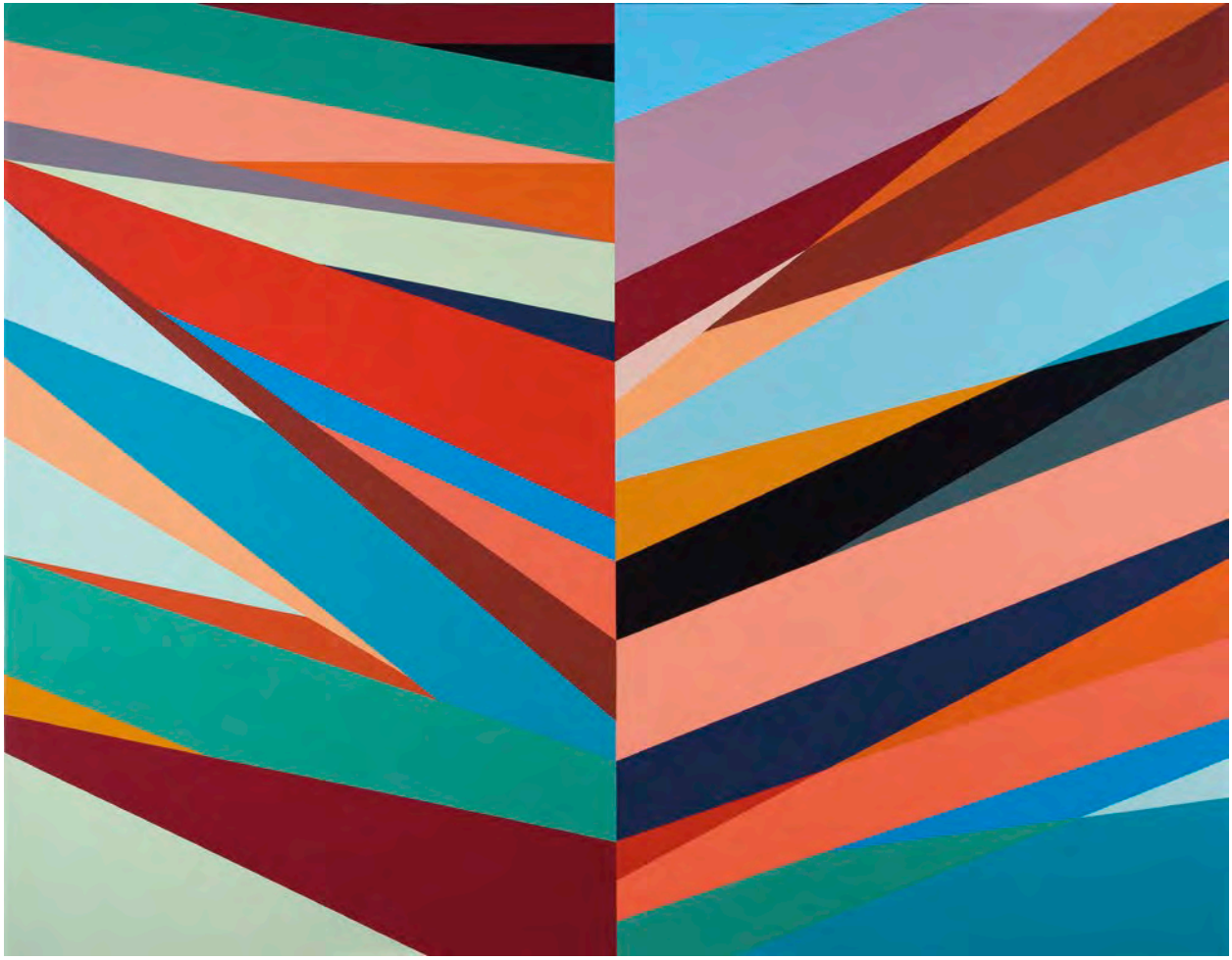
After which, my primary text becomes Josef Albers' *Interaction of Colour*. It is a simple yet complex book, and so beautifully done. It is something that cannot necessarily be read alone – you need to go through it with a group to be able to understand the many different perspectives that can arise from the ideas within it. It is a fascinating book for me, because of its simplicity and directness. The book is actually bluntly obvious, but also laden with subtleties that can take it to so many places conceptually. This can in turn make one read more into it than what it says, so this is why it is better to read it as a group – so that the individuals in the group can appreciate the variety of views that can exist concerning colour. Ultimately, my goal is for the class to learn to personalise colour for themselves, to give colour a home within one's own personal history, since I believe this is the best way for anyone to handle colour qualitatively.

This interview via email was completed in May 2011.

Art historian, writer and curator Dr Robert Hobbs has held the Rhoda Thalhimer Endowed Chair at Virginia Commonwealth University since 1991 and has been a visiting professor at Yale University from 2004 to 2011, and an associate professor at Cornell University.

Flame On
2012
Acrylic on canvas
213.5 x 264.5cm

Plane Shifter
2012
Acrylic on canvas
178 x 228.5cm



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Pages 90-97

AMERICANS

For more than 15 years, philanthropist Jo Carole Lauder has been quietly enlisting America's most important artists to spread their work across the globe—in the name of cultural diplomacy

BY SARA RUFFIN COSTELLO PORTRAITS BY ALEX MAJOLI AND DARIA BIRANG

ABROAD

ELLSWORTH KELLY

"I wanted to give something to China as well as the U.S.," Kelly says of his installation "Beijing Panels," which hangs outside the U.S. Embassy in China. "It's good for our embassies to have great American art. We're all patriotic and that's why we do this."

WITH THE NEGATIVE PRESS that the U.S. often garners abroad—whether about Wall Street corruption, intractable wars or a divisive presidential campaign—there's one category in which our standing remains untarnished: high art.

Like Jackson Pollock's drip paintings and Christo and Jeanne-Claude's wrapped buildings, contemporary American artists have a reputation for making beautiful, challenging work—and, in doing so, reflecting back who we are as a nation. Since 1986 the Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies (FAPE), a nonprofit now led by collector and philanthropist Jo Carole Lauder, has acted as a kind of global curator for our national psyche, placing preeminent American art in consulates and embassies around the world—and allowing luminaries like Ellsworth Kelly and Louise Bourgeois to serve as our cultural ambassadors abroad.

In the 1960s, the State Department inaugurated a program called Art in Embassies, primarily as a vehicle to provide temporary art for ambassadors' residences during their diplomatic tenure. In 1986, Leonore Annenberg, former chief of protocol for President Reagan and wife of former U.S. Ambassador to the U.K. Walter Annenberg, launched FAPE, along with other diplomats' wives. By exploiting their formidable connections to the artist and patron community, these women were able to help pay for extensive redecoration projects (including the U.S. Embassy's residence in London), fund much-needed restoration, and both purchase and solicit donations for embassies from preeminent artists to build what would become an enduring, important collection. Although the seeds of the foundation's legacy were growing, the scope was still small.

In 1996 leadership passed to Jo Carole Lauder, the wife of Ronald Lauder; she steered the foundation away from simply supplying loaner art to diplomatic residences and instead toward building a permanent collection at American embassies in more than 140 countries. Lauder quickly transformed what had been an elite, rarefied program into something more accessible and democratic. "Embassies are the visible face of our country," says Yale's fast-talking dean of art, Robert Storr, who moonlights as chairman of the organization's professional fine arts committee and guides its curatorial mission. "The art installed in and around those government buildings allows foreigners to have a glimpse of our cultural production."

With certain site-specific installations, the art has been created with its architectural environment in mind. At the Charles Gwathmey–designed United States Mission to the U.N. in New York City (a federal building where dignitaries meet and greet), the State Department brought the foundation into the design process early, so Gwathmey could collaborate with artists as he designed the building. From the Sol LeWitt painting on the dome of the 70-foot-high rotunda to the spectacular Odili Donald Odita elevator mural, the art and architecture flow together seamlessly. Standing under the blue LeWitt dome, visitors are engaged with the art rather than just passively looking at it. "There are a lot of things in the USUN that are not standard issue," Storr explains. "The point is not to just put up feel-good art, but to pay close attention to a standard of sophistication. The one thing we don't do is just decorate."

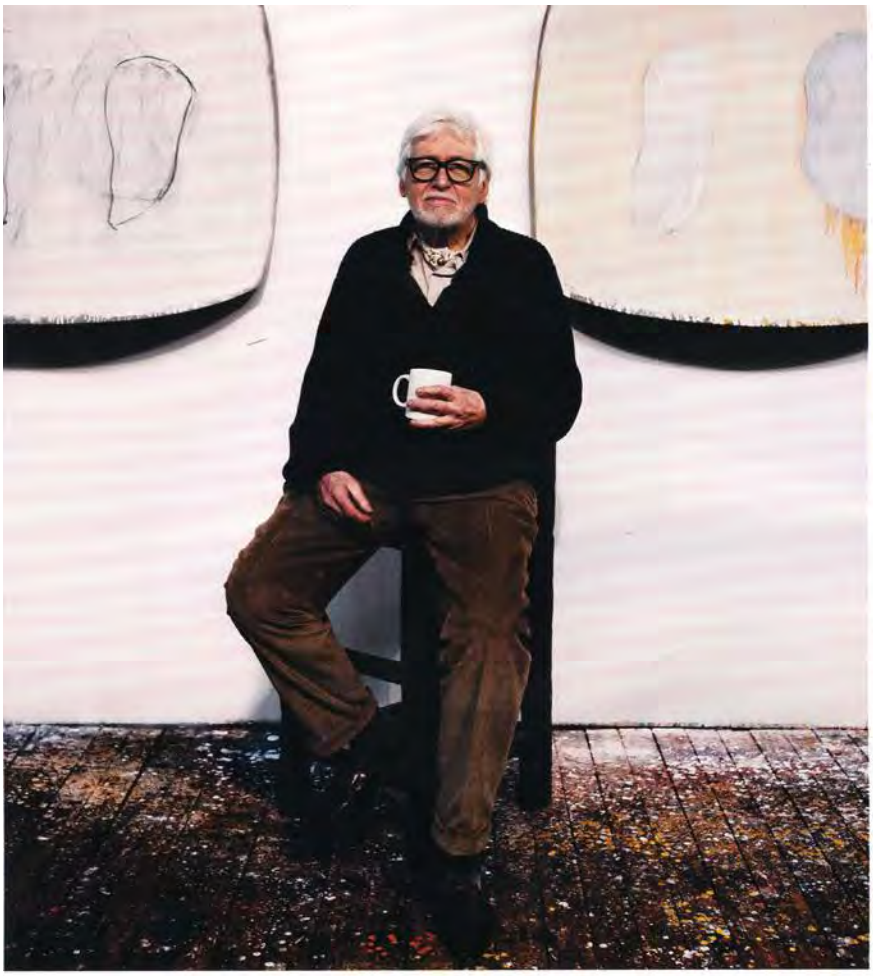
"So many things in today's world are fleeting," adds Lauder. "Having facilitated the collaboration between our country's best architects and artists, I can see things changing in a way that's wonderfully permanent

At the American embassy in Beijing, visitc greeted by two 18-foot-high sculptures by Ells Kelly. Three aluminum panels are mounted on th outside—on one side, two red and one yellow, a the other, red, white and blue. "I am very pat that's why I've done this," says the 88-year-old laughing. "And because of Jo Carole!" Kelly als sidered how Chinese citizens would react emot as they waited in line for their visas. "When peo me what my paintings mean," he says, "I say, 'It question of what it means—ask yourself, how make you feel?' "

The foundation's president, Eden Rafshoo runs the D.C. office, underscores Kelly's point ab effects of modern art. "Whether people understa not, its mere presence works subliminally. If it v there, people would feel differently." In that way, in our embassies program waves a less obvious c flag for America: proof that freedom of expr opportunity, and unity through diversity are val which American artists stand. ◆

PATRON SAINT Jo Carole Lauder, right, and Odili Donald Odita in front of "Light and Vision," the elevator mural he created for the United States Mission to the United Nations (USUN) building in New York City.

