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TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA'S VISIONS OF POWER

In their depictions of domination, the artist's works, full of world-building and philosophy, do more than flip the script.

By Zadie Smith

August 10, 2020

"Suspicions Left Behind" is one of forty pictures in "A Countervailing Theory." Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery © Toyin Ojih Odutola

A woman stands in an otherworldly landscape, looking out. The landscape is sublime, though not the European sublime of cliffs, peaks, and mist. Here the sublime is African. It has many textures—conglomerations of stone, waterfalls, verdant grasslands—and may remind Nigerians of their own Jos Plateau. The woman stands with her left leg raised, surveying it all, with no sense of urgency; indeed, she appears to be in a state of philosophical contemplation. She seems assured both of her mastery over this land and of her natural right to it. This sovereignty is expressed primarily by her body—the fabrics she wears, the pose she strikes, all of which find their reflection in the land around her. The same dark lines tracing her impressive musculature render

the rippling rocks; the ridges of her bald head match the ridges in the stone; the luxurious folds of the fabric are answered by the intricate layering of the earth beneath her feet. Toyin Ojih Odutola's "The Ruling Class (Eshu)" appears, at first glance, to be a portrait of dominion. For to rule is to believe the land is made in your image, and, moreover, that everyone within it submits to you. Structurally, it recalls Caspar David Friedrich's depiction of Enlightenment dominion, "Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog": the same raised left leg, the same contemplation of power in tranquillity, the echoes of hair, pose, and fabric in the textured landscape. But the red-headed man with the cane and his back to us has been replaced by a black woman with a staff, facing forward. The script has been flipped.

The show containing this image is called "A Countervailing Theory." Countervail: to offset the effect of something by countering it with something of equal force. The word could not be more apposite. We are in a cultural moment of radical countervailing, perhaps as potent as that experienced in the sixties, when what was offered as counter to the power of the gun, for example, was a daisy placed in its barrel. A period of hierarchical reversal, or replacement, of this for that. And "The Ruling Class" might seem wholly part of this countervailing movement, oppositional and constructed of opposites: black replacing white, by way of a restricted black-and-white palette of charcoal, chalk, and pastel. A picture that offers a new image of power as counter to an old one.

"The Ruling Class (Eshu)," from 2019. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery © Toyin Ojih Odutola

But that's not the whole story. And Ojih Odutola—who was born in 1985, in Ife, Nigeria—is an unusually story-driven visual artist. Her 2017 breakout show, at the Whitney Museum, "To Wander Determined," with its depiction of two imagined Nigerian dynasties united in marriage, involved world-building equal to that of any novel, and in "A Countervailing Theory" the "story," as the title implies, is not merely a flipped script but also a theory concerning countervailing itself. The forty pictures in the show are hung on a curving wall at the Barbican, in London, and unfold sequentially, like a Chinese scroll. Together, they lead us deep into the wilderness of our present ideas about power—who should have it, how it should be wielded—and then out again, a journey as much philosophical as visual. What are the possibilities and the limits of countervailing, as a political or an aesthetic project? Is it sufficient merely to counter? Or might a higher synthesis be conceivable?

The project started, according to Ojih Odutola, with a "wandering charcoal line," which she followed, "rather blindly, letting my mark making guide me . . . to see what aesthetic characteristics and proclivities recur and how to incorporate these as motifs in the work." (Though Ojih Odutola's images are often mistaken for painting, she has so far worked exclusively in pen, pencil, charcoal, and pastel.) Following this line, she arrived at an unexpected destination, framed as a question. "What would it look like if women were the only imperialists in known histories across the globe?" Which led to another: If the powerful women she was drawing were the masters, over whom did they have mastery? The story developed:

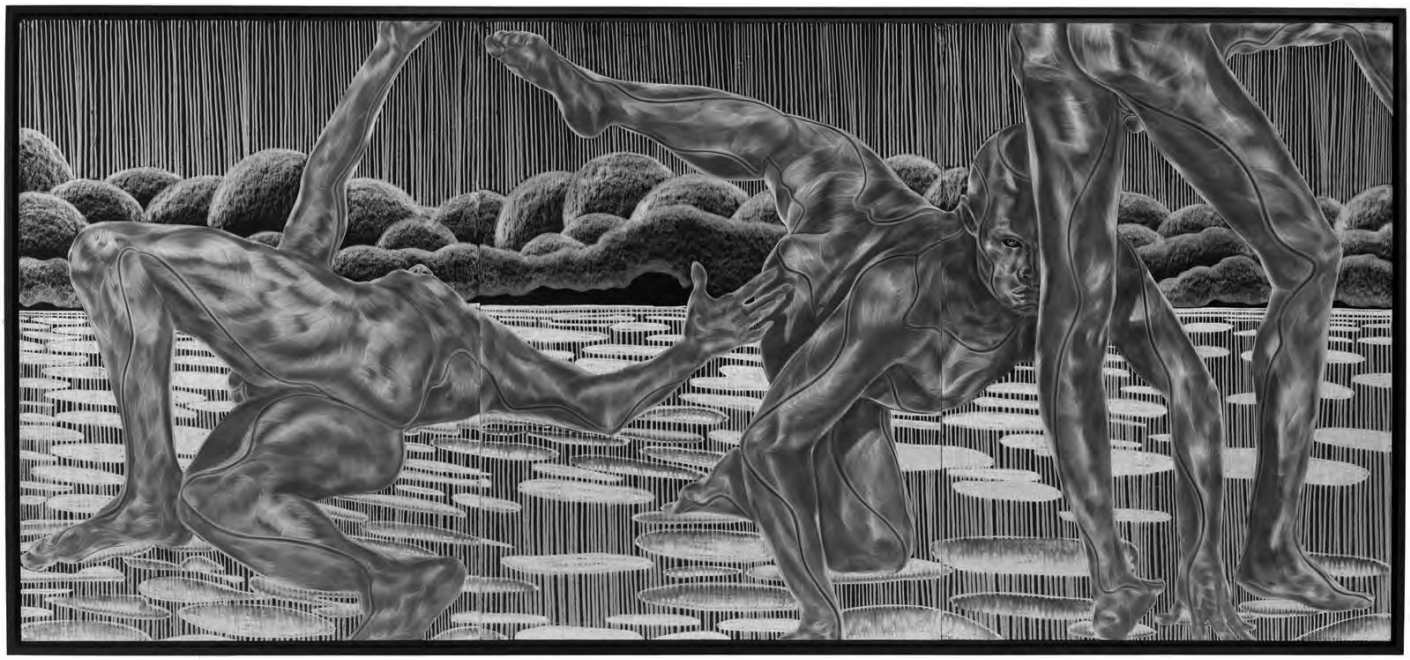
My initial aim was to tell a tale of two beings, one born, another made/manufactured, who exist within a system that enterprises and stratifies war, imperialism and hierarchies—and how these two mitigate their respective lives within it to, ultimately, cross over and come together to bring the whole system down. But they fail.

"This Is How You Were Made; Final Stages," from 2019. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery © Toyin Ojih Odutola

The two beings are Akanke, who is a member of the Eshu—the ruling class of women—and Aldo, one of the Koba, male humanoids manufactured to work for the Eshu, mining and cultivating food. The Koba far outnumber the Eshu—just as slave populations usually dwarf their overseers—but, like slaves, their lives are not their own and they live in fear that their masters will "decommission" them at any time, for any reason. The first eight pictures give us an idea of what it is to be Aldo. Like all Koba, seams run through his body, etched into the skin, through a process implemented, as another image, "This Is How You Were Made; Final Stages," suggests, by the Eshu. And, as is true for all beings, Aldo's own existence seems to be a puzzlement to him, although perhaps, as an oppressed being, he puzzles over it more intensely than the ruling class, who, in their tranquillity, tend to think only of their own power. In "Introductions: Early Embodiment (Koba)," this existential anxiety is expressed through the depiction of hard-to-parse liminal spaces, for Koba seem to come into being in a zone somewhere between the bardo, the depths of a mine, and a penal colony—amid circles, lines, waves, and shadows, where it is difficult to say what is floor or ceiling, ground or sky. In this strange, transitional place, Koba avert their eyes; they seem fearful; each grips his own naked body, which appears to be his only possession.

The contrast with what we glimpse, in "Unsupervised Education," of Eshu childhood is striking. Young girls, future rulers, roam their environment freely, evidently curious, touching and examining the land, even breaking off pieces of it, at ease within their surroundings and never doubting that ease. When Ojih Odutola was asked about some of her sources of inspiration for Eshu society, she offered a line of Camille Paglia's—"Society is a system of inherited forms reducing our humiliating passivity to nature"—and also the geometric costumery of the Dutch designer Iris van Herpen. It is easy to see, in the imperious Eshu, the ways in which this feared vulnerability is systemically disguised and obscured, by staffs and helmets, by bodies trained to show no sign of weakness or potential decay, and by clothing that, like van Herpen's, mimics the patterns of nature and aspires to nature's authority of form.

And yet Ojih Odutola never loses sight of the mutual melancholy that pervades asymmetric relationships of power. In "Suspicions Left Behind," an Eshu woman crouches on the ground, her staff set aside, her helmet in her hand. She has a troubled look on her face. What is she thinking? Has she begun to suspect (like many a colonialist before her) that the asymmetric relationship between the Eshu and the Koba is untenable? For what Hegel revealed about the master-slave dialectic—and Frantz Fanon took and usefully applied to the asymmetries within both slavery and the colonial relationship—applies equally to the Eshu and the Koba: the Koba recognize the Eshu only on pain of punishment or death, while the Eshu recognize the Koba only as far as doing so supports their own distorted self-recognition as "masters." And, further, as it is in slavery, the more the Eshu rely on the Koba's labor, the more dependent they in fact become on the Koba, and the more the Koba understand their own creativity and usefulness vis-à-vis the land, and demand to be truly recognized. In this mournful fable of mutual misrecognition, the secret relationship that we see develop between one Eshu, Akanke, and one Koba, Aldo, results in the creation of a third kind of being (conceived, in this world, through the act of cunnilingus—the Koba have no penises). In "Consequences Unforeseen," twin fetuses emerge, half Eshu, half Koba, the product of a disruptive affection.



"Mating Ritual," from 2019. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery © Toyin Ojih Odutola

These future beings would seem to lend visual expression to Fanonian ideas of hybridity, and to offer a promising departure from a Manichaean world. But hybridity alone is insufficient. There is still the law—unjust, half blind, written by the tranquil conquerors—and in the concluding series of images we see the law crush Aldo (he is accused of killing an Eshu, a crime he did not commit). Akanke and her female partner, another Eshu, do not intervene, and Aldo, as a subject with no rights, who cannot be saved by love alone, perishes. An important lesson: recognition of the other is never solely an individual's gift to give. Love is not law. The system in its entirety must recognize the other.

Instead, the system is oblivious; it is always facing the other way. In "To the Next Outpost," Akanke gazes out toward a distant point of her people's colonies while Aldo, facing the viewer, carries a heavy cable, his labor unacknowledged. In "Mating Ritual," we see several Koba, naked as ever, bending their bodies into striking vogue-like shapes, all without actually touching one another; perhaps sexual activity between them is only psychic or virtual. No Eshu are present, but we can assume they know little

of the mating rituals of their underlings. Why would they imagine a complex culture exists within a community they have refused to recognize as autonomous? In truth, power sees so little. Ojih Odutola herself had cause to note this paradox when she came across another vital reference point for "A Countervailing Theory," an installment of the BBC's 2010 radio series "A History of the World in 100 Objects." The episode in question concerned an example of one of Nigeria's greatest art treasures, the sculpted Ife heads, which, when it was first discovered, in 1910, by the anthropologist Leo Frobenius, was believed to have been created by Greek "Atlantians," so improbable did it seem to Frobenius that such fine work could be the product of "savage" Africans on African soil. (Modern scholarship suggests that the heads were sculpted sometime around the fifteenth century, exactly where they were found.) For Ojih Odutola, this absurd analysis is not only a pathetic error of the past but a continuing problem:

How could such a vivid imagination be afforded to a very misguided German anthropologist—to the point of insult in concocting such a tale—yet the very creations of our ancestors and that of our own today are seen with such limited scope and complexity?

Listening to the episode, I was struck not only by the ugly racial theory but by the form of the countervail, which was offered, in the episode, by the Nigerian poet and novelist Ben Okri:

The presence of tranquillity in a work of art speaks of a great internal civilization. Because you can't have the tranquillity without reflection, you can't have the tranquillity without having asked the great questions about your place in the universe, and having answered those questions to some degree of satisfaction. And that, for me, is what civilization is.

It is, of course, natural that when we are "othered" by the deficient colonial imagination we should want to defend ourselves against the accusation of "savagery" by asserting our own claim to "civilization." However, I couldn't help but remind myself that what is called "civilization" always and everywhere has its discontents, that is, those people who are not satisfied by your answers. When Walter Benjamin claimed that every document of civilization is at the same time a document of barbarism, he made no exceptions, and, painful as it can be to acknowledge, the historical fact remains that the same community that made the exquisite Ife heads also proved capable of slave raids, of selling their fellow-Africans to European slavers, just as the same culture that produced Constable conceived the Royal African Company, which issued slave-trading licenses to the merchants and middlemen of a thriving global business. When we are tranquil, when we believe ourselves perfectly civilized, it is usually because the claims of others are invisible to us. And there are always claims.

"Unsupervised Education," from 2019. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery © Toyin Ojih Odutola

Ojih Odutola's radical visual reversals function like thought experiments that take us beyond the merely hierarchical. By positioning the unexpected figure of the black woman as master, as oppressor, she suspends, for a moment, our focus on the individual sins of people—the Mississippi overseer, the British slave merchant, the West African slave raider—and turns it back upon enabling systems. It was a racist global system of capital and exploitation—coupled with a perverse and asymmetric understanding of human resource and value—that allowed the trade in humans to occur, and although that trade no longer exists in its previous form, many of its habits of mind persist. In "A Countervailing Theory," the habit of thought that recognizes some beings and ignores others is presented to us as an element of a physical landscape, the better to emphasize its all-encompassing nature. That system is the air Akanke and Aldo breathe, the bodies they're in, the land they walk on. For Ojih Odutola, it is expressed by one unending, unfurling charcoal line:

The purpose of beginning the story from the perspective of Aldo, one who is subjugated, is intentional: to show how easily one can be indoctrinated into a systemic predicament. Between Aldo and Akanke, there isn't a clear demarcation of good or bad with regard to their respective worlds and who they are. The system in which they coexist is illustrated through the striated systems in place—with literal motifs of lines throughout the pictures—representing how the system is ever present and felt, but not explicitly stated. The system is fact.

How can such systems be dismantled? Surely, as Audre Lorde knew, it is not by using the master's tools. "A Countervailing Theory" offers some alternative possibilities. Here love is radical—between women, between men, between women and men, between human and nonhuman—because it forces us into a fuller recognition of the other. And cunnilingus is radical, and seeing is radical, and listening is radical, for the same reason. We know we don't want to be victims of history. We know we refuse to be slaves. But do we want to be masters—to behave like masters? To expect as they expect? To be as tranquil and entitled as they are? To claim as righteous our decision not to include them in our human considerations? Are we content that all our attacks on them be ad hominem, as they once spoke of us? If our first response to these portraits of black, female masters is some variation on #bowdownbitches or #girlboss, well, no one can deny the profound pleasures of role reversal, of the flipped script, but when we speak thus we must acknowledge that we can make no simultaneous claim to having put down the master's tools. Akanke is in these images—but so is Aldo. He must be recognized. The dream of Frantz Fanon was not the replacement of one unjust power with another unjust power; it was a revolutionary humanism, neither assimilationist nor supremacist, in which the Manichaean logic of dominant/submissive as it applies to people is finally and completely dismantled, and the right of every being to its dignity is recognized. *That* is decolonization.

One of the premises of this complex visual tale is that everything we see on the walls is archeology: pictographic images found in a black-shale deposit, with Ojih Odutola playing the role of anthropologist, directing the research. I realized, working through these documents of a vanished system, how indoctrinated I am within my own systemic predicament, for I read "Parable Rock, Riyom, Nigeria, c. 2200 BC"—in which the heads of Akanke and Aldo are carved in stone, pressed lovingly together, and loom over the land—the same way I read Stone Mountain, in Georgia, or Mt. Rushmore, or the many giant Stalins that once dominated the landscape of the Soviet Union, that is, as an example of sentimental and deceitful state-sanctioned memory. But to the artist herself, I discovered, this rendering in rock of Akanke and Aldo is sincere—a celebration. It speaks of two beings who hoped to start a revolution by genuinely recognizing each other, in their full selves, and thus momentarily challenged a system expressly constructed to keep them apart. It almost worked. ♦

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ART SY

July 8, 2020
By Gabrielle Bruney

The Enigmatic Stories beneath Toyin Ojih Odutola's Lush Drawings

Left: Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Untitled (Tokyo, 2017)*, 2018-20. © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Right: Portrait of Toyin Ojih Odutola by Beth Wilkinson. Courtesy of the artist.

In Paul Thomas Anderson's 2017 film *Phantom Thread*, Daniel Day-Lewis's character, a fashion designer, embroiders the garments he makes with secret messages of his choosing. Customers may eventually own his work, subsuming the dresses he creates into their lives and habits. But each will forever hold the covert mark of its creator.

Toyin Ojih Odutola is an acclaimed visual artist, not a fashion designer, but she said that her creative process bears some similarities. She's long made texts to accompany her heavily layered portrait drawings, but has rarely exhibited these passages. Instead, they've been rendered tokens secretly imbued in the works, invisible to everyone but her.

Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Nanban*, 2020. © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

But the pieces in her latest show, “Tell Me a Story, I Don’t Care If It’s True,” currently displayed in Jack Shainman Gallery’s digital viewing room—and headed to a forthcoming exhibition in New York planned for September—were created largely while Ojih Odutola lived in lockdown. The solitude of life during the COVID-19 pandemic left her particularly curious about the inner lives of others, and perhaps willing to invite viewers into a new level of intimacy with her work. The show she created largely consists of diptychs—drawings paired with written vignettes. “I took the thread out,” she said, “and just laid it there alongside the dress.”

Working primarily in graphite and colored pencils, Ojih Odutola creates portraits lush with yearning—works filled with quiet worlds and enigmatic dramas. So it’s fitting that, with the works in “Tell Me a Story,” she grapples with both the importance of narratives, her role as artist and raconteur, and the singular storytelling powers that lie at the intersection of images and text.

Left: Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Chosen*, 2020. © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.
Right: Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Homeroom*, 2020. © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Most of the works in the show are tightly framed portraits of solitary subjects; their faces could exist in thousands of contexts. Some of the accompanying vignettes offer relatively straightforward guides, as in the affectionate *Chosen* (2020). The piece depicts Black girls on their way to a show, wearing matching

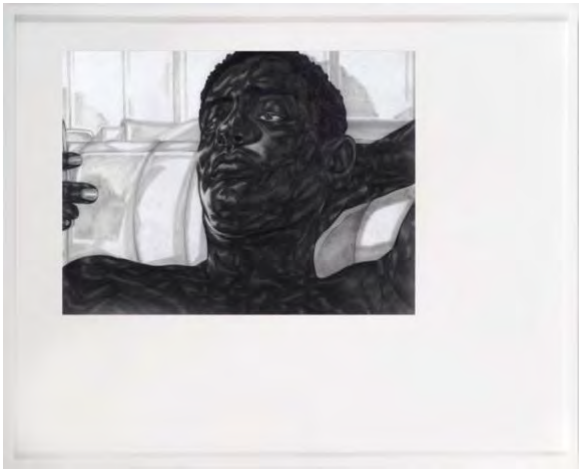
white tops and pearl earrings, as they stop to interrogate their reflections. The text takes the form of a dialogue: “I’m tryin’ to get *chose*,” one says. “If we had the option, we wouldn’t choose ourselves,” her friend quips in response.

Others texts are more cryptic. *Both* (2020) features the face of a man, his mouth and chin out of frame, against a mottled yet luminous red background; his eyes are wide and search upwards. Is he guarding against a looming threat? Or do his arching eyebrows convey simple skepticism? The single line paired with the work answers this question, and any other conjunctive question posed by its subject or viewer: “It can be both.”

Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Both*, 2020. © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Other pieces lack text altogether. One of the most arresting works in the series, *Streets Ain’t Ready* (2020), depicts a young man lounging shirtless in a summery malaise infused with languid nobility, cell phone in hand but held at the very edge of the frame.

“One of the things I struggled with throughout my career, and probably will for the rest of my life,” said Ojih Odutola, “is that I give too much information.” She was perhaps being overly self-critical, but this concern for striking a balance between ambiguity and certainty, disclosure and opacity, pervades her work.



Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Streets Ain't Ready*, 2020. © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Ojih Odutola was born in Nigeria in 1985 and raised in Alabama, and primarily draws Black figures. Especially in times marked by heightened racial anxiety, there’s a desire by the white world to read Black

art as being biographical, and to press artists into roles as “edgy” but ultimately unchallenging educators, offering a Rosetta Stone to their cultures. Ojih Odutola nimbly navigates these expectations, weaving biographical elements into her works entirely on her own terms, and wielding full control over her explanatory power over the narratives she tells.

To Ojih Odutola, the expectation that her work be biographical “is an imperialist position.” It’s white audiences saying, “‘Okay. I don’t understand what you are. Make it into a bite-sized form so that I can digest it. Make it more palatable for my mind and my tongue,’” she said.

Left: Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Every Inch*, 2020. © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Right; Toyin Ojih Odutola, *For Evidence*, 2020. © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

“Yes, I was born in Nigeria. Yes, my family is Yoruba and Igbo,” she continued. “These are things that I start from. They are not an endpoint. I know I keep talking about my biography as an obfuscation—because it is.”

Still, she refuses to squeeze herself into a corner of imposed absolutes by rejecting biographical artistic ties altogether. Between 2016 and 2018, she drew a three-part series that imagined a present-day Nigeria untouched by colonialism. The works—some of which were included in her 2017–18 solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art, “To Wander Undetermined”—feature members of two fictional patrician families, the Emeka and Omodele, who are united through the marriage of their sons. Against this broadly sketched background, Ojih Odutola drew scenes both familiar and enigmatic. One especially gentle work features a small boy looking nervously out of the confines of his bed, titled First Night at Boarding School (2017). Others hold their secrets more closely, like the portrait of four well-dressed women called The Adventuress Club, Est. 1922 (2016).

Left: Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Sadie* (Zadie Smith), 2018-19. © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Right: Toyin Ojih Odutola, *How Far*, 2020. © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Acclaimed writer Zadie Smith, who was portrayed by Ojih Odutola for a commission at the National Portrait Gallery in London that was unveiled this week, recalled in an interview with art historian Katy Hessel and the artist that visiting the Whitney show was like “walking into a novel.”

“Not only because it was filled with fully imagined and animated people within a dense narrative,” Smith continued, “but because the world is so self-sufficient, so obviously the product of a singular, obsessive vision and so independent of reality (while using some of the tools of realism). Yet each picture, despite its roots in the imagined, gives the sense of being absolutely necessary—of having to be exactly as it is. That mixture of the imagined and the urgent is what really struck me.”

Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Tell Me A Story, I Don't Care If It's True*, 2020. © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

The Emeka and Omodele series made use of text as well, with explanatory passages outlining in broad strokes these families and their worlds, and, in one case, through a tender letter from one fictional father to his son. In the mythology of the Emeka and Omodele’s world, Oijh Odutola positioned herself as a secretary, managing communications for her high-born employers.

Ojih Odutola is returning to specifically Nigerian themes with her upcoming show at the Barbican, which is planned to open this August, after being postponed due to COVID-19. “A Countervailing Theory” weaves tales of imagined Nigerian mythology that tacitly offsets imperialist mythology projected upon the nation. As the country is ramping up its mining industry, Ojih Odutola’s work imagines that one such operation stumbles upon ancient pictographs from a hitherto unknown Central Nigerian civilization. The preview images of the works suggest a new style for the artist, transforming her signature sinewy skin into ashen, humanoid figures formed of gently interlocking segments. Ojih Odutola positions herself as a liaison for the works, acting as an archaeologist charged with deciphering them.

Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Ten Minutes*, 2020. © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

In making herself a neutral translator rather than creator, Ojih Odutola subverts biographical expectations, placing herself at the periphery of the stories she tells. But her attraction to these communicator roles also has personal roots. When she was a child, newly arrived in the U.S., she struggled to understand English language aphorisms and slang. Later, she realized that drawing helped her to make sense of layered meanings that had once seemed inscrutable.

This interpreter framing may be absent in her Jack Shainman show, but its title’s testament to the power of stories, both real and imagined, raises similar themes. “The archaeologist’s role, the private secretary—these ruses aren’t meant to be glib,” Ojih Odutola said. “I’m trying to say that as an artist, my role is to help you see beyond the confines of a limited set of meanings and explore a wider array.”

CNN style

June 4, 2020
By Jacqui Palumbo

'Skin is a terrain': Nigerian-American artist Toyin Ojih Odutola on drawing intricate portraits of black life

Credit: Toyin Ojih Odutola.

Nigerian-American artist Toyin Ojih Odutola is known for her rich, textural portraits of black life, layered through intricate ballpoint pen, charcoal and pastel.

Born in 1985, Ojih Odutola is fundamentally a storyteller, influenced by the narrative traditions of her childhood. Her 2017 show at the Whitney Museum, her first solo exhibition in New York, unfolded a dual, interconnected narrative about two fictional aristocratic families in Nigeria.

More recently, when the Barbican Centre in London closed due to Covid-19 restrictions in March, it was just days before her first UK exhibition, "A Countervailing Theory," was set to open. Now, with the show postponed, Ojih Odutola has put together a virtual exhibition for New York's Jack Shainman Gallery, "Tell Me a Story, I Don't Care If It's True," made primarily of works created while the artist was at home over the past few months.

Ojih Odutola is exhibiting new work, made during lockdown, at a virtual show for New York's Jack Shainman Gallery. Credit: Toyin Ojih Odutola.

Her yet-to-be-seen Barbican show centers around myth-making and features 40 drawings based on an ancient legend, set in Nigeria, that the artist imagined herself. Her more intimate virtual show for Jack Shainman, meanwhile, focuses on solitary, free-flowing stories told through images and text.

Here, Ojih Odutola discusses both exhibitions, her rich exploration of black identity and how art can be a balm and a space for agency in a time of crisis.

Ojih Odutola's 2017 show at the Whitney in New York helped raise her international profile. Credit: Beth Wilkinson/Toyin Ojih Odutola.

CNN: Can you walk us through what your Barbican show will look like when it's unveiled?

Toyin Ojih Odutola: Some pieces are seven feet tall and some are really, really small. It's all based on a myth I wrote last year involving an ancient civilization and set in Plateau State in central Nigeria. For me, it was a need to delve into visual storytelling in a way that was engaging and different, and felt very present.

There are these striations throughout each drawing, and they may look like a decorative motif, but in fact, it's the system at work. When you see a drawing fully populated with these lines, you're seeing the system that is not spoken, not seen, but is everywhere in the world of these characters. It influences and affects them but they don't acknowledge it. It's just there. So of course it affects everything.

(The exhibition) deals with gender, power, hierarchies, oppression and imperialism in a way that I hope, once it's unveiled, is very subtle and nuanced and talks about the insidious nature of systemic oppression.

The Barbican show gave Ojih Odutola the opportunity to work on an ambitious scale, mixing large-scale and intimate monochrome works based on an imagined ancient myth. Credit: Toyin Ojih Odutola/Barbican.

How did your new virtual exhibition, "Tell Me a Story, I Don't Care If It's True," come about?

The title of the show came to me in February before lockdown. It was something that felt right and applicable to the time. It's a series of diptychs, standalone drawings and standalone text works. They're stories that came to mind, which was quite new for me because I tend to plan things a lot. This show was much more introspective.

These stories are anecdotal; they're isolated vignettes. There's not too much context, but just enough information to understand. There's a conversation happening between image and text. In one, you encounter a figure leaning against a couch, and you may have your ideas about what that figure is thinking -- the interiority of that moment. And then you read the text, and go back and forth between the two, and form your own meaning.

Viewership is an activity. Take a moment, take a beat. I hope that it's a way to question what you see and read.

Which oral or written traditions related to myths have influenced you?

I grew up in a household where the oratory was the means. Gathering around and hearing someone tell a tale is a huge part of Nigerian culture. I also grew up in a house with two amazingly funny parents who love to tell stories about anything. I've always treasured that. And it wasn't until I got much older that I realized how precious it was to have that experience and to have access to that.

When I first started my career, I was just drawing figures and not really thinking about narrative. But there's a wealth of knowledge that I already have in my own personal history and experience -- and I can apply that to a visual narrative and really help people see the possibilities of figurative work.

Ojih Odutola is exhibiting new work, made during lockdown, at a virtual show for New York's Jack Shainman Gallery. Credit: Toyin Ojih Odutola.

I'm heavily influenced by comic books and animation. For the Barbican show, engaging with epic mythology was my way of being completely free and creating something from scratch. Unlike "Tell Me a Story, I Don't Care If It's True," there's no text (in the Barbican show) -- there's no reference for the audience, and everything is otherworldly and strange. But what I hope is that as they walk through that space, they start to acclimate themselves to my visual language.

You often explore the texture and meaning of skin in your work. How has this evolved with your practice?

Initially I wanted to figure out a way to visually translate what skin felt like. I use sinewy lines; it's very layered, and I was mostly doing ballpoint pen ink works. And then I began including other drawing materials like charcoal and pastel, and now, most recently, colored pencil and graphite.

Ojih Odutola compares black skin to water, calling it "a mercurial surface, a terrain...a place where so much beauty and positivity proliferates." Credit: Toyin Ojih Odutola/Barbican.

When I think about the surface of skin I think about the work of multimedia artist Roni Horn, who uses water as a metaphor for a surface that's ambiguous and ever-changing. I think about skin in a very similar light. Skin is a terrain. It's a landscape that you project meanings onto. It has its own history.

When I look at black skin, I think of it as a mercurial surface -- a terrain, a construct, a projection, but also a place where so much beauty and positivity proliferates. It includes so much and it holds so much.

Following the death of George Floyd, there's been so much conversation about black trauma, depictions of black people in the media and how those images are circulated. How do you think art can play a role at this time?

There's a lot of noise -- images can be noisy. But with art, it's just you and this work. You're in dialogue with it, and there's no right or wrong way to engage. Art provides the opportunity for people to be still, to think and digest this moment and try to understand it.

Ojih Odutola wants her art to provide a space through which viewers can reflect and arrive at their own interpretations. Credit: Toyin Ojih Odutola.

I have made a pact with myself, as an image-maker, that if I am going to contribute images to the plethora of those available on the internet that I will not show black pain, deaths or trauma.

That's my choice. And if you are an artist who does deal with those things, fine. I'm not saying it's right or wrong, but for me it's very important that I provide images and texts that give people something else to engage with because we already know that trauma and pain is a sad and unfortunate thing that connects black people globally.

Black people are catalysts. In every society we've been a part of, our culture has left an indelible mark. That is no accident. And so we shouldn't always think that we're coming from a place of lack, that we are powerless. I'm not saying that these aren't realities. But it's not how we should read ourselves as a community, as a collective (and) as a diverse, brilliant diaspora.

And as someone who's a part of the diaspora, I want to give people space to engage with potential, to engage with our capabilities. Yes, they are afraid of us because they don't know what we're capable of. But *we* should not be afraid of what we are capable of.

NEW YORK

June 22, 2020
By Jerry Saltz

25 Notable New Releases Over the Next Two Weeks

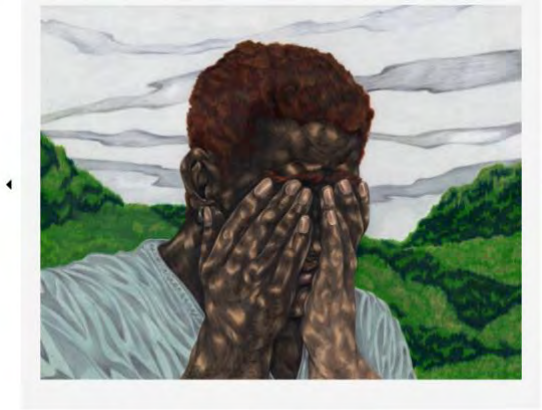
To Do: June 24–July 8
Our biweekly guide on what to see, hear, watch, and read.

Art
1. See Toyin Ojih Odutola
A visual novelist.
The social withdrawal of COVID-19 and psychic outrage over police brutality smash into one another and make sparks in Toyin Ojih Odutola's new series of drawings, "Tell Me a Story, I Don't Care If It's True." Her palette and dense figurative compositions are prismatic laceworks of heaven, glimmering, shifting graphic fields of flickering color that congeal into images, narratives, and abstractions. Ojih Odutola has pushed her art to greater visual intensity and more complex compositional power. This body of work leaves her at the apex of her artistic powers and ready for even greater heights. I can imagine Rubens-size images adorning municipal halls. —*Jerry Saltz*
jackshainman.com.

June 6, 2020
By Editors

"Tell Me A Story, I Don't Care If It's True": New Works on Paper by Toyin Ojih Odutola

Jack Shainman Gallery // June 01, 2020



"I go back and forth between wanting to be abundantly simple and maddeningly complex." This quote is attributed to the late great Californian artist, John Baldessari, whose conceptual works actually seemed to be perfectly defined by his own words here. For obvious reasons, this impresses me. To be able to so perfectly define what it is you do (or attempt to do), is not an easy task. Artists, or at least a good many of them, let their work do the talking, and perhaps leave behind only a few interviews throughout their careers that define a view on their own practice. One of the reasons I love Nigerian-born, NYC-based Toyin Ojih Odutola, cover artist of our November 2017 issue, is how wonderfully she can describe the simplest and most complex parts of her practice, either in essays or even an Instagram post. Her latest show of works on paper, *Tell Me A Story, I Don't Care If It's True*, a viewing room show with Jack Shainman Gallery, is another opportunity to experience her words, which you can read below.

When engaging with image-making, suspicions around legibility and interpretation often come to mind. As with the written text, visual language has a set of symbols which can direct a reader to a frame of meanings. For instance, when you hear or read the word, "chair," a series of images come to mind that represent an object upon which one can sit. Even with more abstract descriptors, such as "love," one's emotions and experiences help render a picture. How might this translate in a figurative drawing? Does seeing a picture of a red chair read the same as someone reading that reference? What happens when an image and text work in tandem? What faculties of understanding are needed when a text reads as "chair," but the image depicts infatuation or a loss of love? Does a third meaning arrive by combining the two? I'm often fascinated with how miscommunications happen and what the imagination conjures in misconstrued spaces—the gulfs between what is intended and how it is received. There' lies possibility for stories to emerge from within these spaces of missed connections.

With past solo exhibitions, Untold Stories*, 2015 (Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis) and* Of Context and Without*, 2015 (Jack Shainman Gallery), I have tried and failed to explore this fascination serially: the unreliability of how a story is presented via text and/or image, which meanings prevail, and what is conjured from the juxtapositions. Sometimes an image may seem unquestioned, but its title or accompanying text renders it ambiguous.* With Tell Me A Story, I Don't Care If It's True*, I'm attempting to question proclivities towards interpretation and the degrees of bias that effect legibility. The invented stories presented in this series of diptychs and standalone works engage with variables, be they irreverent, painful, humorous, and disturbing— the many facets of life and our attempts to communicate these moments. Contexts here are anecdotal: two teenagers rambling before attending a show, a seductive monologue on a train, a woman presenting a lecture, a man questioning his desires, an encounter with a lifeless body. Whatever came to mind, I wrote and drew them out.*

In a time when it seems our priorities are placed on certainty and how to control output amidst a plethora of information that also feels protean and deeply influential, drawing out these vignettes was a means of understanding for me. The works were created using colored pencil, graphite and ink at random, yet seeing them collectively, I sense a yearning. As if, in my attempts at understanding the activity of creating them superseded my intentions; the very conundrum I aimed to solve. Who am I to say what these works mean, but if I present them in such a way as to leave room for others to partake in the translation does that counter the underlying yearning? Exactitude is elusive. Now completed, I'm not where I was when I began the series, but the frame of meaning has tightened. While discussing the series with Reginald Moore, he stated what seems at the crux of this project: "We tend to tell people the things that make us feel better in the telling. It may or may not be what they want or need to hear, but at least we feel better. Is that deceptive or just another means of getting along in the world?" If this is where we gather our truths, then I understand it. In the end, you just don't know. Sometimes, you have to trust yourself. —Toyin Ojih Odutola, 22 May 2020

whitewall

June 9, 2020
By Lola Desmole

Toyin Ojih Odutola's "Tell Me A Story, I Don't Care If It's True"

Left: Toyin Ojih Odutola, "For All the Wrong Reasons," 2020, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman. Right: Toyin Ojih Odutola, "Every Inch," 2020, pencil and ink on Dura-Lar, 11 x 14 inches, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman.

Toyin Ojih Odutola's "Tell Me A Story, I Don't Care If It's True" is currently on view online with Jack Shainman Gallery. The artist is known for her arresting multimedia drawings exploring identity and story-telling. She works in pen, pencil, pastel, and charcoal to create detailed, layered work.

In this new series, Ojih Odutola investigates the connection between image and text, and how that relationship influences the interpretation of the work. "What happens when an image and text work in tandem?" asks the artist in a statement. "I'm often fascinated with how miscommunications happen and what the imagination conjures in misconstrued spaces—the gulfs between what is intended and how it is received. There lies the possibility for stories to emerge from within these spaces of missed connections."

The images feature what feels like private moments: reclining on a sofa looking at one's phone just out of frame; taking a selfie in the bathroom; head against the pillow, asleep in bed; gazing into the distance, earbuds in.

"Sometimes an image may seem unquestioned, but its title or accompanying text renders it ambiguous," says Ojih Odutola. "With 'Tell Me A Story, I Don't Care If It's True,' I'm attempting to question proclivities towards interpretation and the degrees of bias that affect legibility."

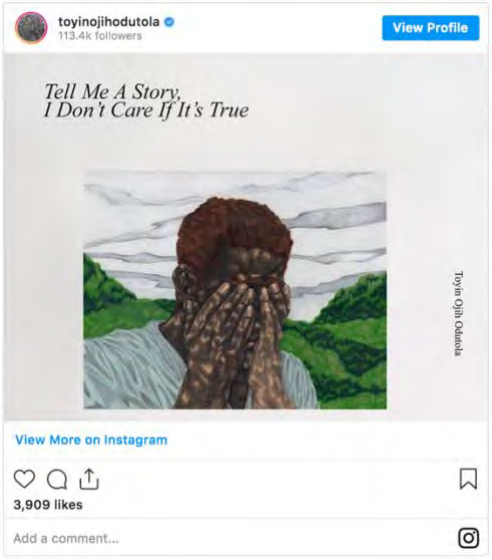
The show follows the artist's journey to understanding what visual story-telling means to her and her audience. Throughout, Ojih Odutola uses drawing to guide her understanding of the world.

10% of all proceeds from the exhibition will be donated to the Moms 4 Housing collective and NDN Collective COVID-19 Response Project, under the Navajo Nation Relief Fund for First Nations.

Galerie

June 2, 2020
By Editors

In the wake of George Floyd's death in Minneapolis, large-scale protests and demonstrations demanding justice have broken out across the U.S. As a result, artists have taken to social media to post works that challenge, educate, and ultimately, offer a space for reflection during this turbulent time. Below, we gathered some of the most powerful images by artists shared on Instagram in recent days.



1. Toyin Ojih Odutola

"Speaking with my dear friend and fellow artist, @tionam, yesterday, she spoke so eloquently of how in times of great pain, anger, and confusion, it's a radical act to create beauty. We have to fight against the urge to contribute to the pain, it's a daily fight to do so. I hold that close to my heart now," Toyin Ojih Odutola says in her Instagram post. With an exhibition of new works created for Jack Shainman's virtual viewing room, titled "Tell Me a Story – I don't Care if It's True," the artist writes: "At first, I wasn't sure whether it was the right time to exhibit, due to the drastic changes we are all undergoing because of the Coronavirus as well as the more recent, horrific events that have transpired, prematurely making ancestors of beloved black and queer lives. Thinking of all the people effected by the virus, by systemic oppression and injustice, all the stories and the new ways we all are adjusting to our present reality transmitted into these works. . . . I sincerely hope these works bring you all solace, a moment of respite, and space to ruminate—quietly, steadily. I hope it helps you all gather, to heal, to find the beauty in our fleeting moments despite the pain and trauma, and in the end, some semblance of peace in the midst of this cruel madness."

AnOther

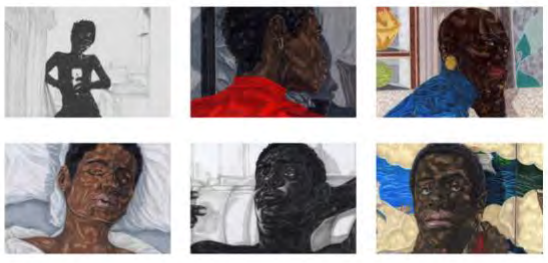
June 11, 2020
By Belle Hutton

In Pictures: The Transporting Drawings of Toyin Ojih Odutola

As He Watched Him Walk Away, 2020© Toyin Ojih Odutola, Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery.

Toyin Ojih Odutola's new exhibition, Tell Me a Story, I Don't Care If It's True, is online now

Toyin Ojih Odutola was due to show new work at the Barbican this year in an exhibition entitled *A Countervailing Theory*. Had the show – Ojih Odutola's first UK commission – gone ahead at the end of March we'd be in the middle of its run, but like so many institutions, the Barbican was forced to close amid lockdown in London due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It was while the New York-based artist was finalising *A Countervailing Theory* that she had started work on another series of drawings, eventually created during lockdown, which are now presented by Jack Shainman Gallery in the online exhibition *Tell Me A Story, I Don't Care If It's True*.



GALLERY / 15 IMAGES

Tell Me A Story, I Don't Care If It's True

For a majority of the drawings in *Tell Me A Story, I Don't Care If It's True*, Ojih Odutola has paired the image with text extracts. Each drawing and each snippet of text tells its own individual story; the artist describes them as vignettes. "The invented stories presented in this series of diptychs and standalone works engage with variables, be they irreverent, painful, humorous, and disturbing – the many facets of life and our attempts to communicate these moments," Ojih Odutola writes in the exhibition's accompanying text. "Contexts here are anecdotal: two teenagers rambling before attending a show, a seductive monologue on a train, a woman presenting a lecture, a man questioning his desires, an encounter with a lifeless body. Whatever came to mind, I wrote and drew them out."

The act of storytelling has long been an integral aspect of Ojih Odutola's drawings. Previous series have seen the artist weave complex fictions set in Nigeria, where she was born in 1985 and lived until her family moved to the USA in 1990. Her first solo exhibition there was *To Wander Determined* at the Whitney Museum, New York in October 2017. The drawings – rich and colourful portraits, still lifes and group scenes – traced the stories of two aristocratic Nigerian families, brought together by the marriage of TMH Jideofor Emeka and Temitope Omodele, the former from a family of longstanding nobility, the latter from a family of new money. Their world is an alternate reality – very much imagined since the two men would not be able to marry in Nigeria, where homosexuality is illegal – which Ojih Odutola was immersed in for years. She herself was their Deputy Private Secretary, and wrote the exhibition press releases.

Misread, 2020© Toyin Ojih Odutola, Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery.

Prior to the Whitney show, a 2016 exhibition entitled *A Matter of Fact* at the Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco also told Omodele and Emeka's story, as did a further three shows. At the time of the final exhibition focusing on this lyrical, compelling story – *When Legends Die* at Jack Shainman – Ojih Odutola said: "I've been consumed by these characters for three years now and it's been surreal, humbling and insanely stressful, but also very beautiful and instructive. It's time to draw it all to a conclusion."

In her work, Ojih Odutola presents black stories: be they tales of lofty, ancestral families; quieter moments of everyday life; or the worlds of ancient imagined communities (her Barbican installation was just that: "a fictional ancient civilisation in central Nigeria dominated by female rulers and served by male labourers"). Each is highly intricate, and illustrated in her signature graphic style. She deftly explores the multifarious textures of her scenes and characters. "When I look at black skin, I think of it as a mercurial surface – a terrain, a construct, a projection, but also a place where so much beauty and positivity proliferates," she recently said. "It includes so much and it holds so much."

The Day You Finally See It, 2020© Toyin Ojih Odutola, Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery.

he works in *Tell Me A Story, I Don't Care If It's True* were created during the last few months, as the world has suffered a pandemic and countries have momentarily entered states of lockdown. It's a period of time that has also been defined by protests against racism, which have unfolded globally following the murder of George Floyd at the end of May. "I sincerely hope these works bring you all solace, a moment of respite, and space to ruminate – quietly, steadily," Ojih Odutola has written on Instagram. "I hope it helps you all gather, to heal, to find the beauty in our fleeting moments despite the pain and trauma, and in the end, some semblance of peace in the midst of this cruel madness."

Tell Me A Story, I Don't Care If It's True is at Jack Shainman Gallery now. 10 per cent of all proceeds from the exhibition will be donated to the Moms 4 Housing collective and the umbrella organisation, NDN Collective Covid-19 Response Project, under the Navajo Nation Relief Fund for First Nations.

artnet news

June 15, 2020
By Caroline Goldstein

Toyin Ojih Odutola's Latest Show Combines Automatic Writing With Arresting Portraits Made During Lockdown—See Images Here

The show is the latest exploration of the interaction of image and text in the artist's work.

Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Nanban* (2020). Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

As galleries around the world begin to slowly reopen, we are spotlighting individual shows—online and IRL—that are worth of your attention.

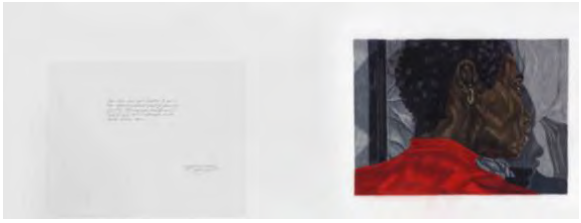
"Toyin Ojih Odutola: Tell Me A Story, I Don't Care If It's True"
Online at Jack Shainman Gallery

What the artist says: "In a time when it seems our priorities are placed on certainty and how to control output amidst a plethora of information that also feels protean and deeply influential, drawing out these vignettes was a means of understanding for me. The works were created using colored pencil, graphite, and ink at random, yet seeing them collectively, I sense a yearning. As if, in my attempts at understanding the activity of creating them superseded my intentions; the very conundrum I aimed to solve. Who am I to say what these works mean, but if I present them in such a way as to leave room for others to partake in the translation, does that counter the underlying yearning? Exactitude is elusive. Now completed, I'm not where I was when I began the series, but the frame of meaning has tightened. While discussing the series with Reginald Moore, he stated what seems at the crux of this project: 'We tend to tell people the things that make us feel better in the telling. It may or may not be what they want or need to hear, but at least we feel better. Is that deceptive or just another means of getting along in the world?' If this is where we gather our truths, then I understand it. In the end, you just don't know. Sometimes, you have to trust yourself."

Why it's worth a look: Nigerian-born artist Toyin Ojih Odutola often weaves intricate narratives into her layered drawings. Her breakout solo show at the Whitney Museum in 2017 was based upon the forthcoming marriage of two men hailing from aristocratic families in Nigeria and included personal letters written from the perspective of the couple's private secretary, a role that Odutola took on herself. In that case, the story was a dream, as homosexuality is illegal in Nigeria, but her deeply felt rendering of the intimate vignettes made the whole thing feel very real.

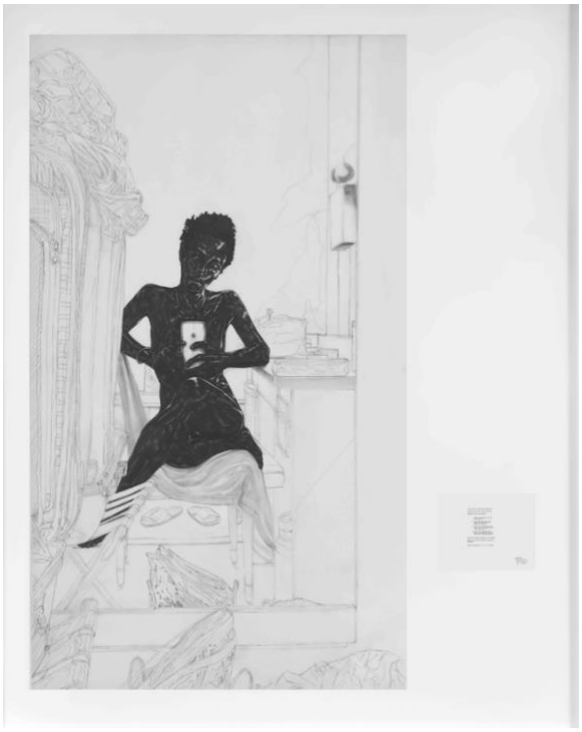
This time around, Odutola is similarly combining image and text. But for this show—which was completed almost entirely during lockdown—the text was the product of her own automatic, free-associative writing. The goal was to juxtapose images with written anecdotes in a way that highlighted misunderstandings or alternate understandings of the source material. The result is a series of drawings—tightly cropped portraits of figures in repose, checking their phones, sitting with earbuds in—that are made stranger and more complex by the addition of text. The show encourages us to use our imaginations to connect the dots, like one might try to reconstruct a dream in the fuzzy light of morning.

What it looks like:



Toyin Ojih Odutola, *The Day You Finally See It* (2020). Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

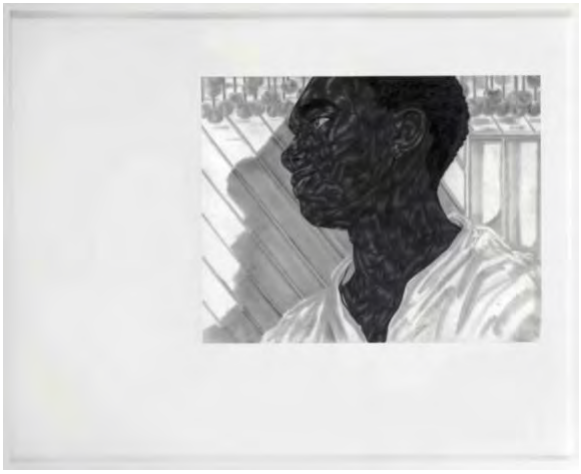
Toyin Ojih Odutola, *As He Watched Him Walk Away* (2020). Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman.



Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Untitled (Tokyo, 2017)* (2018-20). Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Misread* (2020). Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Tell Me a Story* (2020). Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.



Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Heuristic* (2020). Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

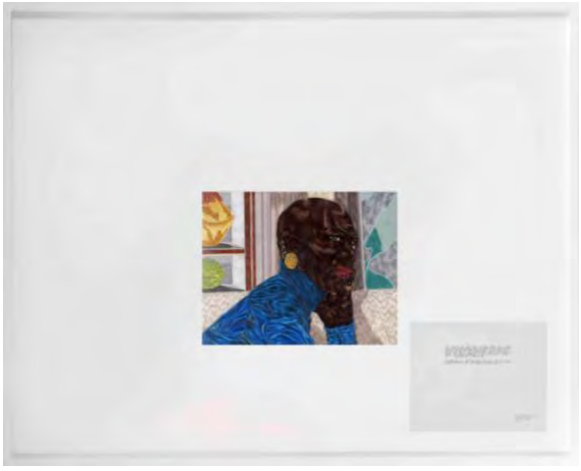
Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Nanban* (2020). Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

Toyin Ojih Odutola, *10 Minutes* (2020). Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman.

Toyin Ojih Odutola, *For All the Wrong Reasons* (2020). Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Streets Ain't Ready* (2020). Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

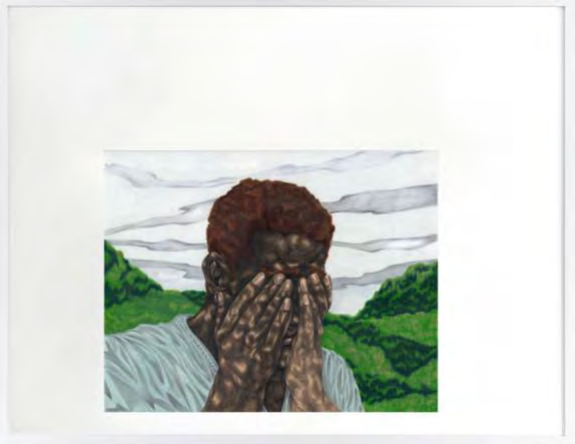
Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Both* (2020). Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.



Toyin Ojih Odutola, *The Collector* (2020). Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

June 16, 2020
By Victoria Valentine

New Drawings by Toyin Ojih Odutola Pair Powerful Portraits with Invented Stories



"As He Watched Him Walk Away" (2020) by Toyin Ojih Odutola

A NEW SERIES OF WORKS ON PAPER by **Toyin Ojih Odutola** explores her fascination with marrying images and text. The artist's pursuit satiates the viewer's natural inclination to spin narratives around her powerful and alluring portraits.

This desire to imagine the lives and experiences of Ojih Odutola's subjects is fueled by the compelling titles she gives her drawings. The latest works include "Misread," "For All the Wrong Reasons," and, most strikingly, "As He Watched Him Walk Away," shown above.

Rendered with colored pencil, graphite and ink, many of the new works go beyond narrative titles, pairing images alongside hand-written text in a series of diptychs that present invented stories.

"10 Minutes" (2020) features a woman with a ring in her nose resting her head against a pillow on a green tufted sofa. She appears deep in thought, ruminating. The text that accompanies the drawing is displayed in a poetic, call-and-response format. It reads: "If you could be anyone for five minutes a day, who would you be? Just five minutes? OK. Make it ten. Go. (…) I guess someone who… understands? Huh? (LAUGHS) Wait. Understands what? Everything. Just … for ten minutes everyday, I'm not forcing myself to be empathetic. That's not how the game works."

By contrast, "As He Watched Him Walk Away" is a standalone work without accompanying text. We can only imagine the scenario. Is it heartbreak or something else?

The new works are displayed in "Toyin Ojih Odutola: Tell Me A Story, I Don't Care If It's True," an online-only viewing room exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York. (The gallery remains closed temporarily due to COVID-19.)

TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA, "10 Minutes," 2020 (diptych). | © Toyin Ojih Odutola, Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Ojih Odutola lives and works in New York. She made the drawings and wrote the accompanying texts during the novel coronavirus lockdown.

The artist's singular style of mark making combines texture and line to create mesmerizing portraits. After working in black and white for an extended period, she began introducing color a few years ago, which has served the work well. The expanded palette adds new dimension, deepening the emotion and perspective conveyed in her drawings.

Most of her subjects are solo, perhaps they are in isolation, too. They are engaged in contemporary activities, such as taking a selfie or wearing white Apple EarPods. Some are depicted in profile or with the backs of their heads to the viewer. Others are captured amid inviting natural landscapes ("For All the Wrong Reasons" and "As He Watched Him Walk Away").

The online presentation includes a brief essay by Ojih Odutola. "I'm often fascinated with how miscommunications happen and what the imagination conjures in misconstrued spaces—the gulfs between what is intended and how it is received. There lies possibility for stories to emerge from within these spaces of missed connections," the artist writes in part.

"'With Tell Me A Story, I Don't Care If It's True,' I'm attempting to question proclivities towards interpretation and the degrees of bias that effect legibility. The invented stories presented in this series of diptychs and standalone works engage with variables, be they irreverent, painful, humorous, and disturbing—the many facets of life and our attempts to communicate these moments."

TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA, "Streets Ain't Ready," 2020 (pencil and ink on Dura-Lar, 11 x 14 inches, sheet). | © Toyin Ojih Odutola, Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Writer Reginald Moore also contributed a short text about the work, which he considers “a generous gesture on behalf of Toyin Ojih Odutola.” Moore calls the artist “a visual novelist.”

It’s an apt description. Ojih Odutola’s portrait of a female collector provides a partial view of two vessels displayed on shelves in the background of the interior space. Wearing an indigo blue turtleneck, she is gazing in the opposite direction. Titled “The Collector” (2020), the drawing is juxtaposed with Ojih Odutola’s text. The language she employs, her literary imagining, suggests a slice of the life of her complex subject.

The artist writes: “It started out slow and modestly. Little bits and bobs here, some memorabilia there, a fateful encounter with a picture. Work and travel built this. Choices that may seem odd, but I only included the things that made me smile. The stories gathered in this room alone… (SIGHS) It’s a biography of a blessed life. / I celebrated my 70th birthday last week. Invited everyone. That’s when the calls and emails came in.”

Ojih Odutola’s drawings are transporting. Her text takes viewers even further.

Writing on Instagram June 2, the artist said: “I sincerely hope these works bring you all solace, a moment of respite, and space to ruminate—quietly, steadily. I hope it helps you all gather, to heal, to find the beauty in our fleeting moments despite the pain and trauma, and in the end, some semblance of peace in the midst of this cruel madness.” **CT**

TOP IMAGE: TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA, Detail of “As He Watched Him Walk Away,” 2020 (colored pencil and graphite on Dura-Lar, 19 x 24 inches, framed; 11 x 14 inches, drawing). | © Toyin Ojih Odutola, Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

“Toyin Ojih Odutola: Tell Me A Story, I Don’t Care If It’s True” opened online at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York on June 1, 2020. Check directly with the gallery for updates regarding scheduling

TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA, “The Collector,” 2020 (colored pencil, graphite, and ink on Dura-Lar diptych: 11 x 14 inches, drawing; 8 1/2 x 10 inches, text). | © Toyin Ojih Odutola, Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA, "Chosen," 2020 (graphite and ink on Dura-Lar 41.5 x 33.5 inches, framed; 11 x 14 inches drawing; 8.5 x 10.5 inches, text) | © Toyin Ojih Odutola, Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA, "Nanban," 2020 (colored pencil, graphite, and ink on Dura-Lar 19 x 24 inches, framed; 11 x 14 inches, drawing). | © Toyin Ojih Odutola, Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA, "All That Weight," 2020 (pencil and ink on Dura-Lar, 41.5 x 33.5 inches, framed; 11 x 14 inches, drawing; 8.5 x 10.5 inches, text). | © Toyin Ojih Odutola, Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA, "For All the Wrong Reasons," 2020 (colored pencil, graphite, and ink on Dura-Lar 19 x 24 inches, framed; 11 x 14 inches, drawing). | © Toyin Ojih Odutola, Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA, "Tell Me A Story, I Don't Care If It's True," 2020 (colored pencil, graphite, and ink on Dura-Lar, 33.5 x 41.5 inches, framed; 11 x 14 inches, drawing; 8.5 x 10.5 inches, text). | © Toyin Ojih Odutola, Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA, "Misread," 2020 (colored pencil, graphite, and ink on Dura-Lar 19 x 24 inches, framed; 11 x 14 inches, drawing). | © Toyin Ojih Odutola, Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA, "Homeroom," 2020 (color crayon, pencil and ink on Dura-Lar, diptych: 11 x 14 inches, drawing and text). | © Toyin Ojih Odutola, Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA, "Heuristic," 2020 (graphite and ink on Dura-Lar 19 x 24 inches, framed; 11 x 14 inches, drawing). | © Toyin Ojih Odutola, Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA, "The Day You Finally See It," 2020 colored pencil, graphite and ink on Dura-Lar, 33.5 x 41.5 inches, framed; 11 x 14 inches, drawing; 8.5 x 10.5 inches, text). | © Toyin Ojih Odutola, Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA, "As He Watched Him Walk Away," 2020 (colored pencil and graphite on Dura-Lar 19 x 24 inches, framed; 11 x 14 inches, drawing). | © Toyin Ojih Odutola, Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

FIND MORE about Toyin Ojih Odutola on her website

BOOKSHELF

"A Matter of Fact: Toyin Ojih Odutola" was published to accompany a solo exhibition at the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco. It is the first exhibition catalog dedicated to the artist's work. "Toyin Ojih Odutola: A Countervailing Theory" will be published to coincide with Toyin Ojih Odutola's forthcoming exhibition at the Barbican Centre in London. The volume includes an essay by Zadie Smith and an interview with the artist conducted by exhibition curator Lotte Johnson.

TIME

100 WOMEN OF THE YEAR

We Designed 100 New Covers For TIME's Women of The Year Project. Here Are the Stories Behind Them

BY **D.W. PINE**

MARCH 5, 2020

To mark the role of the 100 Women of the Year in history, we embarked on something historic of our own: creating a TIME cover to recognize each of them.

From charcoal portraits to a three-dimensional paper sculpture, from photo collages to fine-art paintings, from wooden sculptures to a quilted fabric image, the art we commissioned reflects the breadth of the 100 choices. Regardless of style, our aim was to find compelling pairings of artist and subject.

The project selected a woman or group to represent each year from 1920 to 2019, and our visual approach follows the same arc by re-creating TIME's cover design as it evolved over the past century—from the illustrative scroll of the 1920s to the iconic red border of today. Each cover is visually emblematic of the period its subject - represents.

In all, we commissioned 49 original portraits. These are the stories behind some of them.

New York–based fine artist **Toyin Ojih Odutola** chose to portray Beyoncé Knowles-Carter in a Nigerian-inspired dress shirt and a honey-colored bob. "What I arrived at in my final drawing was a portrayal of a woman completely comfortable in her space whil

curious for what was to come in her future endeavors," says Odutola. "I hoped to express and retain the joy and wonder in her, the magnitude of her influence, and to illustrate how she did then as she continues to do so now: by inspiring us all to follow our creative inclinations yet never lose sight of ourselves."

This article is part of 100 Women of the Year, TIME's list of the most influential women of the past century. Read more about the project, explore the 100 covers and sign up for our Inside TIME newsletter for more.

In Issue No. 4 we meet Nigerian-born artist Toyin Ojih Odutola, Indigenous Australian Elders Uncle Bob Smith and Aunty Caroline Bradshaw, and Palestinian-American chef and artist Amanny Ahmad. We peer inside the Parisian ateliers Lesage and Lemarié, muse over the elegant lines of historical European chair design and celebrate the colourful woodblock prints of Japanese artist Awazu Kiyoshi. We reflect on the connection to one's home post-migration, consider what it's like to pray in different parts of the world and discover why the Filipino mango is the best of them all. And we venture along Morocco's Honey Highway, get lost in the markets of Oaxaca and discover the flavours of Ghana.