"The point is not to just put up feel-good art, but to pay attention to a standard of sophistication. The one thing we don't do is just decorate."

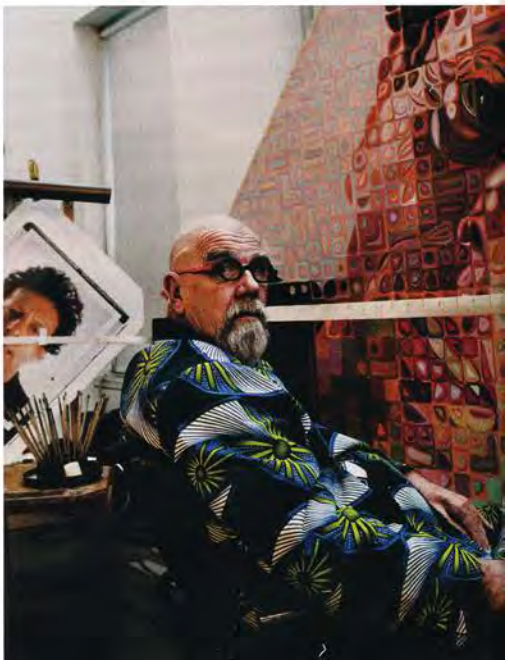


RON GORCHOV

"The only comparison would be a duet in music," Gorchov says of the juxtaposition of his "Totem," a 19-foot-tall, hand-painted sculpture in the USUN building, with Sol LeWitt's painting on the dome of the rotunda above.

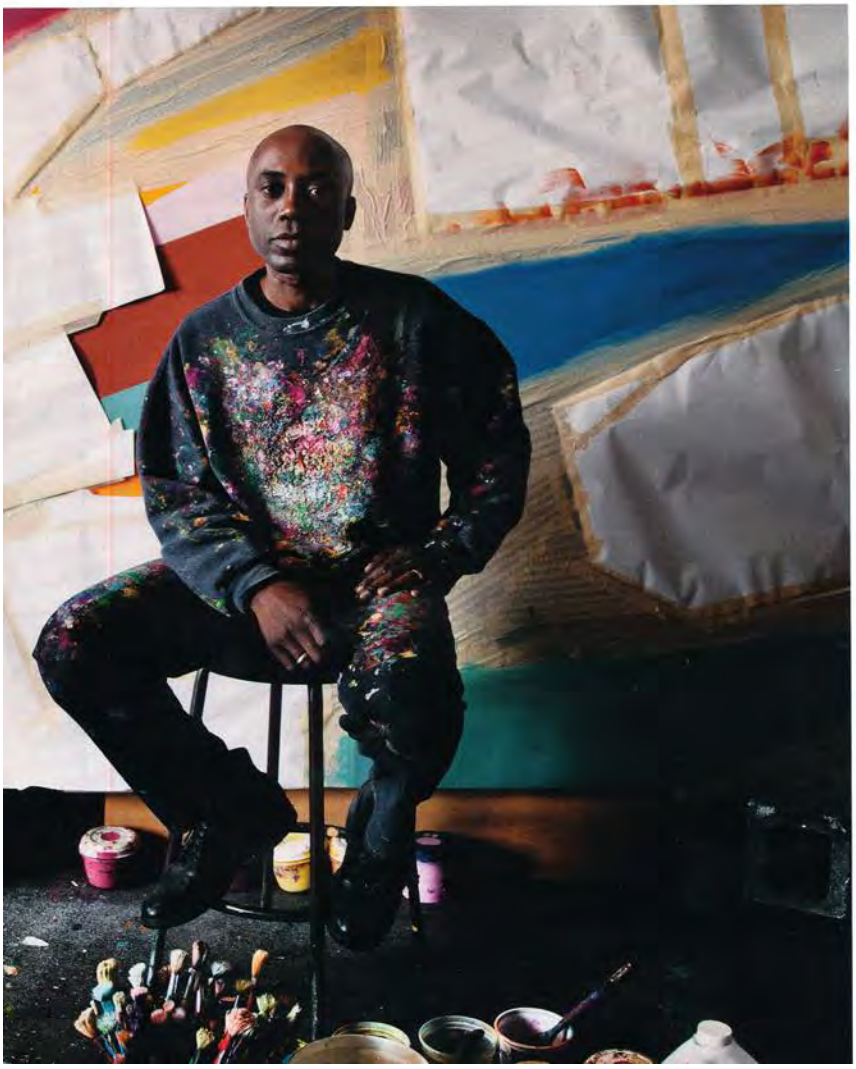
CHUCK CLOSE

"The embassies are full of paintings of dead white men," says Close, whose portrait of the late Roy Lichtenstein was created for the foundation's print collection. "I thought at least one of them ought to be an artist."



ODILI DONALD ODITA

"Growing up as a Nigerian in America, I have a sense of what it means to come to this country and make dreams come true," says Odita, whose mural surrounds the USUN-building elevators.



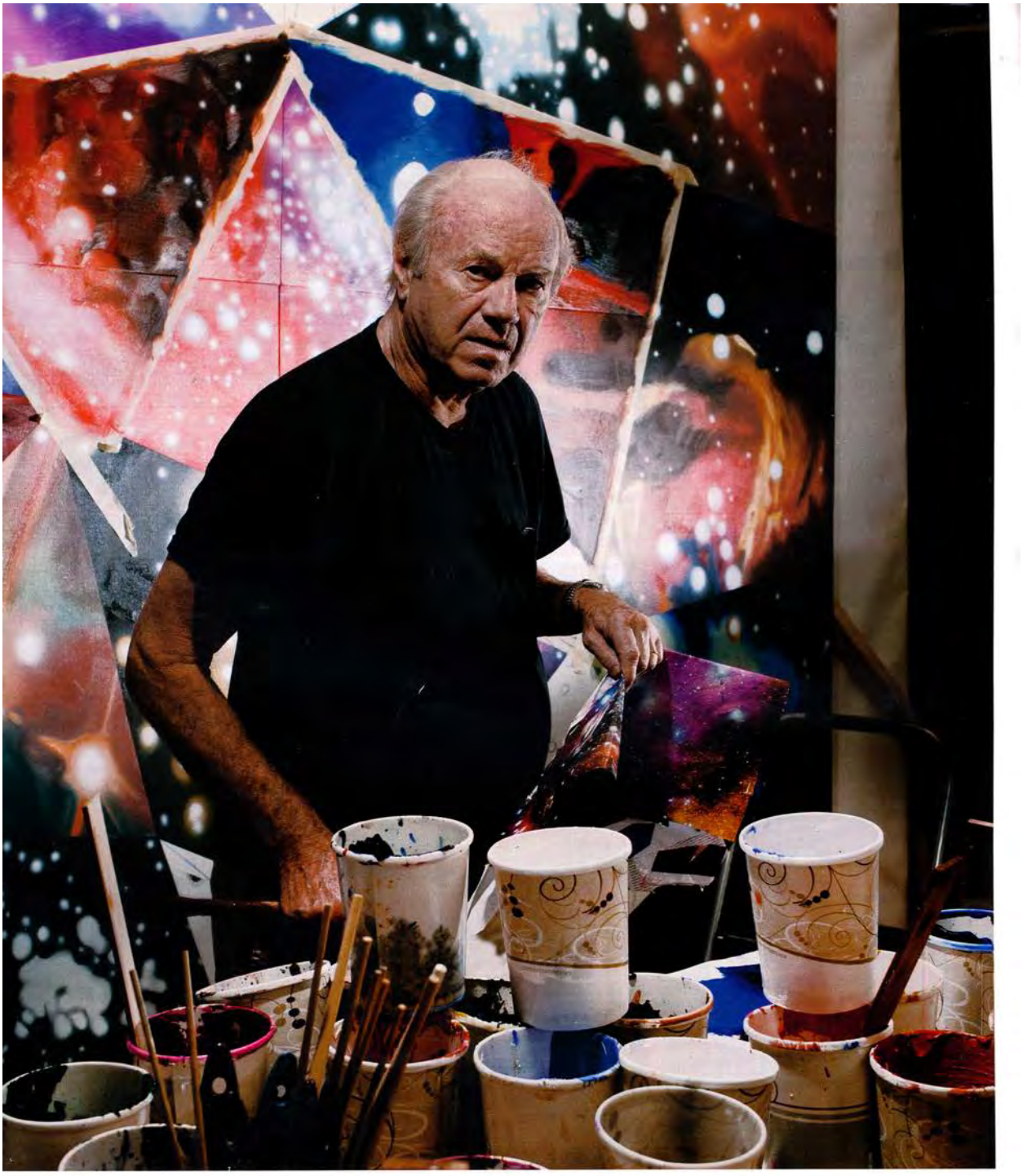
CARRIE MAE WEEMS

"They're like my little morsels, like little Lifesavers. I always want to consume them!" says Weems of her 42-panel work in the USUN lobby. "It delights me to look at that piece. I'm so honored that it's there."

Whether people understand it or not the art's mere presence works subliminally In that way, the program waves a less obvious cultural flag for America

BRICE MARDEN

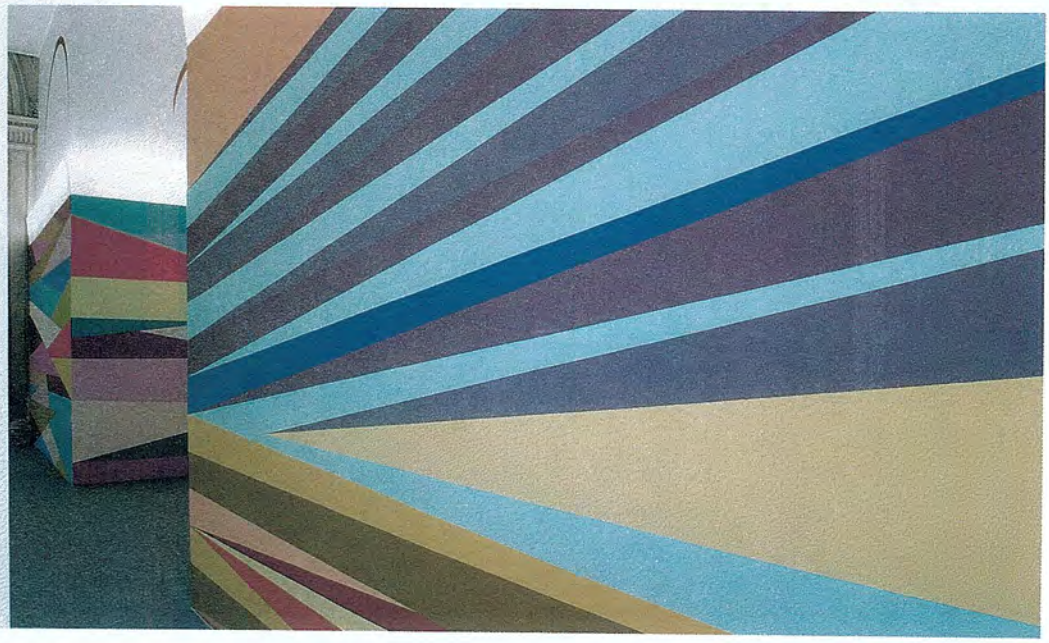
"I tend not to think that the government is a very good client, so I tend to avoid it—but it's an important client," says Marden, whose "First Etched Letter" was made in a limited edition of 50 prints. "It's a chance to place some of your work where people are going to see it. You make the work hoping that it can have an effect."