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Celebrating the importance of culture and place

Issue No. 4

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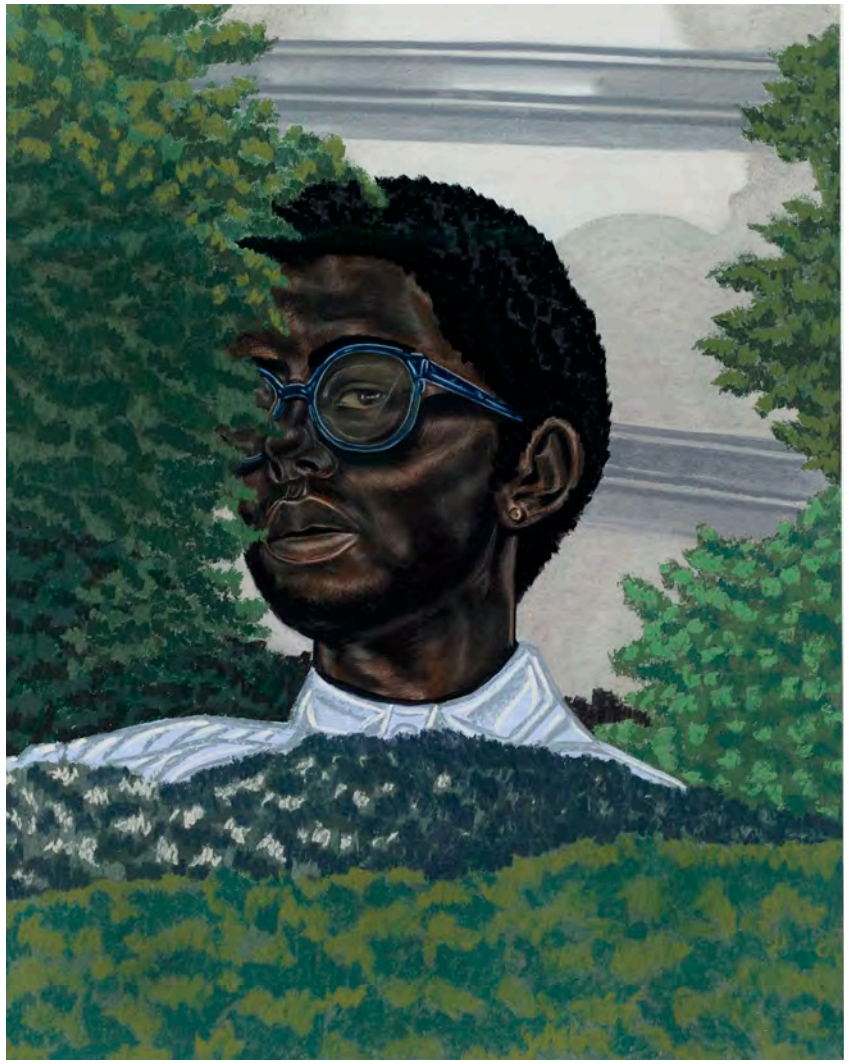
Drawing all the Other Worlds

An Interview with Toyin Ojih Odutola

Photography
Beth Wilkinson



1.1

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1.2 *Crown and House Post, in Congress* by Toyin Ojih Odutola, 2018, charcoal, pastel and pencil on paper, p. 32
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Interview
Kimberly Drew

Toyin Ojih Odutola's practice thrives in its contradictions. It is as public as it is private. As strategic as it is freestyle. And, increasingly, it is as much fine art as it is pop culture, where you'll find her work in the halls of the Whitney Museum of American Art and on television screens across the globe on the primetime show *Empire*.

For Toyin, complicated narratives have always been a part of life. She was born in the ancient city of Ile-Ife, Nigeria in 1985. She arrived just fifteen years after the Biafran War; her mother, Nelene Ojih, and her father, J. Adeola Odutola, are respectively from the Igbo and Yoruba tribes, which were opponents during the conflict. In 1990, as political tensions continued to soar, her mother would move her and her younger brother, Adeola Jr., to Berkeley, California to join their father who was doing research and teaching at the university there. After four years in Berkeley, the family would move again to America's deep south in Huntsville, Alabama, where her father landed a professorship at the historically Black Alabama A&M University.

For Toyin, now thirty-four, it is perhaps this constant change that keeps her work dynamic as she oscillates freely between pen-and-ink and pastels. Since her ascent in the early 2010s, she's shown work in New York, San Francisco, Houston and beyond. In her recent exhibition *To Wander Determined*, the audience is introduced to two imaginary, aristocratic families from her native Nigeria. The families, connected matrilinially by two queer princes, are opulent, multi-tonal and unafraid of the world's gaze. Though homosexuality is criminalised in Nigeria, Toyin's characters live unapologetically on her canvases. On a balmy afternoon in May, I went to visit her new studio in Brooklyn, New York, to see her latest drawings and ask some questions—about her practice as it exists today and what she feels her duty is as an artist.

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Kimberly Drew: I am impressed by your flexibility and courage to experiment in your practice. When an artist becomes as visible as you are, yet still finds space to experiment, it's powerful. How do you do it?

Toyin Ojih Odutola: You know, it's funny... You're coming at a rather vulnerable time, as I am tackling a new project. I have always felt—or at least I've always been attracted to—work that is challenging. Even the stuff I don't like, I tend to sit with it—try to figure it out.

You mean in your own work?

In general—art that I see or experience—and not necessarily in the visual art realm. I think that's where I draw most of my inspiration to try different approaches. One thing I've always felt is key: I cannot be comfortable. If I'm too comfortable with a subject or a material or a surface, then it's time to bounce. Because once that happens, my hands move before my brain does—and I don't like that. It should be the other way around. I want my brain to be faster than my hands—it allows room for uncertainty. I start a line and I don't know where it might arrive, and that's how my career has played out thus far. I start out innocently enough, usually through the material, and it evolves into concepts from that. I guess, that's how I hope for my work to be defined. I don't want it to be defined as a brand, which I guess is very much of our time. Everything I've done, in every stage of my career, you see the mistakes and triumphs conflated. It's all there, no matter how much I try to mask it or make it look otherwise.

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"Struggle and pain are very real, historical and ever-present, but what benefit is it for me to show Black pain in our twenty-first-century zeitgeist? I'm asking as a creator interested in the possibility of who and what we are—not the reactions and realities of society's impositions on Blackness."

1 **Toni Morrison** [1931—2019] was one of the most influential Black writers of all time. She was an essayist, author, editor and teacher who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993.

There is such a thin line between legacy and branding, too. How do you preserve freshness? Especially within this moment when there is such a demand... You share a lot of your process on social media. How do you share and protect at the same time?

When we started on platforms like Tumblr—that was a beautiful moment in the early noughts—it was such a precious time; everyone shared everything and, in a way, we still do. We were sharing our failings all the time. I was constantly in that mode [of wanting] to invite the viewer to see what it's like to create—how frustrating and painful it can be sometimes. I'm sharing the ebbs and flows. In the end, I always think about that fourteen-year-old in Minnesota or wherever, you know what I mean? Who really just loves drawing and wants to see what a working artist does. I want to demystify the art-making. I want to show how I struggle with it every day. [It] doesn't matter what point in my career this is; every time I come into the studio, it's daunting. I still try to share some things. You're in my process, just at a distance, but you're still there. I do this to protect the work. I also do it to protect my head, for the comments and DMs are real... Of course, there's [also] the reality of working and how a studio artist earns a living. There's a lot of misunderstanding and confusion around that—the purported legacy of artists, the way works are sold and acquired... For instance, I often get comments which assume that I don't have a dealer with a gallery. This is due to social media being egalitarian—which I actually like—and, unfortunately, how artwork is "packaged". When you start getting presumptions to the point of disrespect, due to the fact of my being a Black artist and what I am expected to be doing, it makes me want to share less.

I think that's because there's no publicised infrastructure for Black success. Which is why it's even more interesting that you have these sets of series where you're examining not just Black success or wealth, but thinking about creating an alternate universe for them to exist within. The work is completely different than what a viewer may expect to see of Black people exhibiting. In another interview, you once said: "I don't want to be another artist that presents Black pain."

I cannot tell you how often that quote haunts me. In a similar response to another interview, I said I didn't want my Blackness to obfuscate the work. Immediately, the reactions were like, "Why are you denying the richness and depth of Blackness? Can't you see the strength it gives you—what you are denying of yourself?" Again, it's a misunderstanding. My expression isn't new... Nor am I alone in distinguishing from what Blackness is and believed to be from the freedom I wish to have with its narrative and definition. I think of Toni Morrison[1] here: my Blackness is fact; it's not a finite point. It is a catalyst for everything else. So, if you're

All photographs were taken in Toyin's light-filled studio in Brooklyn, United States, where the walls are covered in canvases, the shelves are stacked high with books, and the space is dappled with materials.

only seeing it in that confined space, I can't do anything with it. Black pain is a finite point—that doesn't mean it doesn't exist in our daily lives. Struggle and pain are very real, historical and ever-present, but what benefit is it for me to show Black pain in our twenty-first-century zeitgeist? I'm asking as a creator interested in the possibility of who and what we are—not the reactions and realities of society's impositions on Blackness. There are extraordinary artists who address this pain so eloquently, exploring it with complexity and poignancy, which I deeply admire and respect. I simply do not wish to engage in that territory within my figurative work.

Must the pain and struggle be the means of justifying our success—hell, our very existence? If what we are accustomed to is seeing Blackness as mainly and constantly tied to pain, then that becomes the definition of a vast, diverse, and global demographic. What can we do with all that Blackness? How do we express its capabilities? I want to expand it. I want to give people more options. I want more diversity of thought; we deserve that now. The language that our Blackness affords us is so boundless and beautiful. Why are we limiting it to one tone? This is partly what the wealth series tackled. Pain and struggle were nowhere to be found in the narrative of two Nigerian, aristocratic families. What we saw was something we usually don't get to analyse: the insidious nature inherent in the invention of class—how it establishes itself by erasing the individual, to see the world in a singular, skewed way. When you free up Blackness from being only about pain, the richness and depth in the quality of work comes through, and the stories that spring from it proliferate and get exciting. Eventually, I hope, we won't find ourselves forced to explain it anymore, or as often. The language becomes infinite and the world catches up.

Right, because it can become an uninvited expectation. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about composition? The way you guide the eye is really important and especially in relationship with positive and negative space and colour.

I enjoy the unexpected in the work. Because it helps you pay attention. I hope that when they leave my work they pay more attention to their world—whatever land they traverse. For me, the visual language is a territory. Here is a plot of land... How do I make the eyes traverse this space in a way that feels like a journey, something that makes them lose themselves in that present moment and escape into another world or narrative? Composition plays a huge role in that. For this new project, I'm in a monochromatic world, so it's less about colour and more about texture. I'm thinking about how texture can be read. Different degrees of tonality—which have been integral since my early ballpoint pen days—are also being considered. Whenever I look at a picture, I let my eyes flow through it, wandering... Getting lost... And your mind follows. Sometimes you delve in, then you pull back, and then you dive in again, then you pull back. And through all that, your mind questions everything it's consuming. It's a mesmerising rhythm. I love that about art—what it gifts you. I love that about every type of art, from theatre to film to poetry... When you can have these vignettes in your head or in your experience that feel so alive yet so intimate. And who can tell you that it's wrong or invalid? You don't have to force it on anyone or compare it. It's yours to keep.

Yes, every decision is considered. I think about how some people view Black figures in older paintings. They say, "oh, this person was just a slave" instead of understanding that these figures help to fully execute the composition. The picture fails without them. Without their presence it would not be the same image.

True. But I also think of how that composition can be careless. Manet's[2] *Olympia*[3] is an example of this—which is one of the most brilliantly composed and also equally insulting pieces of art. Compositionally, it's clever: there's a woman holding flowers, she is there for a reason, she's the counterpoint to Olympia's subject. It's a brilliant choice, but it's asymmetrical. Composition is the piece's strength and where the trouble begins, because the composition also projects its meaning. This woman is the visual counterpoint to the white sex worker's subjectivity—yet her own subjectivity is nonexistent.

As an artist thinking about this work on an aesthetic level, I can understand why he made the choice. Why her skin is a certain shade of brownish black—matching in tone to the drapes behind her—why her clothes are so bright, almost cancelling out her skin. She is meant to be present, yet invisible—a probe to establish her more luminous opposite. There are all these levels.

And from a painter who was so dexterous with his applications of the different shades in material black, it makes me pause. The Blackness of her skin is insulting when you realise how knowledgeable Manet was about colour. He could have made her more distinctive, more present. But that's the point: she's a non-factor, emphasised by her fading into the background. The racism in paint is real. I'm always very cautious of that. It was why in *To Wander Determined*, at The Whitney Museum, I tried to explore multi-tonal Blackness. It was really important. Yes, we are all of this, it is all-inclusive, but it was also a compositional choice. When you have more variety of skin tone, there's a balance there. People won't notice it right away, but it flows throughout the work. Your eye travels to each face on a tonal level, but on a material colour level as well.

Now, I'm working with the monochromatic palette, it's a little trickier—and more exciting—because to play with balance in the composition has a more subtle meaning. The limitation in tone makes for interesting choices. You consider more, especially so when it involves race. Whenever people start talking about race—concerning older paintings—I think there's a preoccupation with the Europeanisation of figurative work. We get trapped in a very Westernised view of how pictures work when you go outside of that.

For instance, looking at Arabic art—the miniatures—it's so fascinating. The rules are completely different. Or even East Asian works such as Chinese hand scrolls—the compositional concerns and experimentations are so much more interesting. My problem is this idea that pictures should entertain. There's a thin line between the intention of spectacle and rumination. I understand how both results can be manipulated, but when you move outside of that dynamic, you realise pictures can carry you somewhere.

I'm working with the Black figure, which has always been on the end of both extremes, and it's an exhaustive history. I'm not interested in contributing to extremes.

2 **Edouard Manet** [1832—1883] was a French modernist painter. According to The Metropolitan Museum of Art's website, he is considered the father of modernism.

3 ***Olympia*** is a painting executed by Edouard Manet, which was first exhibited in the 1865 Paris Salon. The painting shows a nude white woman being presented with flowers by a Black servant. The painting has provoked years of scholarship in art history and feminist studies. For many, the painting has served as source material to engage in conversations about the subjectivity of Black women in the history of painting.

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4 **The Yoruba** people are an ethnic group native to southwestern Nigeria and Benin.

5 **The Igbo** people are an ethnic group native to southeastern and south-central Nigeria.

A few years ago, you began using your full name. What was that like for you?

I wanted my mother and her heritage to be included in the narrative of my work. My family comes to my shows all the time and it's always a privilege having them there... To see our name on the wall. My patrilineal last name is Odutola, which is Yoruba[4]. It's a very strong and renowned name in Nigeria. There's a lot of very proud Odutolas in the world. One of the things I noticed around 2015, before I added Ojih, my mother's surname—another respected, Nigerian Igbo[5] name—was when she came to an exhibition, I remember seeing her glance at my name on the wall and going, "Yes, Odutolas, we're here." Hearing her say that, something deep in me hurt, because I knew that I'm not just an Odutola; I'm an Ojih, too. These are two completely different tribes, two completely different histories. Whenever I show my parents my work, I say, "See: we're on these walls," because my dad always says, "Oh, look at my daughter, she's on the walls." No, *we* are on the walls. So when I made that decision it was without question. I remember my mum cried when she found out. She loved it; she appreciated and understood why I did it without my explaining.

Having an Igbo and Yoruba name right next to each other—this confluence of influences... There's no hyphen; they're independent of each other yet stand together—and that's who I am. I'm the composite of these two very strong, proud tribes and I want that to be shared with the world. Some people don't get the context, the war... They don't get that it's a tribal thing. Seeing my mother's and my father's names in equal measure within my surname means a great deal to me. My mother is just as important as my father and it's not like I grew up in a household where that truth wasn't there; I just wanted other people to see it, too.

Could you talk a little bit about community, because I know that you're relatively private, but then there's this universe of people who are seeing things in process? What does that relationship look like for you? When do you call people in?

I used to call people a lot, texting at three in the morning sometimes. I enjoy having a dialogue. I like when friends see something in progress and they're trying to take leaps to what it might be and I'm like, "No, no, no, not yet, I just want to know what you *feel* right now seeing it." It's hard for people and I'm demanding a lot too early. How can someone give you advice when they don't even know what's going on in your head? They're just trying to see what it might be instead of what it is right now, in this moment. That's why I can't share as much as I would like. I need to learn to pull back more and trust myself. I bring people in when there's a lot more work up. When I started these new pieces on linen, there was no one here; it was just me and my doubt. There's more work up now, so I'm bringing you here, and I have a friend coming later. I can be less defensive and let go—just see what they feel. Because things are at a point where they're starting to get a sense of a narrative.

“Having an Igbo and Yoruba name right next to each other—this confluence of influences... There’s no hyphen; they’re independent of each other yet stand together—and that’s who I am. I’m the composite of these two very strong, proud tribes and I want that to be shared with the world.”

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I'm fascinated by mistakes and how you work through them. Maybe thisis because I don't make things. For example, a painter can paint over. How do you work around things that don't feel quite right?

That's a really good question, especially since I'm a draftswoman and not a painter so the process of handling mistakes is slightly more immediate. I'm also working on linen now, which is entirely different—I've never worked on this surface before. Everything's a first right now and it's a bit disconcerting. This studio is new... I'm feeling very vulnerable, like I don't have a handle on things. Up to this point I've worked, as you see, on paper and board. It's a hot press, machine-made surface, which makes it versatile for me. I can really bang up that surface. I go in with my marks; it's a forgiving surface. The linen isn't. I have a fellow artist, Anna Kristensen, who helps me prep the surfaces so I can draw on them. When I was working mainly on paper, I would get a roll and post the paper on the wall and go. Now I have to wait for Anna's work to finish, then let the surface dry, then I can start sketching. I can't jump into it... I have to pace myself. The linen is stretched custom by a company, then Anna readies the surface. It can take weeks. When you are bursting with an idea, it's hard to hold on for so long. There is also the pressure of having to create on something that's taken so long and had so many experts work on. I can't fuck it up. I can't be careless. There is an inclination to risk less, but I have to fight it. It's a different way of working. I'm still figuring out how to mitigate it. I have to let the mistakes lead me. In the past, I feared showing my "hand", revealing my inaccuracies. Now, I realise they only add to the richness of the surface I am creating.

Do you feel a duty at this stage in your career, and your life, towards breaking those types of rules? Do you feel like it has to be a performance?

No, I think performance is a trap. I don't think that way and it's not my concern at all. There is a responsibility I feel as an image maker, but I do like to break the rules. Octavia E. Butler[6] once said: "There is nothing new under the sun, but there are new suns." While I'm here, I hope someone will look at this work and think, "I never saw the human face that way," or "I never saw a figure that way." I don't think about legacy that much—it's a dangerous road to go down. It's about the work—it's always about the work. I hope maybe twenty years from now, if someone were to see this and think, "this was a really interesting turn in her career, why would she go here?" and in turn, they create something completely fantastic from seeing this work—that would be amazing. It's a contribution. If it sparks something in someone, that's a success, I think. Whatever plans of grandeur some might have about artists—the Picassos and Basquiats of the world... That's cool. They're amazing people who created amazing works which inspire us, and that's a beautiful thing. There are a lot more contemporary artists around now... The likelihood is slim on legacies. I'm just mad grateful I get to do this work for a living. I don't know what the future is and I don't want to pretend to know.

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6 **Octavia E. Butler** [1947—2006] was a Black writer who was considered the "grand dame of science fiction." Her work engages with racial histories and futures and, in 1995, she became the first science-fiction writer to be awarded the MacArthur genius grant.

PAPER®

PAPER People: Toyin Ojih Odutola

Paper Magazine | 27 August

Artist Toyin Ojih Odutola (http://toyinojihodutola.com/)'s work can be found in some of New York's most prestigious museums — from the Met to MoMA. Her portraits are frequently characterized by intricate mark-making. She likes to go beyond what a figure looks like, showing a viewer who they are, as she explores representation and identity. One layer of Toyin's perspective is informed by being born in Nigeria and educated in Alabama and California. That's one layer of many. "My art takes work," she once said (http://www.artnews.com/2018/12/06/mark-making-land-eyes-traverse-toyin-ojih-odutola-conversation-zadie-smith/). She has current and upcoming exhibitions in DC, New York, Schenectady, and Seattle — lots of opportunity to get to work. — *Khalid El Khatib*

All Clothing and Accessories: Prada

What's the biggest misconception about you?

That I'm only interested in the genre of representational, figurative portraiture — on its own — instead of the more formalist and/or psychological making which constructs a picture. Visibility isn't enough, I'm interested in what it can do: thought experiments for how you can manipulate an image to express certain visual forms, how that reads or translates ideas about what we feel and believe in, and how it can be utilized and transformed. What visibility confronts, contends with, and contradicts in established codes and standards — particularly those which seem tacitly and subtlety applied — is what I mess with it. The genre itself isn't as limiting as some might imagine; I see it as an amalgam.

What has been your best night out?

Really any evening where I'm with close friends in a cozy setting, discussing a variety of topics, letting the conversation meander for hours.

What was the last text you sent?

"I'm 10 minutes away, I swear."

What's something you wish no one knew about you but everyone does?

This gets misread often, but…that I'm Nigerian — it gets in the way. I mean this not as some fallacy about how identity doesn't affect daily existence, which, of course, it does. I'm incredibly proud of my heritage, yet when that is all you are seeing of me, I, in turn, become this flattened, finite conception in peoples' minds. I cannot be anything but Nigerian, and that is at the mercy of whatever "Nigerian" means to others, especially when there is so little known in the US about Nigeria and other African countries, in general. The power I claim in that fact holds true and I do not deny it, so this isn't about choice of labels and the power one has in owning and expressing one's definition as well. It's about having to consistently express that identity to others, to forcibly announce it — whether one chooses to or not — when you really just want to get on with what you are doing, what you are trying to create. If I could claim it for what it is and not have it be used as an excuse for someone else's lack of imagination, or an emphasis on exoticism and fetishism, or to constantly have to explain my reason for being included — for "being in the room," so to speak — that would be incredibly freeing. However, what tends to happen when people see or know my heritage is that they can't seem to engage with what that can be, how it can inspire and become a catalyst for so many other explorations.

What was the last song you listened to?

"MATH," by QUIN (*Galactica*, 2016)

If you weren't doing this, what would you be doing for a career?

Fantasized about being an ethnographer when I was younger...maybe, that's what I'm doing in a very roundabout way now? Or, I'm still fantasizing.

What's the craziest thing you've done in 2019?

I got braces and four teeth extracted. It's been an intensely painful healing process, but raggedy, overcrowding teeth are real and I finally saved enough to get it done.

What's the most stressful thing about being you?

Not stressful, but it can get exhausting: that my surname is actually "Ojih Odutola," not "Odutola"; no hyphen, just two names which are very important to me and hold equal weight. Not acknowledging, respecting, or straight up omitting this fact sometimes feels personal.

What's your biggest irrational fear?

I don't think it's irrational...the end of our earth as we know it due to climate change, growing man-made intervention and carbon emissions?

What was the last show you binge-watched?

Star Trek: Discovery / *Fleabag*, by Phoebe Waller-Bridge.

When was the last time you cried?

Seeing and reading reports from the internment camps at the borders of Mexico, Arizona and Texas of families being separated and held against their rights. This inhumane treatment of people has to stop. There are no grounds for this kind of action and, historically, we know this to be true. The fact that this is happening in 2019 is beyond appalling and feels like an intentional means of dehumanizing all of us, societally — especially so once you realize most of the problems these camps seems to be addressing were created by US interventionism in Central and South America. To punish people for wanting to be safe and live fulfilled, thriving lives away from the things we helped instigate and establish is a nefarious kind of cruel irony.

What gives you hope in 2019?

People seem to be moving away from bombast and the extreme as a means of communicating — not just in the media and press, but in dialogues amongst ourselves. I sense that we crave more nuance now, less blanket, unfounded proclamations? I realize I live in the bubble that is New York, so I understand if I'm speaking from a situational viewpoint; however, it's refreshing and inspiring to see diverse groups of people more engaged in understanding different perspectives and applying them to their own preconceived notions, their own truths and experiences. The divisions that have been felt since 2016 are still here, but what seemed to come from a place where everyone was so set in their own prerogatives, their distinct proclivities, even their propensity or loyalty towards a specific side or group is now being analyzed more openly.

I think we are now becoming aware that one can stand firmly in their position and beliefs yet still have it be challenged in a way that is educational, respectful, and helps build one up and expand one's thinking. I truly believe in the phrase, "I want to be proven wrong,"—not out of some pretentiousness, but because I believe a person can learn more about oneself by thinking critically and persistently so on one's position. It's not an attack to be challenged in such a way, it's about solidifying the "why" at the core of who you are and what you do, which is a process and isn't determinate. It's really exciting to witness people engaging with this more and more amongst themselves right now.

What's your go-to karaoke song?

"Call Tyrone," by Erykah Badu. Or, "I'll Be Around," by The Spinners.

Photographer: Jason Rowe
Photo Assistant: Anjelica Jardiel
Stylist: Erika Golcher
Stylist Assistant: Matthew Han
Makeup: Sadvhi Babu

Forbes

Twelve Essential Offsite Exhibitions Of The 2019 Venice Biennale

Joanne Shurvell

The latest edition of what is often described as "the Olympics of the artworld" opened in Venice this month and runs until 24 November 2019. The 89 countries participating at the 58th Venice Art Biennale are exhibiting in two main venues, the Giardini and the Arsenale and at official sites throughout the city. But it's often the numerous additional exhibitions, dotted throughout the city, that are the most engaging. Although it's difficult to choose the best from among hundreds of shows, I've chosen a small selection of essential highlights, most of which run through until November although some will close before that so do check listings before visiting.

Detail from drawing by Toyin Ojih Odutola, a shortlisted artist in *Future Generation Art Prize* PAUL ALLEN/ANDFOTOGRAPHY.COM

12. *Future Generation Art Prize*, Palazzo Ca' Tron

The fifth edition of the global art prize for artists under 35 includes 21 artists from almost all the continents and seventeen countries. The artists, selected from 5,800 entries including the winner Lithuanian artist Emilija Škarnulytė and the winners of the Special Prize, Gabrielle Goliath (South Africa) and Cooking Sections (UK). It was a strong lineup but my favorite is the selection of drawings of a fictious wealthy Nigerian family by Nigerian artist Toyin Ojih Odutola.

ARTNEWS

'Mark-Making As a Land Your Eyes Traverse': Toyin Ojih Odutola Talks with Zadie Smith

BY ***Shirley Nwangwa*** POSTED **12/06/18 1:53 PM**

Zadie Smith (left) and Toyin Ojih Odutola.
COURTESY THE DRAWING CENTER, NEW YORK

On Monday night at the Drawing Center in New York, a full house congregated for a talk between Nigerian portraitist and draftswoman Toyin Ojih Odutola and famed Caribbean-British writer Zadie Smith. The former is one of three artists in the Drawing Center's current exhibition "For Opacity," while the latter reviewed the artist's recent Whitney Museum solo show for British *Vogue*. Both were assembled on the occasion of a group exhibit whose title alludes to Édouard Glissant, a theorist who advocated for the value of being opaque and believed that "the oppressed can and should be allowed to exist as different and unassimilated."

Smith, wearing all black beneath a red head wrap and lipstick, engaged Ojih Odutola, whose small afro was free and parted on the side, with a quote from the artist in the show's catalogue—"What I'm really asking myself is: how can I make the eyes dance?" Smith began by projecting an image of Ojih Odutola's portrait *Paris Apartment* (2016-17), in which a dark-brown-skinned woman sits looking out at the viewer in a dizzyingly patterned top and elegant jewelry, with an embellished handbag in the background under old picture frames and an ashtray. "Parisian chic," Smith called it, before saying, "I can tell you about what I see, and then we can talk about about how I'm wrong." The audience laughed. "Oh, you're never wrong," Ojih Odutola said, making clear that "there's no wrong way to read a piece."

Smith compared the picture to Van Gogh: "All marks are in some sense equal. The eye moves fluidly from material to fabric to this topography underneath. It's like a block to objectification." In response, Ojih Odutola said, "I see mark-making as a land your eyes traverse through. That's what drew me to art-making in the first place. It wasn't about this flat matte surface."

Toyin Ojih Odutola *Paris Apartment*, 2016-17.

CHARCOAL, PASTEL AND PENCIL ON PAPER, 59 3/8″ x 42″, DEAN COLLECTION, COURTESY THE DRAWING CENTER, NEW YORK

She fell in love with the tactility of pen ink early in her career, she said, and the expansion of her portraits to include surrounding additions of objects made sense only if she could replicate the same tactility she achieved in renderings of her subjects' skin. She found the answers in charcoal and pastel, with which she began adding reflective surfaces, sections of distant landscapes, walls, shadows, and what she called "ridiculous patterns"—additional layers in the works that seem to belong, without question.

Ojih Odutola talked about unquestionability in regard to her art and the world beyond. In 2016, during Donald Trump's rise, she said she saw his wealth as a dystopic key to a kind of unquestionability that immigrants do not enjoy. "Immigrants are questioned constantly and have to make themselves small," she said. Diasporic people of color cannot take up space, she suggested, but her portraits' subjects defy this smallness—especially in the context of mundane, common settings "so that you can stop thinking it's a black person."

In *Taking Chances*, a work from 2017, a light-skinned black man with freckles, a fro, and a goatee takes a drag from a cigarette ("sorry, mama," Ojih Odutola said) and looks away. He is dressed casually in white and orange, with breezy trees behind a window pane. "The beauty and the reality of blackness is multi-tonality," the artist said. "What chalk pastel provided was that option [to] combine different colors to create these skin tones. With this character, I started to test out the material. And yeah, he's sexy, for real." Smith agreed: "Yes, he is *fine*."

Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Taking Chances*, 2017.
CHARCOAL, PASTEL, AND PENCIL ON PAPER, 24″ x 19″, PRIVATE COLLECTION, COURTESY THE DRAWING CENTER, NEW YORK

Ojih Odutola said she worked hard to get the subject's gesture down. "There's this nonchalance. A lot of that has to do with occupying space," she said. "If you're looking upon a person who does not care what you think of them, who is not there to entertain you, who couldn't care less if you are there looking at them—it takes a lot to build a picture into that." Smith responded, in light of such a sense of interiority, "See, there you are talking like a novelist."

When the image behind her changed to her self-portrait *The Many Ways To Work it Out* (2017), Ojih Odutola said the allure of the selfie can be found in "the enhancement of what we believe to be our true self, or what we want to portray. In this moment I looked raggedy, but I felt so good. I wanted to show a very satisfied black woman." Smith called it "a very unusual image in the culture—this kind of ultimate pleasure."

The artist talked about drawing white people, too—as in *Somebody's Heroine* (2015), which features a woman with paper-white skin and hair pulled fine and smooth into a bun. "I thought, How do I make that whiteness 'other,' so that it's no longer a black mark on a white ground but the other way around."

Her series of pen-and-ink drawings "The Treatment" focuses on prominent white men drawn with black skin. When Smith said she might recognize some of the subjects, Ojih Odutola said, with a sinister laugh, "I'm only doing this once—I'm going to reveal . . ." (One of the men, she said, is Tom Cruise.)

Toyin Ojih Odutola, *The Many Ways To Work It Out*, 2017.

CHARCOAL, PASTEL, AND PENCIL ON PAPER, 40″ x 30″, COLLECTION OF DRS. CARLOS GARCIA-VELEZ AND W. KENT DAVIC, CHAPEL HILL, NC, COURTESY THE DRAWING CENTER, NEW YORK

With every drawing, Ojih Odutola said she wants to invite viewers to contemplate the layers of story and presentation in front of them. "My art takes work," she said. "I told my mom that people have to do yoga moves to see it—to adjust themselves to me instead of the other way around."

culture type

Whitney Museum Acquired 417 Works Recently, Faith Ringgold, Derrick Adams, Toyin Ojih Odutola, and Julie Mehretu are Among the Artists Represented

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE *on* Sep 28, 2018 • 12:58 am

"Husband and Wife" (2017) is one of three works by Toyin Ojih Odutola acquired by the Whitney Museum.

FOR A YEAR, THE WHITNEY MUSUEM of American Art displayed "Hate Is a Sin Flag" a 2007 work by Faith Ringgold. It is a relatively small print, about 19 inches square, that makes a profound statement. On view recently in the collection exhibition "An Incomplete History of Protest: Selections from the Whitney's Collection, 1940–2017," the work directly criticizes the institution and recounts the artist's experience protesting in front of the Whitney in 1968.

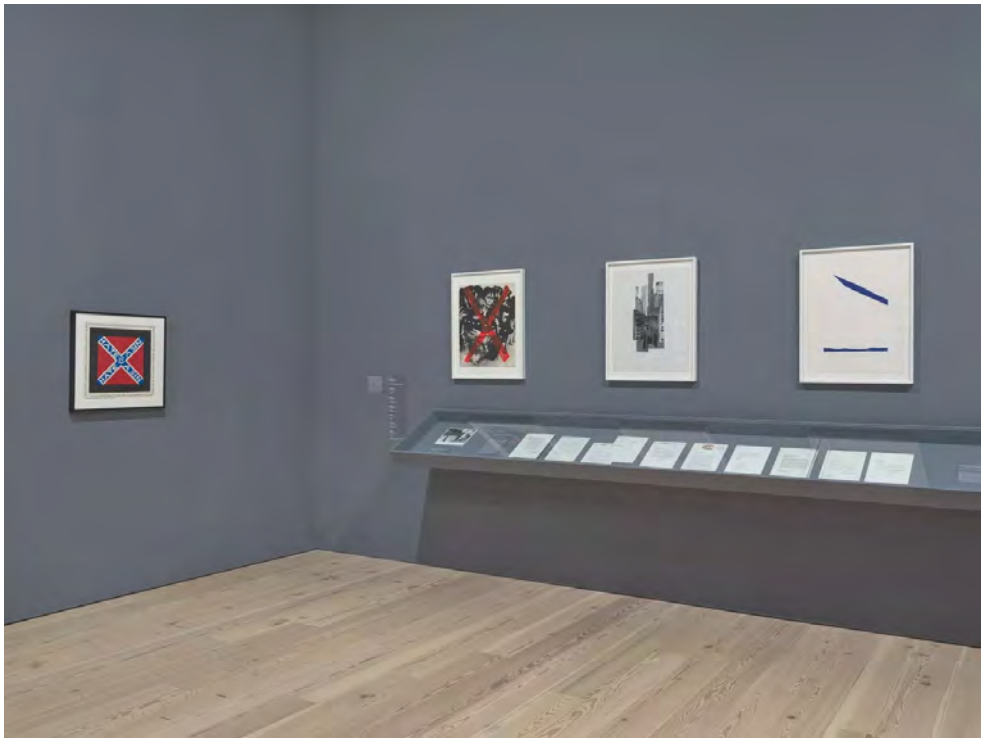
The Whitney announced the acquisition of 417 works of art over the past year. The museum added three works by Riggold, including "Hate Is a Sin Flag." More than two dozen African American artists are represented among the new acquisitions, made between September 2017 and September 2018, including Derrick Adams, Dawoud Bey, Melvin Edwards, Julie Mehretu, and Kara Walker. The additions to the collection by black artists—about three dozen works—represent approximately nine percent of the recent acquisitions.

The museum has acquired three drawings by Toyin Ojih Odutola that were featured in "To Wander Determined," her first solo museum exhibition in New York. The works include "Industry (Husband and Wife)," a double portrait executed in 2017 with charcoal, pastel and pencil.

The acquisitions also include 62 artists whose work is entering the museum's collection for the first time. African American artists Ja'Tovia Gary, Marlon Riggs, Ming Smith, Samuel Levi Jones, Sable Elyse Smith, Saya Woolfalk, Adams, and a few others, are among them.

"The Whitney's recent acquisitions—especially by those artists new to the collection—will allow future curators to present our current moment in all of its complexity, subtlety, and frequent beauty. We thank all of the patrons who have helped make these acquisitions possible and the artists for entrusting us with the future lives of their work," David Breslin, the director of the museum's collection said in a statement.

> *"The Whitney's recent acquisitions—especially by those artists new to the collection—will allow future curators to present our current moment in all of its complexity, subtlety, and frequent beauty."*
> *— David Breslin, Director of the Whitney's Collection*



Installation view, at left, of FAITH RINGGOLD's "Hate Is a Sin Flag," 2007 (acrylic, graphite, and pen on paper –Sheet (sight): 18 3/4 × 19 inches / 47.6 × 48.3 cm); Image (sight): 18 3/4 × 19 inches / 47.6 × 48.3 cm). | Purchase, with funds from the Laurie M. Tisch Illumination Fund 2017.175. See up close image of the work here.

The museum deepened its holdings of several artists already represented in its collection, adding works by Bey, Mehretu, Walker, and Rashid Johnson, among others. The Whitney already owned two photographs and two prints by Johnson and acquired "Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos" (2008), a steel sculpture that stands more than 11 feet high.

Fifteen works by Mehretu were in the collection (the first acquired in 2004) before the museum added "Epigraph, Damascus" (2016). The six-panel editioned etching debuted in "Julie Mehretu: Hoodnyx, Voodoo and Stelae," the artist's 2016 exhibition at Marianne Goodman Gallery in New York.

In its description, the gallery said the work “presented, infusing elements from architectural renderings of buildings in Damascus, Syria—columns, porticos, and arches—drawn upside-down. The magnitude of Epigraph casts a hanging shadow summoning autumn clouds, but from its multitude of stratum, also comes the sense of a possible emergent other.” (In April, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art announced it had acquired an edition of the same work by Mehretu.)

A number of video works by African American artists were acquired by the Whitney. Maya Stovall’s video “Liquor Store Theatre vol. 2, no. 2” (2015) was featured in the 2017 Whitney Biennial. In the work, the Detroit artist turned the sidewalks and parking lots of local liquor stores into sites of dance performance.

Works by Riggs (“Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien,” 1992), Steffani Jemison (“The Meaning of Various Photographs to Tyrand Needham,” 2009), and Frances Bodomo (“Afronauts,” 2014) were also among the acquisitions purchased by the Whitney’s Film, Video and New Media Committee.

JULIE MEHRETU, “Epigraph, Damascus,” 2016 (photogravure, etching and aquatint, six parts – Overall: 97 5/8 × 226 inches / 248 × 574 cm). | Purchase, with funds from the Director’s Discretionary Fund, Print Endowment Fund, Beth Rudin DeWoody, Susan K. Hess, Brooke Garber Neidich, Nancy F. Poses, Fern Kaye Tessler, Lisa Cashin, Stephen Dull, Jane Dresner Sadaka, Carol Weisman, Iris Z. Marden, Mary McCaffrey, Linda R. Safran, Marc A. Schwartz, Flora Miller Biddle, and Fiona Donovan in honor of David W. Kiehl 2017.159a-f

Other highlights include “Toxicity” (20170, a “painting” by Samuel Levi Jones composed of deconstructed medical books; “Martina & Rhonda” (1993), a six-part photographic work by Bey; and three paintings by Purvis Young. The museum has also acquired works by Leslie Hewitt, Walter Price, and Stanley Whitney.

A selection of highly political works is also being brought into the collection. Among them, Dread Scott’s nylon flag “A Man Was Lynched by Police Yesterday” (2015) and the three works by Ringgold, which address mass incarceration, racism, and lack of diversity in museums.

An acrylic, graphite, and pen on paper work, the focus of “Hate Is a Sin Flag” is a red, white, and blue “X” (which reflects the design of the Confederate flag) where Ringgold has inserted the phrase “Hate Is a Sin.” Around the perimeter of the work, which is signed and dated June 22, 2007, she has written: “The first time I was called NIGGER was at the Whitney Museum in New York City. I was passing out flyers about the Whitney’s discrimination against Black artists when a white man told his daughter: “Don’t go near that NIGGER; that was 39 years ago in 1968. Slavery is Hate. Hate is a Sin.”

The work documents an incident Ringgold actually experienced. In Daily Mail interview in February, she said, “I made that print to express the moment. I cannot cease to amazed that the Whitney would tell that story. That’s good though. It’s art.”

The museum’s collection includes more than 25,000 20th- and 21st-century works made by about 3,500 artists in the United States. **View the full list of new acquisitions here. CT**

TOP IMAGE: TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA, “Industry (Husband and Wife),” 2017 (charcoal, pastel and pencil on paper – Sheet (sight (each)): 23 1/2 × 19 inches / 59.7 × 48.3 cm) Image (sight (each)): 23 1/2 × 19 inches / 59.7 × 48.3 cm). | Promised gift of Pippa and Martin Hale, Jr. P.2018.9a-b, Photo by Victoria L. Valentine

BOOKSHELF

“American People, Black Light: Faith Ringgold’s Paintings of the 1960s” coincided with the exhibition of the same name exploring the artist’s early political works about race, gender, and class. “Julie Mehretu: A Universal History of Everything and Nothing” was published earlier this year. “Whitney Biennial 2017” documents the latest edition of the museum’s signature exhibition, which featured artist Maya Stovall, Henry Taylor, Deanna Lawson, Pope.L, Lyle Ashton Harris, and Cauleen Smith, among others.

ARTNEWS

PinchukArtCentre Names Shortlist for 2018 Future Generation Art Prize

BY ***Alex Greenberger*** POSTED **09/28/18 1:02 PM**

The PinchukArtCentre.

COURTESY PINCHUKARTCENTRE

This year's jury included Natalia Valencia Arango, associate curator of Mexico City's Estancia Femsa Casa Barragán; Julie Boukobza, director of the Luma Arles residency program and 89plus residency at the Lab of the Google Cultural Institute in Paris; Tatiana Kochubinska, curator of the research platform at the PinchukArtCentre; Tumelo Mosaka, chief curator of the Investec Cape Town Art Fair; Zeynep Öz, curator of the Turkish Pavilion at the next Venice Biennale; and Richard Riley, independent curator and chair of the Gilbert & George Centre in London.

The shortlist follows below.

Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme
Alia Abdal Figueroa
Monira Al Qadiri
Yu Araki
Korakrit Arunanondchai
Kasper Bosmans
Madison Bycroft
Cooking Sections
Gabrielle Goliath
Rodrigo Hernández
Laura Huertas Millán

Marguerite Humeau
Eli Lundgaard
Taus Makhacheva
Toyin Ojih Odutola
Sondra Perry
Gala Porras-Kim
Emilija Skarnulyte
Jakob Steensen
Daniel Turner
Anna Zvyagintseva

the PARIS REVIEW

There is No Story That is Not True: An Interview with Toyin Ojih Odutola

By Osman Can Yerebakan September 27, 2018

What Her Daughter Sees, 2018.

"There is no story that is not true," says Uchendu halfway through Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart. *Storytelling is at the core of Brooklyn-based artist Toyin Ojih Odutola's drawings, which focus on the fictional narrative of TMH Jideofor Emeka, male heir of a long-standing noble clan, who marries Temitope Omodele, the son of a bourgeois family with recently acquired wealth. The power couple are cultural leaders in their community, and they exhibit their renowned art collection at notable art venues in the United States. Ojih Odutola deepens the fiction by presenting her own exhibitions as curated by the fictional couple, for whom she is the Deputy Private Secretary.*

The thirty-three-year-old artist left Nigeria with her family at an early age, and spent her formative years in Huntsville, Alabama. Her new show, "When Legends Die," at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York, dedicates two rooms to approximately thirty-five drawings. The press release, written by Ojih Odutola, explains that the show is organized by the lord's nephew upon the aging couple's decision to include the next generation of clan members in their curatorial work.

I met Ojih Odutola at Jack Shainman Gallery in August, when the artist was busy finalizing her drawings for her exhibition at the gallery.

Last Portrait of the 18th Marquess, 2018.

INTERVIEWER

Storytelling is a crucial part of your practice. Do you write your stories before illustrating them?

OJIH ODUTOLA

I don’t consider myself a writer. My writing is as episodic as my drawings. Once I sort out a story’s outline and key themes, I select the scenes I want to explore more deeply, and they eventually transform into sketches. At this point I’ll also focus on research about a specific time period in Nigeria. With that scaffolding, I delve into plot points and build out the characters’ relationships to one another. Depending on how complex a particular drawing is, I’ll do ten to twenty sketches. I am weaving something that I hope is not necessarily about text, which is like a safety net for me, but rather about a visual language with cues that words cannot provide. However, I need text to give me the permission to draw. They are two intertwining paths.

Enclave, 2018.

INTERVIEWER

In the narrative background you provide for the work, you relinquish your authorship.

OJIH ODUTOLA

I wanted to distance myself, as Toyin, from the work. When I started this series in 2016, I was wary of how even my fictional work was still about me as an artist of color. My otherness often precedes the content of the work, almost like a cloud before the viewer. Once I became the Deputy Private

Secretary on the press release, the viewer stopped looking into my involvement and tried to grasp the story. I was freed from the distraction of the story somehow being about me. With this new role, I have the freedom to say, I am the communication liaison between the public and this family, but I only reveal just enough of what I find necessary. The work is not about a mythology or a presumption about African-ness. The viewer is immersed in the narrative, an alternative reality. For example, the story's key figures are two gay men, even though, in reality, it's illegal to be gay in Nigeria.

Junior's Research, 2018.

INTERVIEWER

The marriage of those two men anchor the entire story. How did you decide to place two gay men in positions of power?

OJIH ODUTOLA

This is actually a very matriarchal family, but the two men comprise the core. I had the idea of a gay couple coming into power since the very beginning—even before I had any concept about the families. The beauty is that whatever happens in each chapter, they're the reason we are in the room. There would not be an exhibition if their love did not exist, if they didn't loan their collection. I always want to underline this role they possess. The words *his husband* are always very evident in the exhibition materials. When my father saw those two words at the Whitney, he asked, confused, if there was a typo. Seconds later, however, he wanted to learn about their story, and asked me to take his photo with a painting of theirs. I hear people say they carry those two men with them outside the exhibition. The idea of their union becomes less of a fantasy and more of a reality, one in which Goodluck Jonathan never signed the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act for imprisonment of LGBT individuals in 2014. I had initially planned to create the series only about them, but I began to realize the beauty is in not only in their union, but in everything that stems from it—just like coming out as gay, it opens up other possibilities.

INTERVIEWER

Can you tell me about the decisions you have made concerning shifting skin tones in your images?

Heir Apparent, 2018

OJIH ODUTOLA

A character in three different stories has three different skin tones. They are different reverberations of the same skin, each reflecting an experience. Skin is a place we inhabit and have to mitigate while moving through the world. Over various iterations, I transitioned from charcoal skin to pastel. Instead of every figure having the same patina, they've gained multitonal diversity. I want the skin to feel alive and distinctive for each character. I felt my hand gestures change. Although they are strictly drawings, I am aware of their painterly quality. The skin also evolves with age, which is in the current exhibition as many characters are approaching their forties and fifties alongside fresh young faces making their debut. Although the previous iterations have been chronologically slippery, with light references to the stylistic accents of the seventies and eighties, this final iteration clearly brings the story to the present. These characters also own the freedom to travel. How do you capture experience in a drawing? Again, with the skin. A face or skin tone extends to the space surrounding the character. It is activated, almost coming off the surface and into real life. I am committed to illustrating the freedom to be in a body and move through space.

The New York Times

What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

By Will Heinrich, Martha Schwendener and Jillian Steinhauer

Sept. 26, 2018

Toyin Ojih Odutola

Through Oct. 27. Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 West 20th Street and 524 West 24th Street, Manhattan; 212-645-1701, jackshainman.com.

Toyin Ojih Odutola's drawing "What Her Daughter Sees" (2018), in her exhibition "When Legends Die." via Jack Shainman Gallery

One of the most eye-catching works in the Nigerian-American artist Toyin Ojih Odutola's exhibition "When Legends Die," at Jack Shainman Gallery, is the drawing "What Her Daughter Sees" (2018). It centers on a casually elegant young woman who sits, facing the viewer, in a plush dining room. She grips a teapot and looks into the distance with a tense expression. On the viewer's side of the table are a cup and saucer, cut off by the drawing's bottom edge.

The work is beautifully executed: Its composition leads your eye around; the figures are vivid; and the colors are rich and textured, especially the brown of the woman's skin, which has lighter passages that suggest the glitter of the sun on the sea. But what I love about it is its intimacy. The artist puts the audience in the mother's place to witness a private exchange. Another example, "Objection to Bedtime" (2018), is a close-cropped portrait of a figure who seems suspended between boyhood and young adulthood; he lies down but expresses his displeasure with his eyes. That these moments and the spaces in which they occur are fictional only makes them more entrancing. Walking around in Ms. Ojih Odutola's show feels like moving through a novel.

The exhibition is the final installment of a project she began in 2016 that imagines two aristocratic Nigerian families joined by marriage. The drawings — in this case, combinations of pastel, charcoal and pencil on paper — are predominantly portraits of ruminating characters in domestic spaces. In a previous showing at the Whitney Museum, those spaces were often drawn with intriguingly skewed perspectives; here, they notably feature more portraits, including a 2016 drawing of the married couple. This show closes the loop on the project and affirms one of its apparent tenets: the potency of self-representation.
JILLIAN STEINHAUER

A version of this article appears in print on Oct. 12, 2018, on Page C17 of the New York edition with the headline: Toyin Ojih Odutola

THE NEW YORKER

ART

At the Galleries

Toyin Ojih Odutola

Shainman

CHELSEA With this exhibition, which continues at the gallery's location on W. 20th St., the Nigerian-American artist concludes her speculative saga, a plush and vibrant visual account of two fictional aristocratic families, united by the marriage of their male heirs. On walls painted a dusky lavender, Ojih Odutola's framed drawings in charcoal, pastel, and pencil crisply articulate a vision of old money in Africa as if the slave trade had never occurred. Young, elegant people enjoy and preserve inherited wealth, and the art works and artifacts it affords. Most of the drawings are snapshot-like compositions, which capture the élite characters in casual moments against backdrops of architectural grandeur; the exception is a stunning ten-foot-long group portrait, titled "The Firm," featuring nine stylishly dressed family members, in which art-historical European portraiture meets an Avedon spread.—*J.F. (Through Oct. 27.)*

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Toyin Ojih Odutola: *When Legends Die*

by Amber Jamilla Musser

JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY | SEPTEMBER 6, 2018 – OCTOBER 27, 2018

"In humanity, quiet is inevitable, essential. It is a simple, beautiful part of what it means to be alive. It is already there, if one is looking to understand it."[1]

A man lies in repose in a tub. He holds his upper body outside of the water, elbows outside the tub as he looks past the viewer. This appears to be a moment of quiet contemplation. Above the tiled backsplash, the bathroom is adorned with two African masks and a large painting. The cropping of the painting is such that we do not see the faces, though we do know that we are seeing fashionable men in casual postures—hand in pocket, knee bent, hip shifted to one side. For those who have been following Toyin Ojih Odutola's work, the image, one of TH Lord Temitope Omodele and his husband TMH Lord Jideofor Emeka on their honeymoon, is recognizable from her show *To Wander Determined* at the Whitney Museum in late 2017. As the background image, it is less busy than the original—fabric, wood, and rug are simpler—yet still rich in color and texture.

Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Heir Apparent*, 2018. Pastel, charcoal and pencil on paper, 63 1/4 × 42 inches. Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery.

This self-referentiality connects this show to a larger series of drawings built around a fictional aristocratic Nigerian family. *Legends Never Die* is the fifth and final show, which began at the Museum of the African Diaspora with *A Matter of Fact* in 2016 and has continued through *To Wander Determined,* Whitney Museum (2017 - 2018); *Testing the Name* (2018), Savannah College of Art and Design; *The Firmament* (2018), Hood Museum of Art, (Dartmouth, NH), and concludes here with *Legends Never Die*. Ojih Odutola's narrative conceit, announced on wall text and press release, is that the images are culled from the private collection of TH Lord Temitope Omodele and his husband TMH Lord Jideofor Emeka. The works are a mixture of family portraits, documents, and moments of private reverie rendered in charcoal and pastel. The series promises an intimate glimpse of wealthy Nigerian life, as Ojih Odutola phrases it, "their lordships sought to draw a more expanded portrait through the careful choice of works from their famed art collections—separate from the known public image of respectability oft presented by titled aristocracy—to express the inner workings of their family." For *Legends,* Ojih Odutola adds a layer of generational depth and humor to the situation by specifying that the imaginary curatorial baton has been passed to the lordships' nephew and heir apparent, TMH Lord Afamefuna Emeka Iwu, who we are told has chosen works "not seen by other members of both families, including their lordships."

In this iteration, the art is identified as both financial and cultural capital, since the conditions of its display come from the wealth and connections of TH Lord Temitope Omodele and his husband TMH Lord Jideofor Emeka. Art, itself, also figures prominently within the drawings themselves. In addition to the portraits of portraits, there are statues of prominent Nigerian family members, African masks, pottery, and ceremonial robes, all of which are portrayed on display within museums or homes. This meta-commentary on the nature of representation, then, is inseparable from the dynamics of wealth that underlie the art market and the politics of representation that confer value on what is represented. In this case, the series itself becomes an argument for the inclusion of Nigerian capital.

What this narrative framing underscores, however, is not just the importance of a wealthy black imaginary, but how much intimacy, specifically black, queer intimacy, lies at the center of these works. This intimacy unfolds at many levels. The very structure of the shows —a family willing to show their private art collection, including personal portraits—makes this explicit. *Heir Apparent*, the drawing

described above features the curator/heir in the tub in relation to an image of his uncles. Here, he is literally basking in the legacy of black, queer love. This queerness is further foregrounded and formalized by the inclusion of two versions of invitations to the men's wedding in 2014. In the narrative we are given via wall text and images, this same-sex union is mentioned in passing even as there is a paucity of cultural representations of African black queer men engaged in a loving relationship. This taken-for-grantedness of queerness filters down through the exhibit. I use queer here, both to connote the polymorphous sets of familial relations that we are given the opportunity to check in on—we see the late 18th Marquess of UmuEze Amara, sets of siblings, "The Firm," children, and maternal perspectives—and the complex relationship between blackness, wealth, and what Kevin Quashie calls "the quiet."

Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Famed Rivalry*, 2018. Pastel, charcoal and pencil on paper, 68 1/2 × 41 3/4 inches. Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery.

This is not an exhibit that insists on presenting wealth as loud and spectacular. Rather, wealth is what permits contemplation. We see this in the bathtub posture of *Heir Apparent*, but this solitary repose is evident in other images. We see people smoking on patios, engrossed in books, performing research, or looking at themselves in the mirror. There are backs of heads and downcast eyes. Contemplation oozes from these images, imbuing these portraits with an air of intimacy because viewers feel as though they are witnessing a private, quiet moment. The conjunction of blackness and the quiet is queer because it runs counter to the usual representations of black people. For Kevin Quashie, quiet enables us to imagine a wider range of possibilities for blackness and to begin to theorize black subjects. He writes, "Quiet . . . is a metaphor for the full range of one's inner life—one's desires, ambitions, hungers, vulnerabilities, fears. The inner life is not apolitical or without social value, but neither is it determined entirely by publicness. In fact, the interior—dynamic and ravishing—is a stay against the dominance of the social world; it has its own sovereignty."[2] Quashie's insistence that interiority allows for a space separate from domination allows us to think about the form of political work that Ojih Odutola's exhibit performs. On the one hand, the quiet here cannot be thought separately from the parameters of wealth, which, in turn, underscores the relationship between money and the right to privacy. We could, then, register the exhibit as arguing that wealth is required to restore the possibility of black interiority and imagination. If, however, we focus on the role of art in relation to both wealth and the quiet, we arrive somewhere else, specifically the feeling that there is something radical in seeing black people exist in such casual proximity to art—art which we have been narratively given to understand is valuable. This itself is its own form of queerness.

Notes

Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 6.

CONTRIBUTOR

Amber Jamilla Musser

Amber Jamilla Musser is Associate Professor of American Studies at George Washington University and the author of Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism (NYU, 2014) and Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance, which will be published by NYU Press in November.

artnet®

On View

From Joan Mitchell's Early Works to Daniel Arsham's Dystopian Future: 45 Can't-Miss Gallery Shows in New York This September

Mark your calendars.

Sarah Cascone, August 30, 2018

The editors at artnet News searched New York City high and low for the most exciting, bizarre, and thought-provoking gallery exhibitions this fall. From Chelsea to the Lower East Side, we've got you covered.

Toyin Ojih Odutola. Photo courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery.

Toyin Ojih Odutola brings her fictionalized portrait series of two aristocratic Nigerian families, previously the subject of a solo show at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, to Jack Shainman Gallery. "Each exhibition has been a new and instructive experience for their lordships: to see how much interest developed for their heritage, but also for members of Nigerian nobility and for Africa as a whole," notes the exhibition press release, which claims that family patriarchs Lord Emeka and Lord Omodele have enlisted their oldest children to organize this new show, which includes work even unseen by their fathers.

513 West 20th Street and 524 West 24th Street; September 6–October 27, 2018, opening reception 6 p.m.–8 p.m.

AnOther Magazine

It's September! Here's a List of Good Things to Do

DESIGN & LIVING / ANOTHER TO DO LIST

Back-to-school needn't mean boring – consult our list of brilliant exhibitions and openings to fill your weekends with this September

SEPTEMBER 03, 2018

Toyin Ojih Odutola, To Be Titled, 2018 Courtesy of Jack Shainman

***Toyin Ojih Odutola: When Legends Die* at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York: September 6 – October 27, 2018**

The mesmerising paintings of Toyin Ojih Odutola are on show in New York from this week in a new exhibition entitled *When Legends Die*. This show is the last in a series of portraits of Nigerian nobility, as imagined by the artist: Odutola found herself thinking of a fictional Nigerian aristocratic family, the head of which was a nobleman and his husband. The artist immersed herself in this family tree of extensive characters and has based four exhibitions on these imagined figures, with *When Legends Die* representing her final offering from this world. Odutola's paintings have propelled her to the forefront of the contemporary art scene in recent years, and this new exhibition will surely be just as captivating as the last.

ARTNEWS

9 Art Events to Attend in New York City This Week

BY *The Editors of ARTnews* POSTED 10/09/18 11:45 AM

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 11

Opening: "For Opacity" at the Drawing Center
This group exhibition presents work by a trio of young artists who use drawing as a means to think through the complex factors that combine to create one's identity. Though stylistically disparate, each artist is connected by an interest in oblique allusions to their own personal narratives. Figurative drawings by Toyin Ojih Odutola—the subject of a 2017 exhibition at the Whitney Museum and a current two-part show at Jack Shainman Gallery—will be displayed alongside splintered mixed-media work by Nathaniel Mary Quinn and mystical pencil drawings by Elijah Burgher.
The Drawing Center, 35 Wooster Street, 6–8 p.m.

Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Paris Apartment*, 2016–17, charcoal, pastel, and pencil on paper.

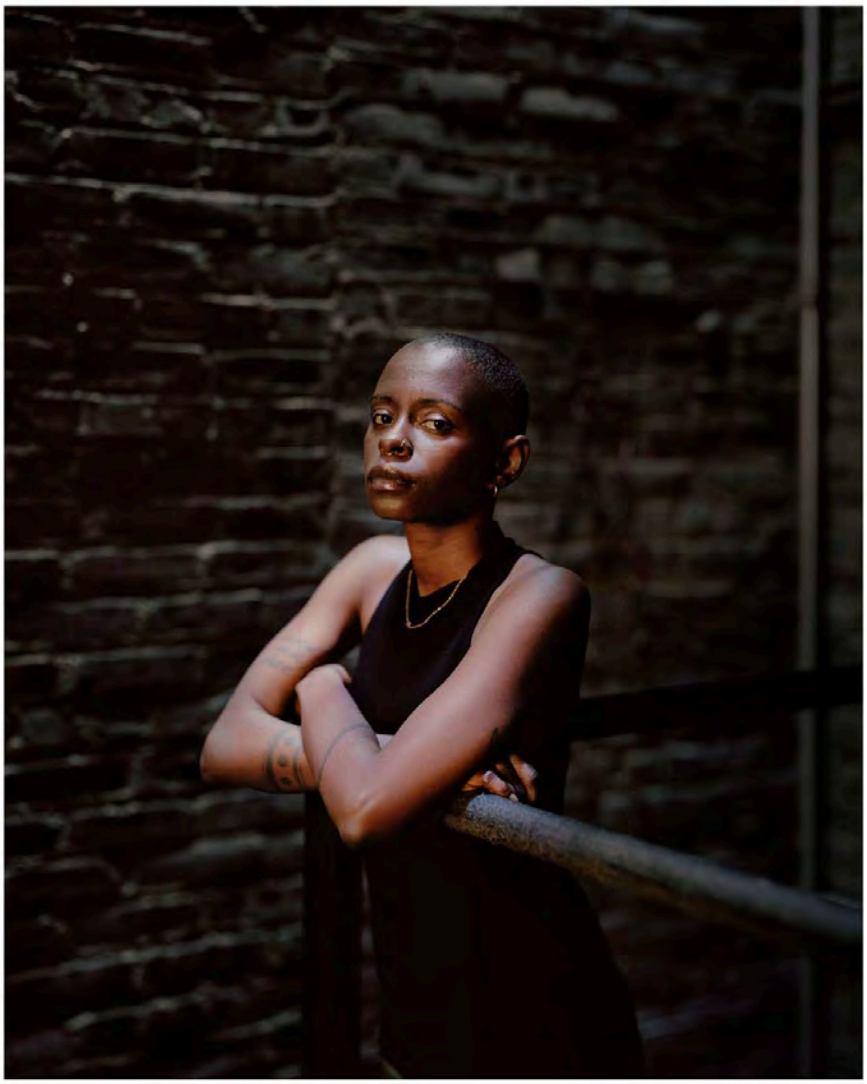
Opening: Beverly Fishman at Miles McEnery Gallery
The Detroit-based artist Beverly Fishman's forthcoming exhibition at the newly-renovated Miles McEnery Gallery is an extension of a series of work she began in 2012. Fishman's fluorescent, polychromatic pieces, which use urethane paint on cut wood paneling, recall the clean graphic energy of American pharmaceutical branding in abstract. "Drugs construct and contest our identities," the artist wrote in an essay for the journal *Cultural Politics*. She also noted, in the same piece, that "the production and consumption of art can seem like an addiction."
Miles McEnery Gallery, 520 West 21st Street, 6–8 p.m.

VOGUE

MAGAZINE

Reimagining Black Experience in the Radical Drawings of Toyin Ojih Odutola

JULY 17, 2018 8:00 AM
by DODIE KAZANJIAN



Photographed by Alec Soth, *Vogue*, August 2018

The artist Toyin Ojih Odutola, born in Nigeria and raised in Huntsville, Alabama, is a new kind of visual storyteller. Right now she's deep into making drawings of the final chapter of a fictional trilogy she has written about two Nigerian families. One is an ancient noble clan, the other more recently enriched by trade and vineyards. The families have been joined by marriage between the two principal male heirs, Jideofor and Temitope. (Jideofor, the second son, became the heir apparent when his older brother was killed by a hyena.)

"It started as a story I was writing, with random drawings," Toyin tells me. It became an extended pictorial narrative "about wealth and nobility, and the sort of self-possession and ownership of capital that surrounds you, instead of you being the capital." In other words, it's a meditation on what might have been possible in Africa if colonial conquest had never happened.

Toyin's saga has already led to solo exhibitions at the Whitney and three other museums in the form of richly colored, large-scale, exuberant portrait drawings supposedly "borrowed" from the collections of both families – drawings, not paintings, because drawing is Toyin's primary medium.When "A Matter of Fact," the first group of these works, was shown at San Francisco's Museum of the African Diaspora in late 2016, the Berkeley historian Leigh Raiford, writing in *Artforum*, said that it "allows us to witness an artist testing new ideas and stretching her craft, testing and stretching the boundaries of blackness in the process." Unlike Kehinde Wiley or Titus Kaphar, who insert an African American subject into an Old Master–style painting to give identity to the black figure, Toyin imagines a contemporary world in which blackness is the norm. She's more like the artist and filmmaker Arthur Jafa, who has said, "I'm trying to make my shit as black as possible and still have you deal with my humanity."

Toyin, 33, is a striking beauty with a shaved head, a barely visible gold nose ring, and many delicate tattoos on her bare arms. She's outspoken, direct, and full of humor and joie de vivre—her sentences often end in bursts of laughter. She has

two modest-size studios (no studio assistant) in anartist-friendly former factory building in midtown Manhattan. On the tenth floor is "the incubator," where she prowls the internet, streams TV and movies (she loved *Black Panther*), reads books, writes, and draws more or less constantly. Her work owes a lot to Japanese art and anime, comic books, and graphic novels, but with Toyin, the written word leads irrevocably to picture making. (She doesn't let anybody read her writings.) Her sixth-floor studio is "sacred ground," she says, laughing, the place where drawings come when (and if) they're ready to advance to the next stage. Against the wall is a ten-foot-wide diptych, the largest she's ever attempted, with the outlines of nine life-size figures sketched in pencil. "This is Temitope's whole family," she says. "Jideofor's family is going to have a diptych, as well, but not as big. Every aristocratic family has a formal portrait, right?"

If all goes well, both drawings will be among 30 or so on view this September at the Jack Shainman Gallery in Chelsea. Shainman took Toyin on when she was a graduate student at California College of the Arts in San Francisco, and gave her her first solo show in 2011. With its panoply of individual black faces against white backgrounds, drawn in layers and layers of ink from a ballpoint pen, it established her as a brilliant innovator in the depiction of black skin.

At a residency in Sausalito in 2016, says Toyin, "I started playing with soft pastel and charcoal on a large scale, and all of a sudden I began writing this story." It set off an avalanche of drawings, much larger than any she had done before—not just of the characters' heads but of their bodies, clothes, and surroundings, capturing patterns and textures with the marvelously fluid lines and colors that pastels make possible, using her fingers instead of brushes.

She's having lots of fun reinventing the idea of nineteenth-century family portraits, which she's always loved – John Singer Sargent is an idol of hers, and James Tissot's 1868 *The Circle of the Rue Royale* inspired the big group portrait she's working on. In Toyin's drawings, however, the subjects are relaxed, casual, at leisure, caught in the moment as if in a snapshot rather than formally posed. The gay, newlywed heirs—there's irony here, since in Nigeria homosexuality is illegal—slouch with untucked shirts and open collars. The technical virtuosity and the boldly inventive use of color pull you into the story: a Netflix series in the making.

"We simply do not see drawings executed at this level very often, and especially not by someone who was born in 1985," says Whitney Museum assistant curator Rujeko Hockley, who organized Toyin's show there last October. "Her hand, her sense of color and material, her understanding of composition, of what to reveal and what to hide—they're all exquisite."

Other unfinished works in the studio show different family members. "There's a cousin, Toyin says, "being kind of cheeky in her short robe, and that's a portrait of

her disapproving grandmother on the wall in back of her. The cousin is an interior decorator, and *she knows she's hot!* Her grandmother is going"—haughty accent —" 'Really? Just showing yourself to these people?' " Toyin roars with laughter, slapping her thigh with one hand. "I know these characters. I've lived with them for three years now."

Toyin was born in Ife, an ancient Yoruba city in South Western Nigeria. The political situation there was volatile, so in 1990, her mother, Nelene Ojih, took her and her two-year-old brother, Datun, to join their father, J. Adeola Odutola, who was at Berkeley to do research and teach chemistry at the university.

"My father is Yoruba, and my mother is Igbo," Toyin says. "And if you know anything about the Biafran War, they were the warring tribes right after independence. Thanks, Britain! I love Nigerian women because they're so confident and self-assured. My mom's a nurse, but she has a degree in comparative literature, and she's really great with words. She's also great with shade."

From her extended-family saga, the bridegrooms in *Newlyweds on Holiday* (2016).

Newlyweds on Holiday, 2016. Charcoal, pastel and pencil on paper, 63″ x 41″. © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Because she's Nigerian, that shade, says Toyin, "is much deeper than you get in

the American South. When I was growing up, our household was very patriarchal. People were happy when I was born, but when my brother was born, the whole village was involved. My father would tell my brother, 'You have to do this or that because you're carrying my name.' My mom would take me aside and say, 'I don't care what your father says, you're carrying my name. You got the Ojih.' " In 2015, Toyin officially added the "Ojih" to "Odutola."

After four years in Berkeley, the family moved to Huntsville, where her father had been offered a tenure-track job at the historically black Alabama A & M University. The prospect terrified nine-year-old Toyin. "I'm an immigrant kid," she explains, who learned her first words of English when she arrived in the U.S., "and I was only taught about slavery and Martin Luther King and the Birmingham Riots a few days before we left, at school in Berkeley, and now this crazy place called Alabama was about to be my home." Just before leaving, trying to lift Toyin's spirits, her mom bought her a *Lion King* coloring book—a big deal because they were virtually broke. Toyin lived in its pages throughout the cross-country drive in a U-Haul van. "That was when art became my central focus," she remembers. She bonded with Timon, the meerkat, copying his face on napkins, scraps of paper, hotel pads, and every other available surface. "Even now, as an adult, I'm Timon," she says. "No one listens to Timon, but he's the only one with common sense. He's ironic. He's sardonic. He plays tricks. He throws shade. I just loved his character."

Although Huntsville was by then a major center for the U.S. Army's space-and-rocket program, Alabama was still a deep South state, and the Odutola children were exposed for the first time to racial taunts and bullying. "It was a crash course," Toyin says. "Your blackness and your otherness are in your face every day in the lunchroom and at recess. It was a three-tiered view of life: You're already a foreigner in America. And now, among African Americans, you're African, which is another strike against you. And even in your own family, you're not the same—you're starting to become more Americanized."

Art was her escape in this troubled sea. She drew all the time. "I was obsessed," she tells me, "capturing everything I saw and being fascinated with the incredibly simple task of looking at something and transmitting it onto paper. It's an immediate magic."

Her high school art teacher saw Toyin's talent, made her the first student in an advanced art program, and introduced her to the work of black artists and writers, including Kerry James Marshall and Kara Walker. She went on to major in studio art and communications at the University of Alabama. Her art teacher there nominated her for Yale's summer art residency in Norfolk, Connecticut. The rest of the faculty were against it, says Toyin, because she had been tagged as a troublemaker ("I've got a mouth on me," she admits). But her teacher fought hard,

and she was accepted.

“It was the worst experience of my life,” Toyin says, “because the way they talked to artists of color was really racist. The last week I was there, I was told that I should probably change my major. I remember just thinking, Fuck you. I’m going to prove you wrong.”

She didn’t apply to Yale’s graduate art school as a result but says, “I’m glad I went to Norfolk and had a taste of what I’m living now, which is people who take art-making very seriously.” Her parents, worried that she could never make a living through art, wanted her to go law school. Instead, she won a full scholarship to California College of the Arts, where she received her MFA degree—and where she was studying when Jack Shainman saw her ballpoint-pen drawings. “My socks rolled up and down without my touching them,” Shainman tells me. “That’s always the key sign for me. I think we purchased every single one.”

Toyin moved to New York in 2013, and her rise has been meteoric: museum exhibitions, four more shows at Jack Shainman, and inclusion in Manifesta 12, the international nomadic biennial that is in Palermo this year. There’s a waiting list for her drawings, some of which startle and perplex viewers. Her 2015 exhibition at Shainman’s included *The Treatment*, portrait heads of 43 prominent white men (Prince Charles, Leonardo Di Caprio, J. Edgar Hoover, Martin Amis, Picasso, Benedict Cumberbatch) who have been robbed of their whiteness (i.e., their “importance”) because their faces are black, rendered in many layers of lustrous ballpoint-pen ink.

She lives in Brooklyn but still spends most of her waking hours in her Manhattan studios—she’s nocturnal and often works through the night there. Toyin travels extensively. She went back to Nigeria with her mother for the first time when she was sixteen and has returned often. She’s spent time in Tokyo, Florence, London, Albuquerque, Joshua Tree, Johannesburg, Lagos, and other far-flung places, and the iPhone photos she takes on her trips often work their way into her drawings. She stays fit with a mostly vegetarian diet and by dancing to Afrobeat, highlife, and electronic music, and doing lots of squats and other exercises in her studio—no time for the gym and apparently no room for romance. Although she cheerfully declined to talk with me about her private life, I could hardly ignore the large *Hello Love* text drawing on the wall of her studio, a hilariously obscene and somewhat violent flushagram to an ex-boyfriend.

“That’s a joke,” she tells me. “I nearly sent it to a person who was being an F-Boy.”

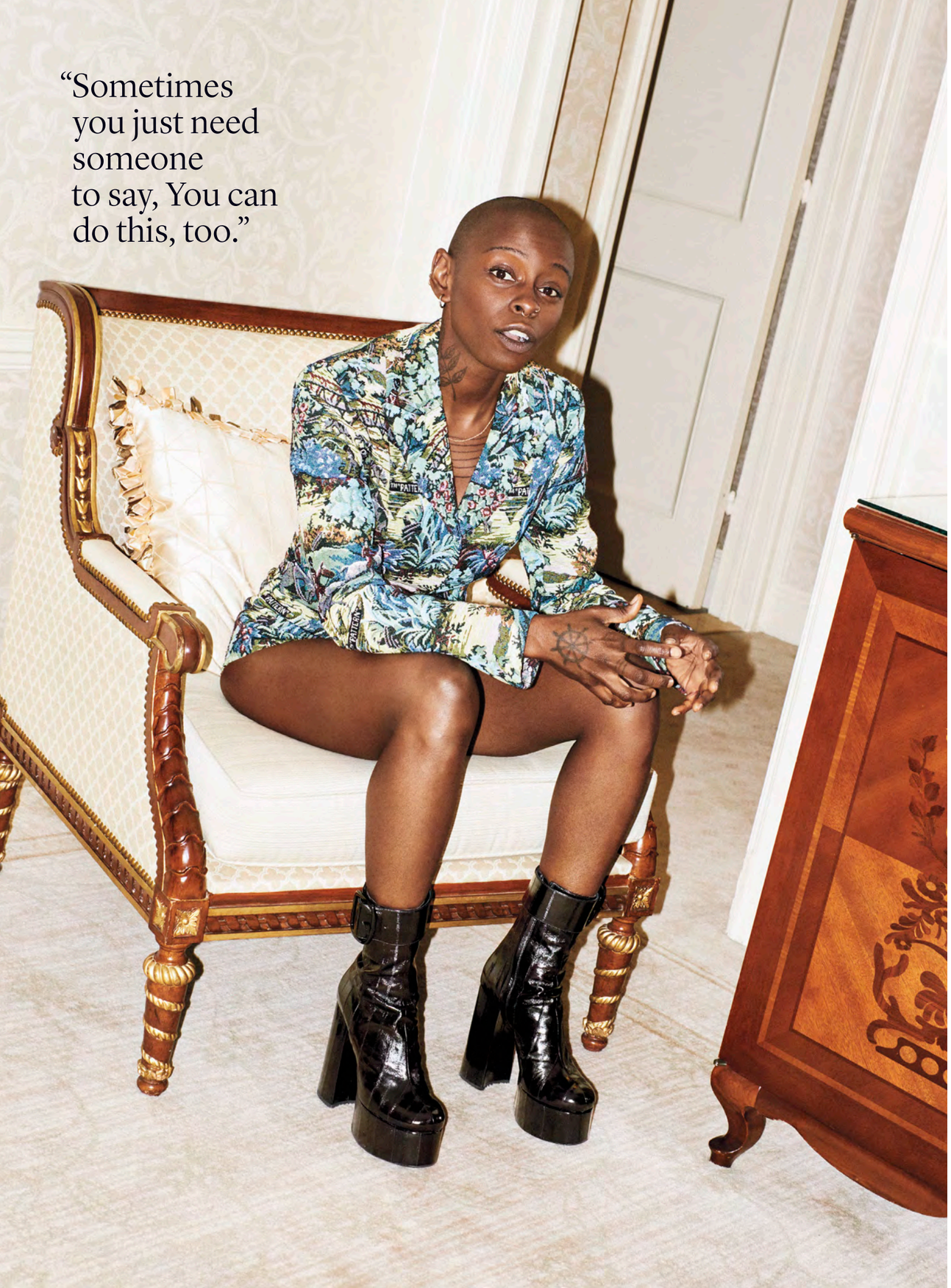
Since her Whitney show, some people have criticized Toyin for depicting wealth as the solution to black problems. “That’s never been my aim,” she says. “I use wealth as a platform. I’m analyzing it, usurping it, playing with it, the way I would with blackness, the way I would with skin, the way I would do with stories. I think

some people thought I was disregarding the work and suffering of black people. It's not disrespect. I just don't want to be an artist who only depicts black pain.

"I understand that this is a significant part of black life around the globe," she continues, "but if all we're known for is our pain and our struggle, what does that say? I don't want young people to feel that is the only way they can talk about themselves, through that lens. Black stories can be ridiculous. Black stories can be silly. They can be problematic. They can be mediocre and remarkable. They can be boring. Can we have that privilege now? Instead of having to be exceptional all the time? That was the aim of this whole saga—just to see that."

In this story:
Sittings Editor: Phyllis Posnick.
Hair: Edris Nichols; Makeup: Renee Garnes.
Photographed by Alec Soth of Magnum Photos.

"Sometimes you just need someone to say, You can do this, too."



Lucy Boynton

ACTRESS

HOMETOWN: London, England
AGE: 24
YOU KNOW HER AS: Countess Elena Andrenyi in *Murder on the Orient Express* (2017).
BREAKTHROUGH ROLE: Mary Austin in *Bohemian Rhapsody* (November 2018).
ON CAREER: "As soon as I got a taste for what a film set can be like, there was no going back."
ON LEARNING: "It was really interesting watching him, and how he engages with every element of filming," she says of co-star Rami Malek. "He doesn't just play as actor—he knows the lens we're on, the camera that's being specifically used. Why this angle, why this shot? Why this setup? That curiosity was very inspiring."

Dress by ***Givenchy.***

Toyin Ojih Odutola

ARTIST

HOMETOWN: Ife, Nigeria
AGE: 33
BREAKTHROUGH PROJECT: "To Wander Determined," 2017–18 solo show at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art.
CURRENT EXHIBITION: "When Legends Die" (Jack Shainman Gallery, September 2018).
EARLY INFLUENCES: Anime, Kara Walker, Jacob Lawrence.
ON SUCCESS: "I went from doing my own thing to representing this movement. It's hard to mitigate it because you're not quite sure why or how you fit into it. But Jordan Casteel and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and Njideka Akunyili Crosby and all of these amazing women artists are all coming to the fore: I'm glad I'm part of the group. I'm not just part of the singular thing; it's all of us in the room."

Bodysuit by ***Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh;*** *boots by* ***Saint Laurent by Anthony Vaccarello.***
Photographed at the Pierre hotel, New York City.

AND STILL WE RISE

In the paintings of Toyin Ojih Odutola, Zadie Smith uncovers an exhilarating alternative history – and a sensational new talent

This past mid-winter in New York was a bleak one: blustery and cold, daily darkened by the news from Washington. But from October to February, if you were looking to come in from the cold – seeking some place to warm yourself, body and soul – you could make your way to the ground floor of the Whitney Museum of American Art. There, the young painter Toyin Ojih Odutola offered the weary an alternative to American dystopia – African utopia. Specifically, a Nigerian *beau monde* of aristocrats and ambassadors, of louche Afrotrash princelings (on honeymoon with each other, pictured in front of Instagram-worthy Venetian wallpaper), of black barons and baronesses surveying their country estates, and glamorous African It-girls posed in their finest threads. My favourite was *First Night at Boarding School*. An adorable Little Lord Fauntleroy – about 10 years old and fighting off sleep – lay between unfamiliar bedcovers, his elegant Afro set at a fretful angle upon his pillow. He looked pampered but anxious: you could see he missed the silk sheets back home, his family, the well-stocked playroom, that kind maid who brings the milk. These were the extent of his worries. If only every black boy in America had worries like these!

"If only" is the sign under which Odutola works. If only slavery had never happened. If only African families had never been broken and serially traumatised. If only Africa's wealth had never dispersed to the four corners of the globe nor her tribal differentiations been lost in the wanderings of her diaspora. For though the name of the show was *To Wander Determined*, Odutola's people do no wandering through the wilderness because they have no need to – the promised land was never lost. Instead, the past 600 years of dispersion and displacement have been magically replaced by consolidation: of wealth, of heritage, of privilege itself. A plaque on the wall grandly informs us that these paintings come from the "private collections" of two fictional Nigerian aristocratic clans – the UmuEze Amara and the Obafemi – who are connected by the marriage of their eldest sons (to each other). Standing amid these life-size fictional portraits is like entering a Nigerian novel of high society written by an African Edith Wharton, and in its richly detailed fantasy recalls other recent, triumphant examples of the black >

Toyin Ojih Odutola, photographed by Jason Schmidt. Top left: the artist's Representatives of State (2016-2017)

RON AMSTUTZ

RON AMSTUTZ

imaginary: the smash-hit movie *Black Panther*, say, in which Wakanda, a nation state of great wealth and advanced technology, lies hidden within the African continent; or Kehinde Wiley's regal depictions of black youth; or Donald Glover's Emmy-laden TV experiment *Atlanta*. Call it the Afroternative! Certainly, there has been a departure from the social realism once expected of black artists, and a move towards the liberty of imagining other possible worlds, a radical and essential freedom in these times. In fact, the longer I spent with the UmuEze Amara and the Obafemi, the more it seemed possible that their world was reality and outside the gallery was where the truly outrageous fiction lived, the one in which a sitting American president just contained every country in Africa within a pitiful scatological expletive.

Odutola was born in Ife, Nigeria, in 1985, and raised in Alabama. She now resides in New York, where she is a central light in a thrilling new generation of black artists that includes her childhood friend, the Ghanaian-American novelist Yaa Gyasi, the musician and downtown alt-star Dev Hynes (Blood Orange) and the singer and performance artist Solange Knowles (who is, alongside her husband, Alan Ferguson, both an occasional model for Odutola's portraits and a frequent collector of them). But if the traditional relationship between painter and patron is one of unadorned artisan and uber-glamorous client, Odutola disrupts all that. Strikingly beautiful and startlingly well dressed, in photos patron and artist seemed clipped from the very world Odutola paints so beautifully: two aristocratic African sisters, just about ready to tear up the (down)town. And that's the funny thing about Odutola: Nigerian high life – as I'm sure she's well aware – is not only

Odutola's 2017 paintings included First Night at Boarding School (left); Unclaimed Estates (below); and (bottom right, from top) Unfinished Commission of the Late Baroness; and The Missionary

an alternative fantasy but a present reality, and I confess that this Caribbean-British viewer's first assumption was that these sumptuous portraits represented real people. Were they members of the kind of "Afropolitan" elite well described by the (equally glamorous) globe-trotting Ghanaian-Nigerian writer Taiye Selasi? Or maybe the children of those oil-rich Nigerian millionaires and billionaires whose comings and goings are faithfully recorded in the Lagos gossip rags? I thought of those lines of Maya Angelou: "Does my sassiness upset you?/ Why are you beset with gloom?/ 'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells/ Pumping in my living room." Maya was speaking metaphorically but in the New Nigeria, oil really is the source of enormous, if unequally spread, wealth. The same viewer who walks out of *Black Panther* wondering whether a militaristic and technocratic monarchy is truly an African vision to which we should all aspire, might also ask herself if there are further dreams we can have about an un-stolen and un-colonised Africa that will turn away from the kind of *Rich Kids of Instagram* fantasies we're sold every day.

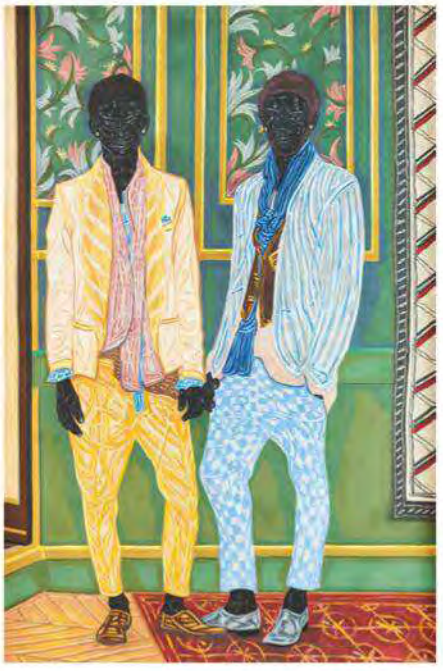
And yet, on the other hand, it's clear that Odutola is interested in inherited >

Standing amid these portraits is like entering a Nigerian novel written by an African Edith Wharton

Odutola knows exactly what she is doing and has many more journeys to take us on yet

wealth not so much in itself as for what it represents: self-determination. Part of her project is precisely to give to black subjects what those rich Instagram kids so like to display: the luxury of journeying wherever you want to go, and the freedom to indulge concerns that begin and end with the self: "I wanted to show historically oppressed bodies in control not only of themselves but in control of the impetus to travel, of their need to exist in the world and not be in control of anything else but themselves. The only thing I knew could cut to the heart of that was Manifest Destiny [the 19th-century belief that white settlers were "destined" to expand across North America], so there's a lot of Manifest Destiny-like, Hudson River School situations going on in these works." As Toni Morrison famously defined it, racism, to the black person, is primarily a tool of distraction: it drags us away from the proper pursuit of our own interests, dreams, plans, projects, ideas. In this context, Odutola's paintings ask

By Her Design (far left); Pregnant (left); and Excavations (bottom left), all painted by Odutola last year. Below: Newlyweds on Holiday (2016)



a vital question: what would we be like if we had never been distracted? But is a black version of Manifest Destiny a true alternate vision or just the flip side of the same coin? Is hoarded black wealth the only correct response to its white equivalent? You won't get any easy answers from these paintings: just like the strange interiors in which these privileged families live, some of the angles are deliberately absurd and the perspectives impossible; bizarrely shaped bricks hold up dubious windows, and landscapes look like fabric and vice versa. A fantasy doesn't need to make sense. But it can still have power, and there is something deeply exhilarating in contemplating a newly married, gorgeous gay couple, who by their union have brought two grand Nigerian families together in a country which we know, in reality, has recently outlawed the very existence of homosexuality.

I think Odutola, who, at only 32, has already passed through several modes and styles – most noticeably from ballpoint pen to chalk and pastel – knows exactly what she is doing and has many more journeys to take us on yet. If anyone can paint an alternative to the alternative, it's her. What will that look like? It happened that the day after I visited Odutola's paintings was the day that the American novelist Ursula K Le Guin – that master of alternative realities – died, and for all of us wondering what force to place against the forces presently working against us (more of the same? Or something entirely different?), Le Guin, in one of her final radio interviews, offered some advice: "My guess is that the kind of thinking we are, at last, beginning to do about how to change the goals of human domination and unlimited growth to those of human adaptability and long-term survival, is a shift from yang to yin, and so involves acceptance of impermanence and imperfection, a patience with uncertainty and the makeshift, a friendship with water, darkness and the earth."

Is the choice really between wealthy conquerors and dispossessed victims, or can we imagine an Afroternative to both? Maybe it's in Odutola's yin-like depictions of black skin – multi-layered, mobile, full of depth and character, earthy, imperfect, but beautiful – that the most exciting possibilities lie. Look closely and you'll see no flat plane of colour but instead rivers and roads, paths and arrows, seeming to trace the many possible future directions of one of the most exciting young artists working today. ■

Toyin Ojih Odutola's work is on display at Talisman in the Age of Difference at the Stephen Friedman Gallery, W1, from June 8 to July 28

ALL ARTWORKS COURTESY OF JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK. RON AMSTUTZ

ART
Toyin Ojih Odutola

Three years ago, the Nigerian-born artist Toyin Ojih Odutola had just flown to South Africa from New York, where she now lives, when she turned on her phone. So many messages flooded her screen, she thought someone had died. Thankfully, the news was that one of her portraits had appeared in Cookie's (Taraji P. Henson) apartment in that night's Season 2 premiere of *Empire*. Ojih Odutola had forgotten all about giving permission for its use months earlier. "Friends were saying, 'Bitch! *Empire!* WTF?'" she recalls. "It was amazing because many more people got to see my work. And my family was excited because they love that show." Since then, the artist, 32, has been on something of a streak, with an acclaimed show at the Museum of the African Diaspora, in San Francisco, followed by her first solo museum exhibition in New York, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, this past winter. In both, large-scale figurative works tell the fictive story of two aristocratic Nigerian families, regally depicted against luxurious domestic backdrops—her take on traditional European portraiture. "This whole saga," she says, "answers the question: What would it look like to have wealth embodied by historically oppressed figures?" Having straddled cultures as an immigrant, first in Berkeley, where her father taught at the University of California, and then in Huntsville, Alabama, Ojih Odutola is nimble at remaking her life. That hard-won skill, she notes, has proved essential to her as an artist "who imagines things that don't exist in the world and figures out how to translate them." For her next solo outing, at Jack Shainman Gallery, in September, Ojih Odutola is exploring the theme of lineage in what she says will be the final chapter of this particular family chronicle. "To be Prince Harry is to always know where you come from," she explains. "So much of the representation of historically oppressed people has been this loss of history that is the transatlantic slave trade. I want to depict a family that never experienced that." DIANE SOLWAY »

Above: Toyin Ojih Odutola, in her New York studio, wearing a Burberry sweater, Loro Piana pants, and Church's shoes.

Photographs by Ryan Lowry

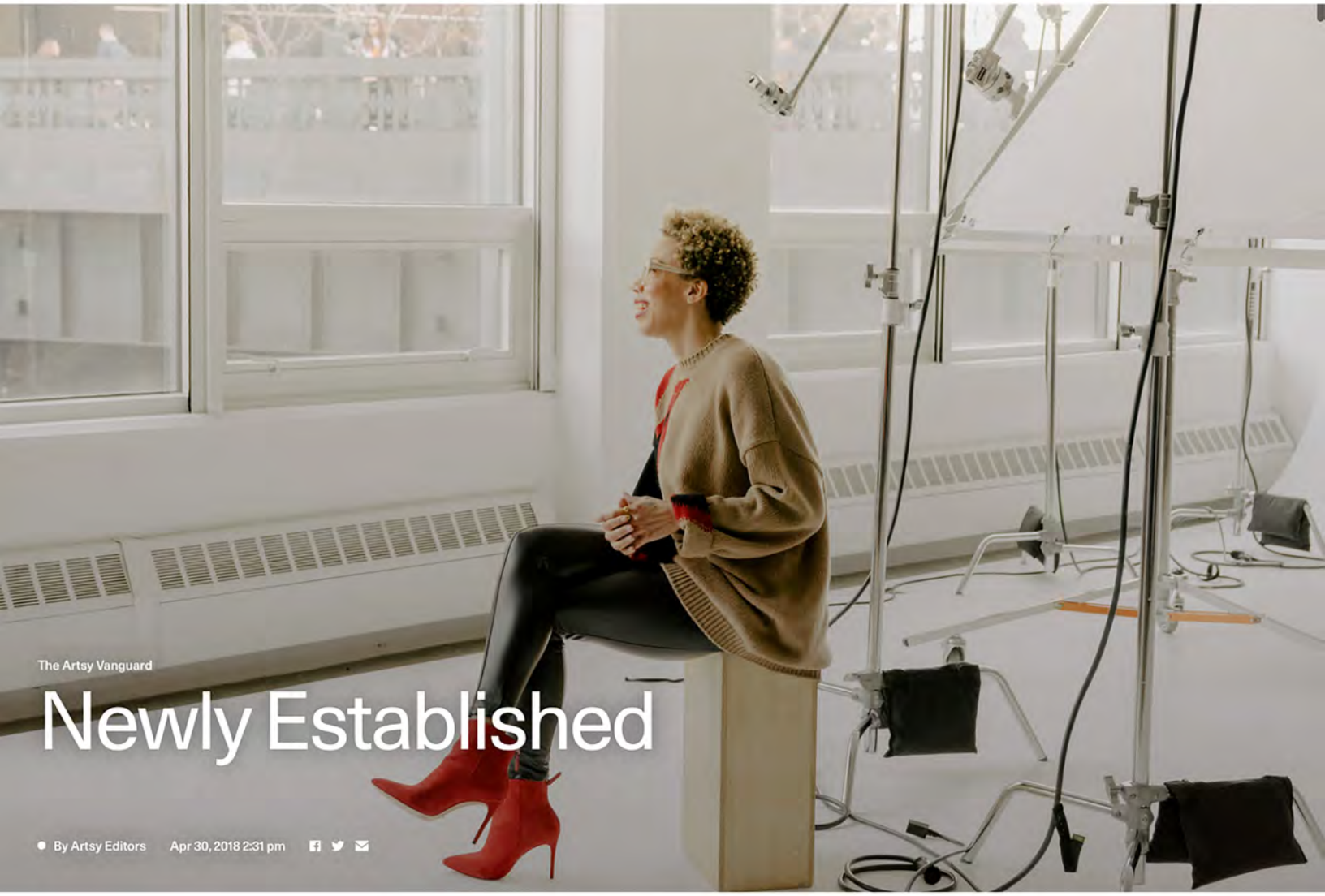
OJIH ODUTOLA: STYLED BY NORA MILCH; PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT: TIM O'CONNELL; FASHION ASSISTANT: BILAL; OJIH ODUTOLA WEARS FALKE SOCKS. KANU: PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT: TIM O'CONNELL; CHAIR ON 84S: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SALON 94 DESIGN

DESIGN
Dozie Kanu

Only two years ago, Dozie Kanu was a film student at the School of Visual Arts, in New York, occasionally helping out classmates on production design for their sets. From there he moved on to various design firms, including stints at Bureau Betak, Matter Made, and Carol Egan, producing small prototypes of his own work after hours. Kanu, who is from Texas and has Nigerian roots, caught the eye of Paul Johnson, the design impresario who spearheads Salon 94's collectible-design division. It was Kanu's contribution to Salon 94 and Maccarone's 2017 group show "Midtown" that grabbed everyone's attention: a purple concrete bench with a base made from two elbow wire wheels. With its seemingly irreverent nods to both hip-hop culture and the work of the design icons that surrounded it, Bench on 84s, as the piece was called, left no doubt that the now 25-year-old was onto something. Kanu, who half-jokingly claims that he got a lot of his design education on Tumblr, is still humbled by the praise, even if he is keenly aware of the importance of getting his name out there. "I'm thinking about the next generation," he says. "Black people aren't really represented in the design industry at all, so in order to shift things a bit, they need to be looking at someone who's doing it at a high level." FELIX BURRICHTER

Right: Dozie Kanu, in the Salon 94 warehouse in Queens, with his Chair on 84s, 2018.

ARTSY



The Artsy Vanguard

Newly Established

By Artsy Editors Apr 30, 2018 2:31 pm

What does it take to officially break into the canon? Consult the latest accomplishments of these 10 members of The Artsy Vanguard—a new, annual list of the 50 most influential talents shaping the future of contemporary art practice. Each of these artists has recently reached a crucial tipping point in their career, whether by landing a major commission, a survey at a globally recognized museum, or a national pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

Toyin Ojih Odutola

B. 1985, Ife, Nigeria. Lives and works in New York.

Toyin Ojih Odutola ***Compound Leaf*, 2017**
Jack Shainman Gallery

Toyin Ojih Odutola's mixed-media paintings are marvels of nuance, drama, and care. The artist's recent solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum presented a series of pastel, pencil, and charcoal portraits—although perhaps, in this case, "portraits" is a misnomer. The figures depicted were fictional members of two invented Nigerian aristocratic families, based not on individual sitters, but on amalgams of the artist's own family and friends.

It's a vision that is both aspirational and empowering. "Representing an imaginary world in which racial oppression, colonialism, and slavery do not exist, the artist makes a strong statement about prejudice and discrimination," notes Silvia Barisione, curator at the The Wolfsonian museum in Miami, who describes the artist's approach as "magical realism." Her subjects possess an effortless confidence and poise that makes her something of an heir to Barkley L. Hendricks; indeed, Odutola was included in "Legacy of the Cool," a group homage to the late artist staged earlier this year at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design.

Ojih Odutola's showcase at the Whitney signalled a moment that is pivotal to any artist's career—a first solo museum show in New York. (Her work's 2015 cameo on the popular show *Empire* also didn't hurt her visibility.) Another upcoming exhibition, this one at the SCAD Museum of Art in Savannah, Georgia, through September, presents new drawings that continue the artist's exploration of the same rich and hopeful fictions.

Toyin Ojih Odutola ***Industry (Husband and Wife)*, 2017**
Jack Shainman Gallery

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THE ART & MUSIC ISSUE

Toyin Ojih Odutola and Solange Knowles Find Harmony at The Noguchi Museum

FEB/MARCH 2018

MINIMALISM NOT MONOCHROME

SOLANGE KNOWLES: MOLLY GODDARD DRESS. BEVZA ARM SLEEVES. HELMUT LANG BOOTS. BING BANG EARRINGS. THIRD CROWN AND LADY GREY RINGS. ON ODUTOLA: WOLFORD BODYSUIT. JON MILLNER JACKET. ALCHIMIA DI BALLIN BOOTS AND LADY GREY EARRINGS. ALL WORKS BY ISAMU NOGUCHI / ©THE ISAMU NOGUCHI FOUNDATION AND GARDEN MUSEUM, NEW YORK/ARS.

Working from within the white cube, artists **Solange Knowles** and **Toyin Ojih Odutola** are changing the conversation about what it means to take up space. At The Noguchi Museum in New York, the friends and peers discuss sound, architecture and creating a visual language.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY AWOL ERIZKU
STYLING BY SOLANGE FRANKLIN

Solange Knowles and Toyin Ojih Odutola with Isamu Noguchi's *Deepening Knowledge*, 1969 (left); *Venus*, 1980 (right) and *Brilliance*, 1982.

Toyin Ojih Odutola: I've always wanted to ask you about your methodology, and how that developed over time through each contextual shift in your work. Did it develop organically through each album and then become sort of its own animal that could exist outside of and separate from the album?

Solange Knowles: For "A Seat at the Table," it was really important for me to develop some sort of a visual language. I think for me, there was a sense of meditation and repetition that I developed with a lot of the movement concepts I was creating for the last show and the music video pieces. I was constantly moving and evolving and re-shaping myself to be adaptable to these different locations and I realized that there was a sense of meditation that I was creating through this repetitive movement. It was one simple gesture, but I felt a sense of control by repeating it.

Once I got a grasp of what that repetition meant to me, and studied some of the movements, I realized that I was creating shapes and sculpture within these movements. It was really a natural progression for me to say, "Well, how do I apply these same practices to landscape and scenography? How do I apply the same sense of shape and meditation and repetition with building a scenography that reflects that?"

Ojih Odutola: It seems like there are three modes you're operating with—the sculptural element, the movement aspect of dance and performance, and the music and text that's associated with all of that. But in a way, these three modes are their own language—particularly the movement and how you use space to mold the movement. I'm thinking of the Guggenheim show, where the way you presented that performance was very much in line with the space itself.

Knowles: Oh, absolutely.

Ojih Odutola: I think that's what is so interesting: how you're able to take this very specific source material—the text and the music from your album—and you translate it into a form that can still be self-contained. It's capsulated and it's separate, all on its own. It can still evolve and change with each given context it's presented in—be it the Guggenheim, the Judd Foundation, the Menil. What's the process for you in engaging with these spaces? How do you bring in your own ideas and how do you collaborate with all of that?

Knowles: Well, I think being in the space to create a specific work provides the best environment for me because I'm approaching it architecturally, I'm approaching it mathematically, I'm getting the floor plans, I'm getting the layout and then I'm creating the experience. The Guggenheim was really phenomenal because there were all of these different ways that I could activate that space and one of my favorite moments was playing with the rotunda and working with its roundedness. Something very emotional happened while working with that roundedness, because it feels very whole. There were horn players and 200-plus bodies walking from top to bottom of that rotunda and attendees wore white, which helped them become a part of the sculpture and the landscape of the show itself. I am creating experiences that are an exchange between people—it is not easy work, but I'm grateful to be doing it.

I'm curious as to how you approach that with your work. You are one of the few artists, in terms of my contemporaries, that plays with color and the way your work is installed. The reason why I feel so connected to your work is because of how your work takes up the space in which it exists and how you are challenging these white walls more and more with each of your shows.

Ojih Odutola: I think that our generation grew up with the proliferation of conceptual art. There was a dominance of this aesthetic and thinking while I was in graduate school for instance, where the white cube was standard. It seemed incorporated into everything. That sought-after blank neutral space, I always found it's stark whiteness very harsh and rather oppressive. It was an erasure. But in some cases—especially being a black woman creator—there's a trepidation about presenting work that's not on white walls, I think.

There are elegant ways to do it. I'm thinking, of course, about works like Kara Walker's, with her cutouts, which is such an elegant gesture. To take the silhouette and impress that silhouette onto the white cube—onto that white, neutral space—and in doing so, activating that space with all these layers and meanings associated with blackness and the black mark, and the contention of that binary. The tension of the black and white as materials and constructs creates a world. I did align myself with that kind of work in my early drawings; investigating how black figures occupied decontextualized spaces—because I believed the audience was willing to go there with me, to understand the subjectivity inherent in the black figures and of the spaces they existed in, equally. I subscribed to the idea that there's no context needed if the body is there, all the information is in and of the body, it's in and of the face, and that can exist in contrast with—but not fighting against—the white space. The story was in the figure taking up space at all—that was the mark, the highlight. I misunderstood that when working in a monochromatic palette how the visual language can be misread, and blackness is still seen as uncharted territory and monolithic. I started from a place of universality, and that is still a kind of erasure. I had to venture more into color because of that; I had to get at the core and expand blackness as a definition visually. And part of what helped in that was engaging with the space the work is presented in—I had to incorporate more colors, I couldn't rely solely on the monochromatic palette anymore. When you visit a museum for instance, there's a specificity to how artifacts are shown, because the narrative extends to how they are presented. And we both know there's a very specific way in which African artifacts are shown that sometimes can be problematic. So, I took a cue from that: to explore and have more control of the narrative in the work and in the presentation.

Knowles: Absolutely.

Ojih Odutola: I didn't want to present blackness in a cliched way that felt dull and uninspired. One of the artists who offered great examples of this application was Lynette [Yiadom-Boakye], because she presents her work in very specific tones in the way the walls are colored and how each work is placed in conversation with the space. I mean, she has shown her work with stark, white walls as well, but I'm thinking of the New Museum show she had last year and how she specifically chose red.

Knowles: Mhmm, that red really blew me away.

Ojih Odutola: Right! And also the way she chose to hang the work slightly lower from eye-view. Normally, you would probably put it at about 60 or 50 inches up from the ground, but she did it lower so it felt like you were a part of the work, like you were entering into the spaces of each painting. And I think that's important, you know, as a black woman creator—or just as a creator in general—we should be involved in the presentation of the

ON KNOWLES: RAUN LAROSE TOP AND TROUSER, BIG BANG NYC EARRINGS AND HELMUT LANG BOOTS. ON ODUTOLA: JON MILNER TOP, RAUN LAROUSE TROUSER AND ALCHIMIA DI BALLIN BOOTS. ALL WORKS BY ISAMU NOGUCHI / ©THE ISAMU NOGUCHI FOUNDATION AND GARDEN MUSEUM, NEW YORK/ARS.

The artists with Noguchi's *Woman*, 1983-1985.

"You have to become a part of the work, and I can't do that on a stage. It's not the access—it's the type of access that I've been allowed to have that's just not enough."

—Solange Knowles

Knowles with Isamu Noguchi's *The Void*, 1970

ON KNOWLES: CELINE JACKET; HELMUT LANG BOOTS. BING BANG NYC AND LADY GREY PINS. MOUNSER EARRINGS. THIRD CROWN AND LADY GREY RINGS. ALL WORKS BY ISAMU NOGUCHI / ©THE ISAMU NOGUCHI FOUNDATION AND GARDEN MUSEUM, NEW YORK/ARS.

work, not leave it at the mercy of the standard white cube. If you have an intimate relationship with the making of the work, you should have a relationship with how it's presented.

Knowles: Absolutely.

Ojih Odutola: Do you sometimes feel as if the pushback is harder because some people can't picture this engagement and how it might manifest? Was there a moment when people would say: "maybe we should try another venue," or "this is too hard, let's try something else"? Have you encountered any issues when you're working on these kinds of projects?

Knowles: You know, I think that I've been extremely lucky and that I've made myself abundantly clear about my practices. But the main issue I've encountered is the expectation of entertainment—the expectation to come and perform and sing and dance and activate the art space as it is and then go home. That is something that I have pushed back on and resisted from day one. I think it's important to talk about this, because I was that young 14- or 15-year-old black girl with an interest in art who would have never ever felt like I had a space or that I had a chance to call myself a performance artist in these institutions. And that's the only reason I speak to it. I have to constantly remind myself to be honest about it because at the beginning of this project—were there invitations to activate art spaces? Were there invitations to activate them as a performance artist? Were there invitations to activate them with culture? Were there invitations to activate them with 200 bodies? Absolutely not.

Ojih Odutola: Right, to activate them with your ideas, concepts, with your own artistry and investigations.

Knowles: Exactly, I think the invitations were based off this idea that I am here, I have this album, I'm speaking about these things that are opening up conversations and you want me to share these conversations in your space, but you don't want me to share my full body of work and the range of my work. I think a lot of people fear what they haven't seen, and that part has been the most frustrating for me in this process. I've had to fight for my sculpture and I've had to fight for those 200 bodies and I've had to fight against not having a space. This idea that visibility will be an issue when for me it's an issue to not be on the same level as the viewer. I need to be able to look you in the eye. I need to be able to interact with you. You have to become a part of the work, and I can't do that on a stage. It's not the access—it's the type of access that I've been allowed to have that's just not enough.

Ojih Odutola: It's also this idea of adjusting your vision right? I think that's the primary pushback—that you have to adjust it. Of course, with everything there are concessions, and there are certain spaces and presentations which demand collaboration and you shift your vision slightly; but how far do you adjust your vision for the sake of someone else's idea of what they think your work is about?

Knowles: Of course, that is what it is; that's what it feels like.

Ojih Odutola: Maybe, because it's in the realm of contemporary art and—again it's very conceptual still—some may think they can enter a space you are creating and without any slow consideration get it quickly and completely, or even without interacting with the work properly at all, they think they understand you as a creator. The presumption can be caustic for the work, not only with how it is framed, but in the potential it has to develop within that space. I have my way for how I would like people to see the work, but I understand there can be ambiguities and everyone's experience is different—that not everyone is going to do it the same way. You still want to frame the presentation of the work just enough that when people walk through it they can access that vision, and then they can dive deep into it and really explore as they desire. For me, coming from a series where I'm dealing with invented narratives, I'm interested in how people move through the space, as if they're reading the stories as they go along. Meandering through the exhibition, it's like you're reading with the pages on the wall—you're walking through the book. In a way, you become a part of the narrative, there's a potential to get immersed in the story.

Knowles: I'm curious with your last few shows, which were so narrative based, was there any resistance to that?

Ojih Odutola: Girl, let me tell you.

Knowles: I already know, but let's talk about it!

Ojih Odutola: Well, the biggest thing was the wall color. Before this last show, conference calls were happening from one coast to another with: "she wants to do what with the walls? Hold up."

Knowles: I'm sure.

Ojih Odutola: Of course, the irony is when we finally put the color up, that was part of what people loved! It was a part of the story: how that color choice activated the conversation between the works even more, and how walking into that back gallery, where it's covered in that color, it becomes this great room of some grand estate that gets realized for the viewer. The drawings in the show aren't arbitrarily placed in the space for you to consume them visually as an accident, they serve a purpose. I work episodically with each drawing, so they are self-contained, but they are also a part of a larger narrative. The problems I encounter are when the work is put up without consideration of that narrative work and its potential to create an experience for viewership. That hasn't happened explicitly with the last couple of shows, but there are moments when someone says something to you in a patronizing way that connotes a lack of understanding of the creator's consideration, and that always frustrates me. I understand the need to compromise when necessary, however to treat artists like we lack the depth of understanding on how an audience interacts with a work is a gross underestimate of what goes down in our minds when we are in the studio, when we are creating the work. It's all a part of it, it's integral to the formulating. I make my concessions, but I assert my stance in regards to the narrative.

The one thing I really fought for in the Whitney show, for example, was the piece, *By Her Design* (2017), of a woman surrounded by water with a boat next to her. At the end they conceded, because of my argument about the conversation happening in the space at the time: most of the figures which were depicted outside or in some exterior scene were men, only one was a woman. She's sitting down on a ledge, not really interacting with her environment, her relationship with the landscape had its own function in the narrative. I fought to add this other depiction because it was important to show an adventuress within the framework and potentiality of black womanhood. And I considered other narratives, of black people and swimming, of just blackness and water as elements—that juxtaposition. This additional character, she wants to go out in the world and discover it. And why not do it in short-shorts, with her natural hair out, and her lipstick on because she felt like doing so? I think, part of what I struggled with... I mean, in the end, we are both

trying to introduce an audience to our perspective, and the more you come into the fore with your vision, by the very definition of what we are, we are actively engaging with and expanding what a black woman creative is.

Have you ever felt as if you have to mentally—almost as a daily think—emancipate yourself from that indoctrinated, limiting view of what that is, of what a black women creative is? And not just what we have to fight against with other people, but within ourselves?

Knowles: Oh, absolutely!

Ojih Odutola: This idea that there are only so many types of black women artists out there, and you can only fit into one paradigm. So, you have to invent one for yourself and how difficult that is?

Knowles: On shoots that I've been on in the past, there was this idea that the strongest way to convey black women who make political work was to put them in the 70's and to create a sort of caricature of the movement and the work that's been done. Something that really stands out for me as a pivotal moment in my life and my career, was on a magazine shoot where the art director had really strong ideas about the direction. I walked up and I saw all of these mood boards with women who I have the utmost admiration for—women who have taught me everything I know about liberation and women who I have held up in the highest regard—who were reduced to an aesthetic. This creative director was making their hard work and their legacy a prop and I said, "sir, I don't feel comfortable with this, I do not relate to this set design, that's not what we discussed." And I distinctly remember him, in front of a room full of people huddling around, looking at me and saying, "minimalism does not look good on you."

Ojih Odutola: Wow.

Knowles: I will never forget the range of emotions that I felt. This idea that black women could not be minimalist, we could not be subtle—we have to be big, we have to be loud, we have be an explosive presence. The idea that minimalism or avant-garde belongs to white people is pervasive.

Ojih Odutola: Or only belongs to a white space… it's also indicative of how black womanhood is seen as inherently political. It's not just limiting black womanhood to an aesthetic, it's how projections usurp the truth of black womanhood overall. It's not seen as multifarious, that it can include so many things. I was reminded of this growing up: how I would listen to a certain record or song from something that was deemed "not black enough," and I remember feeling really uncomfortable about that judgment because my mother liked that same music. I remember telling her one day, "Mom, everyone says so-and-so is white, and I can't listen to it," and she would respond with something like, "It's really strange how people would limit blackness to not include this. Why can't your liking this be a part of our culture? Why don't we have access to that?" And that just hit me like a ton of bricks. There's a one-drop rule when it comes to genetics, but that one-drop rule doesn't extend to culture. You can't access minimalism—WHY? That's such a part of humanity, why should it only be relegated to one specific demographic? It makes no sense.

I'd like to go back to something you said earlier, about the need to be entertained or the expectation about entertaining, which isn't the point of a creator. I'm thinking about to what you were saying about trying to activate spaces and the expectations involved with that. At what point, do we say: "my purpose as a creator is not to entertain you?" For instance, what you did with the Tate project, the performance piece and the video that captured it. I loved how the music and the text was so seamlessly translated into the movement of the dancers and you—in that space, in conversation with the sculptures. I wanted to talk about how you use language in a sculptural way to fight against the expectations. Is the text—the lyrics—a catalyst for expansion from the tropes tacked to entertaining in the videos you direct?

Knowles: I think it varies from project to project. With Tate I started off with this line, "we sleep in our clothes, warriors of the night" which is so subjective to so many different meanings and interpretations. With Solána's [SZA's] video [for "the Weekend"], it was a moment in wanting to use all facets of communication and that felt like an actual mantra of what was being communicated through the video.

Ojih Odutola: Right, and did it also communicate the gaze, like the "black woman's gaze?" I feel like that text was the embodiment of that.

Knowles: Yes, I felt it was really integral to the piece.

Ojih Odutola: It definitely made the video for me… I'm so glad it was just us two doing this interview without a mediator, because often when people try to put two black women artists together, they think: "Let them talk about the struggle, let them talk about the pain and the agony!" And I just wanted to talk with you about methodology—how things can change and sometimes fail and how to grapple with that in artmaking. And about your vision and how it has evolved. When so much of what we have to contend with already is the fact that we have to push against that struggle in our minds and every day, we have to push against all those expectations. If we have an opportunity to speak truthfully amongst ourselves, we don't have to perform, we don't have to talk about the logistics of being a black woman today. That's a fact. Can we move on?

"If you have an intimate relationship with the making of the work, you should have a relationship with how it's presented."
—Toyin Ojih Odutola

ON ODUTOLA: HELMUT LANG DRESS; ALCHIMIA DI BALLIN BOOTS AND LADY GREY EARRINGS. ON KNOWLES: CHRIS GELNAS STRAPLESS TOP, BEVZAARM SLEEVES, CELINE TROUSERS; HELMUT LANG BOOTS. THIRD CROWN BRACELETS. MOUNSER EARRINGS AND THIRD CROWN AND LADY GREY RINGS. ALL WORKS BY ISAMU NOGUCHI / ©THE ISAMU NOGUCHI FOUNDATION AND GARDEN MUSEUM. NEW YORK/ARS.

Ojih Odutola and Knowles with Noguchi's *The Void*, 1970 at The Noguchi Museum in Long Island City, New York. For more information on these works and upcoming programming, visit noguchi.org.

The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

By ROBERTA SMITH, WILL HEINRICH and MARTHA SCHWENDENER FEB. 21, 2018

From Toyin Ojih Odutola's "Wall of Ambassadors" (2017).
Toyin Ojih Odutola, via Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Toyin Ojih Odutola

Through Feb. 25. Whitney Museum of American Art, Manhattan; 212-570-3600, whitney.org.

The official portraits of the Obamas were unveiled last week, demonstrating what is essentially the American version of royal portraiture. The paintings are roughly accurate likenesses but staged to amplify the grandeur and importance of their sitters. In "To Wander Determined" at the Whitney Museum's lobby gallery, her first museum show in New York, Toyin Ojih Odutola works in the same genre — portraiture — except her subjects are two fictional aristocratic families in her native Nigeria.

In fact, Ms. Ojih Odutola functions as much as a storyteller as a visual artist, spinning a fantastic tall tale around the images. Rather than presenting them as her own artworks, she describes them as depicting members of the UmuEze Amara, one of the oldest noble clans in Nigeria, and the Obafemi, minor aristocrats, merchants and ambassadors. The paintings, we are told, represent 200 years of collecting and are offered "in partnership" with the Whitney Museum and presented by Ms. Ojih Odutola in her role as deputy private secretary, signing off from Udoka House in Lagos, Nigeria. (It should be noted that the works on view are primarily from Jack Shainman Gallery, and the museum has acquired three of the paintings.)

Except, of course, the collection is clearly created by one artist and the works, which resemble paintings, might really be described as drawings. Executed in charcoal, pastel and pencil — traditional drawing materials — they are built up with richly colored surfaces, and finely detailed textiles, faces and backgrounds.

There is a "Wall of Ambassadors" (2017) and a young girl tucked into bed on her "First Night at Boarding School" (2017). Portraits of young men "Surveying the Family Seat" (2017) and their "Unclaimed Estates" (2017) suggest a kind of "Downton Abbey" in Nigeria. Or, in the same way the Obamas represented the success of the African diaspora, Ms. Ojih Odutola imagines two clans with longevity, prosperity and regal bearing.

MARTHA SCHWENDENER

Interview

TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA DEFIES CONVENTIONAL PORTRAYALS OF BLACK BODIES

By Kat Herriman
Photography Bjarne x Takata

Published December 8, 2017

Toyin Ojih Odutola's drawings unfold like stories. One enters her world through a main character, but that's just an access point; the 32-year-old, Nigerian-born, Alabama-raised artist uses figuration as a tool for dissecting larger social structures. "I am an investigative artist, so for me the black figure is a medium," she says. "What I'm trying to do is show you that you can use black bodies in a way that explores ideas, rather than simply the condition of blackness." Not long after moving to New York in 2013, Ojih Odutola made pen and ink works that avoided the usual depictions and conventions of portraying black skin by creating figures with bright reflective hues.

More recently, she has been making portraits of imaginary characters as a starting point for discussions about place. In a 2016 solo show at San Francisco's Museum of the African Diaspora, she delved into the luxurious homes of two fictional Nigerian aristocratic families. Currently, Ojih Odutola has a show of 17 pastel and charcoal drawings at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art that follows these figures as they travel through an ambiguous and shifting global landscape. In one life-size work, Nigerian jungles bleed into Tuscan hills. "So much of the historical narrative has been about black bodies being forced to travel," she says. "I was trying to see if I could depict an adventurous spirit and a lack of fear about moving through the world, and not being afraid of the space you occupy."

Toyin Ojih Odutola

“When your life is defined by precariousness, you tend to downplay your efforts… because you aren’t really supposed to be here”

Toyin Ojih Odutola may have felt she had to keep a low profile until now, but she’s finally embracing her moment. A solo exhibition at the Whitney, *To Wander Determined*, her first museum exhibition in New York, opened in October, containing portraits that depict imaginary characters, their lifesize scale anything but shy and retiring.

Words: Charlotte Jansen

When did you move from Nigeria to the US? What was your life like there and what struck you about the US when you relocated? I came to the US when I was five, in 1990. I was enamoured by America—my imagination exacerbated by films from this magical place. The moment I arrived, my lack of understanding of this country became glaringly apparent. I didn't speak English well and struggled early on in school. When I finally conquered the language, it came at a price: I lost my native Yoruba tongue and in so doing severed a personal link to my homeland. From that moment, I moved through the world as if I was trespassing—never certain of my place and always feeling as if I was an imposter. We lived in the Bay Area of California for the first five years I was here, then moved to Alabama when my father got an associate professorship at a HBCU. That transition from a multinational locale to a segregated one was traumatic. I had to relearn how to adjust to this form of precariousness—with an additive: my being a Black person in a Southern town.

How did that experience affect you? The experience shaped me in a way no other locale would have; I became more adept in detecting the shades of my otherness in various spaces—more privy to the subtleties of privilege and prejudice as well as language. This helped me become more acutely aware of the implications of selfhood and how context defines and shifts one's sense of purpose and belonging. I desperately needed to understand what this meant and how best to articulate it for myself—to be more informed and thusly prepared for what was now my life. I wasn't a natural writer and miscalculations were a constant. However, in the realm of the visual I found a home—and that has been my way of understanding the world onward.

You've spoken of the gap between image and meaning. Do you think about the viewer's interaction with your work? I place great emphasis on the potential of viewership and how it can partake in the creating of an artwork. The viewer holds more power than one realizes. You can read the work in whatever way you wish and that doesn't take away from the artist's intention—it expands it. I don't mind ambiguity in my work, but I like to utilize some kind of framework. It's a push and pull; I like to leave enough room for the viewer to allow their own imagination to take a hold and become a part of the story of the work.

Can you tell me more about these characters who appear in the works at the Whitney? The exhibition is the coupling of two chapters centred around a fictionalized husband duo and their respective families. The first chapter, *A Matter of Fact*, was exhibited at the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco last year into this spring. It captures the interwoven lives of the UmuEze Amara Clan, with their present Marquess, Jideofor Emeka, at the helm. It was the beginnings of my exploration into how wealth is depicted when historically oppressed subjects are not only in ownership of their bodies and their selfhood, but also their capital and surroundings. In that first chapter, the questions expanded to how wealth and status affect the way people present themselves in the spaces they create—and demarcate those who are in those spaces. How does one read a portrayal of a subject who is unquestioned?

Following that is the second chapter, *Testing the Name*, which captures the interlocking narratives of the Marquess' husband, Temitope Omodele, and his family under the baronship, House of Obafemi. This subsequent investigation deals with how wealth affords travel and the luxury of choice in regard to travel. What happens when you depict historically oppressed figures who are in control of where their bodies go? And instead of their bodies travelling, what if we shift the narratives to their selfhood as a mode of travel—their impetuses, interests, desires? What might that look like? That was my aim to discover in the making of this sequel. Their lordships, Jide and Tope, are an extension of my thought process and are the anchors.

Where did the title for the show come from? Not too long ago, I came across this quote by the author Edwidge Danticat: "The immigrant artist shares with all other artists the desire to interpret and possibly remake his or her own world." It floored me. Through further research, I found the crux of her argument: that the life of an immigrant, the lands, cultures, principles and beliefs we traverse, is a methodology, a form of art making. Never had my life as an artist been articulated so beautifully and precisely before. Being a migrant, in fact and mind, renders everything I do. When your life is defined by precariousness, you tend to downplay your efforts: you try to make yourself small; you speak as plainly as possible to hide inconsistencies; you don't want to disturb the balance of things because you aren't really supposed to be here. As the works started coming together, I realized what this exhibition could be on a macrocosmic level: a public showing of my state of making; how it has developed up to this point; and how my own personal narrative as a migrant informs so much of how I think of and see the work. The only words that spoke to me in this regard were "to wander, determined". That's what I have always done creatively: I go blindly forward with an inquiry—not at all concerned with the answer or the outcome, but with the lands, states and spaces I travel through in the process of making. That is who I am as an artist—not simply a Nigerian American woman. I am what I am in this creative field partly because of that three-tiered, conscious fact, not despite it.

Previous pages
Portrait by Tim Smyth

This page
The Raven, 2016
Charcoal, pastel and pencil on paper
190 × 106 cm (paper)
203 × 119 × 5 cm (framed)

Following pages, left
The Treatment 21, 2015
Pen ink and pencil on paper
30.5 × 23 cm (paper)
41 × 33.5 × 4 cm (framed)

Right
Wall of Ambassadors, 2017
Charcoal, pastel and pencil on paper
101 × 76 cm (paper)
116 × 90 × 3.8 cm (framed)

ALL IMAGES COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

i-D VICE

toyin ojih odutola's art is collected by solange and shown at the whitney

André-Naquian Wheeler
MAR 12 2018, 4:28AM

Toyin Ojih Odutola is taking in the radically soft, life-sized portraits of a fictional aristocratic family she's created. These mothers, fathers and sisters are visions of black excellence – wearing gentle pastels, sheer fabrics, and thigh-high go-go boots – and they live in a lush Nigeria where the past and present are indistinguishable from each other. "It's almost like we don't get the right to imagine what black wealth looked like," the Nigeria-born, America-raised artist begins. She looks at her character's chiffon shirts with a sense of longing. "For me, it's tricky. With Afrofuturism, we always say the future is going to get better. But what if all of these things we're imagining have happened?" Toyin points to a painting of her protagonists embracing each other. The two dark-skinned men seem uninhibited, despite being fictional royals of a country with very real anti-gay laws. It feels like a piece of magical realism: Toyin imagining a Nigeria in which queer love is free of stigma. But it's not, she says. The painting is rooted in the past, not the future. It's a reminder that queer love stories have flowered in Nigeria for centuries, and will continue to flourish. "If you want to claim Nigeria, then you have to claim them. You can't separate the two," the artist says.

When we talk, Toyin's exhibition at the Whitney Museum, *To Wander Determined,* is nearing the end of its four-month run. Staging her first solo exhibition in NYC – and at the same museum that houses work by modern greats such as Edward Hopper and Elizabeth Murray – was a big deal for the artist. Toyin put the show together in just a few months, after the Whitney approached her. "At first I was like, 'I've done this before, but I'm a little older and have a crick in my back,'" she jokes, her laugh bouncing off the walls before she turns serious. "But I knew this was important because of the institution and how it positions my work in the space."

Toyin Ojih Odutola, Between the Margins, 2017.

Toyin has been making her mark on pop culture for years now. Solange is a long-time collector, poet Claudia Rankine wrote an in-depth essay about her work, and one of her chalk-drawn portraits appeared in an episode of Empire (hanging in Cookie Lyon's living room). She first became famous for highlighting the shimmer and magic of black skin with her intricate ink pen and chalk dots that, in her words, "break the skin up into facets". But her portraits of this fictional family on display at the Whitney seem to suggest a new focus: highlighting the shimmer and magic of black lives.

Toyin says this was the driving question for her Whitney exhibition: What if you claimed everywhere you go as a home? Some black people avoid travelling because they (reasonably) fear they'll encounter racism. Toyin wanted to help ease this hesitation by depicting black people outside, in nature, swimming in lagoons, chilling on the beach, taking in the sunset.

Coat and jumper Golden Goose.

"I wanted to tackle a family that was out in the world," she says, frustrated by the lack of representation in art and pop culture. "So much black imagery is about this idea that black families only in exist in certain hubs like Chicago and Harlem. And you find these old Jet magazines where black people are like, 'Okay, we're gonna go on a little trip, but it's going to be tricky!' Never going into unknown territories, or, if you do, feeling like you should be afraid from the onset."

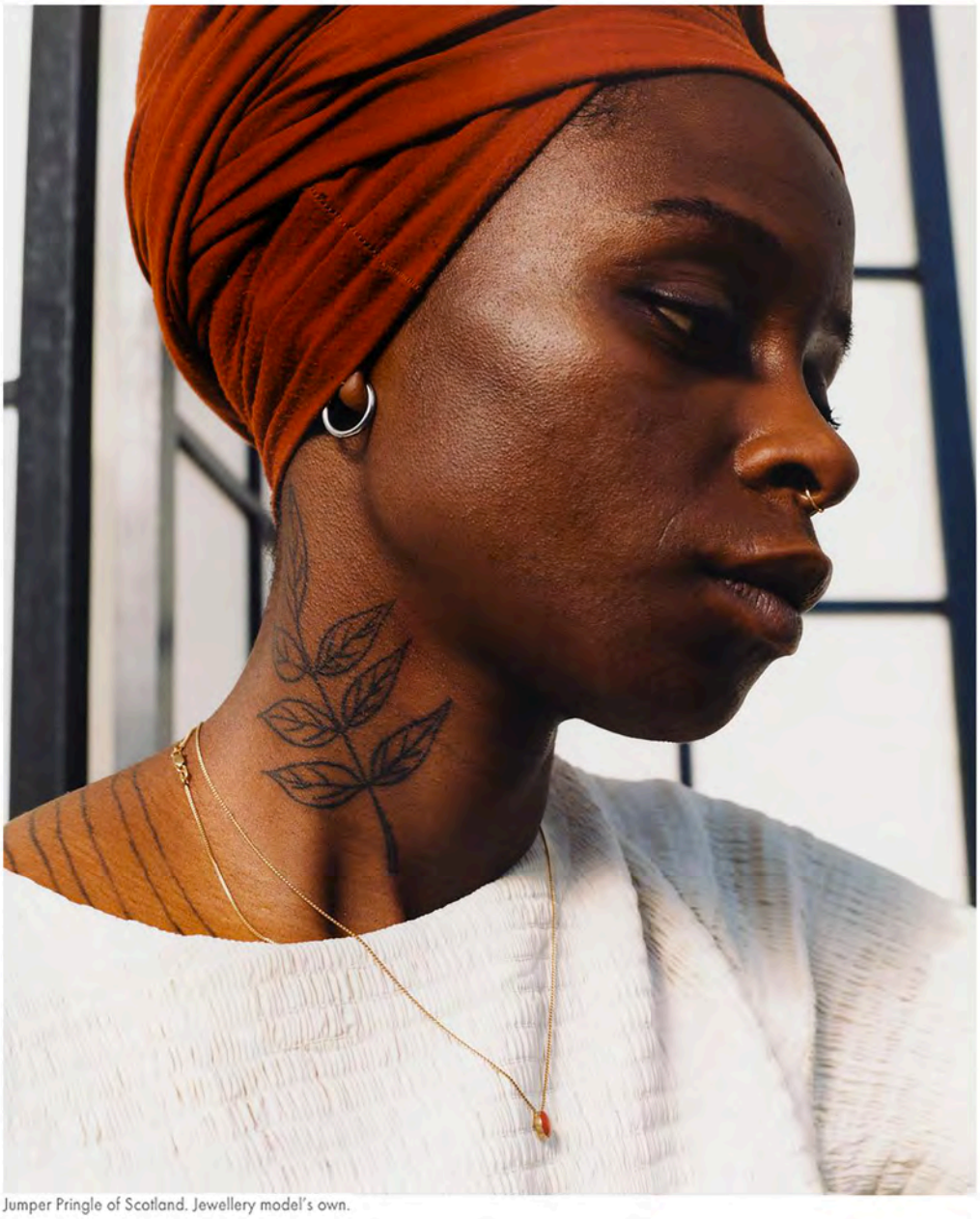
Toyin's latest portraits illustrate a non-performative blackness. Her subjects are captured in states of leisure and, therefore, let us see their most unbothered selves. It's the black body safe from the slew of day-to-day microaggressions. "It can be in an office space or on the subway, but someone can just shift when you sit down and that triggers something," Toyin reflects. "It's really hard to describe that for other people. So, for once, I wanted to see figures that – and I know this phrase is misused a lot – just happen to be black." Toyin doesn't want her paintings to simply provide us with new forms of representation; she wants them to suggest new ways of existing.