JAMES ROSENQUIST

"Lauder and others are putting artwork in embassies so people can see what we're up to," says Rosenquist, who painted "The Stars and Stripes at the Speed of Light" for the foundation's print collection. "There's a history of America wanting to show the world that it's intelligent and has some feeling about art."

Uetting Contemporary Art—25 years in 200 pivotal artworks



Odili Donald Odita
Give Me Shelter
Acrylic latex wall paint and coloured pigment on wall
6 x 11 x 18 m
52nd Venice Biennale

● **Okwui Enwezor**

The title of Odili Donald Odita's *Give Me Shelter* obviously refers to architecture – more specifically to housing – and alludes to the notion of an interior space. That it is a wall painting applied directly to an architectural interior reinforces the double meaning. As with most of Odita's work in the hard-edged geometric mode that he has focused on since the late 1990s, movement and velocity are two of its principal allusions, and motility one of its by-products. In terms of the formal expression of movement within the painting, the plot thickens where the sliding triangles collide with one another or cut into a zipping parallelogram. These are not merely visual effects of the painting but also a fundamental part of their execution and experience. Nor were they arrived at without great circumspection. That a contemporary artist of Odita's experimental mien would make the shift he did – from heterogeneous combinations of painting, collage, photography and installation to his practice of today – speaks more to the conceptual possibilities available to him through painting than to a retrogressive return to formalism. Since this turn, his work has become more complex, foregrounding a view of abstraction that is as culturally heterodox as it is structurally rigorous.

Odita's foray into this field announced a melding of diverse influences, from African-inflected geometric wall painting to the Cartesian rationalism of Constructivism and the disorienting visuality of 1960s Op art. His geometric paintings have often been conceived in relation to flat planes – walls and canvases – as their ground and support, with his paint application seemingly exhibiting no expressive intent, just the production of colours and shapes. The compositions are also predicated on the immediacy, and the heightening, of the spectator's phenomenological encounter with their strong shapes and intense colours. In terms of the works' formats and structures, one associates them with Sol LeWitt's monumental wall paintings or Bridget Riley's physiologically dizzying abstractions. This places Odita among the ranks of contemporary artists, such as Jim Lambie and Karin Davie, whose practices have similarly made conceptual and formal use of geometric abstraction, especially those who place a premium on the conditions of spectatorship.

Conceived for and executed at the 2007 Venice Biennale, *Give Me Shelter*'s distinctiveness is not only a result of its scale, which, like LeWitt's work, is designed to surround and absorb viewers. It also, in a manner analogous to Riley's wavy, listing lines, seeks to destabilize the spectator with its compositional complexity, chromatic vibrancy and spatial organization. In Venice this made for an active, architecturally lively experience. As the spectator entered the space, a kind of optical discharge occurred: a sensation of movement that pushed the viewer through the very motion that the painting depicts. Painting directly on the wall of a space that runs through the building like a spine bifurcating the Italian Pavilion on a north–south axis, Odita structured the work on two contradictory relations. First, the flow of time, expressed in terms of the horizontal fluidity of stacked, zigzagged, crisscrossed and faceted verticals, horizontals, diagonals and overlapping lines; second, a series of mappings built on spatial structures consisting of units of primary colours.

Though Odita used the architecture of the space to its optimum, there were some limitations imposed by the building, of the kind common to most historical architecture. In this case the vertical face of the walls was interrupted by a line of fluorescent lights halfway between the high ceilings and the floor. This meant that the paintings could not occupy the entirety of the walls without becoming decorative. To resolve this issue, Odita stopped his paintings just below the lights but added a series of painted crescents high above them to link the upper parts of the walls to the running curtains that the lower paintings had become. The curved lines gave one the impression of standing beneath a lintel or a triumphal arch, a strategy that served to slow down the viewer and again called forth a response that linked architecture to painting.

2004
Sol LeWitt
Wall Drawing #1138
Acrylic paint on wall
Dimensions variable
Installation view at Lisson Gallery, London

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Galleries: 'Karmic Abstraction' brings a tint of turquoise to renovated Bridgette Mayer Gallery

By Edith Newhall
For The Inquirer

It's hard to say which is more impressive: The renovation of Bridgette Mayer Gallery, which has turned the former parlor floor and cellar beneath it into sleek, muted, minimalist spaces while retaining some of their 18th-century features, or the sprawling, colorful group show of mainly abstract paintings celebrating that transformation. But there's no question that the latter, "Karmic Abstraction," inhabits the gallery's new and improved quarters as if designed to test their architectural refinements.

The show's theme - that all contemporary abstract painting embodies or reflects on the history of art - is fleshed out successfully in most of the works in this 16-artist exhibition, starting with the first paintings you see in the front room. They are Thomas Nozkowski's handsome untitled oil painting of solid forms, reminiscent of late Guston paintings and Brancusi's sculpture *The Kiss*; and Odili Donald Odita's *Electric City*, a huge acrylic of angular, vertical geometric shapes in a composition that seems equally informed by color-field painting, op-art, and art deco art and architecture, but also by African art (Odili grew up in the American Midwest but was born in Nigeria). The two monochromatic phthalo-blue paintings with punctured surfaces by Los Angeles artist Joe Goode look wonderful in their close proximity to Nozkowski and Odita.

Speaking of phthalo blue, that turquoisey hue shows up everywhere in this show - in Leslie Wayne's accumulations of vertical slices of paint, in Matthew Fischer's modestly scaled, broad-stroked oil paintings that recall aspects of Howard Hodgkin's work, in Neil Anderson's oil *Cleopatra's Barge*, in Arden Bendler Browning's monumental gouache and Flashe painting on paper that suggests a cityscape seen through a kaleidoscope, and in Ryan McGinness' mesmerizing *Black Hole*and *SponsorshipRedux* painting and print. There's even a little pool of turquoise in the lower left of Tim McFarlane's *Constant Flux*.

As Mayer clearly knew, having an internationally known lineup like McGinness, Nozkowski, Odita, and Scottish artist Graeme Todd - all of whom have recently joined the gallery's ranks, as have Bendler Browning, Fischer, Wayne, Radcliffe Bailey, Iva Gueorguieva, Eemyun Kang, and Nathan Pankratz - would make "Karmic Abstraction" a must-see. She needn't have included the works of her long-standing artists, but contributions from Anderson, McFarlane, Charles Burwell, and Rebecca Rutstein happen to shine in this company. Now, that's karma.

Newhall, Edith. “Galleries: ‘Karmic Abstraction’ brings a tint of turquoise to renovated Bridgette Mayer Gallery” (exhibition review). *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 20 November 2011.

ODILI DONALD ODITA

Colour's radical potential to dislodge cultural moorings is the subject and modus operandi of Odili Donald Odita's abstract paintings. Raised in the American Midwest by parents who had fled Nigeria in the build-up to the Biafran war, Odita has refined an abstract visual language that imbricates these two seemingly adversarial backgrounds. In discrete works on canvas and installation-like murals, he deploys hand-mixed hues that explicitly evoke skin colours (beige, ochre, dun) or the blues and purples of an imagined sea voyage undertaken by African slaves en route to the New World. Canny conceptual switchbacks trouble these works and lift them far beyond the decorative: if their palette appears celebratory, it should be recalled that their visual pleasure is also routed in a post-colonial reading of history and contemporary media culture. Far from being devoid of political content, these works seek to locate colour within a framework in which beauty has a history that can be engaged with both critically and viscerally.

Odita's path to painting and abstraction in particular has been ambulatory. In the early 1990s he moved to New York and began a critical engagement with contemporary culture through readings encouraged by the newly established *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, founded in 1994 by curator Okwui Enwezor. Initially working across media and often using photocollage to critique magazine advertising, it wasn't until the end of that decade that Odita began producing the colour-based works for which he is now known. Indeed, his abstract murals still invoke such a reading: the artist has noted that his images can look 'like the scrambled reception from a television set', a relationship that might appear abstract but nevertheless gives 'the sense of a familiarity located deep within one's own culture'. These works are equalizers that connect the palette of African textiles, the language of Modernist abstraction, and the visual textures of postmodern/postcolonial life lived in proximity with digital imaging on computers and mobile phones.

Odita has exhibited widely at such venues as the Venice Biennale (2007), Studio Museum in Harlem (2007) and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco (2009). In the latter he presented the wall mural *Post-Perfect* (2009), whose dazzle-like effect seemed designed to confuse the eye and make one's passage through the space a visceral experience. A recent work on canvas, *Brave Men Run* (2010), is a typical exposition of his talent for sharp-toothed energy: a central band sparks horizontally like a modified sine wave in brilliant hues of orange, blue, green and pink. This visual intelligence has a personal history – Odita's father was also a painter who worked in a Cubist-style, and it is evident that Odita junior has spent a lifetime thinking about abstraction. Odita urges us to read colour as a loaded form that cannot escape the culture in which it is embedded. - *Colin Perry*

1.

2.

3.

1. *Serrated*, 2008
Acrylic on canvas
127 x 152.5 cm

2. *Brave Men Run*, 2010
Acrylic on canvas
213.5 x 277 cm

3. *Crash*, 2008
Acrylic on canvas
213.5 x 277 cm

4. *Here and There*, 2008
Acrylic on canvas
228.5 x 178 cm

5. *Post-Perfect*, 2009
Acrylic on wall
Dimensions variable
Exhibition view at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco


SWY
art.
contemporary.
african.
Edition 1
Featuring:
Odili Donald Odita,
Otobong Nkanga,
Lynette Yiadom-Boakye,
Simon Njami,
Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie,
Riason Naidoo,
Chimurenga.
(Re-) Mapping the field: a bird's eye view on discourses.

Chromatic Symphony

Interview with Odili Donald Odita

Missla Libsekal

Interviewed by Missla Libsekal (Another Africa) and Ilpo Jauhiainen

Following his recent solo exhibition entitled *Body & Space* this past Autumn in New York, I had the pleasure of interviewing Nigerian-born (b. 1966 Enugu) abstract painter and hard-edged, colour field enthusiast Odili Donald Odita. His oeuvres, architectonic creations on canvas, plexiglass and wall drawings explore the mysteries of colour, its infinite possibilities considering colour anew - as a conceptual space. The journey discovering his work and thoughts behind his practice has been both intellectually and visually stimulating. His rigorous practice, specificity yet instinctual abandon to chromatic freedom create visual vistas ocularly titillating. Viewing his paintings in the flesh, one can easily find themselves lost in time, gazing and seeing different perspectives shapes and forms ultimately experiencing a renewed faith and love of colour.
During our recent telephone interview in December 2010, Odita spoke candidly of his work, his thoughts on colour how it marks, codifies and shapes our world, influences our understanding and perceptions whether it be at loftier heights such as in relation to socio-political constructs or to the mundane yet rather logical extrapolation as to why stop signs are typically red.

MISSLA LIBSEKAL: What are the themes you have found yourself naturally gravitating towards through your paintings?

ODILI DONALD ODITA: Quite a lot of things actually that I've been wanting to push through with the work. I feel as if I have wanted to speak about painting primarily; it's a very important thing for me to speak through. I want to speak to it in a specific way, from a cultured position, from one who is speaking from a certain place in the world, in a certain mindset from within this world.

I want to speak clearly about painting as not only an African but as a human being. It is interesting for me to try to address certain things that I am concerning with, certain things dealing with power relations within cultures, certain ideas that have, that exist underlying in painting that are very in certain ways hegemonic let's say and so there are a lot of different things that I am trying to do within painting. I want to expand the content of colour and the understanding and awareness of colour rather than for it to be assumed and dealt with in a superficial manner as it is in art and painting. As I look at colour, colour can become an enormous conceptual space that has only begun to be scratched in the realm of painting it's always been looked at in a certain political, conceptual way rather than only a technical way.

ML: The understanding of colour in the West is said to be influenced by Chromophobia, Can you tell us what this is?