Toyin Ojih Odutola, Unclaimed Estates, 2017.

Toyin is quietly getting ready for her next exhibition. This one will also explore the lives of her complex, liberated and elegant characters. But after that she'll take a break from them. "I've been too deep into it," she jokes, reflecting on the time she's spent writing out detailed narratives for these fictional subjects (Toyin, a self-described fangirl, says graphic novels and comic books inspired her creative process).

"Really, at the end of the day, you're walking through a show about two gay men and their lives," Toyin says, a pleased smile spreading across her face. "A lot of people don't realise it, because you're not just seeing them. It's their aunts, their mothers, their fathers. These two men are entrenched in the Nigerian community. You can't extract them from it." It feels like that's exactly the point that Toyin is trying to make: every life touches another. Therefore – white or black, gay or straight – we must own the spaces we enter, travel the world, and embrace each other.

Jumper Pringle of Scotland. Skirt DROMe. Jewellery model's own.



Jumper Pringle of Scotland. Jewellery model's own.

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TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA

INFINITE POSSIBILITY

INTERVIEW BY ***KRISTIN FARR*** *// PORTRAIT BY* ***ABIGAIL THE THIRD***

TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA WAS BORN IN NIGERIA, grew up in Alabama, went to art school in San Francisco, and now lives in New York. Her geographical, literary and creative influences stretch across multiple perspectives, resulting in rich portraits about the landscapes of experience. Prolific in multiple mediums and collected by countless museums, she maximizes the potential of her conceptual portraits exponentially with each new series.

Kristin Farr: **Tell me about the unique treatment of skin in your portraits.**

Toyin Ojih Odutola: The skin in the drawings I create was initially an investigation into what skin *felt* like, to live in that space and the way that affects how the skin is defined, how it is read, how it creates parameters for movement and possibility. I wanted to analyze that through the platform and vehicle of skin, to have it serve as an access point. The style I employ was my way of questioning that surface and seeing the ways I could expand on it. Since then, the investigation has evolved to tackle how the skin can be placed within a composition, how it it works within a larger system on a picture plane and, by extension, how the skin is placed in a public forum. I generally work from a formalist lens, playing with the way surfaces influence our perceptions of things, of people, of places; but I am also interested in the conceptual inclinations associated with skin, with the figure, with a subject's surroundings—the spaces characters may or may not inhabit outside of their person. I look at the figure, as well as the scene where a figure exists, as landscapes our eyes and minds travel through. I like the term "traverse," because it encapsulates what I am doing in the mark-making of an image, as well as how a viewer interprets a work. The application mirrors how an image can be understood. And since everyone has their own distinctive frame of reference, the reads involved with my drawings range from scarification, to hair and muscle, to the internal, intangible workings of a person, to the political implications of race and class, and so forth. I don't discount any of that. I actually welcome it; but when I initially set down a composition or sketch out an idea, I am not thinking about those things at all.

What kind of tensions or juxtapositions are you thinking about?

I like to place contradictory elements together in unassuming ways, to expose those elements in the work. This is a preoccupation of mine: whether these elements are compositional (i.e., aesthetically) and/or conceptual, it extends to include the contradictions inherent in the systems we live in, how we present ourselves to the world, and how we move through the world. There are actions that read louder than words, and to express them in forms that seem established but also absurd is really attractive to me. I often place things together that otherwise wouldn't be, but in a form that feels like it very well *could be*. I want to show how the combinations may very well exist.

above
The Waiting Game
Pen, gel ink, marker on paper
14" x 17"
2015

opposite
Newlyweds on Holiday
Charcoal, pastel,
and pencil on paper
2016

below
Years Later—Her Scarf
Charcoal, pastel and pencil on paper
42" x 72"
2017

opposite (top)
When The Anger Overwhelms or When Tired Isn't Sufficient Enough A Word To Describe This
Marker, pencil and gel ink on paper
11" x 14"
2015

opposite (bottom)
Mineral Survey
Marker and pencil on paper
17" x 14"
2015

Those elements are snuck in every now and again in the most random of places within the drawings, which require a studied look in order to find. The style I employ for the skin is riddled with tensions inherent in the mark-making, and I always like to tease those tensions out slightly, playing with the planes and crevices of the skin's form—for the skin is a bit of a puzzle I'm trying to solve. The marks aren't placed automatically, nor repetitively; they only seem to be. When I am drawing the skin, I am mapping out a territory, which seems familiar to me but is always strange and foreign whenever I engage with it. So, I am discovering it as I am drawing out the figure. The tensions that arise and reveal themselves become so in the process of the making, and I love how every skin layer is different from character to character—even if I'm the only one who can see this.

What is the ongoing relationship with color in your work?
When I first started showing my work, around 2009, 2010 or so, I was very insecure about how to compose a polychromatic palette in an interesting way. I worked mainly within the monochrome because that was something I felt I had a handle on, and that monochrome was a tool. When you see a figure in one tone, your first reaction may be to dismiss it—especially if that figure is rendered so heavily with mark-making and is dark. You see the solid form and that silhouette may appear impenetrable or difficult to access, but the data I pack into each surface usurps that conclusion. When you step closer, the machinations reveal themselves and the figure starts to unravel.

This was my aim for many years, trying to get the viewer to see the layers which compose a character, and those layers expose how we see the world, what we believe, etc. The inclusion of more colors came slowly afterwards. I tried to get at that same layering, placing more varieties of color *underneath* the marks I was making, then slowly moving those colors forward, taking over the space of the entire picture. In the earlier works, the subjects were often isolated, in decontextualized spaces. They only interacted with the viewer or themselves—the narrative was limited and sparse, but the presentation was striking and conspicuous. When I started taking more risks with the palette, color became a tool that I included in the language of the skin as well as the surroundings, expanding the read of the drawings, and the renderings became more subtle. Everything I place in the picture plane has to be intentional, It has to serve a purpose in how the work is read. I like the idea of reading a work as a code, the way one might read a letter or a novella. The drawings I create now read as episodic, even when they are a part of a larger series. The polychromatic palette provided more options for how to engage with that, but it took some time to get there, and I am still learning.

What do patterns symbolize in your images?
I read mark-making as a form of language, the same way one might read English. Because I came to the States at a young age and didn't speak English, I remember watching television and reading people's actions—either overemphasized or

subdued—as a means of communicating, of understanding. I thinks that's why I have such an affinity for animation, because that is how I first came to understand the importance of nonverbal communication and expression, particularly Disney animations and Japanese anime. Productions like *The Lion King* and *Mulan*, as well as those from Studio Ghibli and films like *Ghost in the Shell* and *Vampire Hunter D* gave me life. "Reading" those animations helped me hone-in on that skill in order to process what was happening around me.

"I LIKE THE IDEA OF READING A WORK AS A CODE, THE WAY ONE MIGHT READ A LETTER OR A NOVELLA."

Moving to another country can be overwhelming, especially when there is little to no possibility of returning to the comforts of where you came from. It's not enough to just assimilate, you have to constantly readjust yourself and the space you occupy in order to move through this new world you now inhabit. Images and how they were presented provided a gateway for me to do that, and now as an image-maker, I am always trying to get at those esoteric and universal signs and symbols which can cut through various reads and cultural staples. We often fall back on the spoken and read language as a unifier—a means of settling something or cutting through the disparate noise—but what about visual language? I utilize pattern in this way, as a unifier, to question those symbols or notions that seem to be a given. The skin is an arena for this, as are the spaces where a figure can exist. In my work, nothing is a given or taken for granted, everything is questioned, even a mud-cloth pattern or a hint of a batik print serves the purpose of that questioning. I want to ask why we expect certain elements to exist visually in a certain way, and in order to do that, I have to employ elements that seem familiar with those that do not. Because what may seem strange is completely normal elsewhere—be it culturally or otherwise—the function of every element I place in a work is to draw out those questions of why things are presented the way they are. Once you see that invention is the only reason behind the things we expect to be, that's when you understand that images can purport so much more than simply a rendering of a subject in a time and place, they can illustrate the notions we have about what an image means and how it is used—and how certain people are seen—even in the realm of the fictive.

How do you perceive the influences of all the places you have lived in your work?

The older I get, the more it becomes known to me that I have the mentality of a migrant. I traveled so much as a kid that the idea of a staid and true definition or thing, or more specifically, a steady place that I can claim, is a foreign concept to me. I grew up without a safety net. My life was defined by precariousness. So, I never understood this notion of "taking things for granted" or always having something to fall back on. It's strange that I leaned towards art making as a means of understanding the world, because the effort of art making is a very precarious undertaking. When you gather the confidence to put something down on a surface, to create an illusion, you are playing with all the tools you have gathered—including where you grew up, how you grew up, etc. And because so much of how and where I grew up never felt like my own, never felt certain, I use art to create that for myself. It can be seen as world-building, but the act of drawing for me is a cultivating act. The land I am working with has been plowed through, eroded and mired so much already, before I come to touch it, so I am coming in from a state of possibility—because I've never known of anything else but the tools I have gathered before me. Each drawing I create is my way of crafting a home for myself—in fact, the very act of creating for me is a home-space, and it is very precious to me. I try to protect that.

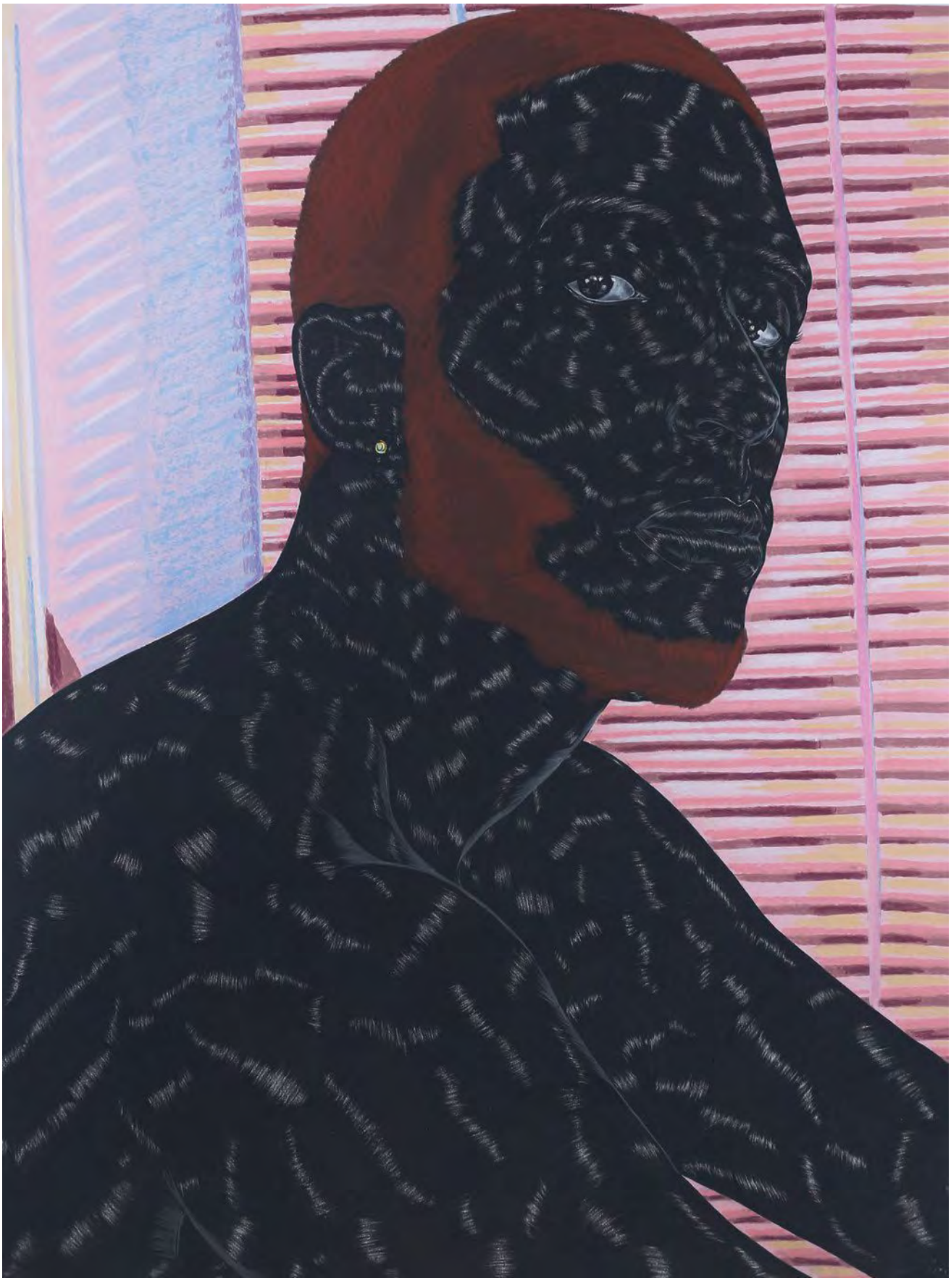
How do you respond when the question of identity comes up?

I refer to my drawings as conceptual portraits, because their purpose isn't to simply depict a person in a specific place or time, but to create a character in a possible space and time. The inquiry is key. I'm more concerned with presenting something that *might be* as opposed to something that *already is*. It's a strange way of describing my thought process, but that is the closest I can get to illustrating what it is I do. Identity art is such a specific movement and work, it deals with concepts which my work can be associated with or adjacent to, but it's not aligned with mine. When I first began showing work, I was clumped into that category based mainly on the fact that I am of Nigerian descent and my subjects weren't seen as anyone but black, and thusly, they were deemed works about blackness. In a way, I was exploring blackness, but not in the reality that is lived, though. In truth, that experience obviously affects the work as it affects my daily life as the artist creating the work.

The black figures in that work existed in my imagination and were more of a record of that internal world made tangible. I think the work I am making now is the work my nine-year-old self was imagining, the way that earlier work was what my five-year-old self was conjuring. These aren't documents of identity or identity politics, because what this work questions is the very notion of an identity—what it serves and how it is read. The drawings I do question identity; they reveal the lie that one chooses to believe about a person, a place, a thing. I'm not concerned with documenting my daily life as it is, but the vignettes of

opposite
The Bride
Charcoal, pastel
and pencil on paper
19" x 24"
2016

above
Pregnant
Charcoal, pastel
and pencil on paper
42" x 74.5"
2017



things, moments, memories, things that don't make sense entirely, but aren't necessarily surreal. There is reality in my work, but that reality is a scaffolding for the imaginary to emerge, proliferate and roam.

During an interview for one of my earlier shows, I was asked what I thought about when I was drawing the subjects, which, at the time, were modeled after myself, and whether I was trying to explore what it meant to be a black woman today. I didn't understand that read at all because it seemed so literal: vis-a-vis an image of a black woman in a space must only be a black woman in a binary space against whiteness. The "othering" of my work didn't bother me, it was how otherness was seen and what it encapsulated that was so confined. The infinite possibility of the imaginary was never included in the questioning of blackness, never even considered. When I look back at that work, the series for my solo show *(MAPS)* in 2011, for instance, I see it was entirely the workings of my internal universe.

Whenever I look at the sequence drawings from that time, I can see the thought process behind them utterly exposed. It's a rather vulnerable series, because it was the first time I took the inner machinations and exploited them in such a revealing way. I no longer go that far in exposing my methodology, but what came out of that work was a need to explore the internal in a more layered, complex way. I can see now how the nakedness of that work could lend itself to identity art, but those drawings were more about an artist discovering herself in the process of the making, not about explicating the state of a black artist in the world today. As if to take the backdrop of a story and push it to the fore when the content, the actual story plays out, is far more nebulous. That entire series is about witnessing ideas take form, that is all. My work since then has expanded on that idea: what might come when you witness an artist grow up in a very public way; witnessing her change her mind and evolve. Is it about identity? Or is it about pushing one's work beyond those limiting parameters to see how far blackness can go, what it can contain, how it can evolve, where it can exist, what it can claim? Identity is just the starting point, it's not the final destination.

Tell me about your brothers who have appeared in your drawings.

previous spread (left)
Looking at the Sunrise and Calling it Dusk
40" x 30"
2016

previous spread (right)
Wall of Ambassadors
Charcoal, pastel and pencil on paper
30" x 40"
2017

below
She Wasn't Warned
Mixed media on paper
29.5" x 42.5"
2014

I have two younger brothers, and they are often featured as characters in my drawings. This is partly due to proximity: when I first started showing and needed subjects to draw, they were there, so I drew them—the same way I would use my image in my works. From the drawings I made where they were featured, it was often to explore an aesthetic or conceptual idea and not so much an investigation into who they are as people. That's private. The only work which came close to that investigation was a series I did in 2013-2014, *Like the Sea*. The show was an expression of my appreciation for them in my life, yet it was also an exploration of the value they hold in their existence as black men in our country. The series was the very embodiment of that phrase, "the personal is the political." I wanted to create a body of work which could reach out to them and so many others like them, to let them know that they are enough and they are beautiful. It was a very literal series and it was important for me, personally, to do that work at that time. It was a capsule.

What are some challenges you've imposed on yourself?
I'm always placing restrictions on myself whenever I start a series. It can be how each drawing is composed, or which colors I'm limited to working with in terms of palette, or what kinds of characters I choose to render and how. I recently completed a series titled, *The Treatment*, where the restrictions imposed were stark: the entire series was composed of men, it was monochromatic, and the skin was the only element which was touched—with the clothes, hair and other accoutrements of each portrait purposefully left in pencil sketch. The process of making that work was incredibly taxing, simply because the restrictions were so tightly wound, there wasn't room for flair. However, the result of that work was a very consistent, visual aesthetic that was so closely knit that it felt like a collective body, instead of a grouping of individual works. Even though that work has since been broken up and shown in different groupings, it still exists as a singular entity—and I'd never had that happen to my works before. It was a very enlightening experience creating that series.

What are you working on now?
The second chapter that follows the series in my show *A Matter of Fact* (2015), which chronicles two wealthy Nigerian families. Parts of this second chapter will be shown in my solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in October—my first solo museum exhibition in New York.

What's something important to you that seems less important to other artists?
I don't know if this is less important to other people, and I don't presume it to be, but I'm attracted to the understated in art: moments that can be quickly passed over, but are complex and layered. There's nothing wrong with bombast, and the maximalist in aesthetic and presentation, and I often exploit those very qualities. But nothing beats the underwhelming, the quiet, the subtle. When you see the economy of line used so effortlessly—that always gets me, because it isn't easy. You have to build up to that kind of confidence; it takes awhile to trust yourself to go there and know that what you are doing hits just the right note. When you get to that place where you don't need a lot to fill in a space and what you lay down is just enough and not overwhelming—that's my goal... and I know it's going to take awhile to get there. Whenever I am stuck on a particular element of a current drawing, I remind myself, "Toyin, don't describe, interpret." That's the aim. If I describe, am I aiming to capture something like a camera would? Or do I interpret, where the perspective of my vision dictates how the work unfolds? It's a balancing act, but it's part and parcel with building up an image to its full potential.

JUX

Toyin Ojin Odutola's solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York opens October 20, 2017.

toyinojihodutola.com

above
Manifesto
Charcoal, pastel and pencil on paper
18.75" x 23.75"
2017

COLUMBIA DAILY SPECTATOR
FOUNDED 1877 • INDEPENDENT SINCE 1962

Barnard's Black History Month kicks off with panel featuring Toyin Ojih Odutola, Mary Sibande

SAMUEL STUART HOLLENSHEAD / COURTESY OF BARNARD COLLEGE

Odutola, Jones, and Sibande discussed their art and experiences as artists on Wednesday night.

BY SOPHIE KOSSAKOWSKI | FEBRUARY 4, 2018, 8:40 PM

Black female artists were put in the spotlight to talk about their art and experiences in their careers on Wednesday night.

Current Orzeck Artist-in-Residence Toyin Ojih Odutola joined sculptural artist Mary Sibande in discussion, moderated by Columbia art history and archaeology professor Kellie Jones in the Event Oval of the Diana Center.

The event, which was the first in a series of Barnard events celebrating Black History Month, focused on themes of equity, power, and race in art.

After short introductions by Jones and Anne Higonnet, department chair of art history at Barnard, Sibande and Odutola presented select works to the audience in order to familiarize them with their art.

Sibande's work focuses on an imagined alter ego named Sophie, whom she dresses in a series of different brightly-colored outfits inspired by South African religious wear and the uniforms of domestic workers. Color theory features prominently in her work; earlier sculptures of Sophie are clothed in muted tans, but began to shift into rich blues and purples as the dresses become more extravagant.

"Sophie connects all the stories from the women in my family... I felt the need to pay homage to these women," Sibande said. "She was about wishing; she wanted to expand and move away from her background."

Similarly, Odutola's work places emphasis on color—both the lack of it in her earlier works and the abundance of it later on. Sketches from the beginning of her artistic career were done entirely in ballpoint pen, placing emphasis on shading and dimension in monochrome.

"I wasn't prepared for how some of my professors not only looked at the pen, but to look at what the pen could do. I saw that as so indicative of how blackness is viewed," Odutola said. "There's this flattening that happens when we engage with that material and that color—of course the social implications of it, but also historically it's not a color you use in the foreground. It's the darkness, it's the shadow. Light brings forward."

Odutola's recent drawings and paintings have been diversified in their color palette; now there is an emphasis on rich, varied hues. The works feature a multitude of black characters in different settings—from a restaurant to an apartment to standing in a river.

"[I wanted to create] a world where there's not black pain. They don't care; they're not smiling for you, they're not performing themselves for you, they're just there in a space, and they really couldn't care less what you think of them," said Odutola. "Sometimes I feel like I'm struggling with it. I always feel like I'm not getting them, but that's the point: I'm not there to capture this person. They can be anybody."

Much of the discussion highlighted not only the artists' work, though, but their experience as black artists as well.

Odutola and Sibande both expressed their need to seek out opportunities and "take up space" in order to find places to display their work.

"I don't know how it is here in the U.S., but in South Africa, no one gives you space. You have to take it. So you, as a black young woman artist, you have to make work and take your work out there. No one will come knock at your door, go 'hey, what do you have?' So it's about taking. Go out there and just do what you need to do," Sibande said.

In response to a question about the ethics of taking down racist and colonialist monuments, Odutola chose to explain her experience in the form of an extended metaphor.

She described racial, gender, and sexual power dynamics as an amphitheater show, with the center stage spotlight given to cisgender white men; the farther away from the stage, the less visible audience members were—with Odutola describing herself as located somewhere near the 300th row.

"I want to turn the light off the stage. I'm really tired of that stage. It's hurting my eyes," Odutola said. "If you turn the light off, and [the people on the stage] finally crank their bodies back and see who's behind them and around them, where is the center anymore?"

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A STORY BY RANDALL KENAN

For Alexa

I heard him before I felt his presence or saw him. A panting, a mild groaning as if from pain. I seem to remember a smell, a smell like an animal when in extreme fear—or perhaps that is simply something I filled in after thinking back upon that morning so many times. I do vividly remember the way the light poured in. The windows were all new and gleaming; the room a bone-white I'd admired and copied from certain museums I'd visited in the countryside of France. He was not hiding in the curtains, but rather on the floor, crouched, the gossamer fabric poorly hiding his dark skin. And he was so very dark. I could see him panting, his body not quite heaving but rising and falling as if in distress. A quilt, made by my mother, was folded at the foot of my bed. That is what I used to cover his nakedness and urge him into bed. He relented, eyeing me somewhat panicked, yet soothed by and by. I petted him, cradled him. After a spell I went down to make coffee and to think what to do.

When I returned with two steaming mugs he was gone.

I've never had a problem sleeping in bright sunlight. Upon awaking the only evidence of his having been there was the two mugs of cold coffee.

"It was a dream, brother."

I doubt it.

I

A HOUSE IS NOT A HOME.

When the real estate agent first drove us up the gravel driveway, I felt I'd been to this place before. I wasn't sure at first, for I'd first been there at night. Over fifteen years before. A dinner of academics after a lecture at UNC on Southern food. I was still living in New York then, and found the idea of owning a two-hundred-and-three-year-old restored farm house out in the middle of nowhere surrounded by cornfields to be the height of fancy. Nothing in my future. Much too *Town & Country* for my tastes. Back then I fully expected to die on the twenty-first floor of a high rise in the middle of some urban engine. How odd.

The two-story structure was still full of charm, not in the worst of shape but needed some serious love. That's how the agent put it.

My boyfriend, who had never visited the American South, fell in love with it before I realized I was ready to come back. "It looks like something out of a movie, like *Night of the Hunter.* Right?"

Even though so much of the space was preordained back when John Adams or Thomas Jefferson was president, I was able to create a place I was more than happy to live and cook in. Especially the kitchen. Something in me feels immodest about falling in love with a kitchen I designed, but there it is. The deep, stainless-steel counters, the tall, glass fronted cabinets, the subzero fridge, the six-burner gas range, the oven big enough for two large birds at once.

Immodest. Yes.

"I will never understand why you care so much about what other people think of you," Siddiq said.

"At this point I guess neither will I."

"Between the Margins" (2017), by Toyin Ojih Odutola © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

VOGUE

CULTURE > ARTS

At the Whitney, a Vision of Africa—Without the Colonialist Meddling

OCTOBER 27, 2017 1:50 PM
by JULIA FELSENTHAL

Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Representatives of State*, 2016-17

Photo: Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

In the summer of 2016, the poet Claudia Rankine published an essay in *Aperture* magazine about drawings made by the artist Toyin Ojih Odutola. Ojih Odutola was born in Nigeria, immigrated to the States with her family at age 5, and spent her formative years in Huntsville, Alabama. "Individuals populate her portraits," wrote Rankine, "but remain in conversation with something less knowable than their presumed identity. To settle down her images, to name them, is to render them monolithic."

Rankine was writing about Ojih Odutola's pen ink drawings, for some time the signature of her practice. These were, in her own telling, "conceptual portraits" of anonymous subjects (though if you looked close, the faces often resembled that of the artist) depicted unclothed and decontextualized in blank space. What distinguished them was both medium—pen and paper is not often associated with fine art—and style. Ojih Odutola's subject, principally, was black skin, which she drew shimmering and undulating and *alive*, sometimes in monotones, sometimes with prismatic bursts of color. She wanted to show "what skin feels like," she told Taiye Selasi in *The New York Times*. "The epidermis packs so much. Why would you limit it to the flattest blackness possible?" These were technical, material investigations into modes of rendering blackness, something the Western art historical canon long treated as a matter of limited interest (in that sense, she's as much in conversation with an abstractionist like Ad Reinhardt, who spent a decade singularly devoted to black paint, as she is with a contemporary figurative painter like Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, whose fictional subjects also subvert notions of "presumed identity"). On another level, Ojih Odutola's drawings operated as a sort of clever reversal: *If all you see is skin, let me show you how I see it, as supernatural, transcendent, defiantly hyperrealistic.*

The artist Toyin Ojih Odutola
Photo: Abigail, The Third

Ojih Odutola's pen drawings won her a significant following. Solange Knowles is a collector. Lee Daniels chose to hang one of the artist's works—a 2013 drawing called *Hold It in Your Mouth a Little Longer*—on the walls of Cookie's apartment on the third season of *Empire*. In 2015, for a exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York, Ojih Odutola introduced a new series, called *The Treatment*, in which she sourced images of famous white men—Prince Charles, Benedict Cumberbatch, Bobby Fischer, to name a few—and drew them with black skin, rendering her subject, in some cases, unrecognizable ("the blackness usurps," the artist observed to *Interview* magazine).

The Whitney Museum of American Art bought one of those *Treatment* drawings, and a couple years later, the institution has also given Ojih Odutola, 32, her first New York City solo museum show. The work that comprises "To Wander Determined," which opened last week and is curated by Rujeko Hockley and Melinda Lang, represents a major departure from the work that sparked Rankine's observation. These are dazzlingly colorful, large-scale (nearly life-size) portraits of richly dressed black individuals. Self-possessed, blasé even, they pose in lush interior and exterior settings, rendered in a sumptuous palette of ocher yellow, deep blue green, lavender, and millennial pink. In *Pregnant* (2017), a slender woman in a floral silk top and a deliberately see-through skirt stands against a glass block wall—a meditation on transparency, perhaps—near a doorway leading out to a sandy path. In *Surveying the Family Seat* (2017), a bald, bearded patriarch in a *Deadwood*-esque vest and trousers gazes out, absentmindedly, over green hills and pastures. *Representatives of State* (2016–2017), which hangs at the entrance of the gallery, shows four female figures, standing in front of an arched window, gazing down at the viewer, regal and distant. Wall text offers clues into who these people are: The members of two of Nigeria's oldest noble clans, joined together by the marriage of two of their sons, the Marquess of UmuEze Amara, TMH Jideofor Emeka, and Lord Temitope Omodele from the House of Obafemi. It's this couple who have together lent their venerable collection of family portraits to the Whitney, and it is they who seem to be depicted, clad in skinny slouchy suits, their hands casually brushing, in *Newlyweds on Holiday* (2016). The plaque that presents this context is signed by the Marquess's deputy secretary, one Toyin Ojih Odutola.

These colorful, intricate, monumental images may be a new direction for the artist, but like her earlier work, there's something deliberately unsettling here. How can Toyin Ojih Odutola be both a secretary and a Whitney-anointed art phenom? Isn't homosexuality criminalized in Nigeria? Identity, it's clear, is ever shifting. So is material: From afar, these appear to be oil paintings; on closer examination, it's evident that they're drawings on paper, made using chalk pastel, charcoal, and graphite, a technique that the artist developed during a 2016 residency at the Headlands Center for the Arts in Northern California, and explored further for a solo show last year at San Francisco's Museum of the African Diaspora (there are a few drawings from that exhibition, which focused largely on the UmuEze side of the family, that also appear in this one, which focuses mostly on the Obafemi side).

Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Years Later—Her Scarf*, 2017

Photo: Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Within these portraits, anachronisms and anatopisms abound. Some clothing is overtly contemporary, some is retro or difficult to place in time. Or in space: In *Years Later–Her Scarf* (2017), a man dressed for cold weather sits in front of an open doorway, palm fronds waving outside. In *The Missionary* (2017), a woman sits on a terrace overlooking a hillside studded with buildings, some of them terra-cotta-roofed farm houses, others concrete, Brutalist-looking bunkers. Is there a landscape in the world that contains both? If you study the indoor spaces, you'll find angles that don't make sense, M.C. Escher–style illusions, off-kilter vantage points.

These moments are intentional, opportunities to set the viewer on edge, and they point to the most unnerving incongruity of all: In this country, we have no visual vernacular for imagining long-standing, aristocratic black wealth. And Ojih Odutola is asking us to stretch to picture it, and in so doing, to recognize that it should not feel like such a stretch. "Everyone says, 'I wish they were real,' " the artist explained when we spoke by phone about her fictional dynasty. "And the thing is, they could be. It's just there was never the opportunity to discover that. And so just imagine that. Really and truly imagine that we were left to our own devices, and we developed on our own: Without any of the colonialist meddling, what would have happened?"

In a way, it's the converse of the *Treatment* series: black figures imbued with white privilege. What's most unexpected about these figures, Ojih Odutola pointed out, is their utter sense of ease, of nonchalance, even insouciance, reflected in their gestures, their postures, their gazes, an entitlement that the artist knows viewers—at least, American viewers—will find hard to square with the color of their skin. "There are imaginary black figures on the wall of the Whitney, and they're completely and utterly self-contained, living their best lives, not caring about our approval at all," she observed. "I just love that."

We talked more about the sleight of hand feat of "To Wander Determined," why Ojih Odutola became so focused on the aesthetics of wealth, and why she decided to center this narrative on a gay couple.

Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Excavations*, 2017

Photo: Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

You clearly know who all these people are and how they fit together, but you leave a lot of it deliberately murky. What's the value of allowing us to draw our own conclusions?

When I started this whole series, I had an outline. I knew the characters, their stories, their backgrounds. I had this whole family tree. That didn't need to translate to the audience. I wanted to frame it in a way that feels like a panel from a graphic novel: You're just walking into that story; it seems disorienting. It seems like I need more context to explain this picture. But the picture as it exists explains enough. I had to fight the knee-jerk reaction to add more. I like the idea that people can decode a picture, but not in some way where they need to figure out why this guy is wearing a vest that looks like it's from the 1920s, or why this woman is dressed like she's from the '40s. The point is more about why your imagination doesn't even assume this in the first place.

I kept thinking of what Claudia Rankine wrote about your work, that your images somehow refuse to be settled down, resist being tied to a single interpretation of identity.

Absolutely. I guess it suddenly becomes a trend now, that artists who look like me are being shown in institutions. And so the question I keep getting is, "What can you offer as a black woman artist?" Which is annoying for me, an immigrant kid who grew up here. I'm three-tiered in my identity: It's not just blackness, not just woman-ness; I'm also an immigrant. The thing I've always wanted to say is, "I want you to see how less small this world can be if we allow it." This is an imaginary family, but it's an imaginary family who could be anything to anyone. To demand that one thing be the case, that's not going to happen with this show. It feels good to leave this here and watch this work become in viewership. I'm just excited to see what it becomes in two months. What is the story? Once I put it on the walls, I'm kind of done.

The thing you're trying to get us to think about is what would black wealth look like and why is it so difficult for us to picture? The question of the aesthetics of wealth, more broadly, feels really timely: We've just seen someone rise to the presidency in this country whose wealth, or perceived wealth, seems to be his only credential. How much were you thinking about Trump when you were creating this work?

That was the start of this whole thing. It was 2016. We were mired in what would be the longest election cycle I'd ever experienced. The guy was a joke, he was a reality TV star, but everyone was like, "Look, he's wealthy, he's rich." That somehow justified that he had a lack of political experience, that he didn't have any idea what the job really entailed. It wasn't in this binary way; let me put black people in wealthy surroundings. I was like, "No, I want to see a space and a subject in that space that's unquestioned, because wealth is seen in a matter-of-fact way." What wealth affords us is the privilege to not care.

Why would we want someone who has the privilege to not care being our president? It makes no sense. It started from a slightly angry place. The show at MoAD developed in a way that was hopefully very positive: Yes, wealth was the starting point, but also a wealth of self, the notion of knowing that you can walk into a space and see these people in the most boring staid way that wealth affords. Fast-forwarding to now, and the Trump administration era that we're in, where nothing seems for sure, everything is mercurial, every day is a new journey, you have to kind of block everything out. I started making this work in June, and I just shut everything off.

Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Pregnant*, 2017
Photo: Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

You mean, the news.

Yeah, it's exhausting. My concern as an artist is to reveal things in as subtle ways as I can. There's this nostalgia: "make America great again." White men are feeling stifled, like they can't speak freely. They're not accounted for. One of the things I tried to inject into this series was constantly hearing about the mediocrity of white men, how that was no longer helping them move through the world. Because, yes, it's a globalized, capitalistic system. You can't just be mediocre. You can't just fall back on your whiteness and your maleness as a thing that can get you ahead. You have to do a little more—you feel me, guys? Maybe put your tiki torches down and try something new. Because everyone here is hustling just to be seen, and all of us have to be exceptional to do so. You have been unremarkable for a very, very long time. I wanted to show an unremarkability: *Yeah, I'm in the middle of a gorgeous home, with a green chair, and a see-through skirt, and a paisley tee, and I'm just living my life.* There's no other purpose besides that. And that is a luxury that's been afforded a group of people for a very long time, until very recently. But in order for me to create that piece, I have to be extraordinary. I have to work twice as hard to make this picture look unremarkable. That was what I was pushing at, what seeped in. Because I kept hearing it all summer, with all the statues, the protests, it was like, *Everyone is very angry*. And I don't understand where this anger is coming from. The people who should be angry are in Flint, Michigan.

There's another layer of politics: The couple at the center of these families is gay; in Nigeria, homosexuality is illegal.

These two men are my heart. I love the idea that these two grand families are anchored by two gay men; that's why we in the audience are even seeing this show: because of two gay men. And as a Nigerian, I'm very much aware that Nigeria made gay marriage illegal, which is very strange considering that they don't have dependable electricity in parts of the country, but yes, let's pass a gay marriage ban. That's definitely what we need right now in the world.

It's just two guys. That's all it should be. The same way you would see in the U.K.: This is the grand collection of the Althorp house, the earl of the Althorp and his wife, they're about to present their collection. That's the joke of it all, I just wanted two gay men to be the grand lords who are imparting their family history together. That, to me, shouldn't have to be political. I would just like people to walk through and not even think about it. That's when I know I've succeeded. They walk through and say "Cool." They don't even realize at all.

Judging by your Instagram, you're a really voracious consumer of images. These drawings are all collaged from different bits of source material: The pose might be different from the face that might be different from the background, et cetera. Can you tell me a little bit about your process?

Hashtag research. The life is real. My work is investigative. It's rigorous. I'll look at thousands of images. Instagram is just a fraction, a tiny speck of that. A lot of it is stuff that's always been around that nobody knows about, particularly because you're dealing with the Western art historical canon. You don't see an amazing commissioned portrait of a Maharaji from the 1920s. I build off of composites: It is a collage, an amalgam of all this stuff. I put it all in the picture but have to make it in a way that you can't tell where the source is from. Everything feels familiar but still foreign and strange, remixed in a way that you haven't really seen this configuration before. This goes to using multiple figures for one figure. I've gone on *Vogue* many times, looked up The Row, Valentino, Duro Olowu, gotten ideas about pattern, color, composition. The best advice I ever got was from my mother: The more you see, the more you learn. I mean, it's true, right? When I was a kid, I came here and I couldn't speak English. I had to watch people. I had to watch a lot of TV. I remember, even as a kid, looking at Disney animation, watching movements, surroundings, because that was informing language for me.

You're so known for pen and ink. What was it like to switch to pastel?

The ballpoint pen was the rudimentary tool that was ubiquitous and easy to find in the doctor's office, and somehow I'm making drawings out of them; pastel is a very unusual choice, because it's a dry medium. It's chalk; it's not even oil pastel, which is a lot thicker, a lot more impasto potential with that. I wanted to have a tool I could blend, I could use my fingers. I'm not using a brush. I'm using my fingers and my hands to make these marks. Pastel is a very immediate tool, as is charcoal. Even though I'm using painterly methods, applying layering techniques that a painter would use, I'm still working with a material that is very quick. You gotta think on your feet with it. You have to really be confident with it. There were times I struggled. Let me tell you! Where I wanted to say, "Why in the hell would you work with this medium?" It is so difficult. It is so not about your life.

It's kind of a caustic medium. It's a bit of a diva. But I don't mind it. I feel like there's so much that people wouldn't expect. They'd expect oil painting, or acrylic, or watercolor, but they wouldn't expect a wall full of pastel drawings. It's so, like, Impressionist. What are you: Monet? It's also the kind of thing you would expect from a soccer mom. Here, I'm going to present it as grand historic narrative painting, and it's pastel drawing. That's pretty fucking amazing, that I could pull off that coup, you know?

This interview has been condensed and edited.

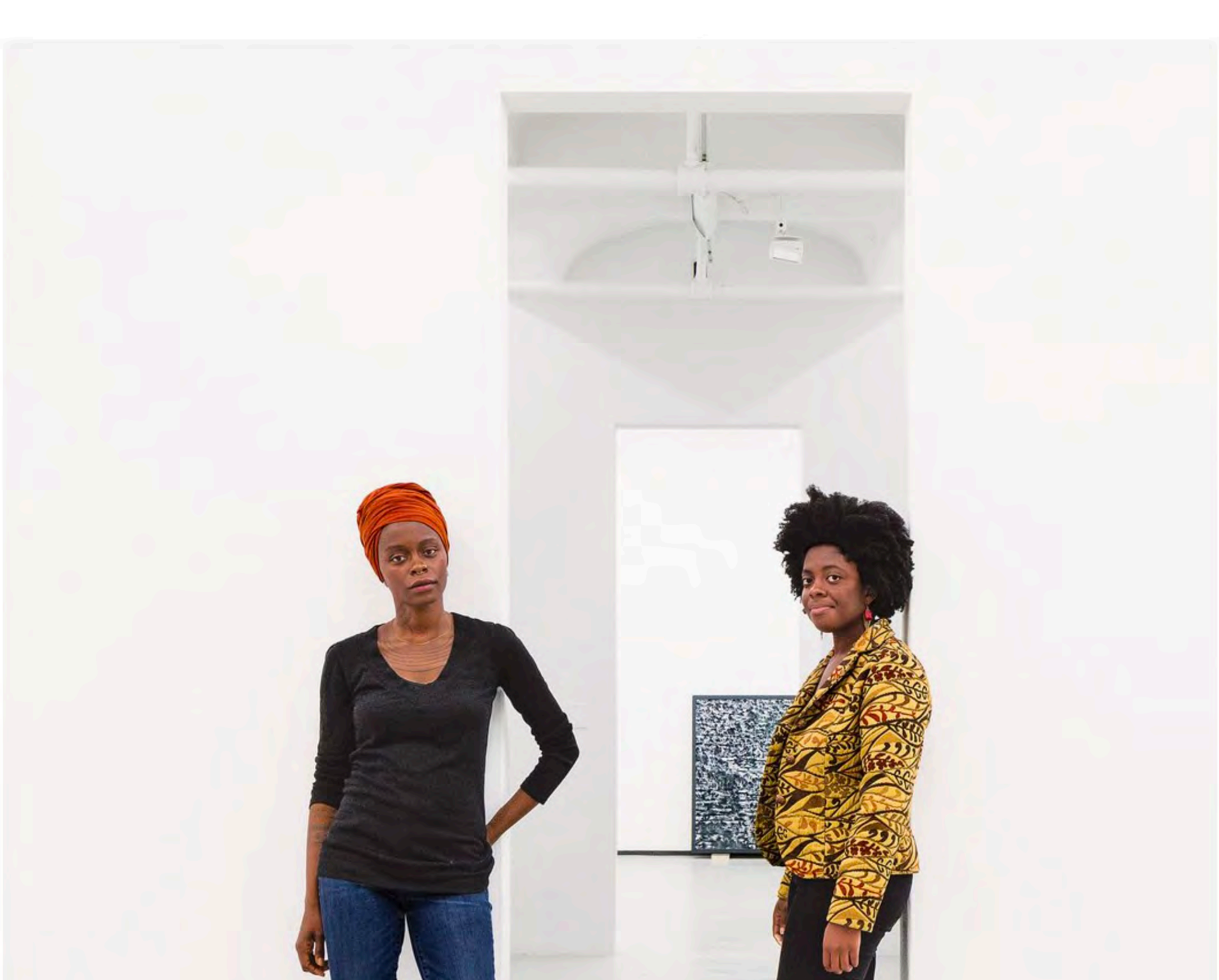
THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

T MAGAZINE

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young African Immigrant

By TAIYE SELASI MAY 8, 2017

The novelist Yaa Gyasi and the artist Toyin Ojih Odutola — both born in Africa and raised in the same Alabama town — have become two of the finest observers of race in America.



Toyin Ojih Odutola (left), originally from Nigeria, and Yaa Gyasi, born in Ghana, photographed in February at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York. Nicholas Calcott

EARLY LAST YEAR I was sent a copy of Yaa Gyasi's debut novel. A multigenerational epic, tracing half sisters separated by the trans-Atlantic slave trade, "Homegoing" recalls the work of Eleanor Catton and Garth Risk Hallberg in its virtuosity. Months later I discovered the artist Toyin Ojih Odutola. Procrastinating on Instagram, as one does, I stumbled upon "Untitled (Dotun. Enugu, Nigeria)." The work, made in 2012, features the artist's signature style: a face rendered in feathery marks, black and white, ballpoint pen on paper. The haunting image seemed to have been created at once in a hurry and with meticulous care: a close-up of a face (her brother's, I'd learn) that radiated might and melancholy.

That these consummate artists were both West African thrilled me to no end. I am a Nigerian-Ghanaian who pursued an unlikely creative career; here were two comrades at the top of their creative fields. The Ghanaian-born Gyasi sold her debut for a reported seven figures when she was 25. At 31, the Nigerian-born Ojih Odutola, whose work is in the collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, has had numerous solo gallery shows. Even without finding their surnames familiar, I'd have marveled at their accomplishments — and was astounded to learn that they not only knew each other, but had both lived in Huntsville, Ala. How was it, I wondered, that two celebrated young artists came from this one Southern town? And what did it say that these poignant observers of race in America weren't American-born at all?

ASK ANY 30-SOMETHING with African parents what it was like growing up in the States and you'll likely hear a story of unbelonging, an account not of double consciousness but triple. The young African immigrant must locate herself along three divides: the first between blackness and whiteness; the second within blackness, between native and foreign; the third between African and American. For years, despite this complexity of experience, the African immigrant went largely ignored. It seems improbable now. The dashing son of Nigerians has starred in "Star Wars," the dazzling daughter of Kenyans has won an Oscar, the child of an East African has led the free world — but it was not always so. One of the country's most highly educated immigrant groups, Africans were long absent from popular culture.

From left: Ojih Odutola's 2013 portrait "Hold It in Your Mouth a Little Longer"; Gyasi's debut novel, "Homegoing," which sold for a reported seven figures in 2015.

From left: Toyin Ojih Odutola, ''Hold It in Your Mouth a Little Longer,'' 2013, charcoal, pastel and graphite on paper ©Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; Mari Maeda and Yuji Oboshi

It was in this representational chasm that Gyasi and Ojih Odutola came of age in Alabama. Theirs is the classic "educated brown immigrant" background: children of professor fathers who, seeking tenure-track positions, move their families to unlikely cities. Gyasi's father is a professor of French, Ojih Odutola's of chemistry; after stints in other states, both found posts in Alabama. There, each family joined the close-knit community of West Africans that seems to exist in every college town: Ojih Odutola's mother was a founding member of the Nigerian Women's Association, Gyasi's equally feminist mother was president of the Ghanaian Association of Huntsville. The artists have known each other since they were children, and have much in common, including being raised as only daughters in families of boys. But their childhoods, rather than mirror images, trace a kind of parabola: two archetypes of the African immigrant narrative.

In 2005 I wrote an essay describing an Afropolitan experience: the decidedly transcultural upbringing of many Africans at home and abroad. How such Afropolitans negotiate that second divide — not between black and white, but between black and African — often depends on where they are raised, whether among or apart from African-Americans. Gyasi and Ojih Odutola typify the distinction. Gyasi, who moved to Huntsville's predominantly white southeast district at 9 years old, wrote in The Times of an early encounter with racism in Tennessee, where she lived prior. Playing with African-American friends, she heard two white boys call out, "Niggers!" One took pains to tell Gyasi, "Not you." She wrote: "I had been brought up to see myself as set apart from what my family called 'black Americans.' ... I believed that the boy had taken the word back as a reward for my good behavior."

Ojih Odutola, raised in Huntsville's urban northwest, describes an entirely different encounter with the epithet. When she was around 10, her predominantly black soccer team traveled for a game. White and largely working class, the other team "played dirty," she said, tackling and shoving without intervention by the referee and to the delight of the crowd. When Ojih Odutola accidentally tripped a player, the crowd turned violent. "Get that nigger off the field!" the spectators, mostly parents, roared. Ojih Odutola's (white) coach took her out, fearing for her safety.

Gyasi and Ojih Odutola, seated in front of selections from Ojih Odutola's 2015-17 series "The Treatment." Nicholas Calcott

Neither story surprises, but the difference between them is telling, suggestive of the ways in which race, gender and class unfailingly entwine. Gyasi, years later, would be informed by a white girl that she would never find a boyfriend, black men being categorically useless. (The exemption she received as a young black woman, for "good behavior," is rarely available to young black men.) Ojih Odutola, harassed by insular white Americans, would be harassed by insular black Americans too, told that she wasn't "really black" or that her father, a Nigerian professor at the historically black Alabama A&M University, had "stolen their jobs." For the brown-skinned immigrant, "black" makes a slippery label, its definition murky, its definers myriad. Perhaps it is inevitable that this immigrant would come to ask, in Gyasi's words, "What does it mean to be black in America?"

The question animates both women's work. Raised on different sides of town, they've trod similar creative paths. Both discovered their talent as children; both were encouraged by teachers; both found, in art, a way to describe blackness as they knew it. "Drawing was always my thing," Ojih Odutola says. "I always signed up for competitions. I won a lot of first-place prizes, but I was very traditional in my renderings." Her parents lauded her gift but viewed art as a hobby. It was Dana Bathurst, a high school art teacher, who challenged their assumptions: that good art must approximate European traditions and that pursuing a career in art wasn't possible. Bathurst introduced Ojih Odutola to a new conception of portraiture through the work of African-American artists like Jacob Lawrence, Elizabeth Catlett, Romare Bearden and fellow Alabamian Kerry James Marshall. Gyasi, similarly, excelled at writing from an early age but couldn't imagine a literary career before AP English. That year, the only black English teacher she would ever have, Janice Vaughn, took her writing seriously. Then, in her senior year, Gyasi discovered Toni Morrison's "Song of Solomon." The language was spectacular; the author a brown woman; the sensibility familiar, Southern.

Importantly, both Gyasi and Ojih Odutola identify as Southerners (among other identities); it is part of what bonds Ojih Odutola, for example, to Solange Knowles, an avid collector of her work. Writing about first-generation Americans can tend to overlook this: the role of locality in shaping identity. Even the immigrant who feels only partially American can feel fully Alabamian; locality, with its rich specificity, tends to inspire artists more than nationality. One thinks of Beckett the Parisian, Lahiri the Roman, Teju Cole the New Yorker, observers whose profound sense of place seems both to arise from and render irrelevant their relative foreignness. With their work, Ojih Odutola and Gyasi — Southern, West African, black — express this relativity, this layeredness.

Ojih Odutola, photographed in front of her work "The Uncertainty Principle," 2014, at Jack Shainman Gallery.
Nicholas Calcott

OR RATHER, insist upon it. Both artists embraced a politicized racial identity in college. For Ojih Odutola this meant challenging how art programs teach blackness. "Art professors don't know how to read blackness — as a color, a material, a concept, a tool," she tells me. "We know all about light, contrast, rendition. Why can't we apply that to the black surface?"

Educated at Auburn University, the University of Alabama in Huntsville and California College of the Arts, Ojih Odutola describes her training as "incredibly shortsighted." The lone brown student in most of her classes, she is forthright in naming her anguish. Bravely so: Too often the mental health effects of institutional racism go ignored. In 2004 at Auburn, where she began her undergraduate studies, she was given an assignment "to break up a face into measurable components." She made this face black and these components planes, seeking "to draw what skin feels like." Her professor reacted with perplexity, as if she hadn't understood the assignment. A few years later, at the Yale University School of Art summer fellowship in Norfolk, Conn., white instructors dismissed her work as "illustrative, graphic — code words for not fine art."

But Ojih Odutola persisted. "I used pen and ink," she laughs, "in part because I couldn't afford my art supplies." The pen, she underscores, "is a writing tool first." In West Africa, where the narrative tradition is oral, "the visual bridges the written and the spoken. Yes, I was drawing. But it was, to me, a form of letter-writing too." To whom was she writing? "To people," she says. "For them to see me, people like me. Just look. The epidermis packs so much. Why would you limit it to the flattest blackness possible?"

Gyasi, seated in front of Ojih Odutola's "Quality Control," 2015, at Jack Shainman Gallery. Nicholas Calcott

With a ballpoint pen, Ojih Odutola found a way to express a blackness of vulnerability and complexity. In her sophomore year at Stanford University, Gyasi found the same. Reading "Song of Solomon" in high school, she'd recognized part of herself, but not all. "That feeling," she says, "spurs you to write something that is entirely yours. Something that speaks to all of your identities, all of your experiences."

In 2009 Gyasi traveled to Ghana on a college fellowship. Since emigrating as a toddler, she'd returned only once. Her intention was to research a mother-daughter novel. Instead, during a tour of Cape Coast Castle, one of about 30 slave castles built in Ghana by European traders, "Homegoing" was born. In the suffocating cells where slaves awaited shipment to the Americas, Gyasi felt "a kind of intimacy with both sides, Ghanaians and African-Americans." She knew "in a stroke of inspiration" that she'd found her story: black experience as lived on either side of the Atlantic. "I grew up understanding that there were different realities under the larger umbrella: Ghanaian, Fante, Ashanti. America doesn't attend to these complexities. I wanted this book to open out, to say: These things are all black. You're allowed to create a plurality of identities within one person, within the same black person."

This, perhaps, is the answer to my second query: how two young African artists came to articulate America's racial complexities so beautifully. Gyasi and Ojih Odutola consider themselves black but have not always. In order to feel at home in that identity they've had to study, understand, expand it. Finally, their work insists that we "just look" — and expand our vision too.

A version of this article appears in print on May 21, 2017, on Page M271 of T Magazine with the headline: Local Heroes.
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ELLE

Artist Toyin Ojih Odutola Finally Gets Her Due at the Whitney

ELLE BY SASHA BONET OCT 30, 2017

I've been to a lot of art openings. They're usually the same: the not-so-subtle posturing, the atmosphere as stale as the snacks proffered, the indifferent crowds outside smoking cigarettes and drinking cheap wine. Toyin Ojih Odutola's opening at the Whitney Museum of American Art was different. Marking her first solo museum exhibition in NYC, To Wander Determined, the event was more reunion than reception. This night, filled with Black artists, scholars, curators, stylists, and writers who have praised Ojih Odutola's genius for years and waited on places like the Whitney to catch up, felt like a collective triumph.

Museums like the Whitney, Guggenheim, and even the more progressive Brooklyn Museum have been historically known to exclude black women artists—and only in recent years have they begun to welcome them in. This shift is due greatly to the tenacious efforts of black women artists in the '60s and '70s—like Emma Amos, Camille Billops, and Faith Ringgold and many more—who simply would not be ignored, and as a response, created their own spaces for visibility like Where We At and The Hatch-Billops Collection. Ojih Odutola is following in this tradition: by not waiting around to be chosen, but instead bringing the center to her.

I first encountered the visual artist in 2012 on Solange's mydamnblog. The younger Knowles sister was celebrating her purchase of a small trilogy of portraits by the artist, back when her distinctive expressional portraits were made solely with black ballpoint ink on paper. I made the immediate connection years later while watching the season two premiere of Fox's *Empire*, where her chalk-drawn self-portrait *Hold it in Your Mouth a Little Longer* took center screen despite its positioning behind Cookie Lyon (Taraji P. Henson).

High art is now accessing its audience in ways that defy elitist standards. Think Mickalene Thomas' signature collage work, which graces Solange's *TRUE* album cover; or performer Okwui Okpokwasili contorting her body into a fluid narrative along the pavement in Jay-Z's video for *4:44*; and multimedia artist Awol Erizku capturing Beyoncé's twin-reveal photos, which reached over 11 million likes on Instagram. Ojih Odutola is one of many young artists of color who are stepping outside of the conventional bounds of visibility and pushing past gatekeepers by utilizing channels like social media, television, and personal websites.

Ojih Odutola's self-portrait *Hold it in Your Mouth a Little Longer* on an episode of Fox's *Empire*.

FOX

Inspired by pop culture, migration, and her experiences coming of age as a Nigerian in conservative Alabama, *To Wander Determined* is an interconnected series of life-sized fictional portraits, rendered in charcoal, pastel, and pencil, chronicling the lives of two aristocratic Nigerian families.

"The skin for me, that's where my career kind of started. The skin was an access point," says Ojih Odutola in a statement to the Whitney. "Whenever I create the skin, it's sort of like a world, this idea of the multifaceted self, the layered self, and how we are so many selves in so many different ways." The artist is able to illustrate the multi-dimensionality of her characters through her distinctive rendering of the intricacy of the skin—the faces seem to move as you change your angle of perspective.

> By presenting this family in luxurious landscapes, going beyond the common role of black skin in servitude, Ojih Odutola is able to challenge stereotypes that surround the Nigerian community, as well as other immigrants in this country. Their placement inside an American art museum insists that the viewer humanize these figures. In our current political climate, with DACA being #hashtagged less and violent deportations rising, this show has the potential to influence and recharge the momentum in conversations around immigration in America.

Installation view of *Toyin Ojih Odutola: To Wander Determined* (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, October 20, 2017–February 25, 2017). From left to right: *Pregnant*, 2017; *Years Later – Her Scarf*, 2017; *Unfinished Commission of the Late Baroness*, 2017.

Co-curated by Rujeko Hockley, who also co-curated *We Wanted a Revolution* at the Brooklyn Museum, and Melinda Lang, the show is located on the first-floor John R. Eckel, Jr. Foundation Gallery, which has free entry, and is therefore accessible to audiences regardless of class, social status, or financial restrictions. This one is for the people. The lavender-hued walls selected by the artist, despite the institution's resistance, emit a warmth that deconstructs the intimidating coldness these spaces can often project.

> On opening night, the room broke out into a synchronized "Aye" as the artist, in her signature brightly colored head wrap, entered. Ojih Odutola stretched her long frame, from the tips of her toes, and scanned the room. She spotted her mother and extended her arms towards her. Exuding the same opulence as the figures in *To Wander Determined*, they lifted their hands to the sky, a real-life instance of the message of the exhibit: the undeniable impact of kinship in identity.

artnet® news

Exhibitions

See the Opulent Portraits That Took Toyin Ojih Odutola From the Set of 'Empire' to the Whitney

The Nigerian-born artist's exhibition, "To Wander Determined," presents a corrective to a Eurocentric art history.

Caroline Goldstein, October 26, 2017

Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Representatives of State* (2016/2017). ©Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

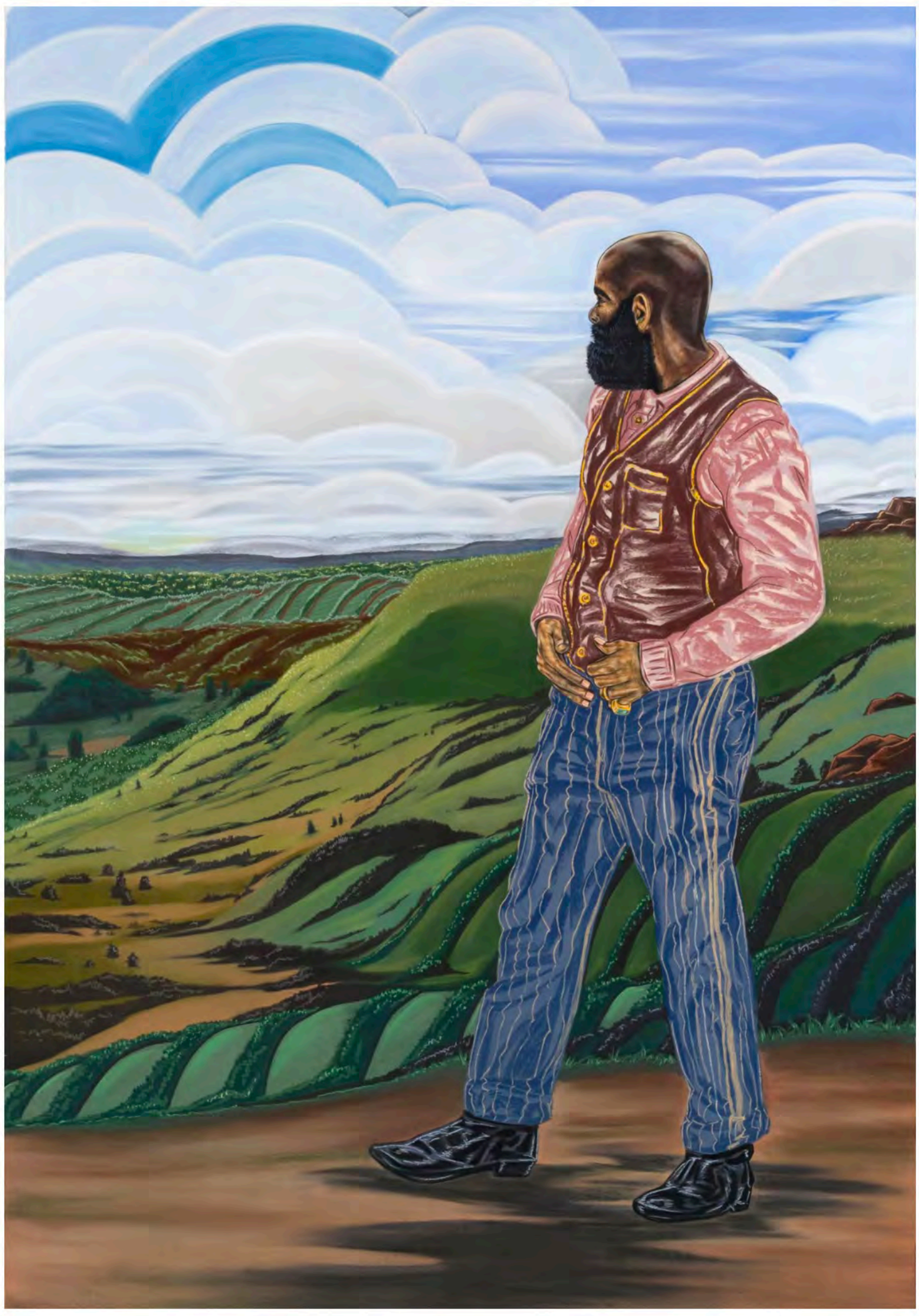
Upon entering Toyin Ojih Odutola's recently opened show at the Whitney Museum, visitors see, posted on the wall, a letter by the artist, written in the persona of the "Deputy Private Secretary" for two aristocratic families in Lagos. The entwined narrative of these two noble houses forms the back story for the show, titled "To Wander Determined." For Ojih Odutola, their images form a corrective to a Eurocentric art history that thinks of both royal court-portraiture and genre paintings as belonging to a primarily white world, with black characters as footnotes—cast as servants, slaves, or left out completely.