ODO: I am borrowing the term from David Batchelor whose great book titled *Chromophobia* goes into the whole notion of the fear of colour in Western culture and it's a book that I use extensively with my students in colour class. It's a book that is interesting because when American kids read this book and I am reading in class, they look at it as an attack against them, or a slight against them, and that is very, very important - that reaction and I highlight to students that he is speaking towards Western culture and they already are feeling attacked. What does this say about their awareness if not intuitive, their conscious awareness of their participation, their embodiment of the West - how they embody the West, how they are the West and how they are receiving this argument in this way, this particular way. It's interesting, this book goes into some good scholarly, historical detail into how colour has been perceived, written in texts, philosophies, colour theories in a way that genderizes it, makes it a state of psychosis, puts it in the space of drugs, illicit drug use, talks about colour almost as a state of anarchy and all these sorts of things. This is all in documented, historical, academic official text. You said something really interesting to me about perception and colour, and again I think this is to speak about how we understand colour our perception meaning or being understanding, perception being the way we see, perception being the way we think, and how colours can affect when used well and used interestingly, can affect, modify and maybe change one's perceptions and feelings, thoughts, considerations, a particular point of view.

So I think that there is a lot of power in colour, and there is a lot of distrust in the normal say Western sense of colour, there is a distrust of it because it is used as something that can't be managed quite easily.

ML: Do you think that chromophobia is something that typically occurs only in North America?

ODO: I couldn't say that either because I know the book, Chromophobia documents the West very thoroughly but again it's also a book from the West. It's an analysis of Western culture. If I was going to make an analysis say of Nigerian culture, I might get into aspects of chromophobia there too - I wouldn't know where to begin in that sense but I think that that could be the case as well. There might be colour associations, symbolic associations, colour that is related to a symbol that one is to say do not trespass this space, because this colour represents this idea or this particular thing. So in that sense it's about surviving and life is always all about this on one level - you know survival. I think that art is this other level, where it's like how do we live and move beyond only wanting to survive. What is life beyond the mere necessity of survival - where is the beauty of life beyond that and that is when I think - you know wow plants with their colours, they are made to attract bugs so that they can pollinate let's say, or plants with colour, bright colour that are meant to be a warning in nature, that is if you eat this plant you are going to die, drop dead and you know you can start to contemplate those things. How does it happen that we have colours and we actually code things with colours and we identify from plant life to stop signs, colour to help us move through things. Certain colours kind of repeat as a certain understanding, commonalities let's say that goes through certain colours identifies in a certain way, the feeling that we have for red then there is fire then there is blood, then there is a stop sign. It is interesting when you think of it in that sense but you have to think about it, you can't just reduce it to only a stop sign, then I think that colour becomes inadequate and becomes only technical

ML: Living in the Digital Age where computers are a common part of many of our lives, how do you feel this is influencing our experience of colour?

ODO: But always remember that you have the colour from the monitor, colour from an image, and then you have colour entering your eyes from a natural light, from being outside, from being in the sunlight - there are multiple experiences. I'm interesting in the quality of colour generated from machine light, from mechanic light, like a computer or a TV light and what that does. I am also interested in what happens with colour in nature under the sun, or in the atmosphere. Because I believe that when we experience colour, through our eyes, just through our eyes in the real world we are going to experience infinity - the infinite, the infinite potential - the infinite possibility. When we have man-made, mechanical light we are going to have another kind of experience, it's just going to be flatter, but it can be equally intense - different. Like an apple and an orange, it's just different. It's a different meaning and a different feeling. To be under a bright sun, outside on a brightly sunlit day or indoors in an intensely neon lit space or fluorescent space. It's just a different kind of experience, and I think that those experiences are equally intense and valid, and specific and I love that specificity of one verses the other because it talks about condition, and it talks about stage and it talks about state of mind.

ML: Your abstract paintings have been likened to the scrambled reception of a TV, unrecognizable imagery yet somehow familiar with the images penetrating the viewer like a slogan. What led you to isolate and define this particular attribute in your paintings?

ODO: Well it's all about contrast for me, all about condition and contrast - what is the nature of the space, how can I bring the space to an alert consideration, to an alerted and alarm consideration, how might I deal with say the subtlety of say a whisper, how can one whisper and bring attention to what they need to say. How can one scream, shrill, and bring attention to what they say. So a lot of it is about being effective. Having a sense of effectiveness of force being able to modify, being able to render in colour, being able to hold in colour the nature of a given space. It's really that I think that there can be so much clarity and at the same time so much openness when one uses colour and there is so much possibility with it and I think, and I know for sure that colour as much as I have talked about it specifically doesn't exist by itself. It needs so much of everything else for it to be something at it's most intense.

ML: The installation in Cincinnati, Flow, you juxtaposed the confederate flag colours with white and black skin colours. Is this one of those invisible penetrations?

ODO: The penetration again is in the mind's eye. It's about trying to change the mind or affect the way that somebody can engage the space. I wanted to be able to come from my consideration of that space you are talking about the one in Cincinnati. To me, my consideration of the space, the nature of the space with Zaha Hadid's design in the space.

I am just trying to do many different things in this sense. I am just addressing some of the many layers, reality to colour. Good colour doesn't exist. Space doesn't exist without colour and drawing. You need line and form. Colour with edge to be able to help give one a definition of space, to give oneself a sense and a definition of space and I'm trying in my work to be able to understand all the different polarities that can possibly exist to get to this notion of space and in that sense having the body react to that space, react to that in new, different and varying ways. I am always interested in being able to come across some other situation or condition that I didn't foresee because then it talks to me about the infinite, about infinity; positivity and infinity of space and the world around us you know, and on many levels, from the level of music, to the level of intellectual inquiry, to the notion of reality I am trying to investigate what colour can be and it's not just wanting to use it to define form or wanting to use it to depict objects, but I want to use it also to help create an understanding of the world we live in and an engagement in that world too through a better understanding of colours, our sense of how we perceive colour. How we deal with it, how we handle it in our daily, our day-to-day experience and it's just so interesting how from one place to the other with travels, literal travel as well as Internet travel, how one can see and experience these changes. If you were travelling, you're going from one city to the next, if you are sensitive you are going to notice that light is different that daylight and the night-light is different and I think that's an important thing to realise. What you are saying is I am here. I am in this world and I see and I can see.

ML: You've described your wall paintings as events, ephemeral, for a definitive period, to be experienced in person and then gone. What does this ephemerality bring to the work?

ODO: As a student, I loved this artist On Kawara, a Japanese artist. He started out making postcards where he would say, he said I'm alive, I'm here and he would send them out to people, his friends and people he knew and later on he made these date paintings which were painted on the day, and the subject matter is the day that they're painted. September 12, 1967 ... February 18, 1966 ... December 30, 2004. They carry the meaning from just the day that they were made. It becomes just a really beautiful experience as I see it - just existing. They have a sense of permanence because that is real, and they are temporary because the day passes and another thing about them is that they were painted out of a suitcase essentially. This guy doesn't need a lab or studio with twenty assistants running around, it's just a modest scale painting with this date on it, written on it, and that is it and I've always liked that idea.

So for me, maybe I'm excited by this notion of the wall paintings because being essentially not literally but essentially something it's like this , I go to the hardware store, buy my paints, I have a pattern and everything, I go in there and paint on the wall, give something to the public, give something to them you know, they can take part in it, enjoy it, and then it comes down and the experience is heightened by the fact that somebody, that you the viewer where able to go see it you know.

ML: Mentioning Kawara he has been archiving the colours from his painting for many years which in turn became *an artwork unto itself. We heard that you too archive your colour palette. Your paintings sometimes use up to 100+ colours, it seems like the archiving process would be quite rigorous. What importance do you put on this process of documentation?

ODO: Well yes I've documented since the very largest painting I made in '98. I document the colours that I've used in my paintings maybe part of it is just the fact of my father being an art historian. It is partly in my mind to want to, to have the desire to document and to make documentation of my actions. It was something that I was taught from him but at the same instance it's about being able to see just the experiences that I've been able to have with colour. On another level it's being able to see how far I have gone with colour. I want to look to see if I am using the same kinds of colours, if I am using different ones, if I am reaching for different considerations or different positions or different spaces through colour. Colour creates space; colour is about space as much as it's about paint. So I want to know that I am being able to challenge myself, challenge my considerations of what it can be, useful, appropriate, what could work with colour.

* Journals 1966 - 2000, On Kawara. Shown in Colour Chart: Reinventing Colour 1950 to Today, MoMA New York 2008.

ML: In reflection where have you gone in your dialogue with colour for example in one instance?

ODO: For me right now, with the show that I have up*, I am very happy with the way that I have been able to create a dynamic that goes beyond just colour itself. The dynamic of the colour and the colour situation, and the composition of the colours created this light, created this type of energy in the space where light and colour and form came together in a way that blew the space apart, that really just pushed the space apart.

I was interested in the physicality of light and the physicality of light being generated through colour and the physicality of light as it moved through the room because it was generated by the colour in the room.

* *Body & Space* exhibited at Jack Shainman Gallery from November 18 to December 23, 2010 in New York

ML: It's interesting your articulation of this intangible phenomenon; I was able to experience this at the show.

ODO: Art in the academy and discourse of the academy, we are trained to find ways to speak of things that there are no words for but you know, it's the power of colour, it's phenomena is beyond words. It's about reality, it's about being able to experience physical nature, how it shapes how it defines, it identifies. It is very important to be able to for me, to be able to experience those things and that is rewarding. It reminds me that colour is not just only an item to fill identification of a space but it is used to really make the world new and again, make the world new and again.

ML: What role does the pursuit of innovation play in your practice; you've written that you hope to make a contribution to the intellectual future of painting? Where do you think you are?

ODO: Well, I am still in the process of it. I had this show that I had a really good experience with. I almost killed myself doing the show cause it was so much work and so much preparation in such a short time but you know I appreciate the process, I appreciate what I learned. There's an artists who once said, talked about coming out of your space, your studio to know what fear is and I think that strong work can be like this experience of coming to face one's fears and learning to live beyond them, yah.

This coming April, Odita will participate in a group exhibition at ARS 11, Kiasma, The Musem of Contemporary Art, Helsinki Finland where he will be exhibited a piece inspired by Africa.

About the artist

Odili Donal Odita was born in Enugu, Nigeria and lives and works in Philadelphia and New York. Odita is currently an Associate Professor of Painting at Tyler School of Art, Temple University in Philadelphia. His work has been exhibited around the globe in solo and group exhibitions. Of note, the 52nd Venice Biennale, The Contemporary Art Museum, Huston, The studio Museum in Harlem and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco.

Odita is represented by Jack Shainman Gallery, New York and Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town.

http://www.odilidonaldodita.com/
http://www.jackshainman.com/
http://www.michaelstevenson.com/

Missla Libsekal
Founder of online magazine Another Africa, a platform to showcase a contemporary vision of Africana. She works as a design business consultant earning her degree in Business Administration with Honours in Management though recently made a foray into the world of publishing and journalism. (www.anotherafrica.net) She is passionate about Africa and conveying stories that speak to the richness and cultural wealth from and inspired by this continent.

Ilpo Jauhiainen
He is a composer, sound artist and writer. Studied Sonic Arts at the Middlesex University, London, UK.

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Odili Donald Odita. Body & Space 2010. Image courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY.

USA

The Global Africa Project

Museum of Arts and Design *New York*

Many have pondered the validity of an African aesthetic: what was evident to early western Modernists is now a disputed issue in many academic and cultural circles. Presented at the Museum of Arts and Design, 'The Global Africa Project' lets the audience decide. Even the curators, Leslie King-Hammond and Lowery Sims, state that a 'global Africa' is a problematic notion, a stereotype waiting to be discredited. Their intent is to present a forum to engage discourse.

The result is as intriguing as it is challenging. An eclectic mix, the exhibition offers a miscellany of works by professional designers, artisans and community workers. King-Hammond and Sims have constructed categories that allegedly clarify – but in actuality add – complexity to a body of work that is hard to group. Rather than discuss elements of design according to disciplines, curatorial expertise is used to create categories such as branding, intersecting cultures, competing globally and locally, sourcing locally and transforming traditions. (An attempt to redirect Western tendencies in addressing the plastic arts?) In the catalogue we are given brief descriptions of works and loose arguments about why they were chosen. Notable are efforts by women who create pottery and basketry and material culture items such as jewellery, beadwork, fashion headpieces and adornments. Works employing industrial design such as an aerodynamic Perspex chair, *Secret Meeting* (2006) by Alexandre Arrechea, are stimulating but do not compare with the intricate embellished beaded teapot of Joyce Scott, Serge Mouangue's serene kimonos based on cotton/silk wax print designs (*Wafrica*, 2008), or the lusty, sepia-toned painting of intertwined lovers by Iona Rozeal Brown. The real delight in viewing this exhibition is the individual pieces clamouring for attention.

'The Global Africa Project'
2011
Installation view

Serge Mouangue
Wafrica
2008
Cotton, silk and wax-printed kimono

The paradox inherent to this show's eclectism is the attempt to survey a continent that is sometimes defined by its nomadic presence indicative of the diaspora. Certainly there is a strong argument for the retention of traditional precepts, attitudes and practices within these dispersed communities, given an overlapping history of four centuries and the global dominance of African-American pop culture. In fact, a principle category delineated by the curators – 'Intersecting Cultures' – is an essential premise in looking at any contemporary African aesthetic: the fluidity with which various notions of modernity are combined with traditional formulas. Even European and white Americans whose aesthetic is informed by things African are included in a major way. It is interesting that the curators acknowledge a heterogeneous thread that links other cultural groups when discussing an African aesthetic, even when inclusiveness is not usually part of the agenda in discussions of contemporary art in general.

As a survey exhibition, the surface is skimmed on many levels. Are artisans and designers from the African continent not enough to take centre stage? Or are those with distant and Romantic ties to Africa in need of validation? In an attempt not to generalize about an African aesthetic, there are significant arguments in support of including artists who have not visited the continent or lived there, but who use African elements in their work. In her catalogue essay, Judith Bettelheim discusses masquerading traditions that have retained an expressive use of materials, the confluence of patterns and design and the significance of spectacle. Sonya Clark, for example, who has studied the material culture and philosophy of the Yoruba, creates head and neckpieces that reflect her understanding of key Ifa precepts. A fairly recent development is the use of recycled materials, but has that not always been an indigenous African tendency? Masking traditions are kept contemporary because of materials used to construct the costumes; notable contemporary African artists like Willie Bester and El Anatsui use commercial discards from factories, cars and assorted detritus revealing a fluid connection between traditions and modernity. Futurism is represented in the space-age design of Kossi Assou's triangular, low-sitting table, replete with chairs and aluminium bowls (*Triangle Table*, 2003). Everything in this piece is stripped to the bare essentials like a post-apocalyptic dining scene.

Humanistic dimensions and bricolage take precedence over aerodynamic design. For example, the Mud Studio's chandeliers of clay, crystals and steel wire are opulent renditions of 19th-century Empire-style fixtures, while the Willowlamp collective constructs a futuristic light-piece based on a geometric floral motif. Of note is a light fixture by Heath Nash made of recycled detergent bottles. Form and function merge in the section of the exhibition titled 'Competing Globally,' in the furniture designs of Billy Omabecho and in 'Transforming Traditions', the 'Nguni Vessel' (2005) by Clive Sithole stands out.

Painting, photography and some sculpture are represented. However, even if the stellar works by Kehinde Wiley and Odili Odita help punctuate salient ideas presented in the catalogue, works by Fred Wilson, Iké Udé and Chakaia Booker veer toward a trajectory that needs more in-depth explanation. Co-existing side by side is every approach to art-making imaginable from the conceptual ideations of space represented in Alice Yard to architectural interventions and community-based design and modes of production.

So what is a Global Africa? This exhibition, with its investigation of colour, texture and form, provides merely a glimpse, albeit an exciting one, of the complexity of the continent's aesthetic.

A.M. Weaver

Art in America INTERNATIONAL REVIEW
MARCH 2011

Odili Donald Odita: *Reach*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 84 by 109 inches; at Jack Shainman.

ODILI DONALD ODITA
JACK SHAINMAN

Eight large-scale paintings on canvas and walls (all 2010), and an earlier piece on Plexiglas, comprised Odili Donald Odita's second solo at Jack Shainman. All nine are showstoppers. Odita continues his angular abstraction and chromatic infusions by both splintering and expanding his signature wedges of color. He may place the wedges on both sides of a center line, as in *Reach*, or run them all the way across the canvas, as in the small but powerful *The Edge*. Through repetition and variation of form, Odita establishes rhythms that are shifting and pulsing and entirely unpredictable. He subtly alters the balance of the compositions by, for example, painting a band along one edge of the canvas, shortening the wedges on that side, or amassing larger wedges on the other. And the wedges sometimes seem to cross each other, shifting hues in the process.

Given a prominent position at the far end of the gallery, most visible from the street, was the roughly 7½-foot-square canvas *Point of Return*. Here the angular forms meet at what resembles a diagonal crease—as if Odita had painted his elongated pie slices on a piece of paper and folded it so that sections of wedges overlap one another. The irregular division and expansion of the slices looks intuitive, recalling Gary Lang's unplanned color divisions and layering; both painters are magical colorists, too.

Viewers entering the main gallery had their heads turned by *Free Form*, the largest canvas in the show at about 9 by 11 feet, hung on the far wall. Its wedges are arranged to make tapering zigzag and sharp boomerang shapes, so that the whole canvas throbs like an oversize polychrome *Nude Descending a Staircase*. Also compelling were the wall paintings in the project rooms. Both responded to the architecture by lapping onto adjacent walls or the vaulted ceiling so that the corners seemed torqued and spatial order dissolved in color and motion.

Born in Nigeria and raised in the U.S., Odita became known for Noland-ish paintings that adopted the palette of his African heritage (landscape or textiles), and in the gallery's press release he says the current works continue his exploration of black in both color and sociopolitical senses. Yet the broader exhibition title, "Body and Space," more aptly reflects his exhilarating presentation.

—*Janet Koplos*

ARTFORUM

critics' picks

“Wild Is the Wind”

SAVANNAH COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

Gutstein Gallery, 201 E. Broughton St., Pei Ling Chan Gallery, 322 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.
January 11–February 28

“Wild Is the Wind” brings together seven artists whose work shares a sensibility that the curator, Laurie Ann Farrell, connects to the mood and lyrics of the 1957 American song of the same title, a slow, melancholic ballad of longing, discovery, and love. To translate these emotions into a coherent visual exhibition, Farrell casts her net wide. *MiddleSea*, 2008, a hauntingly beautiful video by Zineb Sedira, follows a middle-aged man who is alternately lost in contemplation and pacing the deck as he travels as the lone passenger on a ferry. Ghada Amer’s equally compelling installation, *Le Salon Courbé*, 2007, explores the space between cultures and examines the definition of *terrorism* in English and Arabic. Kiluanji Kia Henda’s large-scale color prints reveal the beauty and dignity the Angolan photographer has found among Luanda’s poverty-struck inhabitants. His pictures provide an interesting contrast to *Shish Kebab*, 2004, Lara Baladi’s critical look at the culturally loaded media images that flood society.

Less obvious but no less powerful are paintings by Odili Donald Odita, whose hard-edge abstractions speak of a desire to create harmony among elements that may be at odds with one another. Similarly, Nicholas Hlobo’s elegant sewn “drawings” made from leather, tire rubber, and ribbon offer personal meditations regarding his search for acceptance as a gay black man in post-apartheid South Africa. Combined with Penny Siopis’s figurative paintings, which teeter between romanticism and fantasy, the exhibition becomes a thought-provoking meditation on the very basic human quest for understanding and acceptance.

— Rebecca Dimling Cochran

ARTFORUM

Odili Donald Odita

JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY
513 West 20th Street
November 18–December 23

Odili Donald Odita, *Point of Return*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 92".

For those not familiar with Philadelphia-based painter Odili Donald Odita's vivid revitalization of 1960s and '70s hard-edged abstraction, this exhibition is a concise and elegant introduction. Since returning almost exclusively to painting in 1998, Odita has modulated his work between canvas, Plexiglas, and direct application of paint to gallery walls. Versions of each process are featured here, and all the resulting works are saturated with the rich acrylic tones hand-mixed for each piece.

In some ways, the show demonstrates the seemingly infinite variation of Odita's tightly regulated visual economy. The squared *Point of Return*, 2010, for example, reorients the usual horizontality of his canvases, shifting the rays of color into a receding, radial abyss. The lush pastels simulate perspectival depth, even as a shard of black powerfully drives home the flatness of the work. Yet each of the works in this show, which is titled "Body and Space," relentlessly references the gallery space and co-implicates the viewer.

Some pieces play out the exhibition's title quite literally: A smaller gallery is painted floor to ceiling with vertical bands of color that wrap around corners, imply sculptural volume, and seem to lean against the supports like an early Richard Serra. In contrast, the polyptych *Television*, 2009, evokes space-age static and solid-state silicon wafers. Absent the canvas and stretcher, paint and picture surface become hypnotically coterminous—even white appears here as luminous pigment. And in both cases, figure and ground relationships are left unnervingly indeterminate, embedding us in a sort of unsolvable optical puzzle. While its striking chromatic beauty is a delight, the show is also a powerful reminder of abstraction's enduring versatility as an analytic and visual system.

— Ian Bourland

ARTINFO

EDITOR'S PICK

In New York: Gallery Openings This Week

Odili Donald Odita's "Point of Return" (2010)

Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

By Emma Allen, Andrew M. Goldstein
Published: November 17, 2010

Odili Donald Odita, "Body & Space" at Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 West 20 Street, through December 23, opening Thursday, November 18, 6-8 p.m., jackshainman.com

The Nigerian-born artist Odili Donald Odita has used his colorful geometric abstractions to evoke stories from the African experience, from the slave trade to more recent patterns of willing emigration, using explosions of vibrant paint to suggest manners of movement. In his new show at Jack Shainman gallery, the artist — whose work once graced Barack Obama's White House — has again called upon his eloquent hues to address another improbable subject: the color black, which in theory is achromatic. Not in Odita's hands. "For myself, color is the way to become specific about black, i.e., black as skin, as a social construct, and as real experience," he says in the show's statement.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL. ONLINE

Friday, February 26, 2010

FRI 26 | 'Africa On My Mind'

Odili Donald Odita/Michael Stevenson, Cape Town

Along with live oaks, Savannah, Ga., is gaining an international reputation for nurturing African-American art, thanks largely to the Savannah College of Art and Design. This weekend, the college will oversee "Africa On My Mind: Contemporary Art, Home and Abroad," a series of gallery shows around town featuring major artists like painter Ghada Amer, born in Cairo, and **Odili Donald Odita**, a Nigerian artist known for his paintings of interlacing shards of color. The college's coinciding symposium includes a talk today by Simon Njami, curator of the first African pavilion in the 2007 Venice Biennale.

THE INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF

AFRICAN AMERICAN ART

BEING RICHARD A. LONG
THE LIFE, THE ODDESSY

BEARDEN & WOMEN

LOUIS B. SLOAN

LOWERY SIMS

DONALD ODITA ODILI

MAYA FREELON

ART & HEALING

VOLUME 22 NUMBER 3

ODILI DONALD ODITA
PAINTING AND THE ABSTRACT TRUTH

by Lara Taubman

"For Guston, painting was not so much made as lived; it was a process of perpetual metamorphosis that revealed and transformed the identity of the artist as he confronted the mutable reality of his materials and of the world that surrounded him."