The opulence of bespoke suits worn by figures in *The Newlyweds On Holiday* (2016), and the gold jewelry adorning the male figure as he surveys his family's land, are overt markings of class. In *Winter Dispatch* (2017), crests are embedded in the details of interior scenes, embossed on stationary scattered on the leather desk blotter, and adorning gilded frames the background.

A more subtle theme in "To Wander Determined" is suggested by the landscapes that we glimpse beyond the figures in the artist's various portraits, representing the opportunity to travel, the privilege of holidays and adventures. The attention to detail in each of Ojih Odutola's compositions hearkens back to the iconography of Renaissance portraiture, married with the contemporary stylistic flair that first earned her a cult following after being featured on Fox's *Empire* in 2015.

Below, images from the show, now on view in "To Wander Determined."

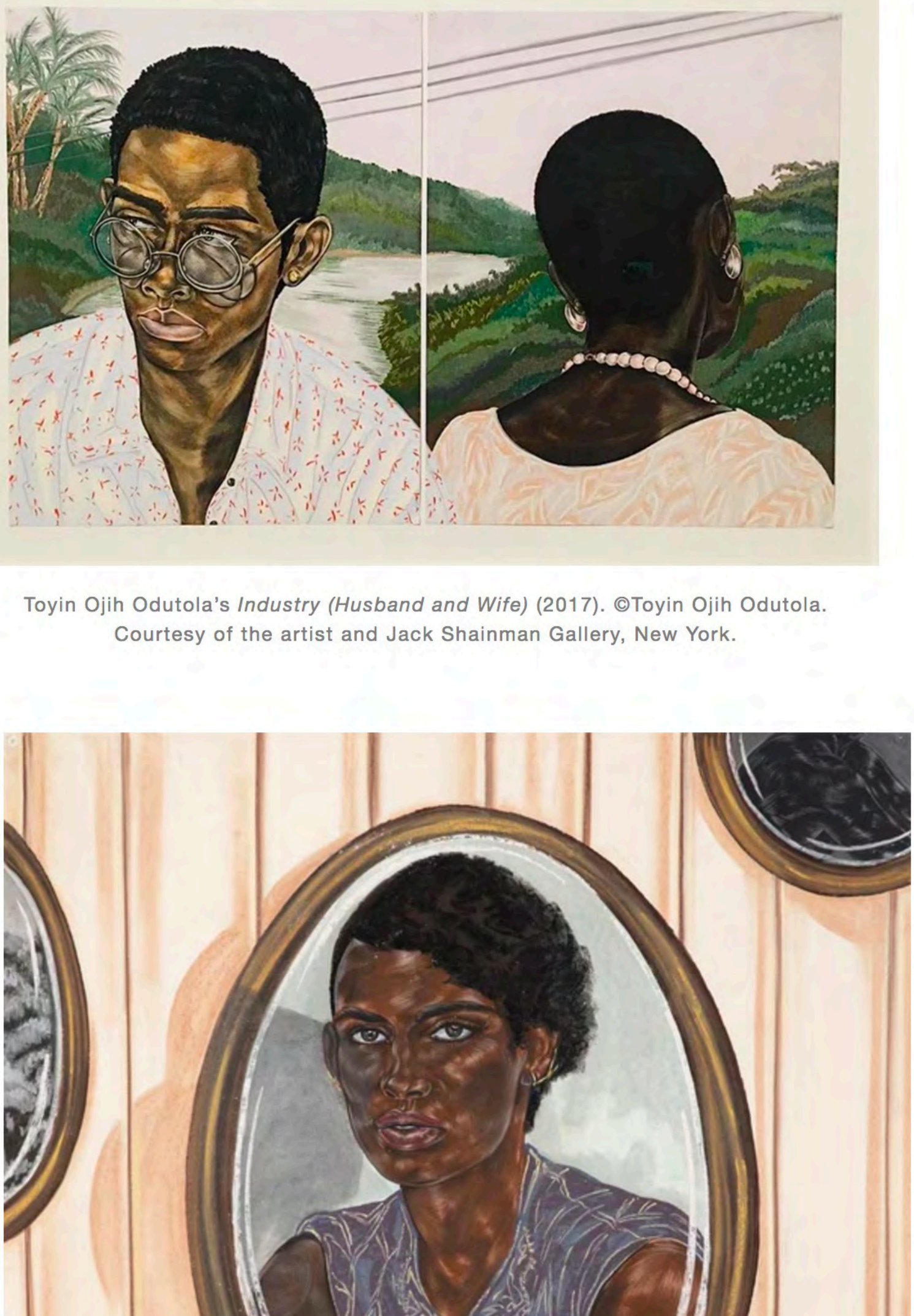
Toyin Ojih Odutola's Winter Dispatch (2016). ©Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



Toyin Ojih Odutola's *Surveying the Family Seat* (2017). ©Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Installation view, “To Wander Determined” at the Whitney Museum. Left: *The Missionary* (2017), R: *By Her Design* (2017). ©Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Toyin Ojih Odutola’s *Industry (Husband and Wife)* (2017). ©Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



Toyin Ojih Odutola’s *Wall of Ambassadors* (2017). ©Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Toyin Ojih Odutola's *Newlyweds On Holiday* (2016). ©Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Toyin Ojih Odutola's *Excavations* (2017). ©Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

"To Wander Determined" is on view at the Whitney Museum through February 25.

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HYPERALLERGIC

ARTICLES

A Year of Magical Figurative Art

2017 was a strikingly strong year for all kinds of figurative representation and portraiture: contemporary, midcentury, imagined, caricatured, oil-painted, and drawn.

Hyperallergic December 25, 2017

Toyin Ojih Odutolah: To Wander Determined at the Whitney Museum of American Art

October 20, 2017–February 25, 2018

Toyin Ojih Odutola, "Representatives of State" (2016-17); pastel, charcoal and pencil on paper, 75 1/2 × 50 in (191.8 × 127 cm) (©Toyin Ojih Odutola; courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery)

Ojih Odutola, a virtuoso of drawing who first came to significant recognition for her sinewy, mysterious ballpoint portraits, has a gem of an exhibition in the ground-floor gallery at the Whitney. Her luxurious, cerebral portraits of members of two fictional Nigerian aristocratic clans are rendered in uncanny palettes of charcoal, pastel, and pencil. She is an exhaustive researcher, chronicler, and writer; the fully conceived, extensively worked out backstories she's created for her subjects give their poses of ennui, repose, or patrician melancholy a vast emotional range. She adds complex tonal layers of affective nuance to their superbly rich surroundings, which themselves are bursting with art historical references and a wealth of knowledge. —*LP*

Raiford, Leigh. "Reviews: Toyin Ojih Odutola, Museum of the African Diaspora." *Artforum International.* April 2017: p. 216, illustrated.

ARTFORUM

Toyin Ojih Odutola

MUSEUM OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

From the outset, Toyin Ojih Odutola's solo exhibition "A Matter of Fact" makes visitors complicit in its fabulist conceit. What we are about to see, an introductory wall panel announces, is the "private collection of rarely exhibited portraits depicting the UmuEze Amara family," a fictional aristocratic Nigerian clan, the portrayals of whom purportedly span two hundred years. The eighteen pieces on view, all made with charcoal, pastel, and pencil, and most of them life-size portraits, provide clues to the family's histories—its proclivities, its relationships, and, above all, its members' *tastes*. Rather than posing as the clan's in-house portraitist, Ojih Odutola casts herself as "private secretary" to the family's queer patriarchs (who are presented as the show's curators, and whose portrait, *Newlyweds on Holiday* [all works 2016], hangs just outside the gallery proper).

Toyin Ojih Odutola, *A Grand Inheritance*, 2016, charcoal, pastel, and pencil on paper, 89 × 60".

Whether portraying queer intimacy or resisting uncomplicated hagiographic depictions of her subjects, Ojih Odutola has long challenged assumptions regarding black life. "A Matter of Fact" is less a departure from than an expansion of the artist's now-signature treatment of black skin: Heavily inked markings render black faces as light and motion. While her previous portraits were closely cropped, their subjects set against empty backgrounds, the new ones are looser, larger, their subjects' surrounds more narrative driven. Ojih Odutola has widened her lens and shifted our attention from skin to body; her figures' personae and experiences are additionally revealed by their positioning within luxe interiors. Richly colored and full of detail and texture, the show manages to be at once studied and imaginative, thought-provoking and playful. Ojih Odutola began this series following a two-month residency at the Headlands Center for the Arts in California's Marin County. It is thus fitting that "A Matter of Fact" debuts at San Francisco's Museum of the African Diaspora, a venue that has grown increasingly innovative in its curatorial practice and programming over the past few years. Opened as a cultural heritage center and educational museum in late 2005, MOAD has recently turned its attention to contemporary work by artists of African descent. "A Matter of Fact" is one of the most robust manifestations of this new direction.

Amid its color and exuberance, the show asks a difficult question: Can black subjects be plausibly depicted as possessors of wealth and trustees of (Anglo) aristocratic lineages rather than as vassals who produce and safeguard the wealth of others?

Ojih Odutola's portraits suggest that this proposition isn't merely a matter of mise-en-scène, a situating of a subject amid a host of signifying possessions. Nor is it simply an inversion in which the expected white sitter is replaced by a black one. Rather, her work demands understanding of the ways in which black bodies might inhabit such spaces. Gesture, posture, and a kind of tactile relationship to domestic interiors and material objects become important ways of communicating black protagonists in possession of their surroundings and themselves.

In *Afternoon Tea*, a bespectacled, informally dressed woman relaxes in a red chair, an opulent gold tea set in front of her. Immediately adjacent is *A Grand Inheritance*, in which a young man reclines with his leg thrown over the arm of a wingback chair whose ruby color matches that of his velvet slippers. Throughout, Ojih Odutola's attention to the body in repose—characterized variously by slackness of posture, the casual folds of stylish clothes, an open shirt or a loosened tie—works to visualize a blackness that is neither spectacular nor performing a politics of respectability, one that is not concerned with who's watching. Through historical portraiture's often rigid compositions, artists and their patrons conspired to idealize sitters and confer notions of depth and value eagerly consumed by complicit audiences. That Ojih Odutola's subjects often appear explicitly *not* to be posing doesn't reveal the "truth" of black subjects so much as it winks at the socially constructed and racially arbitrary value implicit within portraiture itself. "A Matter of Fact" at once mobilizes the conventions of portraiture and highlights the fictions that undergird them.

As a show, "A Matter of Fact" might come across as an embarrassment of riches. The narratives are so densely layered within each portrait and across the tightly spaced exhibition that the editing of one or two pieces might have made the show feel less overwhelming. But this is a minor criticism. Perhaps most exciting, "A Matter of Fact" allows us to witness an artist testing new ideas and stretching her craft, testing and stretching the boundaries of blackness in the process.

—*Leigh Raiford*

THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE | https://nyti.ms/2pmqQmv

T MAGAZINE

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young African Immigrant

By TAIYE SELASI MAY 8, 2017

The novelist Yaa Gyasi and the artist Toyin Ojih Odutola — both born in Africa and raised in the same Alabama town — have become two of the finest observers of race in America.

EARLY LAST YEAR I was sent a copy of Yaa Gyasi's debut novel. A multigenerational epic, tracing half sisters separated by the trans-Atlantic slave trade, "Homegoing" recalls the work of Eleanor Catton and Garth Risk Hallberg in its virtuosity. Months later I discovered the artist Toyin Ojih Odutola. Procrastinating on Instagram, as one does, I stumbled upon "Untitled (Dotun. Enugu, Nigeria)." The work, made in 2012, features the artist's signature style: a face rendered in feathery marks, black and white, ballpoint pen on paper. The haunting image seemed to have been created at once in a hurry and with meticulous care: a close-up of a face (her brother's, I'd learn) that radiated might and melancholy.

That these consummate artists were both West African thrilled me to no end. I am a Nigerian-Ghanaian who pursued an unlikely creative career; here were two comrades at the top of their creative fields. The Ghanaian-born Gyasi sold her debut for a reported seven figures when she was 25. At 31, the Nigerian-born Ojih Odutola, whose work is in the collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, has had numerous solo gallery shows. Even without finding their surnames familiar, I'd have marveled at their accomplishments — and was astounded to learn that they not only knew each other, but had both lived in Huntsville, Ala. How was it, I wondered, that two celebrated young artists came from this one Southern town? And

what did it say that these poignant observers of race in America weren't American-born at all?

ASK ANY 30-SOMETHING with African parents what it was like growing up in the States and you'll likely hear a story of unbelonging, an account not of double consciousness but triple. The young African immigrant must locate herself along three divides: the first between blackness and whiteness; the second within blackness, between native and foreign; the third between African and American. For years, despite this complexity of experience, the African immigrant went largely ignored. It seems improbable now. The dashing son of Nigerians has starred in "Star Wars," the dazzling daughter of Kenyans has won an Oscar, the child of an East African has led the free world — but it was not always so. One of the country's most highly educated immigrant groups, Africans were long absent from popular culture.

It was in this representational chasm that Gyasi and Ojih Odutola came of age in Alabama. Theirs is the classic "educated brown immigrant" background: children of professor fathers who, seeking tenure-track positions, move their families to unlikely cities. Gyasi's father is a professor of French, Ojih Odutola's of chemistry; after stints in other states, both found posts in Alabama. There, each family joined the close-knit community of West Africans that seems to exist in every college town: Ojih Odutola's mother was a founding member of the Nigerian Women's Association, Gyasi's equally feminist mother was president of the Ghanaian Association of Huntsville. The artists have known each other since they were children, and have much in common, including being raised as only daughters in families of boys. But their childhoods, rather than mirror images, trace a kind of parabola: two archetypes of the African immigrant narrative.

In 2005 I wrote an essay describing an Afropolitan experience: the decidedly transcultural upbringing of many Africans at home and abroad. How such Afropolitans negotiate that second divide — not between black and white, but between black and African — often depends on where they are raised, whether among or apart from African-Americans. Gyasi and Ojih Odutola typify the distinction. Gyasi, who moved to Huntsville's predominantly white southeast district at 9 years old, wrote in The Times of an early encounter with racism in Tennessee, where she lived prior. Playing with African-American friends, she heard two white

boys call out, “Niggers!” One took pains to tell Gyasi, “Not you.” She wrote: “I had been brought up to see myself as set apart from what my family called ‘black Americans.’ … I believed that the boy had taken the word back as a reward for my good behavior.”

Ojih Odutola, raised in Huntsville’s urban northwest, describes an entirely different encounter with the epithet. When she was around 10, her predominantly black soccer team traveled for a game. White and largely working class, the other team “played dirty,” she said, tackling and shoving without intervention by the referee and to the delight of the crowd. When Ojih Odutola accidentally tripped a player, the crowd turned violent. “Get that nigger off the field!” the spectators, mostly parents, roared. Ojih Odutola’s (white) coach took her out, fearing for her safety.

Neither story surprises, but the difference between them is telling, suggestive of the ways in which race, gender and class unfailingly entwine. Gyasi, years later, would be informed by a white girl that she would never find a boyfriend, black men being categorically useless. (The exemption she received as a young black woman, for “good behavior,” is rarely available to young black men.) Ojih Odutola, harassed by insular white Americans, would be harassed by insular black Americans too, told that she wasn’t “really black” or that her father, a Nigerian professor at the historically black Alabama A&M University, had “stolen their jobs.” For the brown-skinned immigrant, “black” makes a slippery label, its definition murky, its definers myriad. Perhaps it is inevitable that this immigrant would come to ask, in Gyasi’s words, “What does it mean to be black in America?”

The question animates both women’s work. Raised on different sides of town, they’ve trod similar creative paths. Both discovered their talent as children; both were encouraged by teachers; both found, in art, a way to describe blackness as they knew it. “Drawing was always my thing,” Ojih Odutola says. “I always signed up for competitions. I won a lot of first-place prizes, but I was very traditional in my renderings.” Her parents lauded her gift but viewed art as a hobby. It was Dana Bathurst, a high school art teacher, who challenged their assumptions: that good art must approximate European traditions and that pursuing a career in art wasn’t possible. Bathurst introduced Ojih Odutola to a new conception of portraiture through the work of African-American artists like Jacob Lawrence, Elizabeth Catlett,

Romare Bearden and fellow Alabamian Kerry James Marshall. Gyasi, similarly, excelled at writing from an early age but couldn't imagine a literary career before AP English. That year, the only black English teacher she would ever have, Janice Vaughn, took her writing seriously. Then, in her senior year, Gyasi discovered Toni Morrison's "Song of Solomon." The language was spectacular; the author a brown woman; the sensibility familiar, Southern.

Importantly, both Gyasi and Ojih Odutola identify as Southerners (among other identities); it is part of what bonds Ojih Odutola, for example, to Solange Knowles, an avid collector of her work. Writing about first-generation Americans can tend to overlook this: the role of locality in shaping identity. Even the immigrant who feels only partially American can feel fully Alabamian; locality, with its rich specificity, tends to inspire artists more than nationality. One thinks of Beckett the Parisian, Lahiri the Roman, Teju Cole the New Yorker, observers whose profound sense of place seems both to arise from and render irrelevant their relative foreignness. With their work, Ojih Odutola and Gyasi — Southern, West African, black — express this relativity, this layeredness.

OR RATHER, insist upon it. Both artists embraced a politicized racial identity in college. For Ojih Odutola this meant challenging how art programs teach blackness. "Art professors don't know how to read blackness — as a color, a material, a concept, a tool," she tells me. "We know all about light, contrast, rendition. Why can't we apply that to the black surface?"

Educated at Auburn University, the University of Alabama in Huntsville and California College of the Arts, Ojih Odutola describes her training as "incredibly shortsighted." The lone brown student in most of her classes, she is forthright in naming her anguish. Bravely so: Too often the mental health effects of institutional racism go ignored. In 2004 at Auburn, where she began her undergraduate studies, she was given an assignment "to break up a face into measurable components." She made this face black and these components planes, seeking "to draw what skin feels like." Her professor reacted with perplexity, as if she hadn't understood the assignment. A few years later, at the Yale University School of Art summer fellowship in Norfolk, Conn., white instructors dismissed her work as "illustrative, graphic — code words for not fine art."

But Ojih Odutola persisted. “I used pen and ink,” she laughs, “in part because I couldn’t afford my art supplies.” The pen, she underscores, “is a writing tool first.” In West Africa, where the narrative tradition is oral, “the visual bridges the written and the spoken. Yes, I was drawing. But it was, to me, a form of letter-writing too.” To whom was she writing? “To people,” she says. “For them to see me, people like me. Just look. The epidermis packs so much. Why would you limit it to the flattest blackness possible?”

With a ballpoint pen, Ojih Odutola found a way to express a blackness of vulnerability and complexity. In her sophomore year at Stanford University, Gyasi found the same. Reading “Song of Solomon” in high school, she’d recognized part of herself, but not all. “That feeling,” she says, “spurs you to write something that is entirely yours. Something that speaks to all of your identities, all of your experiences.”

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ARTFORUM

Toyin Ojih Odutola

MUSEUM OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA
685 Mission St
October 26–April 2

The nearly life-size pastel, pencil, and charcoal drawings in Toyin Ojih Odutola's exhibition ostensibly offer a privileged look at the private lives of an aristocratic African family. The subjects' nonchalance, combined with the artist's use of foreshortening and flattening effects, makes these works feel like they are derived from photographs, prompting the question: Whose gaze do we inhabit while viewing them? This query lingers, even after learning that the background story is actually an elaborate fiction that Ojih Odutola has invented to explore the physical markers of wealth.

Her earlier work focuses on individuals, often posed against a plain ground, which emphasizes her stylized rendering of skin: sinewy patterns of rich blacks, highlighted with white and sometimes iridescent blue, orange, and gold. If those drawings collapsed the distinction between visible and invisible aspects of the body, in this new series Ojih Odutola adds to her inquiry the porous boundaries between the self and its surroundings. Her mark-making reinforces this line of research, especially in such superbly complicated compositions as *The Marchioness* or *Lazy Sunday* (all works 2016), where overlapping designs on drapery can be read as depth or simply more flat pattern.

These drawings ask not only what does enormous wealth look like but also what does it feel like to look on this life with your own eyes? The artist's conclusion seems to be a lonely one. Little remains to define individuals if they cannot be separated from their background, in both the literal and the figurative sense.

Toyin Ojih Odutola, *The Marchioness*, 2016, charcoal, pastel, and pencil on paper, 83 x 66 x 2 1/2".

— Kim Beil

Porges, Maria. "A Matter of Fact: Toyin Ojih Odutola at Museum of the African Diaspora." *Daily Serving.* 11 January 2017. Online.

DAILYSERVING
AN INTERNATIONAL PUBLICATION FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

January 11, 2017 Written by Maria Porges

A Matter of Fact: Toyin Ojih Odutola at Museum of the African Diaspora

In *A Matter of Fact* at San Francisco's Museum of the African Diaspora, Toyin Ojih Odutola presents an elaborately conceived and completely imaginary history of the UmuEze Amara clan, as chronicled in a series of portrait drawings in pastel, charcoal, and pencil. A wall text in the main gallery states that these works were selected from the family's extensive holdings of art and antiquities by the present Marquess (a title of nobility, sometimes spelled marquis, designating a rank below a duke but above a count). By focusing on this specific part of the fictitious family's collection, the text tells us that the Most Honorable Jideofor Emeka and his husband Lord Temitope Omodele hope "[t]o engage visitors in the experience of life within a great Nigerian house as well as present an intimate family portrait beyond the public image of respectability."

Toyin Ojih Odutola. *The Marchioness*, 2016; charcoal, pastel, and pencil on paper; 77 x 50 in. (paper), 83 3/8 x 65 7/8 x 2 in. (framed). Courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Signing her name to this statement as “Deputy Private Secretary” to the family, Ojih Odutola sets in motion a story told in pictures: a graphic novel of sorts about indolent aristocrats surrounded by the trappings of wealth. In the brightly colored, high-ceilinged rooms she has imagined, gold becomes a framing device. It surrounds the many pictures hung everywhere, is woven into rugs and drapes, and even covers the molding that decorates most of the walls. There are gold buttons, watches, pens and piping, a gold cup and teapot, and even what appears to be a cloth-of-gold dress.

The show begins with a double portrait of two men standing side by side in vivid and elaborately patterned suits, their knuckles touching lightly. Titled *Newlyweds on Holiday*, this seems to be a picture of the current Marquess and his husband. Some poses do have the deliberate appearance of a commissioned sitting, such as that of the formidable Marchioness in white silk pajamas and a full-length fur coat (in tropical Nigeria!), or a mother and daughter on horseback, straight-backed and formal in exquisite riding clothes. Most, however, seem snapshot-casual, cropped at times with a deliberate awkwardness. In *Lazy Sunday*, the top of a lanky young woman’s head is truncated by the paper’s edge. In *The Enlightenment of the Second Son*, which portrays a young man in striped pink and gray pajamas with, his foreshortened arms thrust toward us, the left side of the drawing elides his knee.

Toyin Ojih Odutola. *A Grand Inheritance*, 2016; charcoal, pastel, and pencil on paper; 89 x 60 in. (paper), 94 x 66 x 2 in. (framed). Courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photo: jka.photo.

Ojih Odutola has talked about artists she admires, and some of those influences are at play here: painters like Kerry James Marshall, Paula Rego, Lynette Yiiadom-Boakye, or the great portraitist John Singer Sargent. Still, there is a degree of abstraction and generalization that suggests the work of David Hockney as much as anyone else—particularly his portraits from the late '60s, in which the place and space of class and wealth is represented as vividly as its inhabitants. In addition, Ojih Odutola's pictures invoke another source she has cited in the past: comic books, with their strongly graphic narratives and tipped perspectives.

For the most part, subjects in her earlier drawings have been isolated from their environment, often set against white or monochromatic backgrounds. From the start of what has been only the opening decade of her career (she is in her early thirties), Ojih Odutola's "signature" invention has been an extraordinarily rich language for depicting the sheen and texture of the skin of her Black subjects, which she creates using primarily ballpoint pen and markers. Hauntingly beautiful, breathtakingly labor-intensive, and magnetically attractive, the scarified surfaces of her drawings recall things as disparate as actual tribal practices of cutting/tattooing and the Ife portrait sculpture of Nigeria (though Ojih Odutola denies having been aware of such things when she began drawing this way), and Leon Golub's flayed, scraped canvases.

LEFT: Toyin Ojih Odutola. *Casual Full Dress*, 2016; charcoal, pastel, and pencil on paper; 62 x 42 in. (paper), 66 x 47 ⅝ x 2 in. (framed). Courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.
RIGHT: Toyin Ojih Odutola. *Last Dance at the Annual County Gala*, 2016; charcoal, pastel, and pencil on paper; 77 x 42 in. (paper), 82 x 47 ⅝ x 2 in. (framed). Courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

The sheer amount of work completed within a short period of time (all eighteen drawings are dated from 2016) means that some works in the exhibition are more convincing than others. Ojih Odutola seems to be finding her way with color and scale, translating the way she draws the texture of skin and hair into finding inventive approaches to clothing and furnishings. A grouping in the smaller back room of the show brings together some of the strongest works. The mother and daughter on horseback, their quiet faces implacably black against the blue and white of the sky; the marchioness in her chair (the walls in the gallery have been painted the same rich red as the room in this painting); and *Selective Histories*, a wry close-up of a wall of heavily framed paintings, hung salon-style and surrounding a tribal mask. Wearing two heavy silver rings, the index finger of someone's right hand reaches into the frame to touch the mask's cheek. Still, as mysterious as this composition might be, nothing in the room is as compelling as the Marchioness's white clothes—simultaneously fantastically strange and mesmerizing. Their draping lines have been abstracted and then divided into areas of cream and the palest blue, with gray lines that suggest the leading of a stained glass window. Improbably, Ojih Odutola has made pajamas into a matriarch's armor, like the rigid style of 16th-century court dress.

Toyin Ojih Odutola, *A Matter of Fact*; installation view, Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco, October 26, 2016–April 2, 2017. Photo: jka.photo.

If only the drawing of the architecture of the room around her could make up its mind about whether it is intended to be equally imaginary, or is meant to describe the space with rigorous perspective. This slightly indecisive quality appears in some other compositions; textures or patterns are sometimes only summarily invoked, and people or objects are depicted as if they are not really in the same space. Working from photographs, as she surely does, creates a certain kind of composition, one that is sometimes shaped differently by the camera's eye than it would be by our own. Still, as Ojih Odutola suggests, the best way to view these figures may be to suspend judgment "and escape into the lives of this great house." It'll be interesting to see where this cast of characters will go from here.

A Matter of Fact *is on view at Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco through April 2, 2017.*

Lewis, Sarah. “Vision & Justice.” *Aperture*. 223. 2016: p 11, illustrated.

aperture

Toyin Ojih Odutola, *I Wish You Would*, 2011. Pen ink and acrylic ink on board

Vision & Justice

Sarah Lewis

In 1926, my grandfather was expelled in the eleventh grade in New York City for asking where African Americans were in the history books. He refused to accept what the teacher told him, that African Americans had done nothing to merit inclusion. He was expelled for his so-called impertinence. His pride was so wounded that he never went back to high school. Instead, he went on to become a jazz musician and a painter, inserting images of African Americans in scenes where he thought they should—and knew they did—exist. The endeavor to affirm the dignity of human life cannot be waged without pictures, without representational justice. This, he knew.

American citizenship has long been a project of vision and justice.

When I was asked to guest edit this special issue devoted to photography of the black experience—the first of its kind for *Aperture*—I could think of no other theme. No matter the topic—beauty, family, politics, power—the quest for a legacy of photographic representation of African Americans has been about these two things. The centuries-long effort to craft an image to pay honor to the full humanity of black life is a corrective task for which photography and cinema have been central, even indispensable.

Understanding the relationship of race and the quest for full citizenship in this country requires an advanced state of visual literacy, particularly during periods of turmoil. Today, we've been able to witness injustices in a firsthand way on a

of visual analysis to read, for example, the image of Eric Garner's killing, virally disseminated through social media, or to understand the symbolism in Dylann Roof's self-styled portraiture before his killing of the Emanuel 9 in Charleston. Being an engaged citizen requires grappling with pictures, and knowing their historical context, at times, with near art historical precision. Yet it is the artist who knows what images need to be seen to affect change and alter history, to shine a spotlight in ways that will result in sustained attention. The enduring focus that comes from the power of the images presented in these pages—from artists such as Ava DuVernay and Bradford Young, Deborah Willis and Jamel Shabazz, to Lorna Simpson and LaToya Ruby Frazier—moves us from merely seeing to holding a penetrating gaze long enough that we consider what is before us anew.

This issue takes its conceptual inspiration from the abolitionist and great nineteenth-century thinker Frederick Douglass, who understood this long ago. In a Civil War speech, "Pictures and Progress," Douglass spoke about the transformative power of pictures to affect a new vision for the nation. This issue opens with that historic framework—Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s writing on Douglass's prophetic, probing ideas and theories about the medium of photography at the dawn of the photographic age. Douglass, the most photographed American man in the nineteenth century, argued that combat might end complete sectional disunion,

American citizenship has long been a project of vision and justice.

Frederick Douglass in Cedar Hill Study, ca. 1880s
Courtesy the National Park Service, Frederick Douglass National Historic Site, Washington, D.C.

We come closer to understanding Douglass's vision of justice with the generation of imaginative photographers and artists represented by projects in this issue, from Leslie Hewitt's and Lorna Simpson's assemblages of archival pictures that speak to the complex legacies of the civil rights movement to Awol Erizku's stylish studio portraits, in which he appropriates iconic poses of Old Master paintings. We see it in the photographs of Roy DeCarava, Carrie Mae Weems, Frank Stewart, and Jamel Shabazz, who never let us forget the dignity of black life, and in those of Deborah Willis, who has also long chronicled the history of the field. We are fortunate to have essays in this issue by a wide range of scholars, artists, and writers—including Teju Cole, Margo Jefferson, Claudia Rankine, Robin Kelsey, Cheryl Finley, and Leigh Raiford, alongside historians Nell Painter and Khalil Gibran Muhammad and musicians Wynton Marsalis and Jason Moran—who offer invaluable insights about the significance of this relationship between art and citizenship exemplified by the works selected for these pages.

Published in the last year of the Obama presidency, this issue marks a time of unparalleled visibility for an African American family on the world stage. Yet this era must also be defined by the emergence of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, the stagnated wages of working-class citizens, and growing impatience with mass incarceration. Devin Allen, a young photographer who came to national attention through his prolific Instagram feed, chronicled the unrest in Baltimore following the death of Freddie Gray in police custody. Suddenly the streets of 2015 looked like memories of 1968, though the circumstances are dramatically different. Radcliffe "Ruddy" Roye, who has propelled the classic genre of street photography into the age of social media, asks, in his continuous stream of images, how we should imagine dignity in the face of oppression. Catalyzed by events just over fifty years apart, Dawoud Bey's powerful meditation on the 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Alabama and Deana Lawson's portrait series on the families of victims killed in 2015 at Mother Emanuel in Charleston, South Carolina, speak to the legacy of the African American church as a target for terrorism and a refuge of grace.

We often see the nexus of vision and justice as a retrospective exercise, chronicling the recent past. We saw this most notably with what I would call Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "aesthetic funerals": the urge after his death to visually unfurl images, ideas, epic visions of African American culture as if to secure the horizon line that felt suddenly in doubt. We saw it in Benedict Fernandez's photograph, taken on April 5, 1968, of three young boys with their torsos covered in buttons of King's Poor People's Campaign as if they were laying out the body of King across their own. At the time of year when Fernandez took this photograph, the Metropolitan Museum of Art was planning an exhibition called *Harlem on My Mind* to open in 1969, which used the visual poetics of an unfurling, a spreading out of an archive, to show the development of Harlem. As Bridget R. Cooks describes in this issue, *Harlem on My Mind* was designed as a tour of Harlem, a processional through thirteen chronologically ordered gallery displays of photographs, dominated by James VanDerZee. It also had a most unusual feature: a closed-circuit television showing exhibition visitors at the Metropolitan real-time footage of pedestrians passing on 125th Street and Seventh Avenue. The now nearly unimaginable feature of a camera displaying Harlem as a distant culture from that of

Aperture's Vision & Justice issue features two covers:

Top:
Richard Avedon, *Martin Luther King, Jr., civil rights leader, with his father, Martin Luther King, Baptist minister, and his son, Martin Luther King III, Atlanta, Georgia,* March 22, 1963

Bottom:
Awol Erizku, *Untitled (Forces of Nature #1)*, 2014

conjured in the mind was intolerable enough to help abolish the institution; the broadside served in parliamentary hearings as the evidentiary proof of slavery's inhumanity.

How many went to Selma because they were moved by images of injustice on their television? How many, like *Brown v. Board of Education* constitutional lawyer Charles L. Black, Jr., saw that segregation was wrong after being moved by the power of an artist, in this case the "genius" of the trumpet playing of Louis Armstrong? Armstrong's genius, Black would state, "opened my eyes wide, and put to me a choice": to keep to a small view of humanity or to embrace a more expanded vision. Once Black made the choice, he never turned back. This is what aesthetic force can do—create a clear line forward, and an alternate route to choose. Later Black would say that, in many ways, this was the day he began "walking toward the *Brown* case, where I belonged." Black never forgot it. He held an annual Armstrong listening night at Columbia and Yale, where he would go on to teach constitutional law, to honor the power of art in the field of justice and the man who caused him to have an inner, life-changing shift.

The gravity of this connection between vision and justice is crucial to understand, as we live in a polarized climate in the United States; sociologists tell us that people now congregate, live, worship, play, and learn with those like themselves more than ever before. Save for constructed societies, we come into close contact with those who do not share our political and religious views less and less. How we remain connected depends on the function of pictures—increasingly the way that we process worlds unlike our own. The tool we marshal to cross our gulf is irrevocably altered vision. The imagination inspired by aesthetic encounters can get us to the point of benevolent surrender, making way for a new version of our collective selves.

Shortly after my grandfather died, I went back to the house where he lived in Virginia, the white clapboard structure nearly ready to sink back into the earth. I stood in that pass-through chamber off of the dining room where he painted. The dining room looked empty, absent the paintings and drawings we'd often splay out on the table as if nourishment of an essential kind. Guest editing this issue of *Aperture* has brought me to that moment again, mindful of my very personal commitment to the artists, writers, playwrights, and filmmakers who, like my grandfather, see this inextricable nexus between race, art, and citizenship. I dedicate this issue to my grandfather's memory and to all those who are working tirelessly to honor the full spectrum of human life.

Sarah Lewis, guest editor of Vision & Justice, is Assistant Professor of History of Art and Architecture and African and African American Studies at Harvard University, and the author of *The Rise: Creativity,*

Gore, Sydney. “Toyin Ojih Odutola Uses Art To Challenge Invented Constructs Of The Self.” *Nylon*. 26 February 2017. Online.

NYLON

Toyin Ojih Odutola Uses Art To Challenge Invented Constructs Of The Self

And emphasizes “being alone and working on yourself”

BY SYDNEY GORE FEBRUARY 26, 2017

In celebration of Black History Month, NYLON is running a spotlight series called UNAPOLOGETIC. Every day, we’ll celebrate different aspects of black culture through profiles, interviews, roundtables, reviews, videos, and op-eds. #Blacklivesmatter and we hold that truth to be self-evident.

Through her immersive art, Toyin Ojih Odutola enables viewers to break down the borders of a body. The 32-year-old visual artist was originally born in Ife, Nigeria, where she was raised in an intellectual community and "surrounded by teachers, scientists, and the like"—her father earned his doctorate in chemistry in the U.S. so he could become a professor while her mother was an English teacher and later went on to work as a neonatal nurse. Ojih Odutola and her family moved to U.S. when she was five and after relocating several times, eventually settled in Alabama.

During all of this constant displacement, Ojih Odutola turned to drawing as a coping mechanism. Over time, it transformed into an "investigative, learning activity." For a while, she wanted to become an animator—she loved "the graphic nature of the lines, the stylized variations of age-old tales, the many iterations and repetitions amalgamating into this form that was instantly recognizable and accessible, yet thoroughly complex and meticulous."

Ojih Odutola's parents enrolled her in fine art courses at school so she could get a proper education on the subject, but she was initially dismissive because she was more concerned with graphic, illustrative styles. Eventually, she realized that it was possible to translate "abstract thoughts into imagined form beyond the limitations of reality" within the discipline as well.

"When I was a kid I truly didn't want to be an artist, even as art making was increasingly an activity I loved partaking in, as well as viewing different types of art making, which brought me much joy, obsession, and relief," she says. "I think this was because I was afraid pursuing a vocation in the world of art was not something that could support a family, and what I always yearned for was some respite for my parents who I would often witness do back-breaking work just to support our family."

Despite her concerns, Odutola would go on to earn her B.A. from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and her MFA from California College of the Arts in San Francisco. At this current time, her solo exhibit, "A Matter of Fact," is on view at the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco. Ojih Odutola describes it as "a culmination of various interests that I have been tinkering with over the years: ideas of wealth and status, and the various manifestations of prescribed and invented constructs of self." One of the standout pieces from the exhibit is "Selective Histories," which further examines the concept of being invested in the outward expressions of identities.

Learn more about Ojih Odutola colorful background in the interview, below.

How has your Nigerian heritage shaped the person you are today?

"Growing up in a Nigerian household was an formidable education for me. I learned that regardless of one's inclination or desire, nothing replaces hard work. I remember my father returning from work late every night, exhausted, but happy to see us, and my mother waking up at dawn to prepare for 12-hour shifts at the hospital. They taught me so much about sacrifice, but they also taught me the importance of making your work your own and never having to pin your frustrations with that work on anyone but yourself. It is your life and, thusly, you should take responsibility for what you want out of it. It's something I hold tightly onto today.

"The best gift I received from growing up in a Nigerian house and, by in large, the community, was the beauty, magic, and energizing spirit of storytelling. Whenever I look back fondly at my childhood, I think of all the moments when we would gather together with family and friends and tell stories to one another—and often there was laughter. That soundtrack stays with me, even when my parents remind me that the environs weren't exactly ideal: 'Don't you remember? We lived in that tiny, dingy apartment, in that shabby old building?' They will ask. I will often just look at them in bewilderment, because the way my parents raised us, it was like our living room and kitchen were the center of another world suspended in time, where we created our own stories beyond what was readily

available to us."

What steps did you take to develop your craft professionally?

"As I approached my high school graduation, I was terrified to realize that despite my efforts, art making became something I was not only skilled at but really wanted to do in my heart. When I finally confessed to my parents that I planned to pursue art as a degree in university, they were very perturbed, but mindful. They wanted to make sure that if this was where I wanted to set the course, I needed to understand the gravity of what I was undertaking. They instilled in me that I would have to work twice as hard if not more to achieve some of the benefits and securities that are automatically attached to other professions. I could never take anything for granted for I was embarking on something completely unknown to them and would essentially be on my own. I admit, I was afraid, but I am so grateful now for their honesty, because that was exactly what I needed to push for it more than I would if I felt like there was a safety net to catch me if I ever failed. I studied studio art as an undergraduate, with a minor in communications at UAHuntsville, and then went on to pursue my master's in drawing and painting at CCA."

What was your undergraduate experience like?

"As an undergraduate, I sometimes floundered, had my ebbs and flows, experiencing many failures and some small advances. There were times when I doubted whether I was up to the task, the responsibility. I was figuring things out and, luckily, that was the perfect time to do it. Upon graduation, I felt I needed a break, a year, if possible, to test out whether I could proceed to the next step of postgraduate study in art. I worked various jobs, got fired, was dumped, was couch surfing—all the while feeling like I had no idea what it was I truly wanted. I had no money and had to move back in with my parents. I found leftover sheets of drawing paper and tools from my old studio in my room and started drawing alone. I didn't share it with anyone for fear they might not understand. I was re-learning why I loved the act of drawing and not so much the final product/object that came from the drawing. I slowly began to understand what I actually enjoyed in the figuring-out part as opposed to the evidence that remained from the activity.

"After creating a small batch that could possibly comprise a series, I put them up on my bedroom wall and sat with them for some time, critiquing and editing them every day for months. After some time had passed, I mustered up the courage to apply for graduate school with those drawings. I had no idea what I was in for, or whether I would even get accepted to any of the schools in which I applied. All I could understand was that I saw something in these new works that was different from my undergraduate efforts, something that I felt was mine alone."

What motivated you after graduate school?

"Many years later, the only thing I can say that has held me in good stead and has kept me going was the search for improving my work, the willingness to learn new skills and applications, the need to be proven wrong time and again in order to take that information and transform it. If you are constantly feeling like you have something to fall back on, you will never push forward. You have to be willing to risk and to risk some more in a way that teaches you how to be better not simply for the sake of it. To be able to help my family now through my work is the greatest gift in the world to me. I take great pride in it and much joy. I never would have imagined that my work would take me where I am today, but I will be forever grateful for it. In so doing, I always aim to push it beyond what others or even I can see it possibly becoming."

What topics or issues do you try to convey through your work?

"It shifts from series to series. Usually the conceptual framework comes from researching other movements and ideas that I find interesting or am simply curious about understanding better. I'm very much interested in investigating form—how it shifts and how it molds. The morphology that

develops from testing out varying applications, creating a visual language that eventually becomes a part of your methodology. There is something inherent in the process of making, the mercurial aspect of it, that is slightly addictive. You are constantly wanting to answer a question, and with every iteration, every bit of progress, brings about another question and then another. There is a brilliant James Baldwin quote I always keep in mind on what is at the heart of any creative endeavor: "To expose the question the answer hides." I feel that is truly what I am getting at in the studio: how to make something that is so familiar seem foreign. This can be achieved in a variety of ways both formally and conceptually. When I first began exhibiting my work, I didn't understand how to verbalize this. I was constantly thrust into spaces that were convenient at the time. I thought that by assuming a role it would be easier for others to read my work, but it was exactly the opposite. It simplified me and it simplified my work.

"This style that I am known for is a visual language I developed as an undergraduate, something I sort of stumbled upon. And now I have spent the last 12 years trying to figure out why I stumbled upon it in the first place and how far I can push the perimeters of this style: What happens when I restrict it with materials and palette? What happens when I get maximalist with the scope, scale, and color of it? The genre I prefer to experiment in with these forms is the portrait, but to limit my work to just a depiction of myself and the people I know is to make the work small. I'm interested in how the form exists in a composition and what happens when you isolate a figure whose body feels like a landscape. Then, what happens when you crowd the same figure with an unusual setting? How do people see the form? How do they interpret it? What sorts of questions arise, what sorts of feelings? From there a series can expand and shift, depending on what is in the line of research at any given time."

During this difficult period of social injustice, activists are also calling on artists to create. What keeps you inspired to continue practicing your craft?
"What consistently keeps me inspired is other art, and other artists. I love researching past and contemporary works—learning what I can from them with each series I am tackling. To me the best education comes from history, for if you really want to create something original it involves combining and/or reconfiguring elements that have come before in ways people have not yet seen. During difficult times, I gather much solace in Toni Morrison's amazing statement, made while in conversation with Farah Jasmine Griffin at the 92Y in New York in 2015, where she talks about how to get through when you feel you cannot be creative and you feel you cannot find the motivation. She says: "You have to do your work, because that is the job of evil to keep us from doing our work... This is the time when artists go to work—not when everything is all right, not when it looks sunny, it's when everything is hard. When you think of all those people who [created] when they were in prison,

in gulags, under duress—they were doing it!" I think of that notion often and apply it as best I can in these times. There are many ways to practice dissent and to act out against oppression. It doesn't always have to be literal."

What do you do when you hit a creative block?
"Whenever I feel like it is too hard to create, when the energy and motivation aren't there, I take a breather. I take a break. I don't try to force anything. So, if someone were to ask me to be political simply for the sake of it—without intention, without proper thought—I take a step back to reconsider, to take the time before rushing into an idea that I don't fully understand. In short, I go to work in my own way. I think that's for the best. I like to work incrementally, and I understand that not everyone has a quick answer to problems, or even an answer at all. In the act of working, I am practicing my own political act and I'm learning; I choose not to compare what I am doing with the acts of others. The fact that I am still working, still taking risks, still figuring things out is something I savor more than anything, because what my work brings for me is the freedom to investigate ideas and express that in my drawings and that is something not everyone has the luxury of doing."
Can you further elaborate on this tweet?
"That tweet was written in solidarity with the Women's March that happened worldwide on January 21. I wanted to express pride in what was happening and how seminal this moment was in our time. It was an amazing gesture, but it was also a reflective point for many of us. If anything, I hoped for the message to inspire and to show that even a delayed cognizance of self does not mean it is any lesser than one that arrived earlier. What I am interested in most is how to become a better person through it all and that comes from paying attention and listening to people—not listening only to wait for your turn to speak—to actually try and understand a situation and ruminate on it. I have my impatient moments like the rest of them, but I often find that when I am still and contemplative, trying to give time to what is going on around me, it helps considerably. I do not feel confident enough to give proper advice on this matter because I am still learning, but what I can say from experience is that through the struggles comes knowledge and I think it is through knowledge that we come to better understand who we are as people."

What have been some of the highlights of your career so far?
"There are two moments I can think of—they both involve my parents. My parents have and always will be my heroes and the standard with which I live my life. I often think of them when I am working and how best to do right by them. So, the first moment would have to be seeing their reactions to my work showing in my first ever New York solo exhibition at my art dealer's, Jack Shainman's, space in Chelsea. When I first told them of the show, I was still in graduate school, and it must have sounded like something out of another world. But the moment they arrived and stepped through the gallery to see their daughter's work, it was something special. My father, especially, started welling up. He couldn't believe this was his child's artwork on the walls. I'll never forget that feeling of pride emanating from them as it was also the beginning of my career as an artist professionally. There was so much possibility looking ahead—neither they nor I could have imagined what was to come.
"Fast forward to the second moment, which came last year, when I got the email from the head curator of drawings and prints from the Museum of Modern Art in New York informing me that the department had just purchased my drawing, 'The Raven,' from 2016, and would now include the work in its permanent collection. To say I was floored is an understatement. I was completely out of body. I recalled telling my parents as an undergraduate, when they asked me why I wanted to continue pursuing my art making, that I wanted them to see a major museum in this country house an Ojih Odutola work and display it on their wall and that they would know our story and they will remember our names. When I phoned my parents upon receiving the news, my mother burst into tears and my

father was utterly flabbergasted. It almost didn't seem real. To claim that space on the walls of such a renowned, global institution as MoMA was something none of us could truly fathom and take in, even though we had wished for it many years before; but I had to remind them that it was what they taught me all those years before, that if I truly wanted to do this, I had to put in that work and truly believe in the work I was doing despite all the voices saying otherwise. Right now, what I feel is the same as I did embarking on my studies in university: There is so much more to come and I am just getting started."

What are you hoping to accomplish as a creative?

"I used to believe that success was only defined by certain acquisitions, a specific stack of achievements that would manifest in very bombast ways; I think we all believe that in our respective fields. This need to constantly show what we have done, to have something to perform for others. I honestly thought that if I achieved all the trappings of a glamourous-looking life then I had truly arrived and acquired all the things that everyone would recognize as 'successful'" I learned rather recently that is not what it is about and not why I get up in the morning to head to the studio. There are so many different kinds of success and to only be concerned with a materialistic kind of success can be debilitating and unhealthy. There is this notion of happiness which I think can become dangerous for it assumes that the form it takes must be of a certain kind of happiness and it too involves a performance. I often find that happiness and success can be quiet, private experiences and moments."

What is one piece of advice that you would you give to a younger version of yourself?

"There are times when you feel you should pay attention to things that others may deem important, but in fact are really harmful to you. You may feel it is expected of you to participate in activities and ideas that seem present and of the times when in actually they are detrimental and distracting. It's hard to turn away from that—doing things for want of attention, instead of doing and thinking of what is right, good, and selfless. I think there is a lot of attention made to earn validation in some immediate and boastful way—to exert the need to be seen in a certain light, constantly, that who you are and what you do or maybe what you like is important and secured in someone else's eyes. The truth I have learned over the years is how little that validation brings any good to one's self-care, which comes from being alone and working on yourself and what you love—alone.

"Figuring things out is a constant state of work and it helps you better understand the world you inhabit and how best to navigate through it. It is also in that alone space where you actually stop worrying about yourself, you stop nitpicking at what you are and what you are incapable or capable of doing. You just try: trying things out and failing then trying to understand those failures. It shouldn't matter what gets validated—what people may or may not see—what is paramount is whether what you do and who you are are fine irregardless of approval or ratings outside of you. The moment you put something out into the public forum which you firmly believe in and love, you will be able to distinguish between constructive criticism and the projections of fear that come your way from that courageous act. It takes time, but never doubt that it is impossible to get there.

"Success takes many forms, there is no standard definition, no staid blueprint. Each of us has to define it for ourselves and, most likely, it's something far more intimate and personal than something you have to share publicly and all the time."

ARTFORUM

Toyin Ojih Odutola

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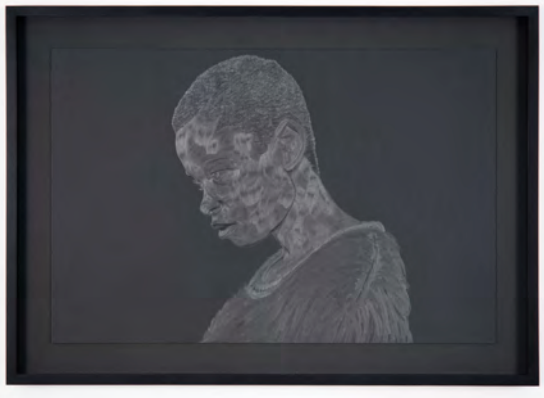
513 West 20th Street
December 11–January 30

When Toyin Ojih Odutola began consistently showing work in New York five years ago, one could not but be struck by the maturity of her approach—portrait drawing at the scale of painting and with the tonal density of a photograph. Her figures are on the surface black, but she depicts them on a sub- or extradermal level, as a sinewy interlacing of hair or musculature. This show demonstrates new possibilities within this framework, as Odutola continues to expand her scale, materials, and emotional register.



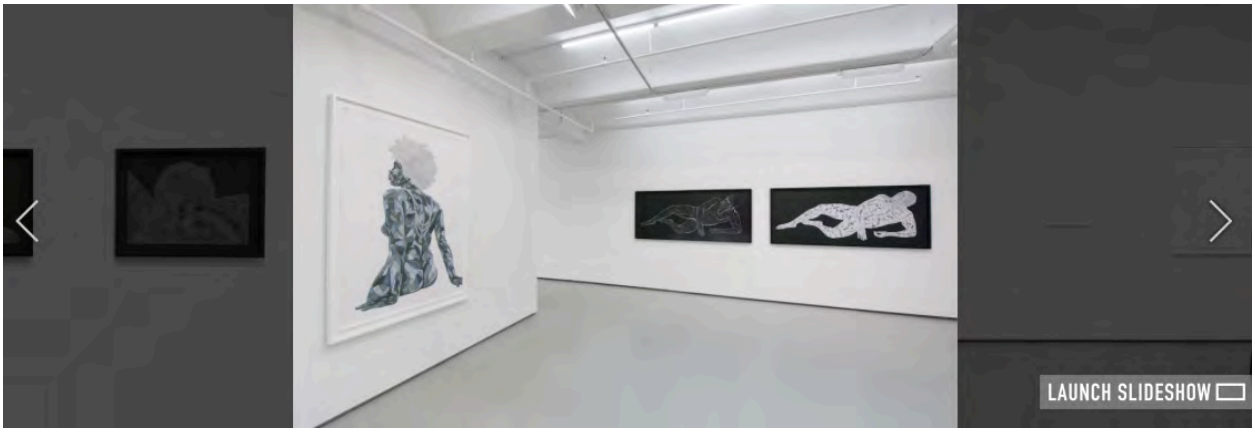
Toyin Ojih Odutola, *The Guilt of Looking*, 2014, graphite pencil on black board, 20 x 30"

A grid of modestly sized portraits at the front of the gallery will appeal to many, but the real gems here are pieces that intensify Odutola's play of tonal contrast. The drawings *Study of Aldo I* and *Study of Aldo II* (all works 2015) play with inverted value by making routine figural sketches into rich studies in tone and density, electrified by Odutola's use of white charcoal. Similarly, the smaller portrait *M5* uses an extreme economy of means—pencil—and produces not just verisimilitude but an uncanny aura around the figure's coiffure and cashmere sweater. Viewing it conjures the strange light of a photogram or x-ray.

Elsewhere, the beauty typical of Odutola's figures gives way to a more menacing and spectral cast: With their piercing kaolin tones, the subject's eyes in *Fabric Free Lives* are at once transfixing and wraithlike; similarly, in *Soil Erosion*, musculature is rendered gelid and orphic, as luminescent washes of cool blues and purples. Race seems suspended here, but that may be incidental—Odutola's stunning formalism transports the viewer to invisible somatic topographies beneath and beyond the flesh.

— Ian Bourland

whitewall



TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA'S "OF CONTEXT AND WITHOUT" AT JACK SHAINMAN

This is the last week to see **Toyin Ojih Odutola**'s exhibition "Of Context and Without" at **Jack Shainman** in New York. It is her fourth solo show with the gallery, highlighting a new direction for the artist. Ojih Odutola told *Whitewall* in a recent interview that she wanted to delay "quick or easy reads" of her subjects. "The crux was to explore how I could suspend race, and by extension identity, as an overlying component, and really focus on the construction of identity, particularly the construction of an image, and how often we as a society can fall into prescribed notions of individuals and groups of people as a whole," she said. Below is more of that conversation.

WHITEWALL: Could you talk a bit about the title of your show, "Of Context and Without," as it relates to themes of identity?

TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA: "Of Context and Without," is a play on perception with mark-making, or the "line," as an agent of identification, and how our attempts at demarcation create more obfuscation than clarity. The central component is the marks that are made to delineate and create singularities within an image. I wanted to see how far I could push this style or language I have been working with for the last ten years into something that eluded even myself. How far could I push it to create something "Other" that felt simultaneously familiar? That was the impetus for me to begin working for the show.

WW: In past shows, you've worked with ballpoint pen, pastels and charcoal, and included vivid textile patterns and colors. What influenced your decision to work exclusively with monochromatic, negative and positive space for this show?

TOO: Materials dictate how I proceed with a series and in turn formulate a show. I don't like to approach a series without having the chosen tool on hand, first, to formulate the concept, and with each solo exhibition, I attempt to challenge how I master a material. The subjects chosen to explore this material aren't arbitrary, but they are not my main concern either. I am always looking for a way to explore the "representational" image in a way that I have never seen before.

The turn towards the monochromatic came after my solo exhibition, "Untold Stories," which opened at the **Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis** in 2015. I had been working with a polychromatic palette in charcoal and pastel and was mainly concerned with narrative. After completing the work for that show, I wanted to see how far I could push narrative when the indicators and anchors needed to navigate a story weren't as readily visible. The monochrome as a theme helped me formulate this idea of the shifting perceptions that we seemingly, automatically utilize to read an image: we constantly look for motifs, clues, and recognizable moments that we can fall back on. I wanted to see what I could do if I minimized all of that and have the outcome be just as interesting if not more interesting when the connotations associated with a broader color palette were omitted.

WW: How does a change in medium change your approach to a drawing? For example, what has charcoal allowed you to explore that ballpoint didn't?

TOO: I like to parallel this to handwriting. When a person begins to write with a pencil or a pen, one's handwriting changes according to the tool at hand, and that shifts moreso depending on the brand of pen or pencil, and the make-up of those tools on a chemical level. There are other contingents, such as what surface one is writing on—be it paper, board, etc. With your handwriting, you may aim for consistency, but the tools and surfaces always influence the result. That is what excites me most about my drawings. Regardless of whether I am using pen ink or charcoal, etc., there are contradictory elements about these tools that distinctly affect how I proceed with the work and the quality of the visuals of this work.

The tenant with which everything else orbits around is my style; this language is my handwriting. From there I apply it to each tool, experimenting with the outcomes. No drawing is ever the same, even when I am working with the same tool on the same surface. What black charcoal provides, compared to black pen ink for instance, is a matte finish with a slowly moving tension as opposed to pen ink's quicker, more rhythmic tension; however, I find that kind of friction in the visual presentation soothing. With the white charcoal, that friction is more harsh: it's highly contrasting and abrasive, which melts features together, seamlessly, far more than pen ink or even graphite pencil. The white, as a material and as a concept, brings out an austerity that my works in the past have never really achieved. I was uncertain about the reactions to seeing how intensely my marks formulated on the surface. There is a sense of something being activated constantly, regardless of the references I am pulling from. That was something that the material lent itself to: the reference didn't matter, and it shouldn't matter, all that remained was how the marks transformed everything.

This same process applied to the marker drawings, in that the soft, meshing together of the parred-down colors, created an almost painterly quality, that seemed like camouflage. These figures and portraits composed of marker became amalgams of things, multifaceted, and slippery in their elusiveness. This provided a read that was two fold, where one could get lost in the make-up of these figures, which could overwhelm with a sense of feeling "unfinished," while also pulling back to see the overall silhouette in a new and engaging way, as a completed thought process.

WW: Who are the subjects of the work in this show?

TOO: The subjects of the show are really the marks themselves. There is no representation happening in these portraits, which is odd to think, because the primary function of the portrait is to describe and render a particular sitter at a particular time. As the "subject" (the "line") does change depending on the surface where the marks rest, the materials I use, and the tones these materials exert when I use them. Beyond that, my aim is not to have people come away from these drawings feeling like I am depicting a specific person or place. There is an intentional suspension of a completed read when that happens and the freedom of interpretation that gives is really exciting to me. That is the sort of freedom I have not had to the pleasure of exploring before this show.

WW: I find portraiture interesting because it is as much about the sitter as it is about the artist, and how the artist see's his or her subject. Could you elaborate on your process of portraiture in this show? How do you approach your subjects—are there certain qualities in a person you seek to highlight?

TOO: I often look to Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's work as an example of how an artist can utilize the portrait as a platform for fiction. The people she paints aren't real, they have never existed in our world. They have only ever existed on the canvas. That is such a liberating concept! In the past, I have worked with portraiture with a more traditional bent, portraying myself, family members, or friends with the purpose of getting at an emotional tactility; but with "Untold Stories" and now with "Of Context and Without," I have moved away from that utility to create portraits which are more of an occasion for marks to happen and by extension a space for me to explore and roam in the realm of the fictive.

Concerning what I am looking for in a portrait or what engages me in the portrait is composition and the potential for the graphical details I can pack into it. Generally, my work is rather illustrative, and the graphic quality of my drawings are intentional. I find that by applying this graphical style that "Otherness" quality comes out more, and there is so much freedom in that otherness. If I were working towards a more… "realistic" visual, the drawings would not be as interesting to me. In sum, representation is not my interest nor my aim. The key to each drawing's success, I think, is in how far removed it is from the actual and more into the realm of the imaginative. From there, the narratives that are conjured up get really fascinating.

WW: You've previously addressed how your use of black and white doesn't necessarily indicate the the race of the subject in the drawing. How do you use black and white beyond the contexts of skin tone?

TOO: I have to admit, when I started working with black, ballpoint pen ink, it was to get at this concept of Black skin that I could not wrap my head around. I wanted to usurp this notion of Blackness as a monolithic entity and break it into something looser, more fluid and more accessible. The more multifaceted I could get the skin to be, the more I felt that the skin could be removed from staid interpretations and into something more neutral. I felt the same about White as a color. As I proceeded with charcoal, this same notion applied only I began to realize that race was becoming less of a concern and more of an encumbrance. So, the marks began to change, they became heavier, more layered, more sinewy and, ultimately, more elusive. As I mentioned before, the subject was no longer an issue, because the marks on their own proved to be more engaging as an agent to compose the image. Once you remove the context of skin color and race from the image, you get something that is more indicative of how you see an image, which is far deeper that the superficial connotations we associate with color. From there, you question the most basic assessments and with that you can move into places you never thought you could go or, at least, those places you never considered, which, ironically, leads you back to race, begging the question of why we have such limited perceptions in the first place.

WW: Are there any specific works in this collection that are particularly significant to you? Or perhaps a piece that inspired you to make the subsequent collection for this show?

TOO: There are six drawings in the show that I felt really broke through in terms of method and presented me with possibilities that were freeing in how to proceed with works in the future. They are: *Study of Aldo I* (2015), *Study of Aldo II* (2015), *The Object is the Technique + the Technique is the Object* (2015), *Melting into Texture or The Future Grows Impatient* (2015), *The Guilt of Looking* (2014) and *The Flavor and the Intent* (2015), which was not included in the show, but was on view at **Art Basel Miami Beach** in December 2015. With the "Aldo" studies, there was really the catalyst for all the charcoal on board pieces in the show. They were the first completed thoughts I finished, back in January 2015. I wasn't certain about what they represented or even what they would mean, but I was excited for how they liberated me from the specificity of form, or any form of overarching identities. That white/black juxtaposition and contrast was so striking it allowed for me to question how far I could layer the marks and push the narrative. Without the "Aldo" studies, drawings like *Melting into Texture…* could not have come to light, which create labyrinthine worlds in and of themselves. With the marker pieces, such as *The Object is the Technique…* and *The Flavor and the Intent*, I was able to push the elusiveness of form even further, and present the "sketch" drawing as a finished piece. The monochromatic palette enhanced the possibilities of what a figure could be composed of and highlighted the construct of the form. And finally, with drawings like *The Guilt of Looking*, I arrived at a verisimilitude and an Otherness I hadn't investigated before.

The quality of the graphite lent itself seamlessly to that of my past pen ink drawings;

however, what it revealed was a visual quality not possible with pen ink: a muted tone and an activating sheen that changed depending on where one stood when engaging with the drawing directly. All of the drawings in “Of Context and Without” have provided me with more possibilities than any series of works I have done in the past, and from there I plan on pushing the marks and materials on hand even further to more expansive spaces of thought and narrative.

“Of Context and Without” is on view through January 30 at Jack Shainman gallery, 513 West 20th Street.

EMORY LOPICCOLO *January 26, 2016*

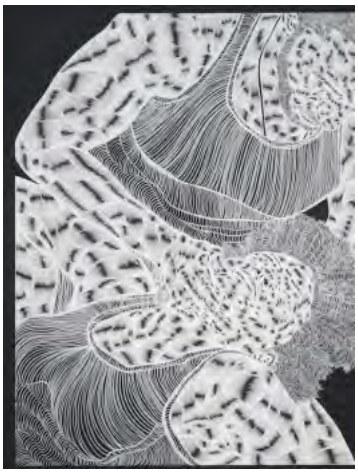
Interview

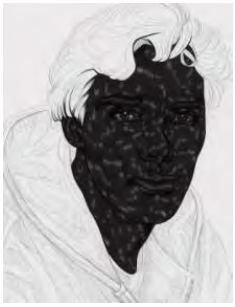
ART

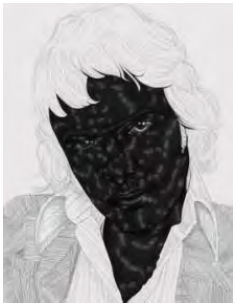
TRAVELING WITH TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA

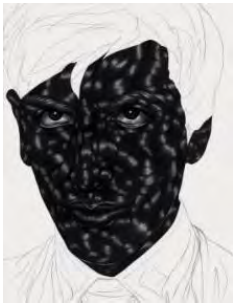
By EMILY MCDERMOTT
Photography VICENTE MUÑOZ

Published 12/21/15









TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA IN NEW YORK, DECEMBER 2015. PORTRAITS: VICENTE MUÑOZ.