ROBERT STORR, GUSTON. ABBEVILLE, MODERN MASTERS: NEW YORK, 1986

In a series of lectures at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in January 2009, Robert Storr discussed Odili Donald Odita's paintings in comparison to the older master abstractionists, Raoul De Keyser and Ellsworth Kelly. Storr is Dean of the Yale School of Art and was curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art from 1990 to 2002. Through a discussion of narrative in visual art, Storr drew these artists together across a 40-year time period. Storr's significant monograph on Philip Guston in 1986 was not only the first in-depth examination of the artist but also the first art historical writing that defined narrative in painting as formed by the subject of identity or identity politics.

Robert Storr has since championed artists who chase down their own narratives, melding or masking them with paint, unapologetic when using the narrative of their lives as metaphors from which they can present their own worlds. Nigerian-born American artist Odili Donald Odita is no exception. He engages the "push and pull" of formalism and abstract expressionism not just as a visual dynamic: he also pushes and pulls narrative in and out of his paintings.

His ability to manipulate concepts in his work with ease is achieved through a rigorous process with materials. Odita's signature bands of color, masking tape and applied pigments are made through a practice that transforms materials into stories.

Odita explained the "story" of some of his paintings during a conversation with Joost Bosland that was transcribed and published as the essay for the catalogue of his *Double Edge* exhibition at Michael Stevenson (October 16–November 22, 2008) in Cape Town, South Africa:

> (The Torch Song painting is) *"a song of lament, of unrequited love. So I wanted the red to be a certain tone, to be a flame that gets extinguished as soon as it flares. That's why I brought the pink in and intensified the orange colors....*
>
> (Double Edge) *has a blues narrative that permeates the work. On the one hand, there is color as the point before language, as some sort of pure state. But it's boring. If it stays there. Color can't stay in its own contained state; it has to breathe into other things. Color is not merely material, it's psychological. That's the double edge.*

The end result is a seamlessly integrated language of symbols and medium. Process has been a priority for Odita. And now, in mid-career, his ambitious world of paint, art history, identity and memory has reached a clarity in expression, as realized through his concentrated room-sized painting installations.

In his 2007 painting installation at the Studio Museum in Harlem, *Equalizer*, Odita painted panels of broken lines, shards of green and pink and brown both in screaming and soft, whitened hues. Refracted shapes look as if they have been pieced together from a kaleidoscope that documents the world passing by. *Equalizer* is a gateway into two episodes of trans-Atlantic migration in the last five hundred years of the slave trade from Africa to the Western hemisphere and then, more currently, African migrations — many of which have ended tragically in death and despair. By contrast, panels of *Equalizer* powerfully evoke tranquil desert land or seascapes or dense urban crowds. And just as these panels approach the linear and literal, like a meditation, they run back to some formative, archetypal place in the mind (e.g., as in the Hebrew meditation of repeatedly turning away from the symbolic object of meditation to focus on the external world then returning to the symbol. It is believed that over time enough small moments of enlightenment accumulate to create true illumination).

Odita proves through painting that abstraction does not have to be only metaphorical but can tell a linear story without becoming literal. His dynamic swaths of color emit fertile narratives of testimonials, experiences and ancient African myths that ignite the viewer's ability to imagine how the narrative title of the installation tells the story about the work.

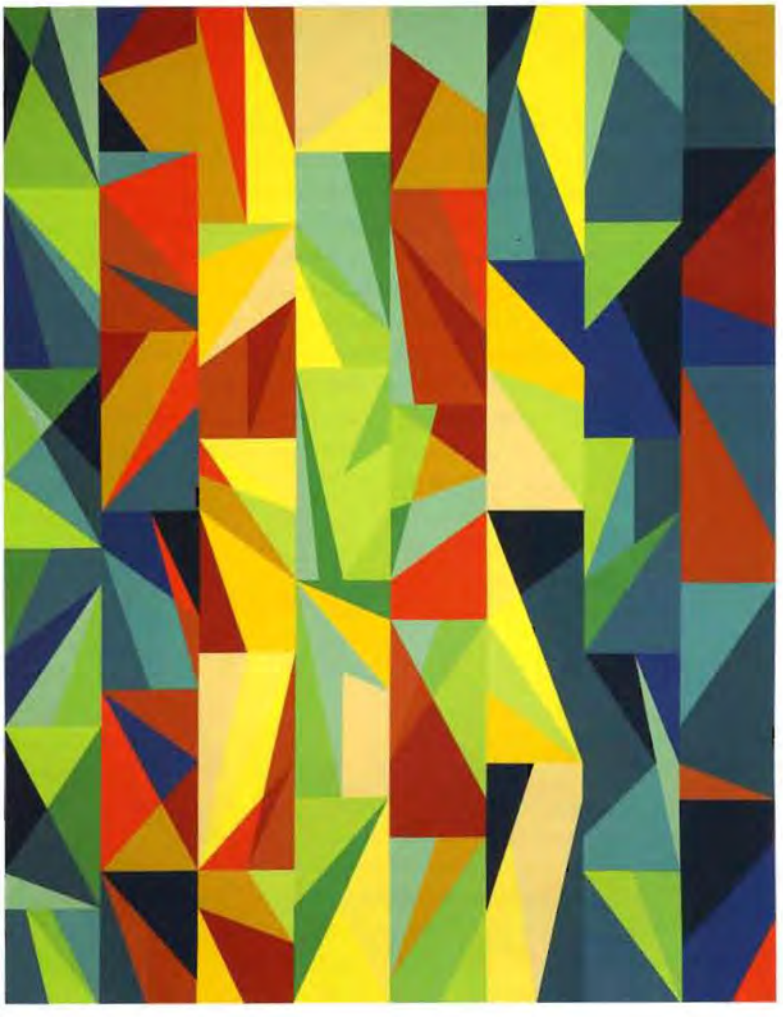
Odili Donald Odita
Night's Door
2008
acrylic on canvas
84 x 109"
STEVENSON, CAPETOWN

Odili Donald Odita
Double Edge
2008, acrylic on canvas, 50 x 60"
MICHAEL STEVENSON, CAPETOWN

Drawing upon influences such as Kente cloth, Philip Guston, Frank Stella, Bridget Riley, Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg and Color Field painters (among others), Odita shows how politics can become potent and relevant in a color, shape or pattern, as his edgy, hard lines are doorways that open into stories, lives and cultures. Odita perpetuates Guston's legacy to dare say that it is all right to imbue serious abstraction with a regional story about cultural identity, ancient myth or a sentiment like love. *Equalizer*, as well as other painting installations of recent years — *Flow* at the Cincinnati Art Museum, *Give Me Shelter* in the Italian Pavilion at the Venice Biennial, *Fusion* at the Jack Shainman Gallery and *Double Edge* — are proof of this, as they are forceful interventions in visual and narrative space and time.

Odita's unabashed introduction of a linear story submerged within a static painting shimmers dangerously on a literal interpretation. But like Guston, Odita's poetry and images co-exist without word for word description. They abide in each other's company, creating new possibilities, much as objects do in an exhibit. Throughout his career, Odita has consistently curated shows as part of his working process and they have taught him how to create the virtual space unique to his canvases. He curates inside the jagged infrastructure of his own device, carefully placing a metaphor, a color narrative, or an ancient African myth in imaginary spaces. The strength of the concept of his paintings allows him to share with the viewer a full hands-on experience of his world, not just a birds-eye view. He shapes the future of

Odita with his
Give Me Shelter
installation
52nd Venice Biennale International
Art Exhibition, 2007



Odili Donald Odita
Here and There
2008, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 70"
MICHAEL STEVENSON, CAPETOWN

his work by understanding visual art as more than a vehicle for metaphor or only as a visual historical landscape. He understands it as a space, virtual or three-dimensional, where work and ideas are tested.

Odita makes each painting a visual reference to a place that exists behind the surface of the painting and beyond what is perceived with the human eye. Guston's world was tight, dark and concentrated; it is the warmth, humor and knowledge that give his paintings oxygen and light. Odita's work is the opposite — light, airy, vibrating and equally as intense. His is an expression of the personal and spiritual in a subtle, evocative virtual world that is formed, ironically, by the human hand and paint.

Lara Taubman is an art critic and independent curator who is based in New York City.

GLOBAL CONNECTIONS

Happily co-existing among Odili Donald Odita's influences, likes and loves are artists such as Steven Parrino, Luc Tymans, Sol Lewitt and Julian Schnabel, musicians such as Nirvana, Outkast, Gilberto Gil, Os Mutantes and Tropicália, African textiles and his Nigerian father who taught him that tradition does not bind the artist to the past; it also can "bring a culture's sensibility into the present."

International artist Senam Okudzeto lives and works in London, UK; Basel, Switzerland and Accra, Ghana and spends a great deal of time traveling to other places.

Paintings by Odili Donald Odita and Senam Okudzeto were in the Distant Relatives/Relative Distance *exhibition in South Africa that examined the globalization and hybridization of African identity through the work of contemporary artists with African connections who live mainly in Europe or the United States. The show's other "Afropolitan" artists were Julie Mehretu, Wangechi Mutu, Barthélémy Toguo and Owusu-Ankomah, all of whom have exhibited extensively around the world. Curated by Michael Stevenson Contemporary in Capetown, the exhibition was on view in December 2006 at the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg.*

Having been "tasked to forge a sense of self from wildly disparate sources," Taiye Tuakli-Wosornu knows the "Afropolitan" world from inside out. Her father is from Ghana and lives in Al-Khobar, Saudi Arabia. Her Scottish and Nigerian mother lives in Accra, Ghana. Her insider's look inside this world, the catalogue essay for the Distant Relatives/Relative Distance *show, is reprinted here with her permission.*

BYE-BYE, BABAR (OR: WHAT IS AN AFROPOLITAN?)

It's moments to midnight on Thursday night at Medicine Bar in London. Zak, boy-genius DJ, is spinning a Fela Kuti remix. The little downstairs dance floor swells with smiling, sweating men and women fusing hip-hop dance moves with a funky sort of *djembe*. The women show off enormous afros, tiny t-shirts, gaps in teeth; the men those incredible torsos unique to and common on African coastlines. The whole scene speaks of the Cultural Hybrid: kente cloth worn over low-waisted jeans; "African Lady" over Ludacris bass lines; London meets Lagos meets Durban meets Dakar. Even the DJ is an ethnic fusion: Nigerian and Romanian; fair, fearless leader; bobbing his head as the crowd reacts to a sample of *Sweet Mother*.

Senam Okudzeto
Untitled (Large Reclining Nude)
2002/3
arylic on somerset paper
160 x 208 cm
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MICHAEL STEVENSON, CAPE TOWN

Were you to ask any of these beautiful, brown-skinned people that basic question "where are you from?" — you'd get no single answer from a single smiling dancer. This one lives in London but was raised in Toronto and born in Accra; that one works in Lagos but grew up in Houston, Texas. "Home" for them is many things: where their parents are from; where they spend their vacations; where they went to school; where they meet old friends; where they live (or live this year). Like so many African young people working and living in cities around the globe, they belong to no single geography, but feel at home in many. They (read: we) are Afropolitans — the newest generation of African emigrants coming soon, or collected already, at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you. You'll know us when you see us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes, e.g. Ghanaian/Jamaican, Nigerian/Swiss; others are merely cultural mutts: American accent, European affect, African ethos. Most of us are multilingual: in addition to English and a Romantic language or two, we understand some indigenous language(s) and speak a few urban vernaculars. There is at least one place on the Continent to which we tie our sense of self: be it a nation-state (Ethiopia), a city (Ibadan), or simply an Auntie's kitchen. Then there's the G8 city or two (or three) that we know like the backs of our hands, and the institutions (corporate, academic) that know *us* for our famed work ethic. We are Afropolitans — not citizens, but Africans, of the world.

It isn't hard to trace our genealogy. Starting in the 1960's, the young, gifted and broke left Africa in pursuit of higher education and happiness abroad. A study done in 1999 estimated that between 1960 and 1975 about 27,000 highly skilled Africans left the Continent for the West. Between 1975 and 1984, the number shot to 40,000 and then doubled again by 1987, representing about 30% of Africa's highly skilled manpower. The most popular destinations for these emigrants included Canada, Britain, and the United States; but Cold War politics produced unlikely scholarship opportunities in countries like Poland and Germany, as well.

Some three decades later this scattered tribe of pharmacists, physicists, physicians (and the odd polygamist) has set up camp around the globe. The caricatures are familiar. There's the Nigerian physics professor with faux-Coogi sweater; the Kenyan marathonist with long legs and rolled r's; the heavyset Gambian braiding hair in a house that smells of burnt Kanekalon. Even those unacquainted with synthetic extensions can conjure an image of the African immigrant with only the slightest of pop cultural promptings: Eddie Murphy's "Hello, Babar" (in the movie, "Coming to America").

But somewhere between the 1988 release of "Coming to America" and the 2001 crowning of a Nigerian Miss World, the general image of young Africans in the West transmorphed from goofy to gorgeous. Leaving off the painful question of cultural condescension in that beloved film, one wonders what happened in the years between Prince Akeem and Queen Agbani?

One answer is: adolescence. The Africans that left Africa between 1960 and 1975 had children, and most overseas. Some of us were bred on African shores then shipped to the West for higher education; others born in much colder climates and sent home for cultural re-indoctrination. Either way, we spent the 1980s chasing after accolades, eating fufu at family parties and listening to adults argue politics. By the turn of the century (the recent one), we were matching our parents in number of degrees and/or achieving things our "people" in the grand sense only dreamed of. This new demographic — dispersed across places like Brixton, Bethesda, Boston, Berlin — has come of age in the 21st century, redefining what it means to be African. Where our parents sought safety in traditional professions like doctoring, lawyering, banking, engineering, we are branching into fields like media, politics, music, venture capital, design.

Nor are we shy about expressing our African influences (such as they are) in our work. Artists like Keziah Jones, *Trace* founder/editor Claude Gruzintsky, architect David Adjaye, and novelist Chimamanda Achidie exemplify what Gruzintsky calls the "21st century African." What distinguishes this lot and its like (in the West and at home) is a willingness to complicate Africa namely, to engage with, critique, and celebrate the parts of Africa that mean most to them. Perhaps what most typifies the Afropolitan consciousness is this refusal to oversimplify: the effort to understand what is ailing in Africa alongside the desire to honor what is unique. Rather than essentializing the geographical entity, we seek to comprehend its cultural complexity; to honor its intellectual and spiritual legacies; to sustain our parents' values.

For us, being African must *mean* something. The media's portrayals (war, hunger) won't do. Neither will the New World trope of the bumbling, blue-black doctor. Most of us grew up well aware of "coming from" a blighted place, of having last names linked to countries linked, in turn, to corruption. Few of us escaped those nasty "booty-scratcher" epithets, and fewer still that sense of shame when visiting paternal villages. Whether we were ashamed of ourselves for not being more familiar with our parents' culture, or ashamed of that culture for not being more "advanced," can be unclear. What is manifest is the extent to which the modern adolescent African is tasked to forge a sense of self from wildly disparate sources. You'd never know it looking at those dapper lawyers in global firms, but most were once supremely self-conscious of being so "in between." Brown-skinned without a bedrock sense of blackness on the one hand and chided by family members for acting white on the other, young immigrants can get what I call "lost in transnation."

Ultimately, the Afropolitan must form an identity along three dimensions: national, racial, cultural — with subtle tensions in between. While our parents can claim single countries as home, we must *define* our relationship to the places we live: how British or American we are (or act) is in part a matter of affect. Often unconsciously, and over time, we choose which bits of a national identity (from passport to pronunciation) we internalize as central to our personalities. So, too, the way we see our race — whether black or biracial or none of the above — is a question of *politics*, rather than pigment; not all of us claim to be black. Often this relates to the way we were raised, whether proximate to other brown people (e.g. black Americans) or removed. Finally, how we conceive of race will accord with where we locate ourselves in the history that produced "blackness" — and the political processes that continue to shape it.

Then there is that deep abyss of culture, ill-defined at best. One must decide what comprises "African culture" beyond filial piety and pepper soup. The project can be utterly baffling — whether one lives in an African country or not. But the process is deeply enriching, in that it expands one's basic perspective on nation and selfhood. If nothing else, the Afropolitan knows that nothing is neatly black or white; that "to be" *anything* (white, black, American, African) is largely to act the part. Identity itself becomes stable and meaningful where it informs group attachments, *individually* defined.

So then, to "be Nigerian" is to belong to a passionate nation; to "be Yoruba," to be heir to a spiritual depth; to "be American," to ascribe to a cultural breadth; to "be British," to hold the passport. At least, that is what the monikers mean to *me* — and that is the Afropolitan privilege. The acceptance of complexity common to most African cultures is not lost

on her prodigals. Without that intrinsically multi-dimensional thinking, we could not make sense of ourselves.

And if it all sounds a little self-congratulatory, a little "aren't-we-the-coolest-damn people-on-earth?" — I say: yes it is, necessarily. It is high time the African stood up. There is nothing perfect in this formulation; for all our Adjayes and Achidies, there is a brain drain back home. Most Afropolitans could serve Africa better *in* Africa than at Medicine Bar on Thursdays. To be fair, a fair number of African professionals are returning; and there is consciousness among the ones who remain, an acute awareness among this brood of too-cool-for-schools that there's work to be done. There are those among us who wonder to the point of weeping: where next, Africa? When will the scattered tribes return? When will the talent repatriate? What lifestyles await young professionals at home? How to invest in Africa's future? The prospects can seem grim at times. The answers aren't forthcoming. But if there was ever a group who could figure it out, it is this one, unafraid of the questions.

Taiye Tuakli-Wosornu, completed graduate study at Oxford and is writing her first novel in New York with the support of Toni Morrison. She also is working as a television consultant and freelance photographer.

LONDON SEEN

Black Panther: Emory Douglas and the Art of Revolution at Urbis, Manchester, UK, October 30, 2008– April 19, 2009.

When candidate Barack Obama visited London in July of 2008, he was warmly welcomed. Obama's subsequent election was perceived in England, as elsewhere, as the fruition of the Civil Rights Movement. When the former Black Panther minister of culture Emory Douglas visited the city of Manchester in January 2009, he also received a warm welcome. In an interview at Urbis where an exhibition of his work was on view, he was asked his feelings about Obama's election.

The question reflects a consolidation of a range of struggles that today inform communities worldwide. The Urbis exhibition *Black Panther: Emory Douglas and the Art of Revolution* recognized Douglas as "an unsung hero of the modern civil rights movement." Curator Pollyanna Clayton Stamm focused the Black Panther history against a backdrop of late 1960s political events. The exhibition displayed pages of *The Black Panther* newspaper, posters, period photographs of the Black Panthers by Stephen Shames and from the personal collection of Pirkle Jones, along with recent paintings by Douglas. This differed from Sam Durant's presentation of Douglas' work "Within the Black Power Movement" in an earlier exhibition at Los Angeles MOCA and associated monograph, *Black Panther: The Revolutionary Art of Emory Douglas* (New York: Rizzoli, 2007). In the monograph, Kathleen Cleaver, Amiri Baraka, Colette Gaiter, and others discuss Douglas' activities in relation to their own, conveying the distinct philosophies informing the various organizations at the time. Both projects highlighted Douglas's work and influence as the graphic editor of the Party's newspaper, *The Black Panther*, published from 1967 until 1979.

As the minister of culture, Douglas was responsible for putting Panther ideas and goals into visible form. His transformation of the common rhetoric of "pigs" — first as swine hung up after slaughter then as uniformed, upright porcine figures — encapsulates his ability to create cartoons expressing biting contempt for corruption and abuse. His illustrations of the oppressed were just as provocative for portraying African Americans as proud combatants. Douglas stopped depicting armed U.S. citizens after 1971 to comply with the Panther Party's position to "work within the law." He portrayed individuals going about their business, often wearing a button with a slogan or image.

His reverential portraits of Panther leaders incorporated religious iconography while tapping the models of Che Guevara and Mao. As Colette Gaiter explains, Douglas' use of limited colors and bold outlines addressed the challenges of the inexpensive printing technology used to produce *The Black Panther*. Incorporating patterning and photographic collage, he nevertheless created recognizable designs of

Emory Douglas, "We want decent housing fit for shelter of human beings." From *The Black Panther*, July 25, 1970

profile

The *seduction* of order

Odili Donald Odita's distinctive paintings, notable for their vivid colours and rhythmic energies, present the viewer with a distillation of African tradition, modernity and a transnational visual aesthetic, writes A.M. Weaver

A.M. Weaver

The work of Odili Donald Odita exists between two worlds: that of western modernism and traditional African textile design. A Nigerian émigré brought up in the United States, Odita adheres to a reductive aesthetic in form and style and is, broadly speaking, a post-minimalist. He is an artist who straddles distinctive ideological zones, but insists he is uninterested in identity politics. In conversation, Odita, born in Enugu in 1966, concedes that the issue of cultural power and its place in the art market nonetheless intrigues him. His paintings are an attempt to place his art firmly within the western canon while retaining a visual language of vivid colours and rhythmic energies that draws inspiration from African art.

Odita received his Masters in Fine Art from Bennington College, Vermont in 1990. A stronghold of modernist activity from the 1950s through to the 70s, Odita's education encompassed intimate knowledge of Clement Greenberg's assessments of abstraction produced in the 1960s following Abstract Expressionism. In his essay for the 1964 exhibit *Post Painterly Abstraction*, which Greenberg organised, the influential critic argues that art following on the heels of painterly abstraction was not a reaction to it but a continuum. The qualities of clarity and openness in the works of the 31 artists he selected for his show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art constituted a freshness in which geometric regularity called less attention to drawing and stressed lucidity of

colour. This background marked Odita's initial brush with colour-field painting, in particular the works of Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski and Morris Louis; however, he cites the work of Frank Stella, Peter Halley and Josef Albers as being the most influential. Exposed to the activities of various conceptualists active in New York, he initially ventured into photo-based installations, but eventually settled on painting. Asked to crystallise his thoughts on this medium, Odita says: "Painting is something that advances its own form and can advance possibilities of consideration and of existence… it is my means of [articulating] my own purpose, my own sense of intellectual purpose and drive." In many senses, Odita's painterly oeuvre, which ranges from small canvases to large site-specific installations, describes a dialogue between self and reality. Dominant as a force in these paintings is Odita's striking use of colour, especially in his large installation works.