"Well, it started with Hank Willis Thomas, as it always does," artist Toyin Ojih Odutola says of her latest series of work. Now on view at Jack Shainman Gallery, "Of Context and Without" marks numerous departures in terms of the artist's

traditional oeuvre. Her ballpoint pen portraits have almost always depicted black men, including her brothers, or herself, and she often interspersed black ink with varied colors. The works in this show, however, are monochromatic and Odutola also strayed from pure pen and ink, introducing both white and black charcoal as well as graphite. Perhaps even more notably than the changes in medium, the show's subject matter denotes an entirely new territory for the 30-year-old artist: iconic white men are rendered with black skin tones and white hair; men and women interact in a way such that one cannot tell if the action is violent or tender; drawings of black men are made with white charcoal on white board; and sketches are included within final pieces. For the artist, these departures, though drastic, were much needed.

"I was scared at first, there was trepidation. But now, there's so much movement," Odutola explains when we speak with her in the lower level of the Chelsea gallery. "It frees me. I feel like I can roam, which, trust me girl, is something you really want."

Born in Nigeria and raised in Alabama, Odutola received her B.A. from the University of Alabama in Hunstville before continuing to California College of the Arts for her M.F.A. "Of Context and Without" marks the artist's fourth solo show in just as many years at Jack Shainmain, but she has also participated in group exhibitions around the world—including one that Thomas curated at Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg and another at the Studio Museum in Harlem, which is still on view.

More than traveling for her work, "I always travel through it when I'm making it," she says. "I always think of my work in terms of landscape, because it is plains, hills, and valleys. There's a sculptural element, a tactility to it," she continues. "The textures, to me, are landscapes." Just after the show's opening, we met the artist to discuss her practice's changes, the constructs of whiteness and blackness, and of course, traveling.

EMILY MCDERMOTT: The series of white men are the first portraits of white men you've ever made in this scale. What led to that decision?

TOYIN ODUTOLA: Hank [curated] "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black," and the premise of that show was to talk about the Black Lives Matter movement. It was shown in South Africa, in Johannesburg, and I thought, "This is an American artist talking about race in a completely different context." I knew my work was known for black subjects and I didn't want to portray black victimhood, so I thought, "What can I tackle? Let me be really cerebral about this..." I wanted to tackle blackness as a subject—not the men, but blackness itself—and how it negates or devalues a subject, at least in our Western construct. Then I thought, "How am I going to make this even more clever? Let me do famous white guys."

MCDERMOTT: Some of them I can easily recognize—there's Mick Jagger, Picasso, Reagan—but others, I'm like, "I have no idea who that is."

ODUTOLA: And that's the beauty of it, because the blackness usurps. The reason we're showing it in a grid was because it's like the lineup, the mug shots. There's one of Benedict Cumberbatch in a hoodie. The guy went to Harrow [School, an English independent school for boys], but does that matter? Because the moment he's rendered in blackness and a hoodie, what do you think?

MCDERMOTT: Who is on the bottom right? He's the only man whose head is cropped, rather than rendered in full.

ODUTOLA: That's Bobby Fischer. He was the first one. That was a test and usually the test is the one you're not quite sure about. I thought, "Maybe if I make it really extreme..." But then I decided, "No, I want them to be traditional head shots." I loved how severe he looked in the photo; it's unsettling. There's an interview with Bobby Fischer, where he talks about being Jewish, being raised Jewish, and his issues with that. But once I render him black, his Jewishness is gone, washed away. So there were certain subjects I picked specifically, but there were others, like Prince Charles, that I just thought, "Why not?"

MCDERMOTT: Were you sourcing images online?

ODUTOLA: There's many departures in this show, but that's one of them—I'm

using sourced material. It's not mine, but it doesn't have to be mine because I transform them in the treatment of the work. Does it matter where it comes from?What it becomes is what I'm interested in. There were a few that I found on Google. Then there was some stuff I found in books.

MCDERMOTT: I read *Alphabet,* the book based off of your thesis, and your artist statement in 2012 was to "depict black portraiture." Do you feel like the works in this show have changed that statement?

ODUTOLA: Absolutely. I'll say it this way: I've always felt the portrait is an occasion for marks to happen. I've never viewed the portrait as about the sitter. Even when I go to the National Portrait Gallery, I'm not thinking about the sitter; I'm thinking about how the artist chose that color or that highlight. It becomes about the time, place, and context—"Of Context and Without," this idea of how malleable identity is when you're looking at a portrait. Are we seeing a portrait of a subject or are we seeing a portrait of the artist?

MCDERMOTT: That directly reflects your own self-portraits and how you don't view them as yourself. They're all from the third person.

ODUTOLA: Exactly. I always say "her." I can't see it as me—girl, that girl up there, that is not me. My booty is not that perched! [*both laugh*]

MCDERMOTT: So when did you start looking at yourself in the third person and why?

ODUTOLA: It's hard for me to engage with the work [otherwise]. It's easier [in the third person]. Maybe because I was raised in a British colony, the British tradition of the third person, but I've always looked at things in the third person when I work. There is some personal stuff, like when I draw my brothers, but when it's me, it's severed, it's very clinical. I'm thinking about me as an artist making it, but not me in the personal sense. I'm only worried that people inject the personal into the read [of the work], like, "Oh this must be about [her]." It's like, "No, it has nothing to do [with me]. It's about the marks." I feel more comfortable using my image as opposed to someone else's because then I can fuck around. But when I do stuff in third person, it's not to devalue.

MCDERMOTT: How does using this third person perspective lead to recognizing new things about yourself as a person?

ODUTOLA: It reveals a lot about what I see. When I separate myself, I see more. When you're too close, things get a bit hazy. When I'm objective—and the more clinical the better—I can play conceptually with things that otherwise I wouldn't. That title, [*The Object is the Technique + The Technique is the Object*], came to me because I was thinking objectively. Originally I wanted to call it *What's On Offer*—not a good title—but I was reading a Francis Bacon biography and there was a quote he said, "The object is a technique and the technique is the object," describing his paintings. I thought, "Boom! This is beautiful, this is describing what I'm doing. This isn't me; this is an amalgamation of marks, this is technique, this is form." The only reason I could do that is because I distanced myself. If you're worried about exposure, like, "Is my tummy tucked okay? God, my hair!" then you're never going to move forward.

MCDERMOTT: Your use of white-on-white is another departure.

ODUTOLA: Huge. I mean, how do you objectify whiteness? I did a series for my thesis in 2012 called "Come Closer" and it was black ballpoint pen, on blackboard, drawing black subjects.

MCDERMOTT: So are these white subjects?

ODUTOLA: No, and that's the only difference. I thought about doing that, but I was like, "That's too easy. Let me make all the subjects black." And that's the point, because does it matter? It's still an exercise, it's absence and presence. I'm always making work that's high contrast: you see it, you know it, and you immediately feel it, specifically the colored ballpoints. But that work, it's monochrome, almost void of color, and almost evades meaning. The feeling of not quite being sure if you're settled on something is something I've always wanted with my work, and that [series] really achieves it. The other piece that was close to achieving that was the guy holding the girl, [*Melting into Texture or The Future*

MCDERMOTT: I was going to ask about that one because when I saw it, I was thinking, "I've never seen any work by Toyin that's so forceful, almost violent."

ODUTOLA: But other people might think, is it tender? Is it a trusting action? That and the piece opposite it—[*And She Accepted This*], the hand with the shoulder—are informally in conversation. His hand is the agent in *Melting into Texture* and it could equally be violent or tender because of the way he's looking at her—but her face is in anguish. In art history, when you show a hand, it means just as much as showing a face. The second one, *And She Accepted*, the guy is laying on her lap, her face may be cut off but his hand is cut off. So who is the actor in *And She Accepted This*? Her hand is on the shoulder, so she is. She takes over. In the other one, her hands are not shown, but his hands are. It's this idea of where is the agency? I love those because I feel like the narrative can change depending on the day, your mood.

MCDERMOTT: You've never had a narrative in your work before. What made you want to go in that direction?

ODUTOLA: The Black Lives Matter movement. I think you're exhausted with victimhood and you feel like my work is now aligned with that—not that it's bad, it just felt confining. It felt like the possibilities were being limited more and more.

MCDERMOTT: Which is totally opposite your approach of blackness being both enveloping and expansive.

ODUTOLA: Exactly. It's always been about the multi-faceted. I feel like there are universes within people and in the work, but the read [of the work] wasn't getting that. I had to restrict myself, ironically, in order to get there, so I took color out completely. When you have such a limit, you want to break free, you want to push the boundaries of the marks, the compositions, the subjects. I could play in a way I couldn't before. I didn't feel responsible for blackness as a social thing, in a way. It was inevitably going to come in, but in the making I wasn't thinking, "Am I representing blackness right now?"

MCDERMOTT: I read an interview that was focused on these works but prior to the opening of the show, and you hadn't really figured out what the meaning was...

ODUTOLA: And I love that. Every show I've done, I've known from the moment it opened that, "This is this. That is that." This is the first show where I'm like, "I don't know..." [The meaning has revealed itself] a little, but I feel like I might come back in January and feel totally different—and I welcome that. In the past, I might not have been as welcoming, maybe because I was afraid. Now, I'm much more open. The inclusion of sketch, girl, that was hard; it's revealing me and how I think. The sketch, to me, is more revealing than showing a naked photo of myself. You see how I demarcate. You see how I see the world.

MCDERMOTT: Why did you chose to do it?

ODUTOLA: Originally it was an accident. Carlos Vega, another artist here [at Jack Shainman], came to my studio and saw it in sketch mode. He was like, "Leave it. It looks great. It feels finished; it feels like a completed thought." I was like, "Are you nuts?! There's no way!" He was like, "Do me a favor and do another drawing exactly the way you want to do it. Then put them side by side." Sure enough, I finished it and was like, "You're right. This is something else now," and I started including sketch in other pieces. Toward the latter half of the year, I started getting specific with the choice of subject, kind of like, "Let's get three tenants, at least." I always try to get three tenants: sketch, absence and presence, and process.

MCDERMOTT: When did you decide to leave color behind?

ODUTOLA: It's all within the past year. Last year, the moment charcoal was introduced, suddenly I saw possibilities. It changed everything. I said, "Okay, colors have to go." Pen and ink was also physically starting to get to me. I love making it, but to save myself physically and emotionally I can't make it all the time. The charcoal, it's a really matte surface and it's calming. The white charcoal wasn't, ironically enough, but black charcoal is. I had a lot of issues with the white charcoal at first, [but] I like what the white does; it renders everyone the same. It was like an erasure. There have been so many times where someone asks, "Is that

a white person?" I'm like, "Does it matter?" The marks supplant the color, and that has *never* happened in my work before. That's what I like about tools: once you change a tool, your whole perspective changes. It's like traveling. You go to another locale, everything is different. But, you're more revealed, right? You start to learn more about yourself in this other context.

MCDERMOTT: I was actually going to ask you about travel, because it's known that you love to travel, even if it's just a new neighborhood in Brooklyn. What's the last place you visited that inspired you or made you learn something new about yourself?

ODUTOLA: This year I've traveled so much, but I think France. I went to Paris for the first time this year. Also, Johannesburg, when I went for Hank's show, was revealing. Every time I've gone to Africa, I've always gone to Nigeria, to my family. Suddenly my blackness meant something different because I was American. When I go to Nigeria, it's a different kind of American because I have family there. This time, it was very distinctive and fascinating to see how people talked to me opposed to people of African descent. I was learning little things about myself, how I walked around, or as I told a friend, "how I wear this skin." When you wear it and you travel, you learn so much about yourself.

Paris was the first time that I felt really comfortable, and that's saying a lot. It's Europe. It's another ballgame. It's another history. I felt comfortable walking down the street. I didn't feel that in Japan; I didn't feel that in Florence; I didn't feel that in Jo-Berg; even in London I didn't feel that. When I would walk through Tokyo, there were moments where I was so aware. But in Paris, people treated us like we were French, like we belonged. We had so many people walk up to us and speak [in French]. To be in a space that you are "foreign" and to feel like you belong and feel safe in that space, especially if you're a traveler, that's crazy. I've never had that experience before, not even in Nigeria.

MCDERMOTT: I imagine that might parallel the new works you've made. Did you feel uncomfortable when making them, but at the end find a place of relative comfort?

ODUTOLA: Yeah. I felt so uncomfortable. Paris was around the time when I was wrapping up [the show] and felt more confident. But January to June or July, I was so uncomfortable. I had a lot of moments—I wouldn't say breakdowns, but it was close. There were times where I was like, "What are you doing? What is happening? This doesn't make any sense. This is completely out of character." There were moments where I truly wanted to start over, do a new series. But, I think that's the beauty of the show: I went into this without any confidence at all. Whereas every show in the past I had at least a little confidence. There were moments when I was making the works, especially the white charcoals, where I just didn't know. That uncertainty is so debilitating.

MCDERMOTT: So what do you do to reground yourself and gain the confidence to continue in a difficult new direction?

ODUTOLA: I would have to center myself and really think about the next one. If I focused on uncertainty, I wouldn't be able to tackle [the next one]. And honey, soundtracks! So many pieces would not have been created if it wasn't for music. That self-portrait [*The Object is the Technique + The Technique is the Object*]—I listened to Adele's "Hello" on repeat for probably 57,000 times, "Hello" for three days. A couple of the white charcoals were "Hustle Hard" [by Ace Hood]. A lot of Kelly Rowland's "Motivation," The Spinners' "I'll be Around," a lot of Al Greene and a lot of Aretha [Franklin]. And Marvin Gaye! It sounds silly, but it really helps. It distracts you from your thoughts. Music was integral to me moving on.

MCDERMOTT: Does music always play such a significant role in your process?

ODUTOLA: It has always kind of been there, but I wouldn't have been able to make the work without it this time. Travel was also a saving grace. You inject yourself with so much and you come back and you're like, "Yes! Let's go!" I don't know if I'm going to have that luxury next year, but I would like to incorporate it more into my practice. It sounds weird, but sometimes you have to leave.

MCDERMOTT: It's not weird at all. If you stay one place, it becomes boring. You have to leave your bubble.

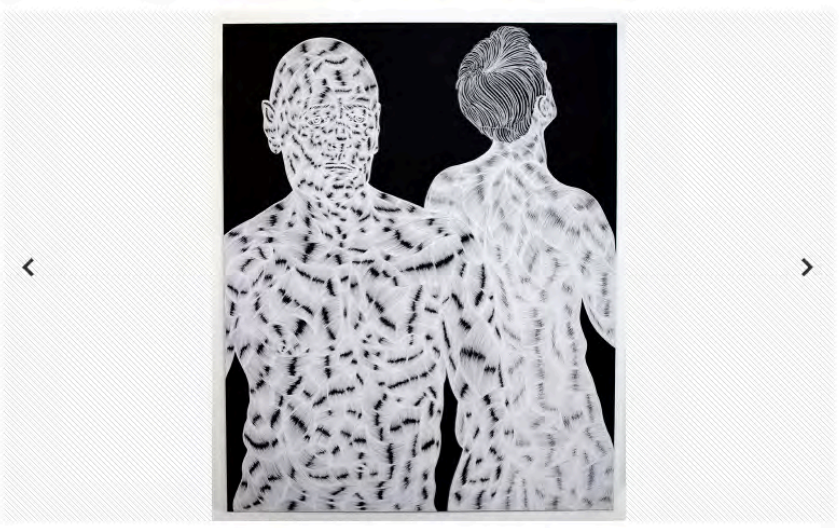
ODUTOLA: Exactly. We get so caught up in the spaces we're in, this body even, and once you move, you have this outer body experience. You feel like you're in a completely different world. Suddenly you do things you didn't think you could do, you bring that back, and it changes everything. That happened in Paris. I bought these Oxford shoes and I would *never* buy Oxfords, but I wore them all the time. I was like, "Ooh, I'm an Oxford-wearing girl!" [*laughs*] This little item of clothing changed the way I thought of myself, and thus changed my confidence in myself. It's little things like that I really love. If you can have one of those moments in a year, it changes everything. It's enough. And I had a lot of that. So I'm very grateful for 2015. I really believe, like Anthony Bourdain always says, travel really changes you.

"OF CONTEXT AND WITHOUT" WILL BE ON VIEW AT JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY IN CHELSEA THROUGH JANUARY 30, 2016.

Wallpaper*
*THE STUFF THAT REFINES YOU

Toyin Ojih Odutola explores race and identity in black and white

Art / 8 Dec 2015 / By Michael Slenske



The Nigerian-born, New York-based artist Toyin Ojih Odutola presents her forth solo show in four years at New York's Jack Shainman Gallery. *Of Context and Without* opens this week on 11 December and runs through 30 January. Pictured: *Denial or To Constantly Exclude Yet Never Be Excluded*, 2015, charcoal on board

1 OF 5

Though she's conceived four solo shows with New York's Jack Shainman Gallery in as many years — her latest, *Of Context and Without*, which opens this week — Toyin Ojih Odutola has always felt that 'there was this period where people weren't getting the work,' she says. 'They weren't getting the narrative.'

While that may be true, the Nigerian-born, New York-based artist's hypnotic, ballpoint pen ink and charcoal figurative drawings have earned her spots in the Studio Museum in Harlem's *FORE* and *Black: Color, Material, Concept* surveys and the *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* group show Hank Willis Thomas curated at Johannesburg's Goodman Gallery. She's also been the focus of solo shows at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis and the Indianapolis Museum of Contemporary Art.

‘To be black today is exhausting enough, but then to be a black image-maker, I have two choices: I can address this frustration that I’m feeling, not just as an artist but as a person, and engage in that in my work,’ says Ojih Odutola, who was upset with the ‘quick reads’ her work was getting. ‘A lot of times you look at a black woman’s work, people think it has to be about certain things, so I really wanted to play with identifying things. I really wanted to confuse people.’

As such, *Of Context and Without* begins with a group of works made with white charcoal on blackboard. ‘What I really loved is that when you use black as a demarcating tool and replace it with white it suddenly makes things really, really slippery and people get uncomfortable because they can’t delineate anything,’ she says. ‘All of a sudden this idea of context is very suspect and the content becomes unreliable.’ To wit, an image of a black runway model is rendered in white charcoal (and somewhat extra-terrestrial).

There are also grayscale figures with shimmering (seemingly pupil-less) eyes that confuse form and image even further, allowing the artist to address race and blackness on the continent with a twist on her iconic pen-and-ink drawings. ‘People expect me to draw black people and obviously that’s not helping the situation, people are still getting killed and mistreated, and that’s not what I want to address. I want to address the image of blackness that society can’t seem to address properly.’

‘What I really loved is that when you use black as a demarcating tool and replace it with white it suddenly makes things really, really slippery and people get uncomfortable because they can’t delineate anything,’ she says. Pictured: (L) *Quality Control*, 2015, marker and pencil on paper, and (R) *The Treatment 14*, 2015, pen ink, gel ink and pencil on paper

After seeing a commentator on a CNN panel discuss the problem of seeing images of Michael Brown as a concept — instead of a person — 'that hit me like a ton of bricks. We're not even looking at all these people, we're just seeing them as ideas,' says Ojih Odutola. 'Once you put blackness on someone you don't even see them, the blackness is an obfuscating element that obstructs anything that's behind.' To redirect the conversation she began a series of drawings, dubbed *The Treatment*, of famous white men — whose identities she prefers not to reveal — with black faces and simple pencil outlines for their hair and clothes that transform these iconic visages into anonymous mugs.

'The reason for my seeming evasiveness towards readily identifying things is because it feels like the act itself is a disservice,' says Ojih Odutola. 'To immediately identify means to give a swooping read, something singular and not at all multifaceted, which is what the actually mark-making of my work has always been about: the multifaceted nature of people, things, and situations.' Two dozen of these are installed at Shainman's 20th Street gallery.

In one final play on identity, the artist's includes renderings of herself. One is a white charcoal self-portrait that was titled *Subway Selfie (Or be Thankful to Exist),* which addresses the need to capture ourselves. The second is larger-than-life-sized marker piece of a nude Ojih Odutola, originally titled *What's on offer* but is now called *The Object is the Technique + The Technique is the Object* (after a Francis Bacon quote).

'I love the idea of that quote because it's about image and not about me. I want the marks to be the subject,' she says, admitting, 'I'm exposing a lot in this show. In particular, I'm exposing my process but I am doing this because I want people to see what I see in the makings of these works that often doesn't get shown in the final product. It's like I'm welcoming them into my studio for a moment with each drawing.'

HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

Stunning Ballpoint Imagery Explores Blackness And The Power Of Ink

Toyin Ojih Odutola bends color and perception.

Claire Fallon | Books and Culture Writer, The Huffington Post
12/09/2015 08:56 am ET

Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

In the practical world, there are myriad shades of black. Anyone who's struggled with slightly mismatched black jackets and pants knows this to be true.

For artist Toyin Ojih Odutola, this quandary doesn't frustrate: It inspires.

In an August 2013 interview, the Nigerian-American portraitist recalled a moment of revelation: "I'm doing black on black on black, trying to make it as layered as possible in the deepness of the blackness to bring it out. I noticed the pen became this incredible tool. The black ballpoint ink on blackboard would become copper tone and I was like, 'Wow, this isn't even black at all!'"

Layering shades and types of black media, she realized, could bend how the colors presented in surprising ways. "The blackboard was like this balancing platform for the ink to become something else," she said.

"Ballpoint pen ink is the reason I draw the way that I do," Ojih Odutola told The Huffington Post

via email. Though in the past decade of work she's incorporated other media such as charcoal and marker into her repertoire, she's continued to explore the themes of skin, blackness and perception in her portraiture.

"Growing up in America as a black individual," said Ojih Odutola, who was born in Ife, Nigeria, and later moved to the U.S., "you can walk into any room and your skin is the first read. From this reality, I treat the skin of my subjects as an arena to expose contradictions -- to expand and constrict."
Her portraits, whether of white or black subjects, layer white on white and black on black, bringing out the texture and sheen of the skin rather than the shade or color we might typically perceive. "I build and build upon the surface various striations in layers," said Ojih Odutola. "Some may describe them as anatomical, sinewy or aesthetically reminiscent of hair. This style is none of those things: it's about texture, tactility and mezzanines."

What does that say about identity, but more interestingly, what does that say about what we are accustomed to seeing when we see an image of a face or bodies?

- Toyin Ojih Odutola

By distorting the representation of a quality that silently governs so much of America's social prejudices and injustices -- skin color -- her work pushes us to look at everything else about the subject.

"I became infatuated with this idea of filtering and transforming. Taking something concrete and very direct ... and messing it up," she explained. "It wasn't about masking the source, but about stretching how an image can be transformed, what it can become, how it can be misleading and also revealing."

Ojih Odutola found she wanted to question, more and more, how her work deconstructed our default views of identity, she said. She'd ask herself as she worked, "What does that say about identity, but more interestingly, what does that say about what we are accustomed to seeing when we see an image of a face or bodies?"

Unlike classical portraits, Ojih Odutola's may not even be recognizable to the subjects. "I never looked at portraits as indicative of the sitters in any way," she explained. "I looked at portraits as a means for the artist to create his or her own space to invent." As a Nigerian-American immigrant, finding a space of her own has been particularly vital. "It helps me deal with that lost, powerless feeling of wandering around as a Nigerian-American kid not feeling like the ground I was stepping on could truly be mine ... I wanted to create my own terrain."

In the landscapes she's created of her subjects' very skin, Ojih Odutola has succeeded at creating her own terrain; but more than that, she's found a way to help us all, slowly and deliberately, re-envision how we can see each other's faces and bodies, without easy categorizations.

Toyin Ojih Odutola's "Of Context and Without" will be on display from Dec. 11, 2015 through Jan. 30, 2016 at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City. Check out more from the show below, and find more from the artist at her website.

TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA

VISUAL ARTIST

The contemporary artist Toyin Ojih Odutola uses pen and ink to etch portraits onto paper that explore how the socio-political concept of skin has led to constructions of race and power. Her show, "Of Context and Without" opening this month at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York, features these works as well as chalk drawings that represent a new way of exploring flesh. "I asked myself, 'What is one group of people who would love to be black?'" Odutola says pointing to *The Treatment* series, included in the show, of more than a dozen portraits of famous white men. One such subject, Ronald Reagan, sketched in white chalk on white paper, is hard to see and that is in part Odutola's point.

The mark-making technique of the Nigerian-born artist seems to expose the sinews of individuals as a way to challenge aesthetic and social implications of skin color. "The style itself is this strange language," she says. "I took it to this organic level and it just started to get more and more perverse," adds Odutola, who has recently exhibited her work at Goodman Gallery in Cape Town, South Africa and was a part of "Fore" at The Studio Museum in Harlem in 2012. "I was always interested in how layered I can make the mark... I am just thinking about the skin as a landscape."

—Antwaun Sargent

The New York Times Style Magazine

The Male Muse, Depicted by Women

By LEANNE SHAPTON SEPT. 9, 2015

In a portfolio curated by Leanne Shapton, eight women capture the mysterious, beloved, scrutinized subject still rare in the art world: men.

"Aldo, in parallel," part of a comic-book project by the artist made with pen ink, marker and charcoal on paper, 2015. Credit Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

Toyin Ojih Odutola

‘I’m attracted to androgyny, so I don’t see male and female qualities as distinctive or different. I like to mix them together. I like to mess them up. I came across a quote recently, from Gabriel Orozco, proclaiming: "I don’t use the word beauty anymore… The word beautiful is not an absolute, it’s a moment." So true!’

THE NEW YORKER

“Empire”: TV’s Contemporary-Art Gallery

BY!ANTWAUN!SARGENT!

Toyin Ojih Odutola’s “Hold It in Your Mouth a Little Longer” appears in an episode of “Empire.”

In 2014, weeks before the pilot was shot for “Empire,” the soapy Fox musical drama, Lee Daniels, the show’s creator, reached out to the artist Kehinde Wiley to ask for permission to include his work in the new project. “He didn’t know if it was going to be the biggest car wreck or the biggest success,” Wiley said. “And I said, ‘Sure.’ ” In the Season One finale, the men of the Lyon family sat at a dining-room table underneath Wiley’s “Prince Albert, Prince Consort of Queen Victoria.” It’s a portrait of a bare-chested and tattooed Jamaican man, one hand on his hip and posturing proudly. Lucious Lyon (Terrence Howard) who had just found out he was not sick with Lou Gehrig’s disease, stood in a gray suit at the head of the table, stately like the figure in the ornate painting behind him, to tell his sons the news. The moment was a dramatic plot twist, and the painting stole the scene. “Just like the script, the music, the set design, and the clothes, the artwork on Empire is its own character and tells a part of the Lyon-family story,” Daniels told me.

“Empire,” the most-watched prime-time show on Fox, is now in its second season. The show’s four-stage Chicago set doesn’t feel like a contemporary art gallery; it’s much less pristine, and the artwork hangs inconspicuously on the walls amid the on-set chaos. But the art world’s influence is clear. The paintings on display, mostly portraits, represent a generation of celebrated works by black artists, which have toured America’s museums during the past two decades. The works sit underneath special lighting, designed to show off their powerful imagery when the cameras are rolling. The show’s set decorator, Caroline Perzan, works with Daniels, art advisers, museum curators, and commercial galleries to pick every piece of the art on the show. In addition to Wiley, the show has featured works by Mickalene Thomas, Barkley L. Hendricks, Kerry James Marshall, and lesser-known artists such as Lobyn Hamilton. “I’ve been doing this twenty-six years, and I was

really excited because rarely do I get a director who includes the art within the shot," Perzan said. "The art has become one of the main focal points of the set design."

The originals of most of the works hang in museums and private collections, so Perzan and her team print and stretch replications onto canvas to be hung in the homes and offices of the Lyon family. "We choose pieces that match the taste of the Lyons and the world they live in—sometimes it's over the top, but most times it's classy and my definition of ghetto fabulous," Daniels told me. His view seems to reflect a yearning to open the artworks up to an entirely new language for interpretation. For example, Wiley's 2007 oil-on-canvas painting "Officer of the Hussars," which hangs in the Detroit Institute of Arts, shows a young male straddling a horse, with a sword in hand. The painting plays with the aesthetics of race, power, and masculinity, as does much of Wiley's work. Hakeem Lyon (Bryshere Y. Gray) is the youngest member of the family, and one plot line follows his attempts to be more than just a rapper; the "Hussars" replica hangs in Hakeem's living room. The characters have never spoken about their taste in art, but Perzan, standing in Lucious Lyon's office in front of golden works by Francine Turk, said that the work she sees as "hip-hop art" is meant to "infuse the art with the message"—that the Lyons, whose family business is hip-hop music, live in gilded surroundings that reflect their taste.

Artists who aim to be embraced by the blue-chip art market traditionally have what Wiley described as "a very strong aversion to popular culture." The artists want their works to be properly contextualized, and museums and galleries take the care to oblige. Now artists are sending Perzan e-mails to see if they can get their works placed on the show. "Empire" gives lesser-known artists a platform to show their work that traditional museums have yet to offer. "Being on 'Empire' is an amazing privilege," the emerging artist Ebony G. Patterson said. Her paintings "Untitled VI" and "Untitled I (Khani+di Krew)," which explore gender performance, hang in Jamal Lyon's (Jussie Smollett) penthouse apartment. "I was quite excited and tickled by the opportunity, and it certainly allowed for my work to engage with a much larger audience," Patterson said. "Through yet another layer of popular culture, my work creates even *more* visibility for those who have been deemed invisible." Indeed, what's art without an audience?

For artists, the gamble is that their works will get lost in the action of the show or, perhaps worse, be seen as merely decorative. Some artists who grant permission to the show, along with curators and gallerists who represent the artists, are doing what they can to stop that from happening. After Barkley L. Hendricks's painting "Lawdy Mama" appeared on the show, the Jack Shainman Gallery wrote, "Did you catch the lovely 'Lawdy Mama,' on Empire last week?" to its fifteen thousand Instagram followers.

And perhaps visibility is the most that an artist can reasonably ask for. During the second-season première, Cookie Lyon (Taraji P. Henson), wearing a blue jacket and gold jewelry, stands in front of Toyin Ojih Odutola's chalk-drawn self-portrait "Hold It in Your Mouth a Little Longer." The work explores the sociopolitical concept of skin color, and was exhibited in 2013 at the Louisville Art Center. It is powerfully layered in a museum context, but hanging behind Cookie in that scene it's more striking as an accompaniment to her fashion ensemble. "I remember thinking, Do I just want for it to be in the background?" Ojih Odutola told me as she moved about her small studio, overlooking Thirty-ninth Street. "This is not what I am thinking when I am making the work. Then you realize this is a part of a story that is bigger than my work. If someone was going to buy my work this would be happening anyway." Daniels and Perzan have, in a sense, turned "Empire" into a prime-time gallery space for artists to break out of the canonized art world and display their work in a place where it's sure to be seen. Isn't that what art is all about?

BOMB

Art : Interview

February 9, 2015

Toyin Odutola
by Ashley Stull

On race, representation, and inspiration.

A Verb and a Noun, 2013. Pen ink and marker on paper. Diptych, 9 x 12 inches (each).

Toyin Odutola is a master of treading softly while issuing a powerful statement. Her conceptually direct images carry with them dense political undercurrents, yet never neglect the fundamentals of form and craft. While the formal concerns of mark-making and portraiture are in the foreground of her renderings, the ideological foundation on which Odutola works separates her from other artists. The images she creates speak about blackness—African blackness, American blackness, and the blackness of the 20th century color field—compounding these issues of race and history with those of gender. Having recently relocated her studio, the artist discusses her new locale, the evolution of her practice, and the few things that will never change.

Ashley Stull You've fairly recently moved to New York after significant periods in Nigeria, Alabama and California. Is this home now? How did you make that decision and how has it affected your studio?

Toyin Odutola I never would have imagined I'd end up in New York. The concept seemed beyond me, because when you claim that address there is something very official about it, like "I'm a professional now." The crazy trajectory of homes that led me to New York all informed me in ways that precipitated the jump. I have no idea how long I will stay, but being in the city has changed me immensely. You have access to such a diversity of culture (and so much of it) that it inexorably comes into the work. For instance, I never would have imagined that I would create an eight feet long charcoal and pastel drawing, but that happened this year with *LTS IX* (2014). I've also made a ballpoint and marker pen drawing that's sixty-six inches tall, *Rather than look back, she chose to look at you* (2013). That's what New York is all about: scale. Things get more ambitious, you take more risks, you invest more time—because the city demands that of you.

AS How did you arrive at ballpoint pen? It communicates dark tones beautifully, but what works about it so differently from other materials—like charcoal? I know you also work in charcoal and marker, but pen seems born out of something interesting I hope you can unpack.

TO I came to ballpoint pen with a need to render how skin felt like to me. It's a tool that seems to translate more empathetically what I was trying to portray… skin as a striated terrain, and in a broader sense, the concept of a portrait as a platform for creating a sense of place. The sheen is the key. When I press the pen into the surface of paper, board or wood, a sort of engraving is taking place, akin to the process of printmaking. The magic of viscous fluid is that the darkest areas, the relief-like marks, also become the lightest areas by simply changing one's point of view. Light and shadow play are what make the pen and ink interactive. I have worked with graphite and charcoal and all are successful in their own way, but there is something very singular about the viewing process of pen ink that sets it apart from the others.

It's incredibly inspiring conceptually, and over time the ballpoint pen has been the driving force for a number of explorations.

LTS VIII, 2014. Charcoal and pastel on paper, approx. 50 x 52 inches.

AS Your early experimentation with marker was drawing on t-shirts, right? What's your history with textiles and how does it play into your work now?

TO I've always been interested in surfaces, textures. Having travelled to and resided in such distinctive locales in my life has often made me question and explore ideas about communication and translation. Drawing is a form of language; so is the art of making textiles. In Nigeria, as in many African countries, there's a rich history involving textiles—the wearing of them, the

making of them and so forth. But, that wasn't always what drew me in that direction. My early drawings on t-shirts were a means of making money and playing with (the then very new) drawing style that I am known for today. I honestly didn't think much would come of it, for I mostly sold them to friends. What I ended up learning from the experience of making them was how my hand moved and adjusted to the surface as I was drawing. Its a hugely significant skill whether dealing with paper, mylar, wood, stone, metal, etc. It taught me how to compose a surface on top of a surface.

AS How do you draw the line in communicating the abstract commonalities of blackness from communicating something more personal? You're known for your self-portraits, but I'm really taken by your portrayal of black men and know you often use your brothers as subjects. Does the concept of "kinship" play into what you do?

TO I have an ambivalent relationship with incorporating the "Blackness" of identity politics with personal portrayals of family members. There are times when these two points are very much exclusive and others when it goes without saying that these are inextricably linked. When I set about drawing a portrait of either one of my brothers, I approach the initial stages from a personal and practical perspective. I want to emphasize the importance of this person who means a great deal to me, but I also wish to explore an inquiry that is broader than that personal realm. It's difficult to describe. There's a lot of back and forth in the process of making that deals more so with implication rather that direct correlations. I am always trying to use the portrait as a means of questioning dogmas or things that appear socially impenetrable, standard and solid. To shake up the notion of something is always exciting to me, even if that means that I am proving myself wrong or attacking a principle or belief that I hold dear. It's a weird balance that I teeter on constantly as I work.

AS We visited in San Francisco several years ago while you were in the planning stages of an exhibition. You were grappling with the most appropriate way to show your work in that space, which was tricky as it wasn't the most conventional of exhibition spaces. I'll never forget the moment it came to fruition and you settled on shelves. *Shelves*. Is there an element in your work that raises questions about the objectification of the black body?

TO Yes! I remember that. I was working on the series "Come Closer," which was

comprised entirely of black ballpoint pen ink (and some times black acrylic ink) on black board. The purpose was to try and invert the context of the portraits I was making, which before that point was mainly black pen ink portraits (sometimes with marker) on a white ground. I was adamant about the white ground before, because I felt the matrix of marks that composed the figures was enough information. But, I was also aware that the impact of black figures against a white ground inherently referenced a contested, objectified read. With the black on black portraits of "Come Closer," I was interested in expanding the materiality and the concept of blackness in form, structure and aesthetic and how that can be applied to social constructs of identity. This convoluted idea of "Blackness" (which is suspiciously static) always puzzled me—and continues to do so. I thought of how to undermine it, to question it in a way that was concise yet thorough. I came to the idea of presenting them on shelves since they were portraits but just as importantly, ideas and objects.

Come Closer: Black Surfaces. Black Grounds. III (Adeola. Abuja, Nigeria.), 2012. Black pen ink on black board, 20 x 15 inches.

AS Can you speak about your influences? I know you have a relationship to artists like Hank Willis Thomas and Kerry James Marshall. In what ways do your influences play into your work, and do you imagine any collaborations in the future?

TO Marshall had a huge influence on me when I was first introduced to him. Every time I see his works, I am always inspired to try different things, different forms, and ways of playing with the surface. Another artist's work I've been really influenced by lately is Lynette Yiadom-Boakye; the way she uses muted palettes and strong accent colors always astounds me. I'm constantly looking for inspiration, to try out different techniques. Influences are great motivators, for they allow you to contemplate processes that may seem far removed from your methodology, but challenge your assumptions about what your work can do, what your work can mean. In terms of collaboration, I am more open to that now than I was a few years ago. I've always wanted to create a comic book, and I often look to artists like Robert Pruitt who work masterfully with that medium. I would love to collaborate with him, if possible. But, if I had an all-time dream collaboration it would be with the manga artist, Takehiko Inoue. Chancing upon his work was one of the defining moments for me as a teenager. Reading the "Vagabond" series made me want to be an artist.

Ashley Stull Meyers has curated exhibitions and programming for the Wattis Institute (San Francisco), Eli Ridgway Gallery (San Francisco), The Luggage Store (San Francisco) and the Oakland Museum of California. She has been in academic residency at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art (Omaha, NE) and the Banff Centre (Banff, Alberta). Most recently, Stull Meyers has been an adjunct professor at Wichita State University (Wichita, KS).

Sunday, January 18, 2015
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Odutola's emphasis is on our common humanity

"This show is singular work," said Toyin Odutola, the 30-year-old Nigerian-American artist whose portraits comprise one of the new exhibitions just opened at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis. "Up to this point, I've been known for doing a lot of ballpoint-pen drawings. Last year, I decided to transition with my materials and my tools, and I started using charcoal and pastels."

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

"What She Saw," 2014, by Toyin Odutola. The artist's "Untold Stories" is a series of mixed-media drawings created specifically for the exhibit at the Contemporary Art Museum.

Last spring, CAM's executive director, Lisa Melandri, met Odutola at another exhibition, "and we connected. She asked me if I'd be interested to do a show, and I told her, 'If I did, it would be very different. I'd want it to be something that is self-contained, that can exist on its own, separate from my other body of work.' It really is a customized show for this space."

Odutola, who came to this country at the age of 5 with her family, lives and works in New York. She just learned that she'll soon be included in another St. Louis show, at the Kemper Art Museum. Her past artwork has been autobiographical, drawing on her own experiences or those of her family, and playing with the assumptions of others about who she is and where she's from. These pieces, however, are fictional.

"I wanted to step away from (autobiography), for people to come in and see the work without knowing anything about me. I felt that would be easier, for both parties, if they didn't know who I was, what my story was, where I came from. Then they would come into the work with a blank slate, and that so rarely happens nowadays in this culture.

"People want some sort of arc. They want to know your stories. Well, here you go: I'll give you a bunch of stories. You can make your connections however which way you want."

She decided to make a series based on stories she'd heard, conversations between strangers on a train, things that were completely invented, "and take something from that — a word, a phrase — and make a drawing out of it."

As the work emerged, "there were a lot of things going on in the world outside my studio," in Nigeria and Ferguson, Staten Island and elsewhere. "That informed a lot of the pieces in the show."

She quoted a fellow artist: "'I don't want you to come into the show thinking about me; I want you to leave the show thinking about us.' The hope is that people can come in and create their own narratives. If they can come out of it with a collective view that humanity is so affected by one another, that it's a culmination of stories, that would be so much better. The least you can hope is that people enjoy the work."

– Sarah Bryan Miller

THE KANSAS CITY STAR.
kansascity.com

What's next in visual arts: Kemper's 'Piece by Piece' leads the way

BY ALICE THORSON - THE KANSAS CITY STAR

01/02/2015 6:00 AM | Updated: 01/04/2015 3:58 PM

Nigerian-born, New York-based Toyin Odutola's "LTS XI" (2014) is part of the "Piece by Piece" exhibit at the Kemper Museum. BILL AND CHRISTY GAUTREAUX COLLECTION

What may be the most exciting show of 2015 is coming up fast.

"Piece by Piece: Building a Collection," opening Jan. 30 at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, offers a look at the international art holdings of Kansas City collectors Bill and Christy Gautreaux. The couple made Art News magazine's list of top 200 collectors in 2014.

The Gautreauxes have been buying work since 1996 and have stepped up the pace of acquisitions in recent years.

“Our collecting gained a lot of momentum when we began to meet many knowledgeable collectors and started attending art fairs like Miami Basel, where we were exposed to great galleries from around the world,” Bill Gautreaux said in a statement put out by the Kemper. “It has become a journey of learning from great creators (artists) and expanding our own awareness.”

The exhibit, organized by Kemper curator Erin Dziedzic, will feature more than 30 works by 26 artists, a fraction of a collection that Dziedzic says contains hundreds of pieces.

Many visitors will recognize Sanford Biggers, Nick Cave, Jeffrey Gibson and Kara Walker from previous exhibits in Kansas City. The thrill of this show is its inclusion of works by rising international stars who have not been shown here before, including Mariana Palma, who is based in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and Nigerian-born Toyin Odutola.

Dziedzic was given a free hand in choosing the works to include, a process that has taken almost two years. Linking her selections is a focus on “process, pattern and material,” while the works range over a variety of topics and themes.

“This exhibition emphasizes an engagement with themes of abstraction, the body and gesture, race and politics, landscape and geography,” she said.

One of the most satisfying aspects of curating the exhibit was collaborating with the Gautreauxes, Dziedzic said.

“There’s a lot of energy exchanged between the collectors, the artists and works in this show,” she added, “and it’s so important and exhilarating to see and present such a rich collection here in Kansas City.”

LANCASTER ONLINE

OCTOBER 15, 2014

Human form explored in Mosaic Project at Pennsylvania College of Art & Design

Posted: Sunday, October 12, 2014 6:30 pm | Updated: 9:29 am, Wed Oct 15, 2014.
BY LAURA KNOWLES | Correspondent

VINNY TENNIS - Staff

Artist Toyin Odutola speaks to middle school students at the Pennsylvania Colege of Art & Design in Lancaster on Saturday, Oct. 4, 2014.

In the Mosaic Project at Pennsylvania College of Art & Design, two artists share their multicultural experiences through drawing and photography.

Toyin Odutola's drawings are a study in abstract portraiture, taking very real images of friends, family and herself into an entirely different realm. And she is very clear that these are drawings, not paintings.

"That's one of my pet peeves," says the 29-year-old artist who now lives in New York City. "I use pen and ink, markers and charcoal. They are drawings."

Still, to most, what could have been simple drawings are most certainly art. With only the simple tools of pen, markers and charcoal, Odutola manages to create vividly colored portraits of people she knows — including herself.

Born in Nigeria, Odutola has lived in the U.S. since she was 5 years old. She studied at Yale University's Norfolk Summer School of Music & Art, then earned her bachelor's degree in studio art at University of Huntsville. Next, she was off to California, where she received her master of fine arts at California College of the Arts in San Francisco. That has given her a broad range of multicultural experiences here in the U.S. — from the East Coast to the deep South to the West Coast.

What she has chosen to focus on is the human form, most importantly, the human face, with deep, dark eyes, finely-chiseled bone structure and a powerful glimpse into the human soul. They are dark faces, like hers. And they are faces accented by an expected rendering of color that comes from the strokes of multihued colors with markers. In "A.O. (Looking Onward)," a man with very dark skin and a goatee looks to the side with his eyes turned upward — and onward. He wears glittering diamond earrings, but what really catches the eye are the swirls and strokes of cool shades of blue and silver.

Odutola's palette turns warm, in "All These Garlands Prove Nothing X." The woman in the portrait — herself? — peers through hertwisted strands of hair, with only her pensive eyes and lush mouth showing through. Her dark skin is richly glinted with shades of gold, brown, bronze and tan.

While the subjects of Odutola's portraits seem very serious — no one is smiling — the titles of her work give a hint of her playfulness in adding magic to her pen-and-ink drawings.

"All These Garlands Prove Nothing" is a series of self-portraits that explore her own identity through hairstyles. In some she wears long, reddish twisted strands, while in others her hair is short, dark and closely cropped. Then she is there as a bleached blonde with very short hair.

"Are they all me? Yes," she says, adding that these are her hairstyles of the past, as she sought out her identity, as so many women do, through her hair. "And I have to laugh at the blonde hair."

In "Are You Sure That's Him? (Yes, I'm Certain)," a triptych study of a man shows three images of the subject looking partly to the side, looking to the side and looking away. The pen-and-ink abstract images are at once intriguing and just a bit fun as the viewer wonders, "Are you sure that's him?"

Odutola is making her mark in the art world. She was featured in Forbes magazine in its 2012 list of 30 notable individuals under 30 in the category Art & Style. As a contemporary artist who focuses on identity and the sociopolitical concept of skin color, Odutola's work has already made its way into major collections at the Birmingham Museum of Art in Alabama and The National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. She is represented by the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City.

"You can look at the human face as it is, or you can look at it in its abstract form," says Odutola, who spent a day at PCA&D discussing her work with art students as part of the Mosaic Project: Toyin Odutola and Lydia Panas in PCA&D's Main Gallery.

Odutola's opening reception was held Oct. 3, while photographer Lydia Panas will be featured at a gallery reception on First Friday, Nov. 7.

Like Odutola, Panas explores the human form. But she does it in stark realism, through her portraits of very real people. In one, three woman stare straight ahead, one with her hand across her blue shirt. In another, an older man in a baseball cap and tan jacket looks at a young man
from behind with a hint of judgment in his gaze. Then there are two woman in a cornfield, one standing and the other crouched on the ground. No one smiles, and the subjects look as if they have been caught off-guard. They are portraits that evoke an air of mystery, like storytelling in
one single image.

Panas is an award-winning photographer whose work has been exhibited at The National Portrait Gallery in London, The Scottish National Portrait Gallery and the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. Her work has been published in the New York Times Magazine, Photo District News and Popular Photography. She received a Whitney Museum Independent Study Fellowship and has taught photography at The Museum of Modern Art.

Her first monograph, "The Mark of Abel, " is on display at PCA&D during the Mosaic Project. It received a Best Books nomination from Photo Eye Magazine and was cited as Best Coffee Table Book of 2012 by the Daily Beast.

Mosaic Project: Toyin Odutola and Lydia Panas is on display in PCA&D's Main Gallery, 204 N. Prince St., through Nov. 15. Admission is free. For more information, visit pcad.edu/news, facebook.com/pcad.edu or call 396-7833.

Posted in Entertainment, Features on Sunday, October 12, 2014 6:30 pm. Updated: 9:29 am.

Portraits of the Artist

Toyin Odutola's rich figures

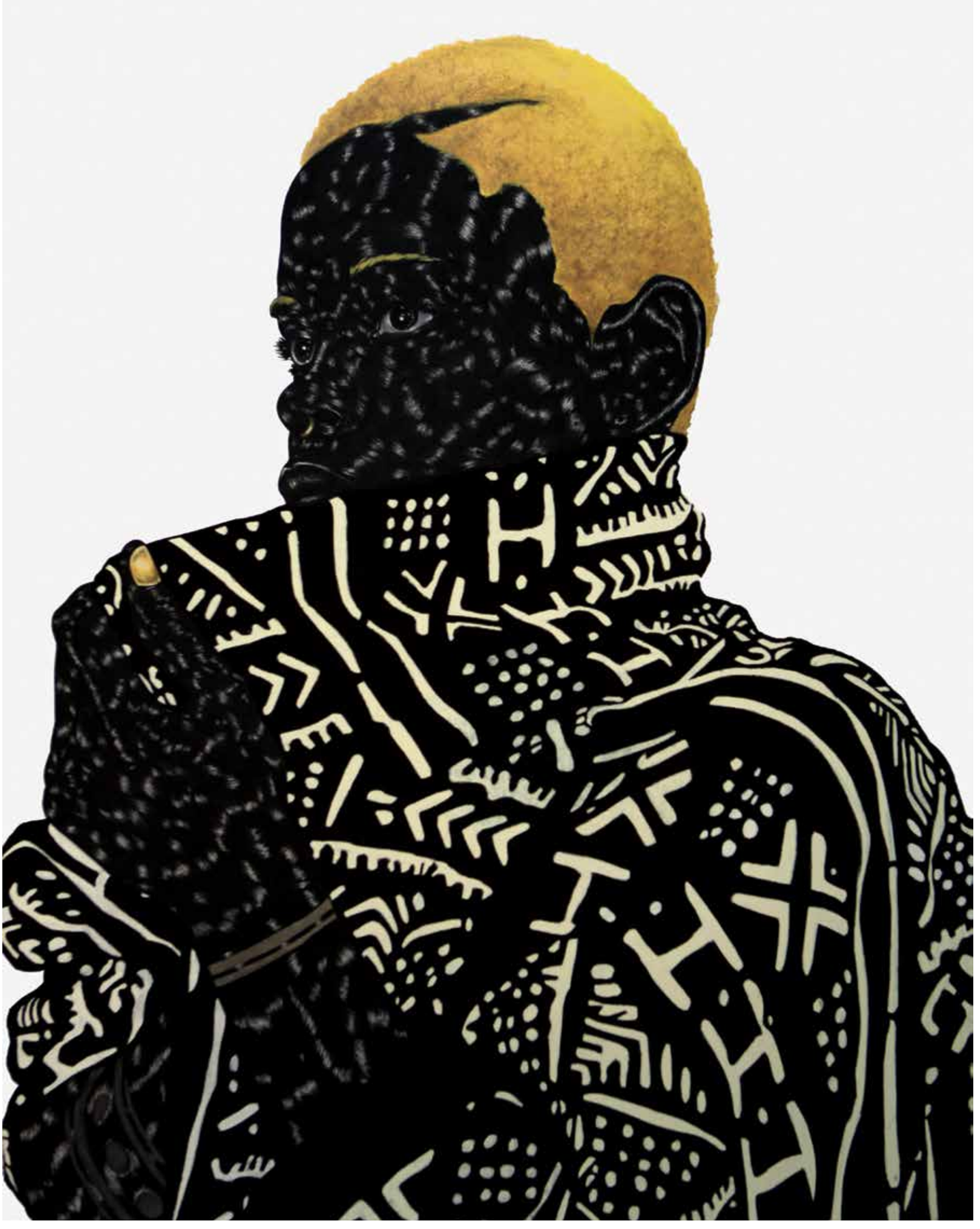
BY MICHAEL SLENSKE

TOYIN ODUTOLA AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK. OPPOSITE: BRANNAN MCGILL

"MY DAD MADE AN EXCLAMATION, and that became my name," says Toyin Odutola, walking around her studio in Manhattan's Garment District on a near-freezing night last fall. She's recalling the panic that set in at a Nigerian hospital in the summer of 1985 when a delivery room doctor explained to her father that they needed to perform an emergency C-section on his wife or else his firstborn would surely suffocate. "My mom was freaking out and, finally, after the doctor was laboring for hours, he goes to my father and says, 'You have a girl!' And my dad shouts, '*Oluwa Toyin!*' It means 'God is worthy of praise,' but in colloquial Yoruba it means 'Oh my God.' So that's the story of my name. It's kind of romantic."

What sorts of stories will we leave behind, 2012. Pen ink and marker on board, 14½ x 23 in.

OPPOSITE: Toyin Odutola, 2011.



Romantic, yes, and certainly appropriate for an artist whose drawings—and obsessive documentation thereof on her fiercely followed Instagram feed (@obia_thethird)—have attracted thousands of fans who continually drop *OMG!!!* remarks on her pages because they can't believe Odutola's hypnotically detailed portraits of friends and family—often small-scale works on paper built from layers and layers of sinuous black, and sometimes golden, lines (frequently punctuated by illuminated rivulets of color)—are simply the product of Sharpies and Pentels.

"Did you know a ballpoint pen could do that? Did you know that someone could have the patience, discipline, and skill to do that?" asks artist Hank Willis Thomas, who met Odutola after a 2010 lecture he gave at the California College of the Arts, where she was then in her first year as a graduate student. "She asked me to do a studio visit. I'd done 20 in two days, so I was like, 'Heck no!' But I don't like saying no, so I stopped by her studio, wrote my info on the wall, and did my best to make it up to her."

Thomas did a lot more than that. After Odutola sent him an e-mail with images of her work, he forwarded it to a group of collectors (including Karen Jenkins-Johnson and Don and Mera Rubell) as well as his New York gallerist, Jack Shainman, who immediately signed her to his roster. "Her materials never gave us pause; in fact, they were particularly intriguing," says Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels, associate director at the gallery. "We've already placed her in several museum collections with a wait list for new works, and the interest has only grown." Since 2011 Odutola has had two solo exhibitions at Shainman's Chelsea galleries and will open a third on May 1 at his 24th Street location.

"Her figures are simultaneously hyperrealistic and silhouetted into abstraction," says Naima Keith, associate curator at the Studio Museum in Harlem, who included Odutola's work in the acclaimed "Fore" exhibition in 2012. "We were also intrigued by her decision to share so much of her process online. She was letting people in, debunking myths surrounding being an artist and opening herself up to feedback."

As an early adopter of Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram, Odutola has embraced social media in a way that few artists have. At the same time, she's also grown weary of the brazenness some of her followers exhibit on her feeds. "The social media bit is really about documenting process. I like the dialogue if it's constructive, but I'm now at a crossroads. I've accumulated a lot of followers, and it's great, but I'm also at that teetering point where people are feeling themselves a little too much, commenting a little too much," says Odutola, noting some followers who've attempted to weigh in a bit too emphatically on color choices and themes in her works. "I just feel like that's not what I'm doing this for, and if they don't stop I'll just get off it."

Of course, these are problems that would never have occurred to Odutola as a child in Nigeria. Born in the southwestern university town of Ife, to parents from adversarial tribes—her mother, Nelene, is Igbo; her father, Ade, is Yoruba—her family was forced by the threat of violence and inflation to leave when she was just five years old. Back then, Ade was just starting out in chemistry; somehow, he scraped enough money together (on a teaching assistant's modest salary) to move his young family to the States, settling in Berkeley to work and study at the University of California. When Odutola was 10, a tenure-track position took the family to Huntsville, Alabama. "It was a total culture shock," says the artist. "That's where my art education really started, because I went from being just this Nigerian kid in Berkeley to being a black kid in Alabama. You start to realize, 'Oh, I'm flattened. I'm not a whole person anymore.' My identity is not based on performance, it's based on something that's predetermined by someone else, and I don't even understand what that is because I'm an African who came to America. Suddenly I'm African-American and black when I didn't even know what the hell that meant."

Over the ensuing years, Odutola would ask herself many questions—*Why is this person called white? Why is this person black?*—while doodling in sketchbooks. Her understanding of art grew at a hobbyist's pace until she came across Lucian Freud's *Reflection (Self-Portrait),* 1985, as an undergraduate at the University of Alabama. "That man changed my life," she says. "The way he's looking out just past the viewer's perspective, the landscape of the face just hit me like a stack of bricks. You didn't see that and see oil paint. I saw that and said, 'I'm going to use whatever medium I'm using and take it beyond. I want you to question what I'm doing.' I still look at that piece and am like, What the fuck are you made of, what the fuck did you do? How did he take this boring face and make it the most interesting thing you've ever seen? You start to think about what his face has gone through, what he's gone through. That minute, I was like, 'Dude, I'm an artist.'"

That revelation—coupled with encouragement from her Alabama professors—instilled Odutola with the confidence to follow the idiosyncratic style she was creating in her

Rather Than Look Back, 2011–13. Pen ink and marker on paper, 65 x 36 in.

OPPOSITE:
Hold It in Your Mouth a Little Longer, 2013. Charcoal, pastel, and graphite on paper, 40 x 30 in.

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: TOYIN ODUTOLA AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY

self-taught sideline of drawing rather than suggestions from others to adopt the more classically informed medium of painting. She began with very contained black-and-white portraits of her friends, parents, and brothers, Adeola ("Addy") and Dotun—her two most prominently featured subjects—but is now venturing into gold-leaf lithography (through a collaboration with New Mexico's Tamarind Institute), video, and sculpture. "I don't want to make it so much about my family as about the idea of narrating seduction in different forms," she says. Up until Odutola's decision last year to add to her compositions natural backgrounds and boldly patterned clothes—which she has integrated to stunning effect in a new series of charcoal pieces, such as *Hold It in Your Mouth a Little Longer*, 2013, for her upcoming solo show—she always drew her subjects naked. More recently, she has augmented their sensuous forms with fluorescent blues, greens, oranges, pinks, and yellows. And she always placed them against the stark backdrop of unmarked white paper, never in situ.

"When I was in school, I conceptually didn't want black people to have context, to take it out of all that history. I wanted nothing to indicate where they are or what time it is, to place them anywhere," she says. "I had to completely remove them from context because I felt like there's enough information on their skin anyway." However, isolating African or African-American figures against white backdrops brought out immediate comparisons to Kara Walker. Odutola is also frequently compared with Mickalene Thomas and Wangechi Mutu, whose extravagantly detailed depictions of strong black women have driven the art world's dialogue on identity politics, colonialism, and race over the past few years. While she respects and admires the works of all three of these female powerhouses, Odutola thinks such "quick" comparisons miss the point of her work.

"It was a total culture shock. I went from being this Nigerian kid in Berkeley to being a black kid in Alabama. I realized, 'Oh, I'm flattened. I'm not a whole person anymore.'"

"It's very difficult as a black artist to say, 'No, it's not about race.' But it isn't," she explains. "I don't think about race before I start drawing. I think about how to make that mark to fit whatever purpose I need it to fulfill." She'd rather her work be read as a labyrinthine narrative, arguing, "I definitely read these portraits like you'd read a letter—not a poem, not a book—like a letter to this imaginative figure I'm creating." Those letters all begin with iPhone or point-and-shoot source images, like one of her wearing an electric-blue sweater, *When the Witnesses Are Gone*, 2013, or another of her brother Addy looking calm amid the chaos at the Abuja airport on Christmas Eve a few years back, *Regarding... (Adeola in Abuja, 2011)*. One deviation from that process is a piece featuring Redd Foxx as a silver-haired Platonic philosopher (*The Philosopher*, 2013–14).

While these new charcoal pieces feature golden-haired subjects as a nod to fetishized medieval and Renaissance depictions of Africans, she says that the drawings are influenced by her love of Manga comics like *Sailor Moon*, *Gantz*, and *Old Boy*. In fact, one of her favorite studio diversions is a trip to Midtown Comics, where she's a regular. In a perfect world, she would someday create her own animated series. For now, however, she's content with her recent evolution to larger-scale works and putting down the pens for sticks of pastel and charcoal.

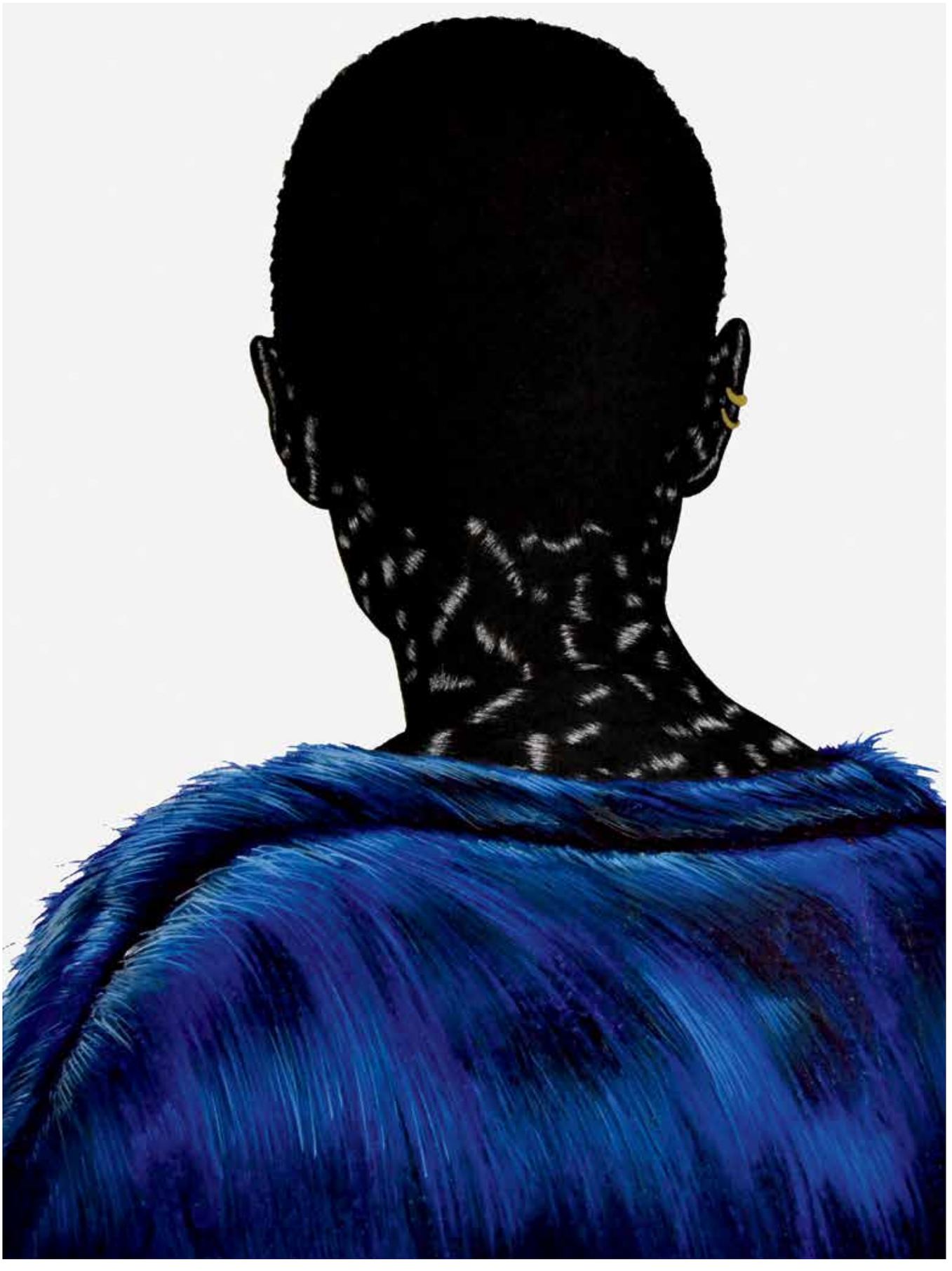
"You can see the new distinctions of how I'm working now—the lines are thicker. The color choices. It's subtle. I've come a long way, baby," she says, noting that her return to charcoal and pastel has been challenging. "I'm rediscovering the material as I'm working, and each piece is new because I've never drawn that way with this tool. It's all a learning experience; it's messy. I'm drawing right on this janky wall. But I like that for some reason. It's masochistic in a way."