Influenced by his environment and systems of design and pattern, Odita distils his perception within two dimensions that often extend outward, defining an architectonic space

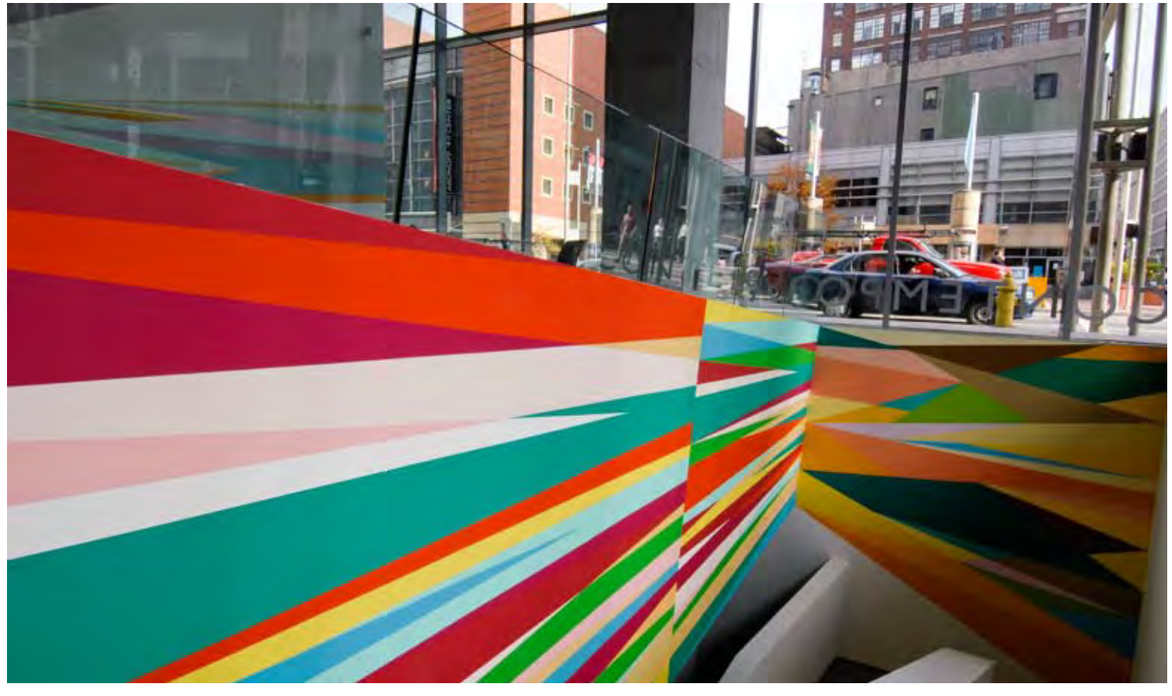
His arresting palette is derived in part from his upbringing in suburban America. During the 1960s and 70s, homes were painted in pastel colours in order to personalise the generic architecture. An avid fan of television and comic books, Odita was influenced by the chromatic colours that appeared at the end of a broadcasting day on television. He uses a myriad of acrylic paints and chooses his colours carefully for each painting.

His enormous canvas work, *Pulse* (2006) – it measures 152.4 x 203.2cm – functions as a large echocardiograph: the horizontal movement of angulated marks and shapes conveys the energy of a recorded life force in rose, mauve and muted crimson. Latent and active force fields converge in Odita's use of vibrant and subdued tertiary colours, combined within angular clusters. Allen Leepa, in a critical anthology on minimalist art published in 1968, describes the 'reality' of minimalism as existing at the meeting point of the inner and outer worlds *in* the painting and not in the mind's eye of the observer. He further explains that the objective of the minimalist artist is to provide clarity and consider the essential aspects of perception. "Minimal art is seen as an effort to deal as directly as possible with the nature of experience and its perception through visual reactions," adds Leepa.

Odita's work is hard to place categorically. However, he does follow some minimalist doctrines in that his marks are based on geometric forms and the flat application of paint is vigilantly measured within taped areas across the canvas. He uses clusters of angulated shapes to construct his canvases. A recent work, *Night's Door*, has the appearance of analytical cubism; he fragments and breaks down his shapes so that sections overlap forming trapezoids and quadrilateral planes. Influenced by his environment and systems of design and pattern, Odita distils his perception within two dimensions that often extend outward, defining an architectonic space.

In recent years, Odita has produced a number of site-specific installations, notably his installation at the entrance to curator Robert Storr's exhibition, *Think with the Senses, Feel with the Mind*, at last year's Venice Biennale. I want to discuss two of these architecturally orientated interventions, both exhibited in the United States last year: *Equalizer*, staged in the Project Room of Harlem's Studio Museum, and *Flow*, presented in the CAC Kaplan Hall of Cincinnati's Contemporary Art Center. Both bring to mind public works by Gene Davis and, more recently, Jim Lambie, a contemporary of Odita. All three artists share a singular, distinctive affinity: colour. Lambie traces rooms in his floor installations and is concerned with the optical plays of colour. While optics is a concern for Odita, he vacillates between using subdued tones and colours in conjunction with dynamic applications of colour that vibrate and shift position in relationship to each other. The interplay of his angular shapes further impacts an overall sense of place. Rather than going for a psychedelic effect, his compositions subtly alter the experience of a room; colour, shape and the direction of Odita's marks determine spatial relationships. Picture windows enhance the unique qualities of *Flow*, which can be viewed internally and externally. In developing plans for this installation, Odita spent time in Kaplan Hall at different times of the day, taking notes on the bustling activity and traffic around the structure; his observations, rendered in sketch form, are reflected in the subsequent installation, which draws on a palette of more than 100 colours.

I visited Odita's studio in Philadelphia, not only to meet the artist in person but also gain insight into the polemical positions and aesthetic attitudes that define contemporary African art. His studio is orderly with shelves full of acrylic paints. While his assistant



aggressively taped areas of his canvas in preparation for adding additional colours, we discussed the position of the presumed marginality of the African artist and his/her journey toward being part of a global art movement. Odita feels that as an African raised in the American mid-west he has taken the entire complex of being black in America and created a cultural product.

Odita came of age as an artist when the work of African American conceptual artists Glenn Ligon, Fred Wilson and Leonardo Drew were gaining widespread attention. At this time, Odita joined forces with two fellow Nigerian expatriates, the painter and scholar Olu Oguibe and curator Okwui Enwezor, helping to establish *Nka*, a magazine focused on art from Africa and the African Diaspora. Along with artist Coco Fusco, New York gallerist Skoto, artist and writer Ike Ude, curator Octavio Zaya, and scholar Salah Hassan, Odita engaged in dialogues that shaped the scope of the magazine. "The imperative was to give contemporary African art a currency, an urgency that made it be seen as serious as the most cutting-edge art forms being produced in the art world," says Odita.

Before settling into his current medium, for a period of about five years starting in1993, Odita produced photo-based installations. However, he always painted and by 1998 began to devote all of his energy to a mode of painting that some view as steeped in twentieth century modernism, a history that has roots based, in part, on work from African antiquity. "My work, in a way, deals with a certain revisionist critique without necessarily being only about that," he says.

Odita's work evidences elements of traditional African aesthetic: the chevron designs of the Kuba, the colour palette of Kente clothe. In conversation, he cites linear and design orientated Uli body art and painting as a reference, which the Nsukka School of thought used as a foundation for its radical practice of artmaking. The actions of Nigeria's Zaria Society predate the activities of the Nsukka School by a decade. In the 1950s, vanguard artists such as Uche Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Yusuf Grillo and Demas Nwoko began to experiment with abstracted elements, shifting from the prevalent naturalistic style that, up until then, had followed a European mode. (Of note, Odita's father, Okechukwu Emanuel Odita, was a member of the Zaria Society.) During the 1970s, the advent of the Nsukka School eventually became the official art of the nation. It has been the recent thrust of Nsukka to promulgate a postmodern agenda. Odita's work parallels that of recent adherents to Nsukka, who are concerned

with how contemporary African art transports itself in the world. His works are philosophically grounded in interpretations that range from direct observation of the interplay between light and colour to the pictorial allegory of migration from Africa to America, as in *Equalizer*. Although not formally tied to Uli, there are indeed political overtones to the underlying explanations of his imagery.

In his 1999 essay, 'Between Worlds: Postmodernism and African Artists in the Western Metropolis', Okwui Enwezor proposes paradigms that have shaped discussions on the challenges confronted by African artists working in, and informed by their presence in western cultural capitals. In this essay Enwezor analyses how identity is mediated through the quest to embrace a "new politics of difference". The cultural world of the African artist in the west, Enwezor states, "represents a plural universe built from the multiplicity of frames that aspire towards the creation of new territories". He uses the term postmodern throughout the text to imply the flux and ambiguity that surrounds the present moment in history. At best this term encompasses an inclusive aesthetic operating from a de-centred core with ample room for the multivalent explorations of artists once considered other or marginalised. Odita operates within this context.

Odita pursues an idea of artistic freedom through abstraction, and his work attempts to push the viewer's vision beyond the formal categories of pure colour and form. "I have been able to find an understanding of freedom and all that this can entail through the notion of possibilities, an aspect inherent and intrinsic [to my] process of painting," he says. His work appeals to the intellectually tenacious viewer who is willing to look deeply for its essence in African tradition, modernity and a transnational visual aesthetic.

A.M. Weaver is a curator and writer based in Philadelphia

52nd VENICE Biennale 2007

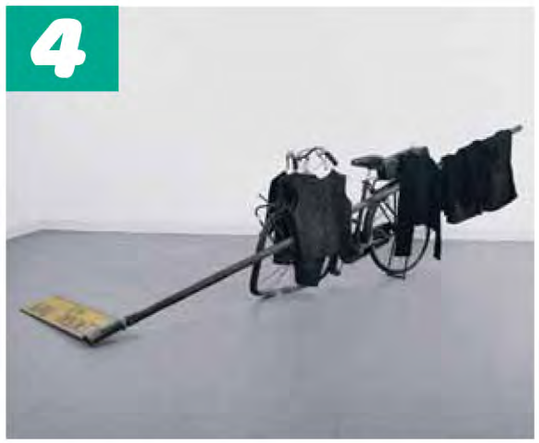
Top Ten

by Christine Y. Kim, Associate Curator

El Anatsui's monumental *Untitled* (2006–7), a mixed-media, woven aluminum, bottle cap and copper wire painting, stretching twenty by thirty feet and draped on the facade of the Fortuny Museum, brings together small, quotidian gestures and architectural grandeur. Also impressive are the artist's works, *Dusasa I* and *II* (2006–07), installed in the Arsenale.

Thomas Demand's *Grotto* (2006), at the Fondazione Prada's space on Giudecca, is the first installation of the artist's large-scale, meticulously constructed, three-dimensional model of the grotto used for his photograph. Seeing the installation along with the final photograph enhances the understanding of and fantasy surrounding the artist's practice.

Steve McQueen's 35 mm film *Gravesend* (2007), installed at the Italian Pavilion, offers a mesmerizing extension of the artist's mining theme and a departure into abstract and lyrical cinema.



David Hammons's various drawings, sculptures and installations at the Palazzo Grassi, featuring work from the Pinault Collection, are of course a treat to see in one place, especially the body-print and rock-head works on the third floor and *Central Park West* (1990), a found-object installation including a bicycle, a street sign and a cassette player playing John Coltrane's *Central Park West*.

Isa Genzken represents Germany in the German Pavilion at the Giardini with *Oil* (2007), a set of whimsical vignettes composed of objects and parts, such as masks, mannequins, luggage and astronaut suits.

The legendary Malian photographer **Malick Sidibé** won the prestigious Golden Lion Award. Selections from the new series *L'Afrique chante contre le SIDA* (2007) are installed in the Arsenale.

Charles Gaines's *Airplanecrash Clock* (1997, 2007) kinetic sculpture and *History of Stars* photo and drawing diptychs (2007) are installed at the Arsenale. Bravo!

Odili Donald Odita's magnetic site-specific wall drawing, *Give Me Shelter* (2007), composed of acrylic latex paint and colored pigment in his signature jagged bands of color, is located at the entry intersection of the Italian Pavilion.

Sophie Calle's video installation, *Pas pu saisir la mort* (2007) in the Italian Pavilion monitors the final moments of her mother as she lies on her deathbed. This challenging, candid, deeply personal, disturbing and beautiful work keeps me thinking, feeling, disbelieving and grieving ...

David Altmejd represents Canada in the Canadian Pavilion at the Giardini with an installation, *The Index* (2007). Lights, camera, action! ☼