She says she approaches each piece with the clinical eye of Chuck Close and the raw painterly energy of Freud to produce "perverse" abnormalities and "awkward moments" on the page. "When I get into it, I go real Lucian; I get dirty," she says. "I used to be afraid of that in grad school. Now I'm ready to go HAM about it."

Aside from "Honey, let me tell you something…," "going HAM" (hard as a motherfucker) is perhaps Odutola's favorite phrase. Though it's a reference to Jay-Z and Kanye West's song "H-A-M", it's a concept that draws her to the combative, adversarial side of life: one in which she gets new tattoos with every transitional life moment ("I'm probably going to be completely covered when I'm 80"), obsessively watches BBC documentaries on the royal family despite their perversions ("They're crazy people"), or develops a forthcoming series on transsexuals based on the post-op bodies of friends. "That's the most intense thing—you really take control and remake your form," she says. "But that's what art is."

You see, in Odutola's world, there is no reward without a little risk…no pleasure without a little pain. MP

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: TOYIN ODUTOLA AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY



When the Witnesses Are Gone, 2013. Charcoal, pastel, marker, and graphite on paper, 40 x 30 in.

OPPOSITE:
The Philosopher, 2013–14. Pen ink and marker on board, 30 x 20 in.

JANUARY 2014

ARTnews

Ballpoint Magic

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Ballpoint Is on a Roll

Accessible and affordable, the ballpoint pen has become the medium of choice for artists to make obsessive abstractions, extreme drawings, and playful riffs on venerated ink traditions

BY TRENT MORSE

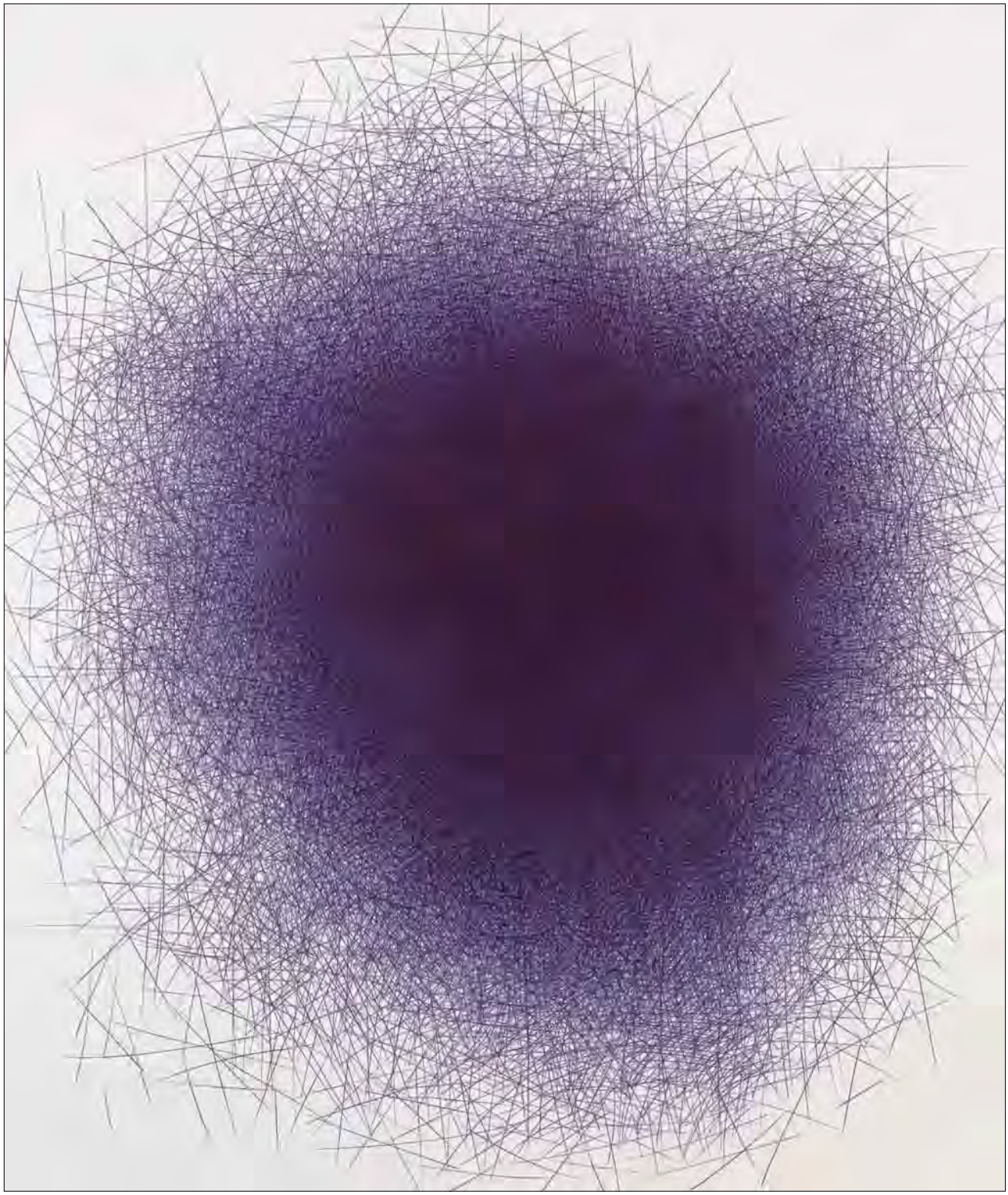
Last August, Toyin Odutola brought a stack of ballpoint pens and markers into the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, sat down, and drew a picture. A large screen projected her progress as she filled the paper with thousands of marks. Museumgoers circled around her and asked her questions. "One lady was like, 'Is that pen? I don't believe it!'" Odutola recalls. "I was drawing, and she took the pen out of my hand and looked at it."

To shut out these kinds of distractions and focus on the task at hand, Odutola put on headphones and listened to dance music. Four hours after she started drawing, she was done, having produced a densely limned portrait of an Asian woman with golden hair and eyebrows, her skin composed of Odutola's signature sinewy ballpoint lines, with blue, green, and flesh tones rising from underneath. "It was shocking that I finished, because I'd never really *performed* drawing," says Odutola, who was born in Nigeria and grew up in the Bay Area and Alabama. "It's normally a very solitary act within my studio."

Trent Morse is senior editor of ARTnews.

Toyin Odutola's self-portrait *Text Turned Flesh*, 2013, ballpoint pen and marker on paper.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK



Il Lee's *BL-1201*, 2012, ballpoint pen on paper.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ART PROJECTS INTERNATIONAL, NEW YORK

Fortunately for Odutola, she has been in plenty of other exhibitions over the last year that haven't required her to perform for a crowd. She had a solo show at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York, where she's now based, and her ballpoint drawings have made appearances at the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Menil Collection in Houston, and the Chinese Cultural Center of San Francisco and are now at the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts in Brooklyn (through January 19).

She was also included in "Ballpoint Pen Drawing Since 1950" at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut, which placed the 28-year-old Odutola at the tail end of a succession of creators who have embraced the lowly ballpoint pen as a serious tool for making art. The others in the show were Alberto Giacometti, Alighiero Boetti, Il Lee, Jan Fabre, Martin Kippenberger, Bill Adams, Joanne Greenbaum, Russell Crotty, Rita Ackermann, and Dawn Clements. But curator Richard Klein traces the genesis of ballpoint art back to Argentina in the 1940s.

The ballpoint pen was first patented in 1888 as a device for jotting on leather. It wasn't developed as a writing tool until 50 years later, when the Hungarian journalist László Bíró had the idea of putting fast-drying newspaper ink into a pen with a tiny ball at the tip that would allow the ink to flow evenly. Then came World War II, and Bíró escaped to Argentina in 1941, taking his invention with him. Manufacture of the pens began in Buenos Aires soon afterward.

Lucio Fontana also moved to Argentina in the early '40s. He was born in that country in 1899 but spent a large part of his life in Italy, where he had come under the influence of the Futurists and shared their obsession with cutting-edge technology. "Fontana was the first artist to use ballpoint pen, in 1946," Klein says. "The pen was heavily promoted in Argentina, and I'm sure it's no coincidence that he was using ballpoint pen in the same place where Bíró had invented it." Those early ballpoint sketches reflect Fontana's interest in merging art, science, and technology through his Spatialist movement. In one drawing, Fontana doodled a spiraling funnel filled with swirling orbs, as if he were testing the continuous-flow quality of the new pen.

Soon, the ballpoint spread to Europe and the United States, thanks in large part to the clear-plastic Bic Cristal. It was cheap, portable, and reliable, and it didn't smudge or blot as much as fountain pens did. It also produced uniform lines, making it a quintessentially modernist tool. Throughout the '50s and '60s, Giacometti, Jean Dubuffet, Agnes Martin, Andy Warhol, Nam June Paik, Yayoi Kusama, John Cage, Sigmar Polke, Louise Bourgeois, and many other artists sketched with ballpoint pen. Cy Twombly incorporated it into his doodle-and-text works, and "the Fluxus artists used all sorts of office materials, including ballpoint pens, tape, stamps, and typewriters," says Scott Gerson, associate conservator at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

A detail of Liu Wei's accordion album *Untitled No. 6 "Flower,"* 2003, pencil, acrylic, ink, ballpoint pen, and watercolor on paper.

PRIVATE COLLECTION, NEW YORK

Perhaps the first person to use the ballpoint as the primary medium in a major work of art was Alighiero Boetti. Starting in the early '70s, the Italian artist employed dozens of helpers to fill sheets of paper with solid fields of black, blue, or red ink. His 1973 piece in the Aldrich show consisted of eleven such panels, all with "ONONIMO"—a wordplay on the Italian terms for anonymous, homonymous, and eponymous—etched from white negative space at the top. "The blue in this work is really extraordinary," says Klein. "The pieces are really well preserved. Other Boettis were not—they are faded."

Which brings up the biggest problem with ballpoint ink: preservation. "Early ballpoint-pen ink, especially the blue, would fade if you exposed it to the light. It's not permanent," Klein says. "That's because most of the inks are dye-based colorants, which are susceptible to color-shift or fading," says Gerson. Today, many professional artists buy pens containing archival inks, but "really, the only reliable thing is to keep it out of the light," Gerson adds.

In the decades since Boetti's collaborations, the ballpoint has become increasingly absorbed into the art world, and like all artists today, ballpointists aren't hindered by style or scale. Jan Fabre spent a decade working with the pens, which culminated in his covering an entire Belgian castle in blue ballpoint marks in 1990. Russell Crotty makes large grids of small scenes of the shifting California landscape, the ocean, and astronomical phenomena, and he also draws these things onto globes. In Boston, Joo Lee Kang portrays animals and plants in the style of Victorian naturalists and sometimes converts her drawings into wallpaper or crumpled-paper sculptures. Renato Orara, who recently showed at Josée Bienvenu Gallery in New York, smoothly renders any object that catches his eye: a wire brush, a wristwatch, a broken umbrella, a leather jacket. "I don't try to make things look real," he says. "An art writer once pointed out that I use realism, but only as a strategy for smuggling something else."

In Asia, some artists use ballpoint to riff on venerated ink traditions. One such piece appears in the show "Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China," at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (through April 6). That work is Liu Wei's 24-leaf accordion album *Untitled No. 6 "Flower"* (2003), which contains painted and drawn Chinese landscapes and giant peonies next to "naked figures with exaggerated genitalia," says Maxwell K. Hearn, the Met's chief curator of Asian art. These mixed-media scenes are embellished with "scratchy lines that are ballpoint pen," Hearn adds. "They're scribbles. You could miss them."

You couldn't miss the scribbles in the work of Il Lee, who, since 1981, has been filling canvas and paper with abstract, woolly lines that progress from wispy to murky. The Korean-born, New York–based Lee, who's represented by Art Projects International in New York, is a ballpoint purist, meaning he goes through a lot of ink. "I usually use anywhere from 100 to 120 or more ballpoint pens on large canvas works," he says. For his 2007 solo show at the Queens Museum of Art, he emptied 600 blue ballpoint pens to make a 50-foot-long drawing that snaked along the wall.

Joanne Greenbaum, *Artist Book*, 2007, ballpoint pen on paper.

Joo Lee Kang, *Family Portrait #6*, 2013, ballpoint pen on paper.

TOP: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY, CHICAGO; BOTTOM: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALLERY NAGA, BOSTON

Like Lee, Italian artist Angiola Gatti, who had her U.S. debut at New York's Ryan Lee gallery last fall, scrawls with ballpoint to form abstract masses and voids. Gatti says she works on a "corporeal, one-to-one" scale, drawing on vertical canvases that are roughly the size of her body. She likes how intimately close to the artwork ballpoint brings her, and sometimes she presses the pen so hard that the "canvas is nearly carved."

Marlene McCarty, who shows at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. in New York, also draws on large surfaces, but her work is highly figurative and psychologically charged, populated by sexualized adolescent girls and great apes. To her, the blue ballpoint pen reflects what high-school girls use for homework and for "doodling on their notebooks," and it's the preferred tool for "primate fieldwork." However, McCarty is not as romantic as Gatti when it comes to the physicality of ballpoint. "For the scale of my drawings, it's a horrible, tedious, painful medium," she says. "Ballpoint is unforgiving. It can't be corrected. I draw on the wall. Unless the pen is held at just the right angle, it stops working. The pressure required to keep the ink flowing causes shoulder injuries."

"Ballpoint-pen drawing can be extremely labor-intensive and time-consuming because the mark it makes is linear," says Dawn Clements, who shows at Pierogi in Brooklyn. "I make tonal drawings, so my drawings often take a very long time." Clements describes her patched-together panoramas of the inside of her home and movie sets as life-size "sketchbooks." As with McCarty, the medium mirrors the content in Clements's works, which can run more than 40 feet long. Ballpoint is, she says, "a common domestic implement used to express my experience of domestic life and melodramatic movies that depicted domestic familial situations."

The domesticity of the pen helps explain its mass appeal as an art material. "All of us touch a ballpoint pen practically every day," Klein says. There are now photorealist draftsmen from outside the art world whose pictures have gone viral on the Internet, such as Samuel Silva, a Portuguese lawyer living in London. Though, inexplicably, the curator adds, the Aldrich exhibition might be the first museum roundup of ballpoint art, and that show featured only eleven artists in a 1,400-square-foot gallery.

As for which brand of pen is best, it depends on who you ask. "Joanne Greenbaum uses Schmidts that are made in Germany," Klein says. Crotty likes the Swedish Ballograf. Odutola and Clements both use Paper Mates. Lee says he formerly favored Paper Mate but noticed changes in the "chemistry of the ink." Lately, he's been on a Bic kick.

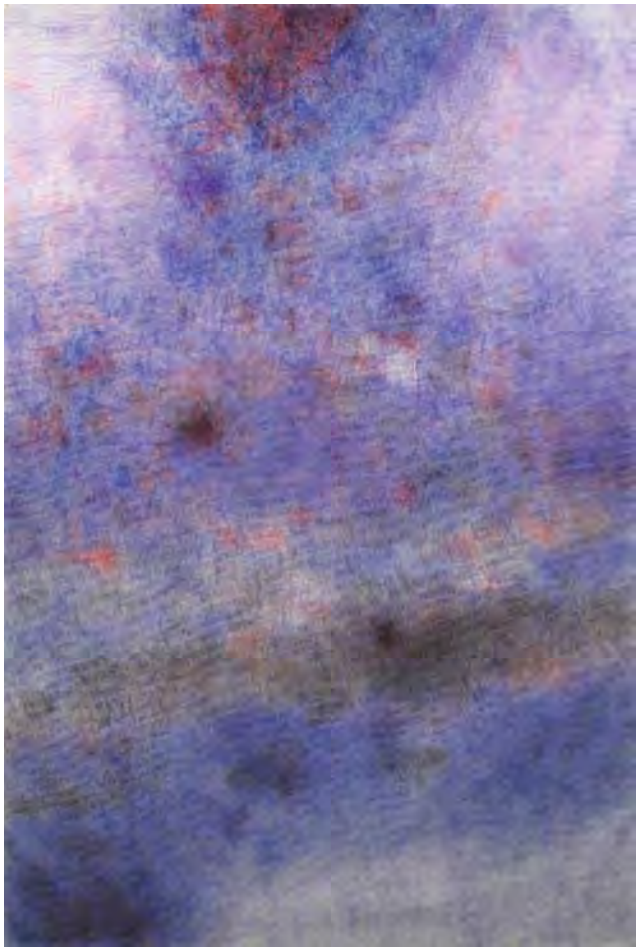
Gatti goes for Bic, Staedtler, and Pilot, while Orara imports his Pilots from Japan. McCarty prefers the blue Montblanc that is designed for "signing important documents." However, she adds, "they are too heavy to hold upright against the wall for hours at a time, so I take a Montblanc ballpoint refill, force it into a cheap lightweight plastic Bic pen handle, tape the whole thing together, and use that."

Peter Saul, who has been drawing and painting his funky, freaky, cartoony characters for over half a century and now shows his work at Mary Boone Gallery in New York, says, "I only use black, and I never pay attention to the brand." And Yoshitomo Nara claims that when it comes to drawing his Kute Kulture figures, "I'm fine with the kind of pen you find on your hotel desk." ■

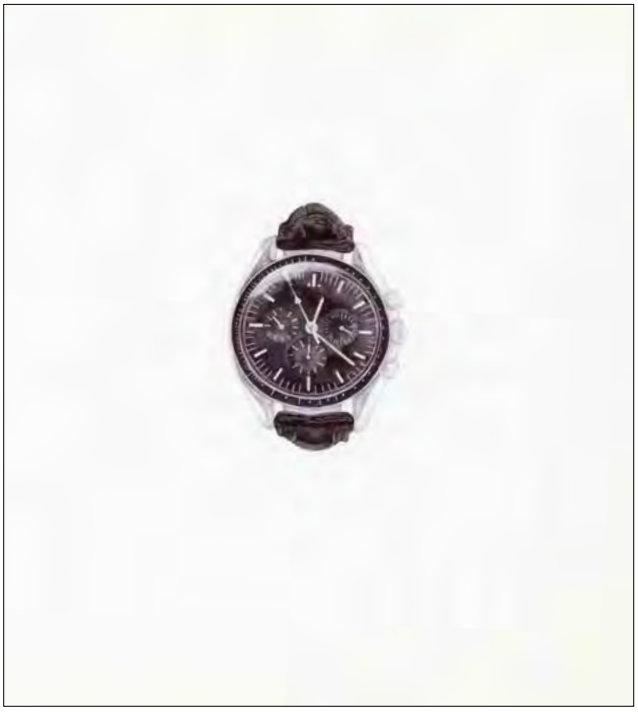
A detail of Dawn Clements's 20-foot-long ballpoint drawing *Mrs. Jessica Drummond's (My Reputation, 1946)*, 2010.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PIEROGI GALLERY, BROOKLYN

Russell Crotty, *Watch the Dolphins Play*, 2007, ballpoint pen and watercolor on paper on a fiberglass sphere.



Angiola Gatti, *Untitled (Senza titolo)*, 2012, ballpoint pen on canvas.



Renato Orara, *Untitled 2011-05*, 2011, ballpoint pen on paper.

Marlene McCarty, *GROUP 3 (Tanjung Putting, Borneo. 1971)*, 2007, ballpoint pen and graphite on paper.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CRG GALLERY, NEW YORK; COURTESY RYAN LEE, NEW YORK; COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SIKKEMA JENKINS & CO., NEW YORK; COURTESY JOSÉE BIENVENUE GALLERY, NEW YORK

THE INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ART PLUS
EXTENDING THE COVERAGE OF THE PRINT JOURNAL

MY COUNTRY HAS NO NAME

fayemi shakur

It is the story that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is the escort, without it we are blind. – Chinua Achebe.

Toyin Odutola, All These Garlands Prove Nothing VI, 2012, pen ink and marker on paper, 14x17 in. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

After 9/11, Nigerian-born artist Toyin Odutola noticed a shift starting in American society. Nationhood and patriotism suddenly took precedence over upholding the principles of a multi-cultural society. Odutola's perception was that the American spirit, once symbolized as a melting pot, changed; in her eyes it became a lie. "I remember as a teenager feeling pressured to be a certain way, to be very American and I knew that didn't make sense. I was like a lot of people — a combination of two very divergent cultures," Odutola recalls.

Shakur, Fayemi. "My Country Has No Name." *International Review of African American Art*, 2013. Online.
<http://iraaa.museum.hamptonu.edu/page/MY-COUNTRY-HAS-NO-NAME>.

Odutola was born in Ife, a town in southwestern Nigeria with a history of naturalistic bronze, stone and terracotta sculpture production dating back to antiquity. Her name, Oluwatoyin (shortened to Toyin) means praise God or God is worthy of praise in Yoruba. “My Dad says that I severed God and I’m just 'praise.' It has been a long standing family joke since I was a little kid,” says the 28-year-old artist.

Her family moved to Huntsville, Alabama when she was nine years old. Although Huntsville is predominantly conservative, her family found space in multiple communities where they could thrive. Huntsville’s sizable Nigerian population provided a sense of community. There was also church and for Toyin, arts clubs and an eclectic group of friends. “Huntsville is very much an engineering and military town, not a town you come to for the arts, but being in Huntsville helped me. Being in a place where everyone was so logical and practical, something snapped. I realized I did not want to be that type of person and gravitated towards the arts and out-of-the-box ideas.”

While she was in middle school, Toyin, for the first time realized that she was black and “foreign” because she was told so to her face. “Before that, being black and African was just part of the cornucopia of what made me and I was treated based on my performance. But when I moved to Alabama, I realized my performance no longer mattered because my skin suddenly spoke for me. I realized it would impact how people treated and responded to me and that continued into my adulthood.”

Navigating the tween and teen realms is already challenging under the best circumstances but for Odutola, it was also an experience of being “flattened” into a preconceived notion of who she was presumed to be. “Nothing affects a person more than living in a space where you’re a minority,” she says.

“You want to talk about identity politics, go to a middle school lunchroom. Your identity is your only capital. I struggled with the idea of what I had to assimilate to, which group to join in, and what would make it acceptable for me to move through this new culture. These ideas of otherness and segmenting people seemed very important at that age. It starts really young with children. Then you come into some consciousness and realize ‘I’m more than this flattened portrayal of myself’.”

As an dark-skinned African woman, Odutola also has experienced intra-racial bias. Growing up, she was annoyed by black people’s color hang-ups and their “Yo Mama so dark jokes.” It seemed to her to be self-destructive. “It was like, you’re making fun of me but you’re really making fun of yourself. I didn’t internalize it, I always questioned it.”

Odutola studied at the University of Alabama, Huntsville (BA), and the California College of the Arts, San Francisco (MFA). Trying to acclimate herself to the majority and explain her life and culture to others was initially frustrating. She didn’t start feeling the power of identity struggles until college where she began learning about African American woman artists.

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One of her instructors at the University of Alabama in Huntsville nominated and encouraged Odutola to enter Yale University's Norfolk Summer School of Music & Art program. She was the only person from her school to get into the program. While at the California College of the Arts, Odutola met visiting artist Hank Willis Thomas who continues to be a strong and supportive mentor. Odutola cornered him after a lecture and invited him to a studio to review her work. At first he declined but he did come. Impressed by her work, he sent some images of it to Jack Shainman which led to her being represented by the gallery. She had her first show there in 2011 − *Toyin Odutola: (MAPS)*.

My Country Has No Name, an exhibition of Odutola's latest work, was on view at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York, from May 16 until June 29, 2013. Her drawings touch upon themes of triple (African, African American and general) consciousness and blurring identities. In exploring the skin of her subjects as a geographical terrain, she traces connotations of blackness. Like the ancient Ife sculptors, Odutola too creates intricate line work and focuses on the face, a traditional style she likes but wasn't aware of until she began studying at the university level.

Odutola found that visitors to the *My Country Has No Name* show could relate to the expression of her personal experience with their own feelings of dislocation. "This idea, which people say they can relate to in the show, of floating, or feeling like you're not really rooted anywhere. It's something I suspect a lot

Figure Toyin Odutola, All These Garlands Prove Nothing IV, 2012, pen ink and marker on paper, 14x17 in. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

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of people feel, always trying to mark the ground with your presence to show that you have been somewhere. It's a futile act. You have this feeling that nothing is quite permanent."
Odutola hit on an existential fact that gave rise to whole schools of philosophy and psychology: how to square the seeming solidness of this self in this moment and place with the recognition that the only constant is change and that we all will die.

"My family has been here for a long time," Odutola reflects. "I've spent more time in America than anywhere else. So in that regard, I shouldn't feel like I'm in a purgatorial state. Ever since I was a kid, the feeling of being home was a very unsettled feeling. It felt much more exhausting when I was younger."

As Odutola settles into to a new studio and apartment in New York City, and establishes a professional reputation, she likes being close to museums and a part of a thriving art community. She looks forward to seeing how her work will evolve in a fresh, new setting. She also looks back over her long experience of uprootedness and declares, "Now that I'm older it's liberating.

She likes that she's not limited or beholden to any one thing. "I don't completely commit to any one identity and that's okay. I'm aware of how an identity is invented." I remember my parents, like a lot of immigrant families, would invent or create a culture here in America that's almost like an exaggeration of their Nigerian-ness. It was strange to me because it felt like a hyperbole: hearing our parents speak in Yoruba very loudly and boisterously amongst themselves in ways they rarely spoke back home, seemed almost desperate since it was only emphasized in specific functions. I didn't resent it, I was fascinated by it, but I also didn't trust it. I felt like it was something they felt they needed to do to feel comforted and to establish something in a new land, a place that did not feel like their own. It wasn't a bad thing. They needed that illusion. We all do. We try our best to make do with what we have to make our parents feel better, to make ourselves feel better, but it's never authentic enough."

"Some kids made a lot of effort to learn the dances and their native tongue and others wanted to embrace their American-ness instead. I didn't feel fully committed to either side. I felt very ambivalent. My mom would probably just say I was a smart mouth."

"Growing up I would always be quick to tell my mom she was contradicting herself and she would say 'so what.' It's like the Walt Whitman quote, "So what if I contradict myself. I contradict myself." It's fascinating to me when exposing a lie becomes a good thing."

I AM NOT MY HAIR

In the series, *All These Garlands Mean Nothing*, Odutola explores women's relationship with their hair. "It really started by accident, I created a portrait of myself with long hair. But [Hurricane] Sandy happened and the work was damaged. The idea was stuck in my head for a long time. The image, it seemed to me was like another person. The concept of it stayed with me and I wanted to 'talk' to her," she explains.

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“I started going through Facebook archives and I found cornrows, afros, braids, bleached hair, twists, weaves. Through the drawings I was re-acquainting myself with those personas. I always thought of them that way, as different personas. Every time I finished, I looked at these portraits as different people. All of these personas were like projections. Someone said (upon seeing the completed series in the exhibition) 'oh, they’re all selfies.' But it’s really not about that. It’s about how they are all at odds with one another. It’s like what Romare Bearden once said: ‘They’re all at issue.’ That’s what self-portraits capture, how we’re always at issue with ourselves and our differing personas."

Toyin Odutola, All These Garlands Prove Nothing (Redux), 2013, pen ink and marker on paper, 14x17 in. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

"All the politics of hair was very prevalent throughout the series. It’s like looking at 14 different people. People who came to the show told me later that they returned home and started going through old pictures of themselves, looking at their old personas. Some conceptions of the malleable self I respect, especially those concerning women's identities. It’s like a survival instinct. We’re changeable for a reason because we don’t want people to pin us down. I think we need to be slightly slippery in society because we can get too complacent in one position or in one stance. It can easily become something that we turn on. We try to freshen it and change things up. I suspect it helps us feel good but as a social tool, it’s effective because it shows the different qualities we can embody and that’s appealing to people. You

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see it everywhere now in our society's current marketplace, people tend to hyphenate their professions and, ultimately, what they are capable of being: writer-director-natural hair- blogger-fashion designer, chemist, theoretician, psychologist.…"

"Me? I just draw people. I'm ambivalent…. The one thing I really like within my work is contradiction."

BLACKNESS AT GROUND ZERO

The series, *Come Closer: Black Surfaces, Black Grounds,* is described as a personal rejection of everything associated with blackness, which Odutola admits is a very complicated work.

"Come Closer was me accepting black as a material, as an aesthetic meaning and a conversation. I used blackboard, black ballpoint pen ink and in some cases, black acrylic ink underneath and as a process I was looking up definitions of blackness and black identity in literal terms. I was reading a lot of Franz Fanon, W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, alongside looking up artists such as Romare Bearden and Charles White with very modern takes on blackness and thinking about it as I was drawing the portraits."

"It was shocking to me how the material aspect took precedence and what it does to overshadow the reality of black identity with its descriptors. 'Flatness,' 'negative space,' 'darkness,' 'mystery,' 'impenetrable,' 'evil,' 'the unknown,'... those were just a few of many words I found describing 'blackness.' I was exploring the Western, linguistic landscape about how blackness was viewed religiously, economically, and politically, on so many levels. And here I was in a basic, concrete way drawing blackness and it expanded my mind. I was reading these definitions, the counter definitions, and the counter stances of those definitions seeing that I'm here in the 21st century creating new works and these words and the context still seeps into it even when I'm trying to remove or distance or emancipate that definition from itself."

"I'm doing black on black on black, trying to make it as layered as possible in the deepness of the blackness to bring it out. I noticed the pen became this incredible tool. The black ballpoint ink on blackboard would become cooper tone and I was like 'wow, this isn't even black at all!' The black board was like this balancing platform for the ink to become something else. I instantly recognized this notion, of how we think something is a certain way and in reality it is something else. This goes for individuals as well. What we think we are, we are not, the things that we project aren't inherently so. The aesthetic of it led me to push it further. It brought me to another question. What happens if you invert the image, like a negative of a photograph? (*Gauging Tone*, 2013) "This, in turn, led to more inquiries: 'What if you invert the black image and blackness in general, as a tangible, aesthetic thing, what happens?...' "

"I did that for a couple of drawings and it felt like a release for me, if that makes sense. This became a new series. I really love the series *Gauging Tone*, which was the title of this follow-up series. It was a very personal journey for me to see what I could do with the black image in a very limited but somewhat

inventive way and have it not be beholden to something else. The only thing black was the context that surrounded the subjects portrayed, literally the blackboard that theyre drawn on. The images are not black. So the real question was 'when you invert the image does the meaning change?' The answer for me was sometimes 'yes' and sometimes 'no.' It's terrible…. I went back and forth. It was fascinating to see. Conceptually, it pushed me to explore how aesthetics can be an interesting segue into another dialogue in not just blackness but also perfection and how we tag on certain meanings to things, to people, even to context."

Black Men, Before You Put On That Sentence, You Are GOLDEN

Particularly among black men in America, Toyin says she noticed an invented attitude**:**

"I would have these conversations with my brothers and they'd be like 'I am a sentence, that's all I am and you need to respect that and acknowledge that.' They would be like: 'I already see it, I wake up in the morning, take off my du-rag and I'm good.' They're totally fine with that. And that fascinated me."

"There's a portrait in the show of my younger brother naked and he's sort of pinned down with his knee close to his chest, looking off to the side at the viewer. I was careful to title the piece which is "You Are Enough-- As Is". I think, so often, especially with my brother, men take on that sentence and push it up to the world. I think it's exhausting for him, and for many other men, to have that sentence pushed up in front of them, the sentence comes first and then he comes afterwards. He would never admit that to himself or anyone else. The sentence is up there by necessity. It's like an armor that he puts on and I wanted to shed that armor in the portrait and present him in a very vulnerable way and that's something that you do not do to Black men. They hate seeing themselves vulnerable, the history of that image, leads to a very dark path for them which is understandable."

"I drew him with a metallic golden Sharpie and he's literally golden. I told him, upon finishing the portrait: 'Look at you in this vulnerable state. You're golden. You are beautiful. You are enough. I respect you and your sentence but before you put on that sentence, this person exists and that person is you. And it's beautiful.' I wanted him to know that."

WE CONTAIN MULTITUDES, RE-IMAGINGING OUR STORY

"There are a lot of pieces like that in the series, "Gauging Tone," says Odutola.

"One of my favorite pieces is 'The Story of the Hunt Glorifies No One.' It's an homage to Chinua Achebe which goes into more specific things about colonization and the origins of blackness through the plans of colonization. The conceptual idea for the work, of the blackness, came from that history (colonization), because that's when slavery was justified. The title of the piece is a play on a Chinua Achebe quote from an interview in the *Paris Review,* where he talked about why it's so important for him to support the African post-colonial voice, the underdog. He cited a well-known proverb and said, "Until the lions have

their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter. Once I realized that, I had to be a writer. I had to be that historian. It's not one man's job. It's not one person's job. But it is something we have to do, so that the story of the hunt will also reflect the agony, the travail—the bravery, even, of the lions." Once I read that quote I thought, 'of course Chinua, yes, we want to triumph over the hunter's story that's always been written.' But me being the weird, ambivalent artist that I am I think, the problem isn't so much the hunter or the lion, the problem is the hunt itself. We need to get out of this conversation entirely about this hunt because it seems to cause us problems-not simply for both sides, but for all sides That's what the series *Gauging Tone* is all about…the story of the hunt glorifies no one. Even if I invert this image, it doesn't change the situation. I've got to get out of the whole conversation to really get it."

"Ultimately, the belief in the endless possibilities of a full-fledged person is one that Toyin Odutola wholeheartedly embraces. "I'm interested in invention. I'm interested in how we create all of these things on a whim, like in *All These Garlands*, —like the Walt Whitman quote, "I contain multitudes", that's brave, it's so powerful."

"When you see my drawings, they are containers, right? The subjects are containers of these multitudes-of marks and landscapes and colors. They're not real, they are 2-D figures in a picture plane, but what really is going on is those multitudes aren't grounded in reality at all. When your imagination is aware of that and you willingly take that on, of course you can portray anyone, anything. It's incredibly freeing as an artist in that way because you don't feel restricted by any social code, aesthetic rule or formal standard. You can push past that. I love when people describe the drawings as a galaxy or the universe. It's an incredible observation. That's exactly where I want to go with this work. That's something black people have avoided up until very recently and where we need to go."

To view more of Toyin Odutola's work visit: www.toyinodutola.com

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Interview

ART

TOYIN ODUTOLA AND THE PUBLIC STRUGGLE

BY JULIE BRAMOWITZ

Toyin Odutola. *Hold It In Your Mouth A Little Longer,*2013. Charcoal, pastel, and graphite on paper. 40 x 30 inches. 48 x 37 ½ x 1 ¾ inches framed. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Bramowitz, Julie. "Toyin Odutola and the Public Struggle." *Interview*, 4 December 2013. Online.
<http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/toyin-odutola-the-constant-struggle#slideshow_59304.1>

Last week, 28-year-old artist Toyin Odutola was home for Thanksgiving, back in her childhood bedroom, where, as she recently posted on Instagram, "My past efforts haunt me. Ha!" Odutola isn't afraid to blog about her failures, successes, and everything in between; indeed, she says that her work is all about process. Now, 13 of her arresting pen-and-ink portraits, which caught the art world's attention after a sold-out show in Chelsea last spring, are the focus of Odutola's first solo museum exhibition, "The Constant Struggle," opening at the Indianapolis Museum of Contemporary Art on December 6.

Born in Nigeria, raised in Alabama, and trained at the Bay Area's California College of the Arts, Odutola draws on references as diverse as her upbringing, from animated Japanese serials and African carvings to the sinews of anatomical diagrams. But the blank white backgrounds on which she'll place a disembodied arm or head, the subject's dark skin radiating with flashes of disco-colored strobe light, strip away any context, preventing viewers from creating narratives about who's pictured. Instead, with their open expressions, these figures look back at us, shifting power away from the audience by reflecting our own gaze, and calling into question ideas of identity and race.

At Art Basel Miami Beach this week, Jack Shainman Gallery presents Odutola's most ambitious work to date, a five-foot tall portrait from her latest series, while earlier pieces are currently on view in group shows at Brooklyn's Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts (MoCADA) and the Jenkins Johnson Gallery in San Francisco. Effusive, gracious—and quick to slip on an accent (Southern or Nigerian, depending on the story)—Odutola spoke over the holiday weekend about what's ahead and knowing when to let go of the past.

JULIE BRAMOWITZ: You recently relocated to New York. What has that been like as an artist, and do you find it distracting to work in a city with so much stimulation?

TOYIN ODUTOLA: It's been six months, and I'm not going to lie: It is *hard* to produce work in New York. You kind of have to center yourself—do some Zen meditation exercises and just focus. [*laughs*] It is very distracting, and money, of course, is an issue. I don't think I would have been able to make the work that I made for the show in May if it wasn't for me being in Alabama and away from New York, because it does have this way of influencing how you feel about your work. You hear outside voices and it permeates all that you do. But so much has happened for me in the studio here and I know that direct contact with inspiration wouldn't have happened if I didn't have access to what you have in New York, such as galleries, museums, lectures—what I could only access through the Internet in Alabama. I remember just recently going to the Edward Hopper show at the Whitney. Of course you read about his work in books, but to actually be in a room where you can study his hand, his mark, it changes your entire education.

BRAMOWITZ: You've mentioned Hank Willis Thomas as a mentor. Could you talk a bit about his influence on you as an emerging artist?

ODUTOLA: Oh, yeah. Hank says that I mention him too much, and I need to quit because people are starting to feel a certain way. So there's this joke between us that the next interview I do, I say, "I don't know who Hank Willis Thomas is. I met him one time and it was really awkward." [*laughs*] Hank's great. He's the one who "discovered" my work and saw something that I didn't see. He's still constantly pushing me to try out new ideas and not be afraid of what other people will say.

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He truly is a mentor, and I often ask him about the art world, how to juggle it all and not lose your mind. It would be like accepting an award without thanking him because he really has been so supportive.

BRAMOWITZ: Since joining Jack Shainman Gallery, are there other artists whom you've had an opportunity to meet and whose work has informed what you're doing?

ODUTOLA: Jack's gallery is great, because there's a lot of people whose work I admire and I didn't even know were represented by him until I got there and was like, "Oh, shit!" I've had the chance to meet people that I think are icons, like Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and Kerry James Marshall. Kerry James Marshall especially was a huge influence on me in graduate school, as were Wangechi Mutu and Julie Mehretu. These artists are titans. My education was also very much in comic books, so I've been going to comic book events in New York and have met a few artists there.

BRAMOWITZ: Anyone in particular?

ODUTOLA: Cathy G. Johnson, who does a lot of web comics. I love her style. It's very different from mine, so I don't know if people will see the connection, but I've definitely played with some things just looking at her work. Anthony Cudahy. Mostly indie artists that I've been following for a few years online. I'm really interested in independent publishers and memes and mini comics. But even before that, I was interested in Japanese manga and anime.

BRAMOWITZ: When you're creating a series, do you conceive of it like a graphic novel, in which there's a narrative and images are ordered as a sequence of events?

ODUTOLA: I think about composition and narrative a lot. Each piece, in a way, is a panel. It's easier to tackle it when you think about the silhouette in that contained space. The graphic style itself is influenced by a lot of very layered and detailed comics that I read as a kid, like *Vagabond* by Takehiko Inoue. Sometimes I'll do sequences or multi-panels where there's movement, kind of like a movie.

BRAMOWITZ: What's the story behind your latest series, "Of Another Kind"?

ODUTOLA: It came from a postcard that I bought at some museum store. It was a sculpture of a young boy in gilded bronze. His skin was black, and his hair was this shocking blond. His hands were above his head holding out a cigarette tray, and he was standing on top of this leafy gold setting. It was very strange and I didn't understand why I liked it. I hated the servitude aspect, that it was just for someone to put down their cigarette. But, as an aesthetic, I loved the black-and-gold combination repeated throughout. So I started researching references. The more examples I would find, the more I had to type in "Moorish sculpture" or "Moorish portraiture," the mode for portraying "Moors"—basically, blacks—in Medieval and Renaissance Europe. I liked the aesthetic but I didn't want to fetishize or perverse it, so that became a vehicle for me to explore it but without the subjects being exoticized or serving a purpose, like an ashtray. The title, "Of Another Kind," is about looking at this genre from another perspective. The series also changed how I consider restriction when it comes to palette.

BRAMOWITZ: For the golden sections, what are you using?

ODUTOLA: It's a Sharpie, girl! It's a gold Sharpie from Office Depot. The whole piece is first done in pen and ink to engrave the surface of the paper, and then once that dries, the areas that I want to be gold I go over with a marker. That gives it the texture underneath, but also the sheen of gold on top. It's important for me to emphasize texture, to get that sculptural feel, which is what influenced the entire series because I was largely looking at sculpture and reliefs.

BRAMOWITZ: You were born in Ife, Nigeria, which is known for its carved sculpture tradition. Did that play a role in your earlier work where you focused on faces and expressions?

ODUTOLA: Ironically, I didn't know about the Ife sculptures until I came to America. It's so funny that I would be doing this work that's heavily drawn off of scarification, striated lines, that whole aesthetic. When I went back to Ife for the first time with my mom, we visited the museum there, and I was blown away. Up to that point, I thought that this style of mine was just this weird amalgamation of all these disparate references, and it made perfect sense once I saw those pieces. There are mirrors with my work, especially with the faces, the emphasis on the head, which, of course, is identity. You rarely see the whole body, and it's usually dwarfed by the face. But it was absolutely something that I came to later. My mom always says, "It's like you're coming home."

BRAMOWITZ: I read in a previous interview that you've been wary of depicting women. What pushed you away from portraying female subjects and towards males?

ODUTOLA: For a while, I was nervous about portraying women because of the objectification that automatically comes with it, whether the artist intends or not. With "Of Another Kind," I've not so much drawn nudes—I hate saying "nudes" because it's not a spectacle—but portrayed people naked. I see them in a more straightforward way—exposed, but with no indication of who or what they are; they're just there. That's a very powerful statement because when they're stripped bare of everything, there's no marker for people to label them or place them in a box. I wanted to twist that, so I use my brothers a lot, portraying them naked, open, exposed. That's something you don't see a lot, especially with black males, unless it's referencing slavery or pain.

BRAMOWITZ: The focal point of this series is a departure for you: *Rather Than Look Back, She Chose To Look at You*, a five-foot female portrait that will be on view in Miami this week. You worked on this piece over three years?

ODUTOLA: I started it and was like, "Mom, I don't think I can finish this piece," and she was like, "No, you're not ready." [*laughs*] So it was just stored away, and every once in a while I would bring it out and work a little bit on it, and then I'd put it away again. Then I decided to move to New York and was like, "I'm not going to finish this. It's been in the basement and every time I come and work on it a little bit, it's just more depressing to me." But my mom kept saying, "Take it with you." So I took it back with me, put it up, and said, "You know what? If there's one thing I'm going to finish this year, it'll be this piece." I was sick of having it be incomplete and I just went H.A.M. on it. I spent a good four to five months working on it, along with other projects. Once I finished, the piece was really about me dealing with a past that I felt haunted by, about Ife, as well as about coming to terms with failure. Suddenly you find yourself in the present with a finished piece and going, "I'm done. I can't keep feeling a certain way about the past." That's what the title is about.

Bramowitz, Julie. "Toyin Odutola and the Public Struggle." *Interview*, 4 December 2013. Online.
<http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/toyin-odutola-the-constant-struggle#slideshow_59304.1>

BRAMOWITZ: When you post works in progress on Tumblr and Instagram, is it essential to your process to document these phases online and gauge the reactions of fans?

ODUTOLA: I originally started blogging because I didn't know if I wanted to be an artist. I wanted to talk to other people online who were doing art, so I would post work and ask for feedback. I loved that an artist like James Sheehan would show his process on his blog. It became this open dialogue that, unfortunately, we don't have a lot in the fine-art world. People will say, "Wow, you share a lot." I'm like, "No, I make it a point to." Instagram is a great place for people to share failure. I don't want people to think that being an artist is some glamorous life. Not everybody is Jeff Koons. Not everybody *wants* to be Jeff Koons, you know? You go through a lot of battles in your studio. I'll say, "I'm having a certain feeling about this piece and it's not a good one." [*laughs*] People respond to that in a very positive way. There are moments when they tend to get a little too fresh or try to art direct. But I'm just lucky to have someone see the work and be a part of the process in real time.

BRAMOWITZ: You've got several group shows lined up this coming year. What else can we expect in 2014?

ODUTOLA: I recently started working in charcoal and pastel. I hadn't touched them since I was in high school or early college, but I had been working in pen and ink for so long that I was like, "Okay, I need to break free of this." So I just picked up a charcoal pencil that I had around the studio and started drawing this piece, *The Paradox of Education*. I don't know where it will go but I would say 2014 is going to be a year of different materials. The pen and ink was my hand's education; now my hand is applying that same style with new tools.

RATHER THAN LOOK BACK, SHE CHOSE TO LOOK AT YOU *WILL BE ON VIEW AT THE JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY AT ART BASEL MIAMI BEACH FROM THIS THURSDAY THROUGH SUNDAY, DECEMBER 5 THROUGH 8. "THE CONSTANT STRUGGLE: TOYIN ODUTOLA" OPENS AT THE INDIANA MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART THIS FRIDAY, DECEMBER 6. "SEVEN SISTERS" IS ON VIEW AT THE JENKINS JOHNSON GALLERY IN SAN FRANCISCO THROUGH DECEMBER 21. "SIX DRAUGHTSMEN" IS ON VIEW AT MOCADA THROUGH JANUARY 19.*

Bramowitz, Julie. “Toyin Odutola and the Public Struggle.” *Interview*, 4 December 2013. Online.
<http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/toyin-odutola-the-constant-struggle#slideshow_59304.1>

Toyin Odutola Captures The Multitudes Within Our Skin

By Emily Colucci
Posted on 06.05.13

In his iconic *Black Skin, White Masks*, Franz Fanon explains, "I am black, not because of a curse, but because my skin has been able to capture all the cosmic effluvia. I am truly a drop of sun under the earth," which almost perfectly describes artist Toyin Odutola's exhibition *My Country Has No Name* at the Jack Shainman Gallery. Transforming the human body into a luminous, rich and colorful visual landscape, Odutola's gorgeous and thought-provoking show, open until June

29, presents Odutola's deft artistic investigation into blackness and identity through her intricate line work.

From metallic Sharpie on black board to pen and marker on white paper, Odutola consciously selects her materials for their vibrant sheen. In addition to their artistic function, Odutola also enjoys using everyday materials such as ballpoint pens to create her almost paint-like surfaces. As she explains, "I love that my materials are cheap. I love that they are primarily regarded as office supplies, not art supplies; that by my utilizing these tools in such a way expands their consideration, making them more than what they are generally known for doing, limited to by perception."

Born in Nigeria and currently living in Alabama, Odutola's background heavily influences her focus on identity in her art. As she describes, "I've always felt ambivalent about my heritage and prescribed identity. There is something suspicious about labels: they define you in very concrete terms and they can emancipate you all the while potentially limiting and trapping you in place. The finite nature of labels often feels demanding to me in some way, so I try not to let myself get too attached or beholden to them. This process of tug and pull is often documented in my work."

Colucci, Emily. "Toyin Odutola Captures Multitudes Within Our Skin." *Societe Perrier*, 5 June 2013. Online. <http://societeperrier.com/new-york/articles/toyin-odutola-captures-the-multitudes-within-our-skin/#.UbCrg0DqnuG>.

Looking at the work and the title of *My Country Has No Name,* Odutola reveals that she "attempts to highlight the contradictions of commitment and disillusionment towards identity: how one is susceptible to it, how one can manipulate it and how one can disregard it altogether." Playing with her ability to artistically alter identity such as her complete color inversion in her series*Gauging Tones*, Odutola creates stunning portraits, which tread the line between realism and imagination.

In the series *All These Garlands Prove* Nothing, Odutola presents herself in various hairstyles ranging from dreadlocks to a shaved head. Changing her own identity through her hair, Odutola observes, "Identity in presentation changes so dramatically and can be altered on a whim—according to contexts, embellishments, ideas, and so forth. Hair (and the lack of it) being the focus of the series became the true subject to capture."

Not only portraying the interaction between identity and presentation, Odutola also references the historical significance of hair to the African American community. Odutola describes, "Considering the long and contentious history regarding women of African descent in the United States and their personal, socio-economic and political relationships with their hair, *All These Garlands Prove Nothing* nods at that larger dialogue."

Colucci, Emily. "Toyin Odutola Captures Multitudes Within Our Skin." *Societe Perrier*, 5 June 2013. Online. <http://societeperrier.com/new-york/articles/toyin-odutola-captures-the-multitudes-within-our-skin/#.UbCrg0DqnuG>.

Similarly, Odutola's radiant and unique treatment of black skin whether with metallic bronze Sharpie or multi-colored markers allows her to delve into the experience of having black skin. "When I began working this way, rendering the skin like this captured what I thought 'black skin' (in literal and visual terms) felt like," says Odutola, "The role of blackness in the work began as a personal investigation on the aforementioned 'feeling' of it, the material implications of it, and how these aspects could be showcased throughout the skin's landscape. Since then, it has progressed to expand the possibilities of what the meaning of 'blackness' (and in turn, "black skin") can entail."

Odutola's rendering of skin as a colorful landscape allows her work to transcend just one singular identity, encompassing and inspiring viewers with a wide variety of identifications. Asked how she wants to affect viewers, Odutola responds, "I only hope the individuals who view each drawing get an idea that what one is seeing is the many multitudes contained within all individuals, and how much of that is invention (which cannot be designated as "good" or "bad," 'right' or 'wrong.')"

Images courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Colucci, Emily. "Toyin Odutola Captures Multitudes Within Our Skin." *Societe Perrier*, 5 June 2013. Online. <http://societeperrier.com/new-york/articles/toyin-odutola-captures-the-multitudes-within-our-skin/#.UbCrg0DqnuG>.

Toyin Odutola "My Country Has No Name"

The Nigerian-born, Alabama-based artist discusses process, identity and selfies

by James Thorne in Culture on 16 May 2013

A recent graduate of California College of the Arts, **Toyin Odutola** is already celebrating her second show at **Jack Shainman Gallery** in NYC. The energetic artist produces ink works on paper from her studio in Alabama, updating friends and fans through an active blog. At 27 years old, Odutola is unabashed of her millennial status, exclaiming of her self-portraits as she walks through the gallery, "There are a lot of selfies—let's just call it out!" But behind the humor, there is a seriousness. The exhibition, called "**My Country Has No Name**," takes on race, nationhood and identity through the fine tip of a ballpoint pen.

Thorne, James. "Toyin Odutola 'My Country Has No Name'." *Cool Hunting*, 16 May 2013. Online.
<http://www.coolhunting.com/culture/my-country-has-no-name-by-toyin-odutola.php>

Nigerian-born Odutola's series of self-portraits takes the name "All These Garlands Prove Nothing," a reference to the artist's protean hair style. "The portraits go from me having this crazy afro to punk dreadlocks with a half-shaved head, long braids, this Grace Jones 'Eraserhead' look—but it's the idea of the artifice of a presentation and how malleable a persona is," she says. The artist also catalogues friends and family members; mostly young and mostly bored. "I like awkward or candid moments that just look off," Odutola continues. "Disillusioned and blah—it sort of represents our generation. We've seen so much and we're so bored."

Thorne, James. “Toyin Odutola ‘My Country Has No Name’.” *Cool Hunting*, 16 May 2013. Online.
<http://www.coolhunting.com/culture/my-country-has-no-name-by-toyin-odutola.php>

Odutola seems to be fed up with the wall that traditionally hides process from final product. Her **Tumblr** is made up of candid shots of works in progress that are meant to explain her methodology. "I'll be honest—I started the blog because I grew up in the south where there was no access to any museums or galleries," she explains. "So my ticket to people was the internet. If I was going to get into this world that I had no idea how to navigate, I wanted it to be honest."

The surface effect—the result of layering pen on marker—gives Odutola's figures a distinctive shimmer and patchwork quality, and opinions differ on what to make of it. "People have a different response [to the effect] each time—I've heard muscle, hair, wires. Someone said it looks like a nightclub and there's a light show shining on the face." For the artist, the main visual component is the blocked-off quadrants that underly the surface-level work, a sort of puzzle that creates the planes of the face. In terms of color, Odutola has taken pains to represent a "multifaceted brown" that is applied to each subject, regardless of race.

Thorne, James. “Toyin Odutola ‘My Country Has No Name’.” *Cool Hunting*, 16 May 2013. Online. <http://www.coolhunting.com/culture/my-country-has-no-name-by-toyin-odutola.php>

Odutola's inclusion in Forbes' **30 Under 30** list for notable names in arts and style puts her in a league with artists like JR and Jacob Kassay. Despite her success, the artist remains humble. She thanks predecessors like Chuck Close, whose process-heavy portrait work was an influence early on, and apologizes for subjecting gallery-goers to so many pictures of her "mug."

"My Country Has No Name" runs at Jack Shainman Gallery through 29 June 2013.

Portrait by James Thorne; all other images courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

Thorne, James. "Toyin Odutola 'My Country Has No Name'." *Cool Hunting*, 16 May 2013. Online.
<http://www.coolhunting.com/culture/my-country-has-no-name-by-toyin-odutola.php>

fore

THE STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM

Toyin Odutola

From Quiet Subtleties Come Shared Revelation

Adwoa Adusei

Standing face to face with one of Toyin Odutola's portraits of single figures against unadorned backgrounds is a study in the subtleties of depth. One discerns that the apparently flat surface is actually incised with precise grooves from a ballpoint pen, and an undercurrent of white, black or colorful washes. Her subjects' skin is made up of hundreds of singular, sinuous lines that coalesce into facial features. Mass and shape are not conveyed through linear shading techniques such as hatching, and the washes rarely indicate form. Instead they obscure the figure so that the source of light seems undetectable. In more recent work, the multi-colored washes combine with the flowing lines to create the effect of light reflected on water, further obstructing the viewer's discernment of depth. The manipulation of color and line to indicate shape is made even more complex by Odutola's stringent use of a minimal palette.

The chromatic scheme of her earlier works remained faithfully the same —usually black pen and ink on white paper—and continues to be a signature of Odutola's oeuvre. The title of her MFA thesis exhibition at California College of the Arts, *Come Closer: Black Surfaces. Black Grounds* (2012), is a distillation of Odutola's current material choices. In this series, black ballpoint pen and black acrylic ink on black glossed or matte board exemplify Odutola's self-described "almost monastic" use of materials.[1] The consistency with which she plays with these media energizes her visual lexicon so that she isn't beholden to draw only "black on black" portraits, but to build nuance through selectivity. In Odutola's own words, the problems in "a chroma that doesn't exist outside of the two-dimensional space" surface through her work, revealing that the black materials she uses are never true black. For example, some black pen inks are more copper in tone, while some black matte papers appear blue. These gradations are also apparent in Odutola's color-infused works of 2011. With these works, the eye excites over the muted yet rich and glossy jades, violets and blues that shine through.

The tactility of Odutola's work conveys her increasing interest in pushing texture beyond the drawing surface as a means of heightening experiential depth. After a recent trip to Japan, this interest has come to be expressed in Odutola's concern with conveying the correlation between mapping land/cityscapes and portraiture. She recounts how the bright lights of nocturnal Tokyo reflected on her brother's skin, as if projecting through him. He absorbed the environment around him almost to the point of obscuring him to invisibility. Attempting to capture this image of her brother- in-cityscape would address the complexity involved in combining personage and location in drawn portraiture. How does one capture a place and a time through the body, and what medium would best do the job? As Odutola describes it, graphic artists have done so successfully for years, and she refers to her first encounter with a Lucian Freud (1922–2011) self-portrait: She travelled through the painting's surface and colors to see "both a portrait and a place." Citing Kerry James Marshall's (b. 1955) illustrations of blackness, Odutola remarks how place and person can convincingly become intertwined through an artist's selection of media.[2] This brings to mind the large un-stretched canvases of Marshall's 1998 *Mementos* exhibition (The Renaissance Society at the Institute of Chicago) in which "souvenirs" of the black American experience—important people and places—are commemorated.[3] In 2010, Odutola experimented with paper sculpture, and graphic-novel panels influence her more recent GIF animations.[4] Unlike Marshall's multimedia oeuvre—works that often begin as drawings—Odutola's works currently manifest persistently as drawings on paper.

These brief explorations between media, particularly animation, together with Odutola's use of the Internet to enhance viewer experience of her artistic process, speak to a desire to connect with wider audiences. This desire is shared by contem-porary artists of the African diaspora and contemporary artists worldwide as a solution to some of New Internationalism's failures to merge contemporary art worlds through wider accessibility.[5] Odutola's interest in creating visual variety for audience interaction is notable in her blog, where she allows viewers to see her creative influences and progressions.[6] However, Odutola admits that reproductions online do not compare to in-person experience. In person, color schemes and textures change according to the viewer's angle. Online, this nuance is subdued, and the flattening of the

RIGHT
—
I Had Her and Then I Lost Her (detail), 2012

OPPOSITE PAGE

TOP
—
Untitled, 2011

MIDDLE
—
Above all else make it look effortless, 2012

BOTTOM
—
D.O./H.W.T. Study, 2011

picture plane via an electronic screen serves to both limit and enhance the subtleties of legibility.[7] Ironically, this degree of digital separation actually mimics the idea that perception can change according to how one experiences something—particularly race. Speaking of the color as a medium, Odutola says that "black is a construct, because what precisely is it made up of?" The question appropriately relates to race as a social construct.

This conflation of color and race, combined with the stringency of Odutola's material choices, is a play on black portraiture, a subject that explores issues of representation, social agency and race. The image of the black body as a conflicting yet fetishized symbol of profit, desire, pity and fear is central to the subject. In Odutola's black portraits, the primacy of the color black as "constructed" becomes apparent as a reenvisioning of the subject's vocabulary. In these small portraits, black is always something else, always changing, so the viewer's perception and experience of the work, too, is always changing. In the minute space of each scene, Odutola personalizes her renderings of the people in her life, mapping out the details of their lives as she sees them. Rarely working on paper larger than 20-by-30 inches, she works with a scale that allows for intimacy in the viewing experience—yet without knowing who the people are. Her subjects are of different races, genders and ages, but Odutola's faithful and skillful manipulation of media diffuses concerns regarding identity markers. Often appearing youthful and androgynous, figures become almost indistinguishable from the stark, shallow spaces that contain them. It is only the texture of their skin, like the fleshy tendons of one's musculature, that indicates human markers. But each figure, no matter his or her identity, is stripped bare. Visually traversing the paths and lines of Odutola's work reveals layers that express the commonality of human experience.

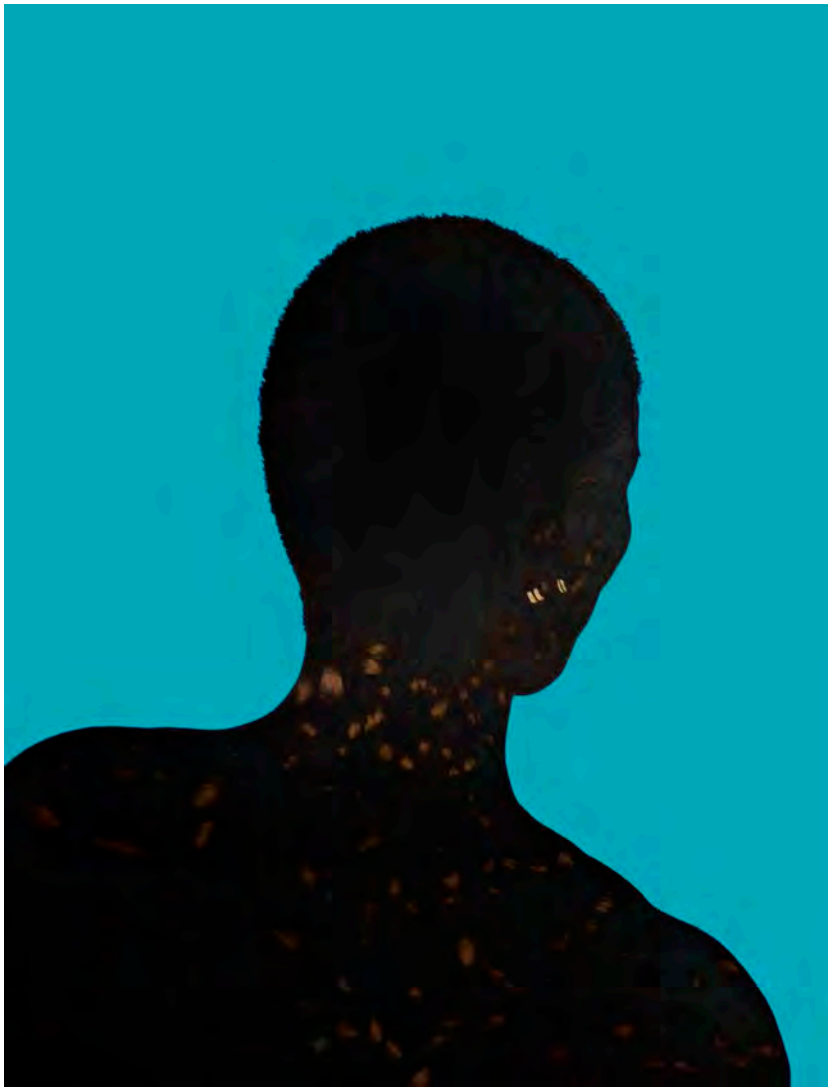
1 Toyin Odutola, interview with the author, July 27, 2012.
2 Ibid.
3 Kerry James Marshall et al., *Kerry James Marshall: Mementos* (Chicago: Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 1998).
4 The "Masks" series of 2010 is a set of drawings on vellum paper in which the impressions of the pen on the vellum paper causes it to protrude into three-dimensional space. Odutola's GIF animations are built from several drawings synced together, and are ongoing since 2011.
5 New Internationalism is a conceptual and practical framework for exhibition practice and art historical discourse born out of postcolonial theory's influence within the arts. Following the 1991 establishment of the Institute of New International Visual Arts in London, New Internationalism is loosely defined by Lotte Philipsen as "an attitude that aims at institutional inclusion of non-Western visual art." Since there are more artists than there are global institutions to exhibit and house their work, many contemporary artists (with access and the means to do so) continue to explore use of the Internet and social media as means of increasing exposure and accessibility. Lotte Philipsen. *Globalizing Contemporary Art: The Art World's New Internationalism* (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2010).
6 Toyin Odutola's blog can be seen at www.tobia.tumblr.com
7 Interestingly enough, Kerry James Marshall's *Black Painting* (2003) of an interior scene inspired by Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952), made primarily of black acrylic paint on fiberglass, is also disarmingly hard to reproduce through photography. *Kerry James Marshall: One True Thing: Meditations on Black Aesthetics* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003).

Art in Print

January – February 2013
Volume 2, Number 5

New Editions: Toyin Odutola

A Lapse in Judgement (2012)
One-color lithograph, 9 x 7 inches. Edition of 10. $800. Two-color lithograph, 14 x 11 inches. Edition of 10. $900.
If she doesn't say anything, then it never happened (2012)
One-color lithograph, 25 x 19 inches. Edition of 28. $1000. Three-color lithograph, 25 x 19 inches. Edition of 16. $1200. Printed and published by Tamarind Institute, Albuquerque, NM.



Toyin Odutola, ***If she doesn't say anything, then it never happened*** *(2012).*

For more than half a century Tamarind has been offering residencies to up-and-coming artists, hoping to lure them into prolonged engagement with lithography (and to give Tamarind printers-in-training exposure to disparate artistic aims and approaches). It can be hit-or-miss, and Toyin Odutola is very young (she just received her MFA this year), but one glance at her ink drawings, with their brilliantly carved silhouettes and scattered moments of sinewy shine, was probably enough to convince Tamarind to lay odds on her printmaking.

Odutola's residency was part of a larger Tamarind project that brought together artists of African descent from Brazil and the United States. (Odutola was born in Nigeria, grew up in Alabama, and lives in California.) Implicit in such a project are themes of displacement and otherness. Odutola, however, is less interested in blackness as a foil to whiteness, but as something in and of itself—a color, a graphic device, a cultural identity. This is a set of concerns ready-made for print processes. Two of the prints she did at Tamarind were black on white and dynamically graphic. Two other images, however, were released in both black-and-white and color versions. But while "color lithograph" usually suggests something more vibrant than its binary cousin, Odutola has used blue and brown to replace contrast and clarity with a kind of twilight shine. Forms loom out of darkness rather than asserting themselves as pattern.

In these images Odutola challenges the assumption that the black marks disrupting white surfaces is some universal norm. It's an idea with profound implications. ■

The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

Reflections

By HOLLAND COTTER, KEN JOHNSON, KAREN ROSENBERG and ROBERTA SMITH

Published: January 3, 2013

With New Year's hoopla behind us, we begin to turn a corner on the season of long nights and short days. But there's still a good stretch of darkness ahead, and New York City museums have their lights on bright.

Illumination has been a subject and condition of art since prehistoric painters at the Lascaux caves positioned their images to catch the rays of the sun at winter solstice. Great classical cultures across the globe spun visions of the universe around the presence of solar and lunar deities. To designers of stained-glass church windows in medieval Europe light was divine benevolence in sensible form. To the Muslim creators of lusterware in the Arab world radiance as a decorative property helped bind together the widely dispersed faithful.

Painted dawns and sunsets carried spiritual, political and personal messages for Romantic landscape artists in America and Europe. Light was scientific data to the French Impressionists, the raw material of an optical sublime. In our own era, when art has no center or has centers everywhere, light as a medium has atomized into countless forms and meanings, from fluorescent tubes and video screens to glittering magpie-eye scraps and painted rainbows.

With the prospect of considerable midwinter indoor time still to come, four art critics for The New York Times recently fanned out into museums in search of art that captured light, or referred to it, or generated it. **HOLLAND COTTER**

Cotter, Holland, Ken Jonson, Karen Rosenberg and Roberta Smith. "Reflections". *The New York Times*, Weekend Arts: C23, C30, illustrated.

Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

"26 July, 4:50 am," by Toyin Odutola, the Studio Museum in Harlem.

’26 JULY, 4:50 AM’ BY TOYIN ODUTOLA, STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM

The young Ms. Odutola is a Nigerian-born portraitist who works in blackness and light. Taking family members and friends as sitters, she begins each bust-length likeness with a loose sketch done in color washes, then fills it with patterns of tight, narrow, precisely drawn linear bands done in ballpoint pen.

The bands cross over and under one another like weaving or like the tissues and sinews of musculature, creating subtle highlights where they curve, giving the skin a subtle luster. And no matter how dense and black looking the patterns are, the facial features of the sitters come through in minute detail, literally eyelash by eyelash.

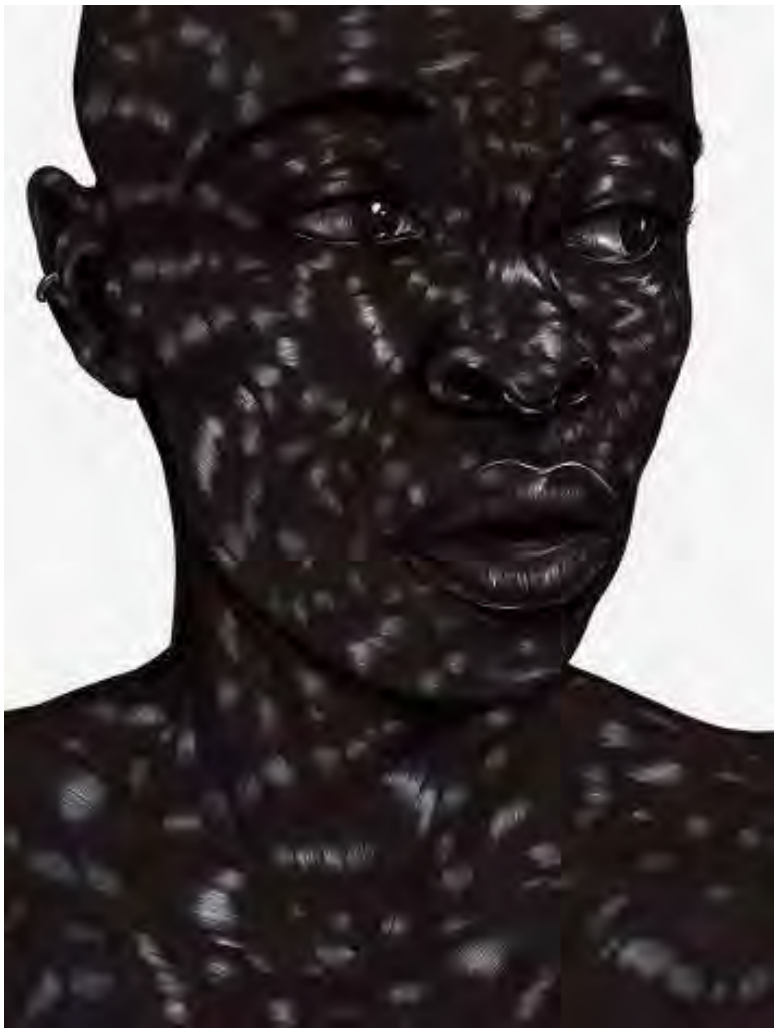
In one sense Ms. Odutola is interested in examining notions of blackness as a race-defining attribute, one that can make people, depending on the context, either invisible or vulnerable. Certain other, older artists, notably Kerry James Marshall, have done remarkable and complex things with the concept of blackness as a graphic marker of race, and Ms. Odutola, whose work can be seen in a group show called “Fore” at the Studio Museum in Harlem, takes the idea in a direction of her own. The blackness in her portraits is not blackness at all, in an essential, finite way.

The ballpoint ink colors she uses range from copper-brown to deep blue. Her sitters range across the ethnic spectrum. The colors that begin each portrait show through at the end. Beaming through chinks in the dark weave they look like stars in a night sky or filtered rainbows. **HOLLAND COTTER**

Cotter, Holland, Ken Jonson, Karen Rosenberg and Roberta Smith. “Reflections”. *The New York Times*, Weekend Arts: C23, C30, illustrated.

San Francisco Chronicle
NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

‘The Moment for Ink’: Show frees artist



Toyin Odutola's "Whenever the occasion arises"
Pen ink and marker on paper 9 x 12 inches (2012)
Courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

By Kimberly Chun
Friday, March 22, 2013

Arrayed among the more traditional sumi ink works at the Chinese Culture Foundation's group show, "The Moment for Ink," Toyin Odutola's dark, textured ballpoint-ink-and-marker drawings pop - in their intensity, richness and blackness. The very qualities of the work of the Nigerian-born artist, who is often slotted into shows as an African American woman, make this exhibition a special one for her.

Chun, Kimberly. “ ‘The Moment for Ink’: Show frees artist.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 March 2013.
<http://www.sfgate.com/art/article/The-Moment-for-Ink-Show-frees-artist-4371515.php#ixzz2O9fJQQdy>

"Being a black artist, the first thing people want to talk about is your blackness, the importance of your blackness and your black presence. What I like about this show is that I felt free from that blackness and I could really exploit the pen and do crazy patterns and have that be the focal point of it," says Odutola, 27, who graduated from California College of the Arts last year. "I'm celebrating the ink and what it can do and transforming what it can be."

"It's also nice to have something that came with such a rich history with Chinese literati and the rich history of pen ink and how it's used as a tag in China," adds Odutola, who is now working in Alabama on her May solo show for Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City. "In the fine art world in America, you don't see a lot of pen ink unless it's graphic novels."

The mangas that once inspired Odutola are far away: The self-portraits she made for the exhibit are both eerily anatomical and strangely futuristic, as if she had traced the rhythmic weave of musculature beneath her skin. In "No Difference at All," a figure skeptically regards the viewer from beneath her lids, and in "Whenever the Occasion Arises," she peers to the side, the whites of her eyes satiny and the almost bronze pen strokes resembling those of a tress-obsessed Arcimboldo.

"It's kind of a language I've developed over time that's basically breaking up the face into components and planes," Odutola says of her work. "Inside each plane, I draw gradation marks, and when planes come together, they form sinews, a hairlike weave that's like a landscape of the face."

She ventures a comparison to the portrait deconstructions of Chuck Close: "It's an abstraction that happens from looking really hard and long at a face," she says. "I hope that, looking at these portraits, you'll see a person underneath that mark making."

If you go:
The Moment for Ink: Through May 18. 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. Chinese Culture Foundation, 750 Kearny St., S.F. (415) 986-1822. www.c-c-c.org.

Chun, Kimberly. " 'The Moment for Ink': Show frees artist." *San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 March 2013.
<http://www.sfgate.com/art/article/The-Moment-for-Ink-Show-frees-artist-4371515.php#ixzz2O9fJQQdy>

the village VOICE

Q&A: Toyin Odutola on Drawing, Chinese Art, and What It Really Means to Have a Big Head

The portrait artist readies for a group show at the Studio Museum in Harlem

By **Alexandra Bell** *Wednesday, Nov 7 2012*

Odutola's *Bored, Doe-Eyed and Waiting*; *Courtesy of Toyin Odutola and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY*

Toyin Odutola; Courtesy the artist and Studio Museum in Harlem

Toyin Odutola's pen-and-ink drawings are part of the upcoming group show "Fore" at the Studio Museum in Harlem (November 11 through March 10). "Fore" is the fourth installment in Studio Museum's "F" series, which showcases the work of newer artists of African descent. Held every four years, the "F" series has exhbited work from some of today's premiere black artists. At just 27, Odutola is quickly becoming a noted portraitist. In 2011, her first solo show at Jack Shainman Gallery—they represent her—sold out before opening day.

Born in Ife, Nigeria, Odutola moved with her family to Berkeley, California, at the age of five and later to Huntsville, Alabama. Her drawings, which she typically creates with just an everyday ballpoint pen, often arise from an encounter with an interesting face and evolve into near-multidimensional statements on identity.

The *Voice* chatted with Odutola via video about black images, art in Alabama, and why the face makes for better art than the body.

You started getting serious about art in college. What kind of work were you doing?
I was doing all kind of things. When you start college, you do a lot of foundation courses—you do painting, you do graphic design. Drawing was something I was interested in since I was very little, but I didn't really know that drawing was something I was going to keep doing after college—it was just something I kind of did on my own. And the style developed—that I'm kind of known for now—developed in college on my own. I was playing around with the contours of the face and different components and things and it fell

Bell, Alexandra. "Q&A: Toyin Odutola on Drawing, Chinese Art, and What It Really Means to Have a Big Head." *The Village Voice*, 7 November 2012: illustrated.

from that. I graduated, and of course you don't have a job, and you're sitting in your parent's basement and you keep drawing and working at McDonald's and then you kind of build and build and build. I built up a portfolio I thought was strong, and applied to grad school at CCA. I just graduated. I don't really know how I got here—just some steps—step after step.

A majority of your work depicts the human face. Why did you choose that part of the body?
It's two things. One, I'm more interested in the face than the body. I sometimes feel like the body—and this could be my own projection—but I feel like the body is contentious, and whenever you show a body, whether male or female, immediately people kind of have this image with representational work. People say, "Oh, that's a penis" and "Oh, those are breasts." Human beings cannot separate—it's just a go-to thing. And for me, it's about identity, so identity doesn't necessarily have to be a body—it has to be identifying a face. The conversation is more interesting when it's directly looking at the face, the countenance.

Secondly, I'm really fascinated by this concept in Benin ancient sculpture, which came from where I was born, in Ife. Benin sculpture is all about the face—the face in Yoruba culture is often referred to as the "crown," and it's the most important part. If you look at a lot of sculpture from Nigeria in this time—12th century and 16th century—the head's always bigger than the body. You always see sculptures where the head's huge and the body is tiny. My dad would always joke with me and say, "Us Nigerians are very big-headed.' [*Laughs*.] No, I think it's about identity. I'm attracted to that, I'm attracted to the face more.

And black figures? You draw primarily black figures.
Yes and no. It's a trick.

How so?
Of course they're black figures because they're drawn in black pen, but not all of the figures are of African American descent, or at least the reference isn't. One of the things I like to play with is, "What is black?" Is it because I drew it? Is it because it looks black? Is it because you think the figure is black? Because a lot of it is just a filter, and the filters get more and more obstructed by whatever people think the image is about and not really what it is. So often times I don't tell people a lot about the work because I think they create a mythology around it, which is far more interesting than what it actually is. I give little tidbits in titles, but I like that there's a slight ambiguity—not too much—but enough so people can invent their own stories.

How does the color of your subject influence the way you approach your art?
One thing that I'm very interested in is composition and how interesting the gaze is. Often I'll take a photo of someone—they can be Asian or black or white, and I just really like their face. I want to take their face and put it into this image. Of course, that could be me just inventing a character too—I'm not going to deny that—but a lot of times, it's the face. It's hard to describe. Sometimes, I see something in a photo and think, that'd be really interesting to draw. What would that mean if I drew that, and how would it take on a different sort of identity or form if I took these things out of context and recreated it in this way? A lot of my work is decontextualized—there's no background because there's enough information on the face as it is. I don't need to give it some fields of glory and Tuscan villas.

You work primarily with pen and ink—are you thinking of incorporating any other tools?
Yeah. I have acrylic ink underneath, markers, ink wash, and I work with a variety of surfaces. It's all white background when you see it digitally, but the actual surface could be a really glossy board or a really toothy paper and that literally looks completely different in person than when it's scanned and put online. The surface is very important because the tactility of the work is really, really interesting. The geography to me is the story, and when you create something that's very sort of striated, and heavily layered and textured, that to me is like a story. You read that story through those lines—the surface of that is also equally important. If you have a very rough textured paper, that adds to the story of the face. I hope I don't do pen ink the rest of my life. I'm sure that'll probably destroy me in a few years.

You give the viewer access to your work on your site. Why?
One of the reasons I wanted to start the blog is because I wanted to show people the process of the work and also how boring it is. When I started the blog in 2009 there was this sort of myth around artists. Being an artist is not that grand. It's you, alone in a studio, drawing or painting, and it is very tedious and repetitive. Sometimes you'll go over things and it won't look like change, but it is a huge change for you, so

I would always update those things on my page. It is a very long process. But that's why you do it—you do it because you love it.

Do you think people have more of an appreciation for the process since they can see it on your blog?
Yeah. The demystifying aspect of it, I think, really attracts people, 'cause it's just very barebones. And I tell them each stage, or I play coy. For the most part, I think people appreciate something that's straightforward. I think for some artists it's better economically for them not to talk about their process, and that's fine—that's their business.

How so?
I was talking to someone in grad school and they were like, I would never post my process, someone might steal it.

I don't know if I decided to take my ballpoint and draw something if that'd work out.
If someone happens to steal my process, good for them, 'cause it's extremely tedious. If they can do it, I will personally come up to them and hug them and say, "You too, you too—great!" But I like the blog format because it also allows me to backtrack. I can go back and see things from a piece I did a month ago. How did I work that part out? How did I do that? You know, it actually helps me work with future work, so it serves both ways.

Who are some of your favorite artists?
Oh god! How much time do you have? I loveLucien Freud, almost obsessively. I cannot not say Kara Walker, because then I'd be doing a disservice to all black women artists—everywhere. Kerry James Marshall, of course. Gosh! There are a butt-load of Chinese artists, but I can't remember their names right now. At. All. It's a shame, 'cause they're really good. Korehiko Hino, he's a Japanese painter—really great painter. A lot of Japanese manga, which people would never think, but I love Japanese manga. I've read it since I was in grade school, and a lot of my style came from it. Uh, I should give cool answers, shouldn't I?

No. You don't want it to be a typical list, you want people to go and look it up. You got Kara Walker in there.
Yea, I got the prerequisites down. But yeah, it's a variety.

Why the Chinese artists?
One of the things that's happening now is there are a lot of Chinese artists in blogs and art magazines. And so you read them, and you say, "Wow, that's visually striking, and it's so different aesthetically from anything I've seen before." A lot of that work is coming from a different historical perspective, so a lot of what they're painting, and colors they're using, and the styles are just a different reference from what a Western-influenced artist has. It's very inspiring to me because it says I can break the rules and still be aesthetically pleasing.

I really believe formally in work. I think sometimes there's a lot about the message and not about how formal it is, and beauty—if you dare say the word—they're very beautiful works. A lot of these Chinese painters and draftsmen and printmakers make just really powerful stuff—very detailed. For me, if you put a lot of detail and a lot of time into the work, it's a gift to the viewer: I'm gorging on this—it's so beautiful and luscious! That's sort of what I'm really interested in—opulence and aesthetic.
China is a ways away—you're in Alabama right now. What's the art scene like there?
It's very crafty. It's interesting. I'm actually right next to a collective called Lowe Mill, and they own studios that you rent out, and they're pretty nice. There are a lot of people here that have gallery representation in New York. It's super-cheap to live here, and you just go to New York when you have to work—that's your job. I've always thought I was going to move to New York at some point—it's like what you do. But right now, with student loans and everything, it's not really feasible—the dream is not practical.

What's next?
There are a lot of group shows all over the States. They're all kind of happening. It's exciting. I'm kind of shocked that people want me in their museums and galleries. I always look at my work and think, this is so weird—people are gonna think my drawings are aliens. My brother always walks in and says, "Why do you draw me so weird?" Sorry, it's kind of what I like.

Bell, Alexandra. "Q&A: Toyin Odutola on Drawing, Chinese Art, and What It Really Means to Have a Big Head." *The Village Voice*, 7 November 2012: illustrated.

CRITIC'S PICK TOYIN ODUTOLA

Toyin Odutola's diptych *Default Position (Study)*, 2011, drawn with pen and marker on paper.

Toyin Odutola was in her first year of the MFA program at the California College of the Arts when alumnus Hank Willis Thomas—an artist whose work she so admired that it had influenced her choice of graduate school—came to deliver a lecture. When Odutola wasn't selected for a studio visit with Thomas, the Nigerian-born artist made a personal appeal. "After his talk, I introduced myself and said, 'Hey, I love your work and if you have a chance, maybe I could show you mine.' He literally looked at me and said, 'No.'"

But shortly thereafter, Odutola, now 26, learned that the visiting artist had stopped by her studio. As Thomas tells it, he felt guilty that he'd denied her request and looked around her studio when she wasn't there. Taken with her painstakingly detailed ballpoint-pen portraits of African American subjects, Thomas sent images of her drawings to his gallerist, Jack Shainman. Last spring, Odutola had her first solo show at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York. "Every time I see Hank, I tell him I owe him my first born," she says. Her works now sell for between $3,200 and $12,000.

Odutola moved to Northern California from Nigeria at the age of five, and later relocated to Alabama when her father, a chemist, took a job there. Feeling isolated in her new environment, Odutola began to draw more frequently. She went on to study art at the University of Alabama, Huntsville, where the foundations of her labor-intensive style emerged.

Toyin Odutola.

Odutola starts with a rough sketch on board or paper. She sometimes incorporates shards of color, adding acrylic ink or marker, then builds up the drawing with layer upon layer of ballpoint pen. The result is a richly textured portrait set against a stark white background. "The pen and ink is like a container that reveals and also hides," says the artist, who usually depicts friends and family. "The more information I give in terms of mark-making or texture, the more the person's state of mind is revealed."

A fan of storytelling—Odutola counts the writer Zadie Smith among her influences—she has begun to explore narrative in multipanel works. In a diptych titled *Default Position (Study)*, 2011, a young shirtless man hunches over, staring meekly off in the distance in one panel. In the other, he sits upright, directly addressing the viewer. Odutola is also experimenting with larger formats. Glancing at a 20-by-30-inch portrait-in-progress of her brother, she says, half-joking, "This one's going to kill me." ***—Rebecca Spence***

Rebecca Spence is a writer based in Berkeley, California. She is currently at work on her first novel.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Toyin Odutola creates viscerally stunning, intricately detailed images that are redefining the perception of contemporary African art, how we look at the world and how we view ourselves. The Nigerian-born, American-raised artist employs a painstakingly thorough creative process that uses rudimentary tools – ballpoint pens, ink and paper – to investigate perceptions of 'blackness', gender and place. Seems like a handful for an artist who is just going into the second year of her Masters in Fine Arts at California College of the Arts. Already Odutola's street buzz has caught the eye of both major collectors and celebrities, such as Solange Knowles. This spring she opened her first major solo exhibition, MAPS, at New York's Jack Shainman gallery. As expected, it was an instant hit.

Since 2004 San Francisco-based Odutola's artistic practice has evolved from imaginary into a more sequential cinematic narrative, featuring herself as the subject. Her work, both simple and detailed at the same time, stimulates a dialogue between the artist and the viewer. And it has a rawness – in part due to the medium of ballpen, part due to its microscopic imagery – that leaves the viewer in an emotional trance as they seek to decode it. What is striking about Odutola's work is the absence of the typical cultural tropes associated with many popular contemporary African artists.
"If I were too specific about my Nigerian identity, it would become this eroticisation of Nigeria," she says. "I don't feel like I'm an accurate participant in creating that narrative."

Using her artistic platform as a conduit for women to create their own narrative, Odutola believes that, "we are active participants in decolonising our own spaces" and her art is a catalyst that ignites fresh debate around concepts of self. Certainly at the show opening in May, there was much discussion about what her imagery represented, literally, between the lines. "In many ways, it's an exploration of the limits and possibilities of contradiction," she told Think Africa Press. "The ability to transfer experiential geography onto a person never fails to excite me."

WORDS **LARRY OSSEI-MENSAH**

☐ *www.toyinodutola.com*
☐ *tobia.tumblr.com*

Expanding the Aesthetic Horizon

SHARON F. PATTON

IN COLLECTING ART BY ARTISTS OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA, our lives are enriched, a legacy is achieved and artistic representation of the African Diaspora is secured. To acquire art, especially most recent art, is to assume a degree of risk. But it is praiseworthy. It is faith in a creative undertaking that has been underserved and under-represented in the global art community.

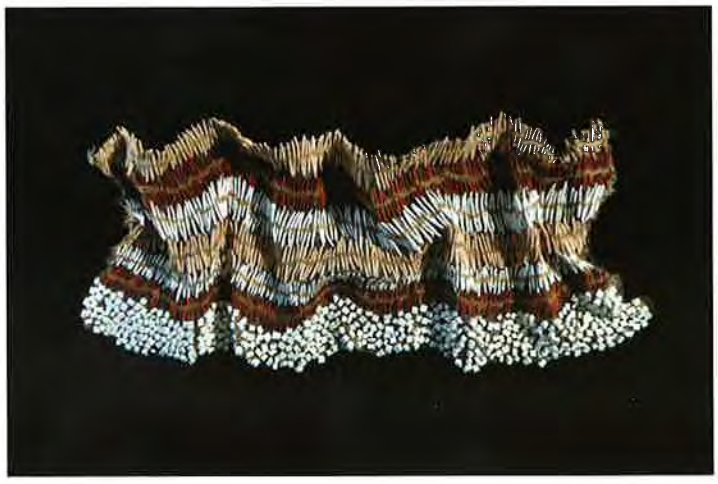
Overall the art represented in this issue shows an aesthetic that denotes hybridity — a vibrant cross-fertilization of cultures and artistic genres. Familiar signifiers such as race, gender, sexuality, and social and political inequities, continue as before. Very evident among these artists' works is an interest in history, specifically mid-20th century modernism (which reflects their academic training). Not surprisingly, given recent reports on global demographics which show population shifts to cities, urbanity is the dominant visual context for much of the art today. And while the black body continues as a powerful visual metaphor of dislocation and difference, these artists are skeptical yet optimistic.

A growing number of African-born artists have joined and enriched the international art scene. Among them are Nnenna Okore and Toyin Odutola. Okore's monumental wall sculptures — dyed and braided fiber, clay, burlap, handmade and recycled paper — as in *Akwa Ocha* (2009) are akin to works by El Anatsui. *When the Heavens Meet the Earth* (2011) exemplifies the cacophony of texture and color that typifies Okore's works where fluidity juxtaposes structure and opacity juxtaposes transparency, creating a simulacrum of nature and biology.

Odutola's figurative drawings meticulously rendered in pen and/or acrylic ink are hypnotic as in *Uncertain, Yet Reserved (Abuja Airport Nigeria)* (2012). A singular black figure surrounded by white surface is a foil upon which we ascribe our prejudices, fears and prohibitions. Our respective perception of blackness is unavoidable as a formal metaphorical subject.

Deborah Grant's large collage-paintings and collages are a refreshing conflation of biography, social history and art history. Adroitly using familiar Dadaist/Surrealist techniques with underlying anarchistic humor, Grant provides a skewed commentary and succinct narrative about an alternative art history of modernism as shown in *By the Skin of Our Teeth* (2001), a series based on the life of Bill Traylor, and *The Provenance and Crowning of King William,* (2012) based on the life and art of William H. Johnson.

One of the few artists who closely approximate the inter-relationship between visual arts and modern music is Jennie C. Jones. Actual recording media such as tapes or CD boxes or abstract paintings, all of which are stylistically Minimalist, mimic musical scores when installed, e.g., *Acoustic Paintings* (2011, part of an installation titled *Absorb/Diffuse*). Jazz and avant-garde music contrasts with devices from which no sound is emitted. The presence and absence of sound within a particular



Nnenna Okore
Egwu Ukwu, 2009.
clay and burlap, 30 x 65 x 7"

Nnenna Okore
When the Heavens Meet the Earth, 2011
burlap, dye and acrylic, varied dimensions.

(top right)
Jennie Jones
Semitone-Bar, 2011
acoustic absorber panel, black gesso and acrylic glaze on canvas, 24 x 48"

(top left)
Resonance at 1/3, 2011
acoustic absorber panel, 'carbon black' & fluorescent acrylics on canvas, 24 x 48"

(left)
Deep Tone, 2011
acoustic absorber panel, black gesso and acrylic glaze on canvas, 24 x 48"
Courtesy of the artist.

installation format allude to memory and the obsolescence of culture and the manner in which we engage it.

In *Oh, Johnnie Ray (My Brother)* (2010) or *The Long Jump by Carl Lewis* (2010), color saturation, brevity of line, simple shapes — cityscapes and people reminiscent of figurative expressionist paintings of the 1950s — come to mind when I see Henry Taylor's paintings. Figures and objects jostle in the same spatial plane, giving the illusion of compressed space. This effect of spatial tension enhances Taylor's point of view about urban communities and the people who inhabit them.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's oil paintings recall 18th and 19th century Western portrait paintings — dark colored background, full-length figure, layering of color to affect light and form, and fluid brushwork. However Yiadom-Boakye's prosaic "portraits" are fictional composites of people she has met or observed, each displaying a casual indulgence and self-awareness that is enigmatic and disarming as in *11 pm Friday* (2010). Devoid of any meaningful clues surrounding each figure, we are left to form our own narrative, which reveals as much about ourselves as that which we infer about the figure depicted.

Portraits may be unflinchingly realistic. LaToya Ruby Frazier's black-and-white photographs of her family in *The Notion of Family: Family Work* (2002–2009) or herself in *The Homebody Series* (2010) verge on excess — "too real, too painful," as one critic wrote. Not polemical, they exude a raw honesty that alters the connotation of 'family' and provides vivid insight about institutional failure and personal vulnerability. And yet this photographic compendium documents an unwavering familial bond and individual steeliness.

Jefferson Pinder's signature medium is video, often showing him in some type of physical exertion, a metaphor about struggle being needed to achieve one's goal. His videos and performances are personal commentaries about racism, freedom, survival, transcendence, perseverance and disenfranchisement as in *K-Street Installation — Gate Keepers* (2010). History, popular culture and theater fuse in succinct performances about black culture and history as in *The Escape Artist* (2011–12) which refers to the 1931 lynching of Matthew Williams in a straightjacket in Salisbury, Md. Pinder adeptly samples different cultures and media to make insightful critiques of modern and contemporary society as shown in *Afro-Cosmonaut/Alien (White Noise)* (2008). The plot is the classical myth of Icarus enacted as Butoh theater. The backdrop is a film of NASA rocket launches, while an audio of Civil Rights oration and NASA Flight Control plays. The symbolic rise and fall of a black man becomes a post-modernist critique of the Civil Rights Movement and mainstream U.S. society.

These and other contemporary works reproduced in the collecting section of this issue show that artists of the 21st century African Diaspora are a part of a generation of artists who are not conceptually and intellectually moored to a specific place or locale. Born in United States, Western Europe or Africa, residing in U.S., Europe, Africa and Asia (sometimes with multi-residences), they see the world as their 'home' and

Toyin Odutola
Uncertain, yet Reserved, (Adeola, Abuja Airport, Nigeria), 2012
pen ink and acrylic ink on board
20 x 30"
Courtesy of the artist and the Jack Shainman Gallery

Henry Taylor
The Long Jump by Carl Lewis, 2010
acrylic on canvas, 87 ½ x 77"
Courtesy the artist and Untitled, New York. © 2011 Henry Taylor. On view at MoMA PS1 January 29–April 09, 2012.

have discovered that others share similar social and economic grievances and individual aspirations.

Unquestionably each artist's experiences infuse his or her work with a particular perspective of racial consciousness. But to categorize their work as African American art, as if there is a unifying unique aesthetic, is a disservice to how they view themselves and what their work reflects.

The collectors, who own works by the artists mentioned here, share a vision that the African Diaspora has and will invigorate contemporary visual arts and enhance the international art scene. Such collectors are audacious. And the venture is most rewarding — acquiring work by an artist of the African Diaspora. Collector and artist are mutually expanding their aesthetic horizon for the benefit of all of us.

Sharon F. Patton, Ph.D., is an art historian and former director of the National Museum of African Art and the Allen Memorial Museum at Oberlin College.

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Redefining “Blackness”: An interview with Toyin Odutola

DECEMBER 18, 2012 BY ZACHARY ROSEN

The richly layered portraits of Nigerian-American artist Toyin Odutola have been on the Africa is a Country radar for quite some time. Painstakingly created with marker and ballpoint pen, Toyin’s drawings have been making waves in the art world and across social media platforms. Aesthetically striking in their own right, Toyin’s unique style sparks important questions about the concept of identity. Her pieces tempt us to wonder about the identities that society projects onto us and more reflectively, how we have been sculpted by time into who we are at any given moment.

2012 has been an important year for Toyin’s progression as an artist. She received her MFA from California College of the Arts, published her first book of drawings — *Alphabet*, completed two residencies, including one at the legendary Tamarind Institute and exhibited works in numerous group shows including the “Fore” exhibition which is currently running at the Studio Museum in Harlem until March 10, 2013. With a major solo exhibition lined up at the Jack Shainman Gallery in April, the year 2013 is poised to be quite notable for Toyin as well.

We spoke with Toyin about her thoughts on post-racial aesthetics, perceptions of “African” art, androgynous figures and the nostalgic crystallization of past selves through portraiture.

Your predominant style of drawing involves creating a figure with many layers of ink, do the layers contribute to the mapping of the skin’s geography?

Absolutely, in the sense that the process of making layering, is, in essence, geography. I think a lot of people look at my style and they think it’s a means to an end, but honestly it’s the only factor. I think about what other people read in the work and it’s interesting, they find other things that they like, but for me it’s

always been the skin. The skin is the most interesting thing. And it's the reason I go into it as hard as I do. Many people will say "I really like the eyes," or "I really like how you draw the hair," but to me that's embellishment for the skin. It all boils down to the skin. The whole geography of skin thing has kind of shifted I guess, with color — the sort of color pieces that I'm working on — because I think people are seeing that the language is expanding. So for them it's like, well, are you trying to create a whole new geography, an imagined geography, as opposed to something that's a little bit more personal to the subject or grounded to reality in any way. I never really was grounded to reality, at all. My work doesn't look like anything in the real world. So for me it's always been an abstraction — but it's an abstraction that is the lie that creates the reality. In the abstraction something real comes forth.

From some of your earlier interviews and then through your book, the way you actually talk about the skin and blackness has evolved and shifted.

I definitely sense that, but I'm also a bit nervous about it, because when I started this whole thing — around 2009 — it was just a means of making me not go crazy, honestly. It was so immersive and I could just lose myself in the meditative form of repetitive archs and puzzle-like form that I would never pay attention to the fact I was homeless and I had no job and I was really depressed. From that really dark place, I gained sort of a thing. For me every time I see the transition I remember that dark place because it was the reason I started.

Discovering and finding comfort in your own identity is a major theme of your book *Alphabet*, how has your art evolved as your conception of your identity has evolved?

Alphabet was my thesis. The way you present a thesis in my school (CCA) is that you have to talk about everything that your work is about. The program was really immersive and so they wanted you to provide a thorough context for your work. Alphabet became an Oprah Winfrey session, where I just poured out everything and Alphabet, the book, was a much-abridged version of that. It was both cathartic and nice to get it published, like a form, and say: this is my life. On the one hand, I'm this black woman artist, but on the other hand I come from a very specific identity and a very specific string of events. Some of it is recognizable to people and some of it is not. Alphabet was a shift happening in me and I wanted to record it, and I did, and my work has changed with it.

Often in popular discourse, the term "African" is not simply a geographical descriptor, it comes with cultural projections, As a Nigerian-American artist, to what extent is your artwork labeled "African" and how appropriate do you find that branding?

I'm proud that it's called "African". And I'll say that without having an illusion of what Africa is tied onto. Because my work and many works like it are whistleblowers to the illusion of Africa. I think there's this idea that African artists have this soulfulness that is inherent in the continent and create these grand narratives. But what I'm doing is, literally, drawing people. In a very basic way. With a pen. And that sort of resourcefulness is very African I think. Because you take something that seems very rudimentary, and you really go ham on. That might be something that is distinctly African. On the other hand, I'm specific to being Nigerian, so when I hear "African" it just seems like they're lumping me into something immediately and not taking the time to research me. It's annoying because whenever people talk about art history they just talk about Europe; so when you hear artists say "I'm a European artist" people are like "Okay, but say you're Italian." They take the time to be specific with Europeans so why can't they take the time to be specific with me? It just seems kind of lazy.

Sometimes it is a good tag. Sometimes it is not. It's a love-hate thing. So, again, whenever I hear "African" I don't really know how to respond to it. I feel very proud to be a part of something that up to this point has been used very negatively; something that has been excluded or omitted in the art world. So it's really nice to be someone who comes from that continent and says, "Hey I have a voice and you better listen because I have a right to it." On the other hand it's getting old because it's 2012 and people still don't know where Nigeria is located. It's always going to be a struggle, probably for the rest of our lives, sadly. Maybe when I'm 40 people will be like, "I totally know where Nigeria is, I totally know about this culture." The way that they know about France.

As a follow up to that, what do you think when some exhibitions are curated as a collection of "African" artists and they box you in to being an "African" artist as opposed to being a simply an artist?

I just returned from a show of African-American artists ["Fore"] and that was really interesting. I think that was the first time in New York where I was with some high class African-American people. A majority. It's fascinating to me because we need those things. That's the sad thing. It's because of our society that we need those exhibitions, even though they're something of a double-edged sword in their own way: they're limiting us to a very specific way of seeing the world — but what they're aiming to do is bring that specificity for people to come in and they see our universe. But how many people are going to go in without some kind of preconceived notion?

I think whenever anyone lumps me into an African genre, again I'm proud to be in that show, I'm happy that that show even exists, but I don't want it just to be black people coming to the show, or only Africans. Yes my work deals with that subject matter, but that doesn't mean you can't come and see it if you are Asian, Latino or Caucasian. It doesn't matter to me. It's the fact that you're even allowing the time to investigate my work. That is why that African show is needed — often times a lot of black artists aren't included in shows, unless you're a super mega artist. If you're an emerging artist, you need that kind of exposure early on in your career. Not everyone is Kara Walker or Glenn Ligon, for whom it of course also took a while to be who they are. I mean Julie Mehretu took a minute to be Julie Mehretu and she wasn't even dealing with representational work. It is what it is.

Your works often explore elements of "blackness", though your portraits depict people with a variety of cultural backgrounds; do you consider the redefinition of "blackness" in your work to be post-racial?

Oooh. That's such a dirty and weird word, "post-racial". Thelma Golden is the one who started the idea of post-racial in the 90's. I don't think we're post-racial, ever, until people stop thinking about race. Which is not possible. One of the things that I like about Hank Willis Thomas — the air I breathe — is that he is such a genius in undermining the ridiculousness of race. I posted a video where he boils it down, he says, "[race] has been the most successful marketing ploy in the history of the world." I just love that. And it's totally true. Because everything that we think about another race is false. It's completely false. The whole thing about blackness for me is that I wanted to make the work as dark as possible when I started because I'm a dark person and I wanted to capture what it feels like to be black. And then it just evolved. I started thinking, what if I draw this Asian guy as dark as possible…what does he become? Does he become black because I draw it or because they think he's black? I even did his hair the way he has it. And still people will be like, "Oh. What is she trying to say?" And I'm like, "No, it's an Asian guy that I just drew this way." Suddenly it's about my experience and my blackness and it's not about him at all anymore and that's a really fascinating process for me to digest. I'm the devil's advocate when it comes to blackness. It's always going to fascinate me because I've been treated a certain way since I was a child because of my blackness, which has been imposed on me. So for me to explore that in my work is to question why I was treated this way and how people read other people.

To me the interesting thing about blackness now is the pen. When you see a black pen, it's not black at all. I love the moment when people see my work in person and they're like, "Oh, but it's not really black?" Taadaa! That's why I use pen. Because it's not black. The ink is not black.

These days, if you draw a black figure, because you're coming from a place where you've tried to understand blackness as a concept, are you drawing that figure with a narrative of blackness or is it simply to say this is a person and we don't have to deconstruct a racial message?

Blackness was a concept in my earlier work. It didn't have to do with the person, it had to do with the concept of blackness, literally, because I wouldn't even give them names. I would call them "female this" or "boy that". I didn't really think about people until 2011. It was just: here's a person who is black. And black in

itself is twisted, because that is a material description. So before, I was definitely aware of the history of blackness in aesthetics, especially representational aesthetics. When you're doing portraiture and you're a black person and you're portraying black figures, there's always going to be a loaded history. I had to go through that to get where I am now, which is a very freeing place, where the black figures that I make can be various. The work isn't limited to that history anymore. And I think it has to do with the time that we're in. People are more free to be themselves and they're black, whereas before you had to represent blackness so much and you had to sacrifice a little bit of yourself to do that. Now it's more like I want to be me and me can be all of these things at once and have nothing to do with black social representation at all.

I actually am a super formalist — a dirty word in art school. No one wants you to be a formalist, you have to have a message. I look at Lucian Freud because he really was the embodiment of his craft being the message. The time it took, the labor, the way of looking at a person, that was the message. Because he drew predominantly white people so no one really assumed anything else. Take Elizabeth Peyton for example. The thing that really infuriates me is that I can't be an Elizabeth Peyton: painting and drawing people in my life, who aren't famous and who have no significance besides my connection to them, but I draw them in this way where I'm full-on adorning these people and all the public has to do is digest them as pretty. Peyton's gotten a little more political recently doing portraits of Kanye West, but of course black people, they're always political. That's when her message shifted. I think for me the moment I came out to do the work it was considered political, because it's the idea of seeing black men, black women, androgynous figures overall, being presented in this way was very different so of course I'm going to have to push a message with everything. But in the end I just want everybody to think "That's a really pretty blue." "I like that lash right there." Because that's what I see. I see the lashes, I see the fine points, but no one wants to focus on that because it trivializes a bigger issue and I understand that. The bigger issue is that we still have issues of representation in this country and that's a fucking big problem. Sometimes it's very frustrating to be an artist in that arena and you're like, "I don't want to always have to represent everyone." But at the same time I have to, because no one else will. It's the great burden of post-racial artists.

Do you think in your lifetime you'll be able to get to a place where you'll be able to transcend race with your art?

If you look at black history, especially women artists, usually the moment when they get famous for being what I'm seeking out is the moment they die. Think Zora Neale Hurston or Josephine Baker, women who

were very specific about not looking just at race, just at social representation, but rather at the artform itself. Time had to shift. But then I think about people like Toni Morrison who in every essence created works where the foundation has been about blackness and black representation, but she's transcended it completely. And she's still alive and she's still kicking it, but when people think about Toni Morrison, what's the first think they think about? "Mmm hmmm Negro Spiritual" [singing]. And she's more than that. So maybe when she passes away – and I don't wish that upon her – but chances are, that's when it's gonna shift. Same with brilliant luminaries like bell hooks and Octavia Butler. I don't know, maybe in my lifetime…I'm not holding my breath though.

Many of your drawings are self-portraits, what drives you to capture many different variations of your own image?

There's a Romare Bearden quote that I posted on my website where he talks about how it's always difficult to draw yourself because you're always at issue, you're always changing, especially if you're an artist because you see everything. Observing yourself is very uncomfortable and you're more attuned to a shift. It's very difficult to draw yourself and think that's it. A mirror isn't the only form that can capture you, you can do it in so many different ways. Noah Kalina, the guy who takes his photograph everyday, is a brilliant example of that. The idea that you're always at issue, you're always changing even when you look exactly the same, with the exact same face, everything is shifting. I draw myself because I want to capture a shift. That's why I always get tattoos, they're temporal, they represent a time that's passed. It's a moment to take a break and look at myself properly. It's not just how I look, it's what has happened. As James Baldwin says, "Where I've been and what I've been."

The reason I started doing self portraits in the first place was to see myself. Not just in a mirror or in a photo, To really take the time and look. Through that I'm getting at the psychology of looking, I'm really getting at what I was thinking, what I was feeling. There are moments when I think, "Oh my god I hate my face," but I also have moments where I think — and it sounds totally narcissistic and it's not meant to be — "I have a really interesting face." It's the same reason why I'll draw my brothers 'til the day I die, because they have the most interesting faces. Especially my youngest brother. He's 6'7" and he's got these huge eyes and he's always looking at me with this look of incredulity. He's like "Really?" I love that. He has so many variations of that "really?" He can do "really?" from the back. He can do "really?" from the side. He can do "really?" looking up.

You were born in Ife, Nigeria, but you have lived much of your life in California and Alabama, all very different cultural environments. How has this plural cultural experience shaped your artwork?

It's helped in color. It's helped in tone. It's helped in creating puzzle-like forms. I always go back to memory when I work. For me it's constant. They're not even places I have lived in the past tense, they're always relived in a way. I'm still there and they're still shaping me.

Your drawings portray people not only as they are, but often as they were at some previous time; is there a certain nostalgia captured in your pieces for the selves of moments passed?

It's all nostalgia. It's all about time. The reason why I'm always obsessed with capturing myself is because I know I'm never going to be that way ever again. There's this piece I did called *All these garlands prove nothing* (2012), which I made when I had super long hair. That piece got damaged in Hurricane Sandy and I was really bummed about it. It wasn't the only one that got damaged, but it was the one that was hit the most. There's a lot of emotion involved with the series I'm working on now. It's the idea of literally something lost and what you do in response to that. So I started drawing all the hairstyles I've ever had. Which are a lot actually. I had this punk thing, I had an afro, I had long hair. You'd think I was schizophrenic, but it really was just me trying to discover myself and figure out what I can get away with. While I'm working on this piece, even though I'm spending a lot of time on the details, I'm aware that people are not going to see that or it has the potential to be gone. All that time I spent doesn't matter anymore. The piece doesn't exist in that same way again. That was a big wake up call recently. The amount of time I spend on my work and what it really means. Does the time spent equal the time that's lost?

Some of the figures in your drawings appear androgynous, is there a message about gender that you are trying to convey through such pieces?

I am a huge fan of androgyny. I think more people should be androgynous in portrayals. I embrace the masculine and feminine side of myself and I like to explore that in my drawings. When I draw my brothers in particular, I exploit the feminine. I always give them huge lashes and I always capture them in poses that are not quintessential black male poses. There's one piece that's based on a photo I took at the Abuja airport, which is absolute chaos, where my brother's head is cocked up and there's a tinge of terror in his eyes. He was trying so hard to be this calm, cool black dude. I loved that. I called the piece*Uncertain yet Reserved* (2012) because he was reserving everything. He was trying so hard to hold onto his blackness, his maleness, but he was very scared and neither of us knew what was going on. It's the slight sense of uncertainty where his eyes are wavering. I love that kind of portrayal. The whole point of exploiting that gender construct is to get at the person and not get at the label that society wants to put on them. It's all about the social construct of an identity and the reality of a person, which are very different things.

I've always been some who's been very androgynous. I'm glad I'm a woman. I love being a woman, but I'm also aware that I have very masculine sides to me. That's something for black women that you don't see a lot.

You are a prolific blogger and instagram user, documenting your artistic process and your musings, does interacting with your audience impact your pieces?

I remember when [blogging] was a really weird thing I did on my own and I had ten friends. It was really personal. It was me. I would go back and I would say, "What did I do with that piece again?" and I would literally go back into my archive and I would look it up and watch the different stages because I was so obsessive about documenting everything. I would watch how I had constructed it. No one else gets it but I do so I would look at those pictures and think, "I got it. I know how I did that piece, now I'm going to apply it to this one." But then suddenly the audience also got involved. There would be questions and it turned into a dialogue. Back then it was a beautiful moment where there were these very cerebral questions that really made me take a step back. I often came up with rather long answers, but it was because I was thinking. What those questions did for me was provide questions for my thesis. Which is what Alphabet is about. That's why I wanted to publish it — because it started on the blog. If I hadn't had those questions I don't

think I would be eloquent enough to talk about my work. Dominick Brady would ask questions, and so would Derica Shields — people like that who were thinking as they were seeing my work. I received really hard-hitting questions where it took me three days to respond to. Now I get the questions where someone asks, “How do you figure out your color palette?” I want to say, “Figure it out yourself!” I’m not going to answer everything. There’s a lot of really young people that follow my blog now and I totally get that because when I was 17 I was also wondering, “What oil medium does Lucian Freud use? Does he use linseed oil? Oh my god.” Can you imagine if Lucian Freud had a blog? I would kill him with questions. Every time I get annoyed with questions I imagine Picasso having a Tumblr, I’m sure people would ask him the same thing. Or Matisse.

On your blog Obia the Third, you often share quotes that resonate with you from the likes of Zadie Smith and Virginia Woolf. How does literature inform your artwork?

Well, it’s really great for titles. I’ve always loved reading ever since I was a kid. I remember the first time I read a Zadie Smith book, who I adore. I think she’s the female literary equivalent of me as an artist because she’s always questioning herself and that’s something I do when I work. I love to read interviews with her equally as much as I love to read her books because they are such brilliant windows into her world. Same with James Baldwin.Interviews with James Baldwin are the Holy Grail. He’s so on it, he’s so aware. I’ve read*Another Country* 50 billion times.

We live in a world where we’re so inundated with visual language that people think they know what they’re seeing when they don’t. So you need literature to hone it into something very specific. I’ve noticed many times when I leave my pieces untitled, peoples’ imaginations will run crazy. So it’s about taking control of what I’m making and getting to a point where I’d like the audience to start from instead of just having them start from wherever they feel like. If you look at any major artist, they have to write something. We can’t just leave it at the art alone anymore. You have to write so you have to know what good literature is. My style is very much a reflection of people I read. Literature allows me to properly talk about my work. If I were ever to meet any of these people I think I would probably cry. I’m terrified too, because I would probably get a restraining order on myself.

But here’s a question, how accessible should writers and artists be? I always question that, especially with my blog. How much is too much? I’m getting to that point where I’m thinking I need to take a break because people start thinking you owe them something. No artist owes you anything. So how accessible do I want to be and how much mystery do I want to keep? I used think mystery was bad for a very long time. I thought I had to be as transparent as possible. And now I’m like, “No, I need to protect myself.” I’ve had a couple shows were people come up and they touch me. And I understand that because I was always someone who was a fan. But now someone is a fan of me, which I find incredibly crazy because I’m a crazy person. Online life and real life interaction is very different for me. If someone is going to message me online, there can be this tone of authority. That’s where I feel the access stops. But if you come up to me in person and you say you just want to talk to me for like 5 minutes, I’ll talk to you. Online it feeds into the fantasy of what I am, but if you talk to me in person you get to see that I’m just me and that I’m awkward and silly.

You've mentioned Hank Willis Thomas, Kara Walker, Kerry James Marshall, Lucian Freud and Korehiko Hino among the artists you admire. Who would you most like to collaborate with?

Hank is N°1 because he's such a good collaborator. He's the collaborator king. Kerry James Marshall too, but I'd be so terrified I probably would end up doing nothing, I'd just watch him the whole time. For a lot of these people I would just want to be in the same studio working with them, but not necessarily literally collaborating. I would love to meetTakehiko Inoue, the guy who did that *Vagabond* series that I love so much. I just want to be in his studio drawing with him. His energy to me is so inspiring. If you see him work he's like a machine. He's making these huge pieces. He's the only reason that I think I have a possibility of doing large work because he's doing ridiculous detail.

Hank Willis Thomas has been a part of your career from early on and has facilitated your development as an artist, he clearly digs your work, so what is preventing the Hank-Toyin collaboration from actually happening?

I feel like he's just so busy, but it's probably gonna happen. Knowing Hank, something's gonna come up. The reason I studied at CCA was because of him. He graduated from that school and I thought if this guy went there and was able to make that kind of work, I am in. He's the reason I'm even having this interview. I joke around a lot, but I owe him so much. He's been so supportive. He's the kind of person that you would want as a mentor because he's honest, he just tells it as it is. In the art world, no one can prepare you for this craziness. It's so nice to have someone to help you navigate because it is treacherous.

So someday. I hope so. Put it on blast. Say, Hank, I'm ready to collaborate.

You have a solo exhibition scheduled for April 2013 at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City, is there a theme that unifies the pieces you will show at that installation?

I'm trying. I'm all over the place because my interests have been all over the place. Ok, I'll give you an Africa is a Country exclusive. Amber. That's all I'm going to say. Every bit of the definition of amber is what I'm really interested in right now. And it's been making sense for the color choices I've been making recently in the last few months. But it's really hard for me to bring pieces together for a show. Even for [my previous show] MAPS it was like two separate shows. There was a lot of older work and then there was a lot of this new sequential work. At the end of the day it's probably going to be that way. Two ways of seeing will

definitely play into it. I have the whole gallery this time, which terrifies me. I'm excited, but I'm also dreading it a little bit because I really don't know what people are thinking. At all.

There are a lot of people saying I should do a life-sized portrait. I've done full body before. For me whenever I introduce naked bodies it's a whole other conversation. Do I want to have that conversation? I've had people be annoyed that I don't do full bodies and I just say, "Trust me. There's a reason I don't do naked bodies." I did it before and people think, "Oh my god those are her boobs!" First thing. And then of course it becomes this thing about slavery. People say I'm commentating on that, which I never am. I might do one and make it really uncomfortable for people. Something really inappropriate. And maybe then they will get off my back. But they'll probably want more. They'll say, "Why don't you do 5 more of those pieces?" The full body thing is interesting in the sense of doing something like Laylah Ali's *Greenheads*; something that deals with a narrative. If I present a naked body, it's going to be a group of them doing something. And I don't want it to be referring to some classical arrangement, I want it to be its own story, in its own world. And that takes time and planning and you really have to know what you want to do ahead of time, which I never do. So it's not something that's out of my purview.

In the letter A in *Alphabet* you describe the people you've been during your lifetime; who are you at this very moment?

Still trying to figure that out. I'd say I'm very indecisive. Unsatisfied. A completely self-indulgent draftswoman who came back to the South because she needs to find grounding at a crazy crazy time. Someone who's questioning her very image and the mythology around people more than ever.

All these garlands prove nothing II (2012)

*Toyin was born in Ife, Nigeria and raised largely in Alabama. Her self-published book*Alphabet *is available here. Find Toyin on Tumblr, Instagram and Twitter. As a tribute to the manner in which Toyin methodically documents her artwork on her blog, the images above illustrate the progression of how her portraits come to life. Some excerpts from the video interview can be found on YouTube.*

The New York Times

Museum and Gallery Listings for June 17-23

Published: June 16, 2011

Art

★ **Toyin Odutola: 'Maps'** (through June 25) Using ballpoint pens and other drawing utensils, this young artist, born in Nigeria and living in San Francisco, makes a polished New York solo debut with small portraits. Each one, derived from photographs of friends but incorporating Ms. Odutola's features, looks to have been weaved from strips of dark, ductile, sinewy material, then finished with hair-fine details. Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 West 20th Street , (212) 645-1701, jackshainman.com. (Cotter)

VOGUE ITALIA

http://www.vogue.it/en/vogue-black

It must be every artists dream, that whilst obsessing over a piece of work in the studio some magic is taking place in the outside world that lands you a gallerist and a sold out show in New York.

For **Toyin Odutola**, her dream came true, one year in to graduate school at California College of the arts the Nigerian born artist can barely contain her excitement. Between breathless giggles she describes how a coping mechanism (drawing) became a tool for change and possibly a way to put her name on the map.

"I moved around a lot when I was a child, two of the houses I grew up in have totally disappeared. One was burnt in a

riot, and the other was pulled down." **This sense of instability inspired the Nigerian artist to start drawing aged nine.** "I needed to create something I could take with me wherever I went." What started out as little doodles **have become bold expressions of work that have had an overwhelming reaction.**

Odutola's gallerist **Jack Shainman** describes the artists work as detailed and almost obsessive, but beyond the appearance of the work the artist is making firm declarations. Odutola says that **her work is an exploration of self.** " I kept wanting to push my image as validity, I wanted to see my portrait on a wall and know it was okay." Fans claim to see themselves in Odutola's work, they see a deep resemblance, and they ask the same questions the artist herself: Do you see me? and Can I just exist now? The answers lie in Odutola's work as continues the quest, **hunched over her canvas, pen in hand creating bodies of work that speak to the world.**

Toyin's work is exhibited at the Jack Shainman Gallery until June 25th.

BY Yomi Abiola

Published:
06/09/2011

THINKAFRICAPRESS

Interview with artist Toyin Odutola

blog | 30 May 2011| By Natascha Chtena

Just before the opening of Toyin Odutola's first solo show at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York, I had an extended and unusually honest chat with the young artist, discussing the 'anatomy' of her technique, perceptions of 'Blackness', politics of identity and artistic convergence amongst many, many things. And behind the "hottest young African import" to the US, I discovered an artist that is painfully aware of every aspect, every second of her creative process.

How does it feel having your first solo show in New York?

I am ecstatic! Sure, there's a multitude of adjectives that come to mind, but nothing truly captures the pride, nervousness and excitement that is consuming me at this moment. I am eternally grateful to my family and friends for helping me reach this point. It's an amazing opportunity.

How is living in California different compared to living in Nigeria?

California is a bit of a strange entity. It encompasses the mythology of the vast, open West: full of infinite possibility, otherworldliness, the unknown frontier; yet, it's choc-full of welcoming pocket communities of the most esoteric kind. Truth be told, grad school requires a considerable mount of concentration and a slowness that is difficult to jump into if too distracted by one's environs. In San Francisco, there's just the right amount of hustle and bustle with a settled calm of a small town. You feel comforted, and yet, you also feel the need to push yourself, to test the waters within a sort of laboratory that is a very peculiar city.

Do you miss home, do you see yourself going back?

The last time I visited Nigeria was back in 2001. It's an incredibly beautiful and vibrant country, full of various textures and tones in the human landscape exemplified through skin, culture, language and history—all of which have been inspiring to my work. Lately, I feel a distance. I do miss it. Being in a sort of limbo state, I identify very much as a Nigerian American, but my birthplace, family heritage and genealogy all harken back to Nigeria. It's a strange place to be in: belonging and not quite belonging, always balancing one's personal affiliations. Also, being of both Yoruba and Igbo decent makes me sort of an anomaly in the Nigerian community, which only adds to my personal feelings of displacement. In any case, I would very much like to visit; I'd planned on doing so this summer, however my plans fell through.

Are you at all in touch with the arts scene in Nigeria? Could you tell us a bit about it?

Sadly, not so much. I've just started scratching the surface, from the little bits of information I've acquired. I've only recently discovered El Anatsui's work, as well as the Center for Contemporary Art in Lagos. From those two discoveries I've been exposed to a plethora of artists and movements unbeknownst to me before, and it's incredibly inspiring! It certainly makes me seriously consider the possibility of working in Nigeria at some point in the future.

How did your parents "react" to your talent and how do they comment on your work now?

There's a commonly cited joke on the reactions Nigerian parents will display upon the discovery that their child intends on pursuing the arts. It's a terrifying notion to them: uncontrollable laughter, flailing arms, screams of agony, tears of failure and resentment, profuse kneeling at the alter and deeply reverberating prayers and songs are exerted. The idea that their son or daughter is willing to take a risk for the entirety of their adult career, as in to voluntarily sacrifice certainty for the sake of art-making, is a foreign concept to parents who have worked so hard to prevent their children from ever being in too precarious a situation financially.

So they don't approve of the artist lifestyle for their daughter?

I remember the first time I mentioned the very idea of it to my parents and was immediately met with a scoff and a near fainting incident. But I persisted; and I must say, compared to other Nigerian parents in the small town I grew up, mine were by far more supportive and tolerable of my explorations into this field than my fellow Nigerian mates, I think. My parents invested in my inclination, my need to keep at it—much to their chagrin at first—but eventually, it all paid off (at least, I hope that is what they think). Nowadays, they seem exuberant. They are very open to my being an artist and supported my grad school aspirations with pleasure. It's a gift really, for I know how difficult it must have been for them to throw caution to the wind hoping, in the end, it would all be for the best. Concerning my "lifestyle", they accept me as is and love me regardless of what I do or whom I appear to be, which is very refreshing.

How long did it take you before you "settled" on the technique and aesthetic you are now employing?

The beginnings of this style came about in 2004 as an inquisition—playing with the planes of the human form, namely through the rendering of skin. It was my response to a Figure Drawing assignment I had to tackle during my undergrad foundation studies. Since then, I've been enamored with this idea of analyzing the skin in the form of landscapes and scarification. Every detail of information, on and of the skin, is abstracted and manipulated in a way that renders it recognizable yet foreign. In many ways, this style is an exploration of the limits as well as the possibilities of contradiction; the ability to transfer experiential geography onto a person, it never fails to excite me.

Could you elaborate on that?

I've gradually adjusted the style in time to a smother surface, a more seductive presentation from the harsher more graphic drawings of its beginnings. Although the style is still quite graphic, I'm far more interested in how it has become a sort of specified visual language I've created for myself. No longer am I too concerned with my subjects being directly recognizable in any sort of...anatomically accurate way; nor am I too concerned with stringently comparing and/or contrasting it to the expansive visual language the history of Pan-African representative portraiture has to offer, which obviously greatly influences the work.

But with what?

Currently, I'm more engaged with where the style begins to transcend one's notions of skin and placement. If someone is rendered in a way that is fundamentally dermal and experiential, but somehow separate, it leaves a space for one to implant his/her ideas of belonging and not belonging, possession and freedom from it. Formally, I am very settled on a sort of minimalist presentation (pertaining to the subject/ground relationship). Although most of the action takes place on the skin itself, the aesthetic exposes how the subject interacts within a decontextualized space. The actions which the subject partakes in (as in this "terrain of one's being") is contrasted by the un-colonized space she inhabits and explores. This binary tension is exploited in the obsessively layered mark-making employed. In the end, what I hope to reveal is that the territory being explored is the

subject herself, not the imposed context surrounding them, and what it means to explore the geography of a stranger and find yourself hidden within that person.

Have you ever tried working with color?

I go in and out. For a while I worked very extensively with color. Around 2009, I took a more “monochromatic” turn, if you will. The irony of my works being labeled (and edited by myself considerably) as monochromatic, is the material qualities lending itself otherwise. Working mainly with pen ink, one is acutely aware of how susceptible to light it is. Regardless of whether I am working in black pen ink or some other color tone, the light will always reveal it as a rusty, copper-tone. I find this “surprise” element incredibly seductive, which has led me to apply the mark even deeper, darker and more solidly (as in heavily), to really get at capturing the darkness and the light simultaneously.

What drew you away from it and what role does the monochrome (black & white) play in your work?

All the attributes that lend to the beauty of a polychromatic surface are also the very detractors which cause formal problems in my skin explorations. The main obstacle being the agitated clashing of harsh color with detailed texture. With the heavily considered mark, texture is paramount to me. So, when I do introduce color into the language of this mark, it generally distracts from the geography I wish the viewer's eye to explore undeterred. Although, one of the pieces in (MAPS) utilizes color, in order for the image to work the way I wished, I had to use it sparingly.

The turn towards a monochromatic aesthetic was economical. I wanted to minimize the image to its essential impact—that of creating a space for the skin to speak for itself, and not the context of the subject's skin. This is a double-edged sword approach: in my desire to create subjects that are more than simply Black figures, I render them so graphically with detail that one cannot help but to be consumed by their Blackness. This is meant to be the initial impression, which I hope compels the viewer to investigate the subject further. In so doing, the silhouetted figures' narratives expand and suddenly a whole new experience is revealed.

Your subjects always face the viewer directly. Why is that?

I truly believe in the power of the penetrating gaze. From the beginning of my working with portraiture, I wanted the subjects I created to be active participants in staring as much as the viewer. The direct gaze, even subtly hinted at, hopefully allows for the subject to speak with equal intensity in a very base, humanistic way, as her skin speaks on a territorial level.

It’s widely accepted that in art there is a huge, uncontrollable gap between (the artist’s) intention and (the viewer’s) interpretation. What do you nevertheless hope that you are mediating to your audience?

That is the question that wracks my brain constantly. It's a tricky, near impossible question to answer, really. I mean, in all honesty, the gap between intention and interpretation is where the magic happens, I suppose; it is where the second crucial stage of art-making commences. I could go into deeply personal convictions I have about the work, but that wouldn't much influence how an outsider feels when coming into contact with the work in person. I've had scores of critiques in school where a myriad of responses to my work took place. Some were recognizable, as in somewhat parallel to my intentions for the work; however, for most of it, I was thoroughly surprised. That surprise has altered my own perceptions of the work and, at times, given me cause to seriously re-evaluate my process entirely. Either way, it is a crucial element to my development as an artist.

I assume, then, that you are a 'supporter' of the notion of public art?

Art is meant to be presented and open to a public forum, I suppose. I cannot deny the power of that kind of exposure, regardless of one's romantic notions of "art for arts sake." There is a need to make the work and it is very important that an artist know her impetus for working, for making, which is extremely important, but it is also essential for an artist to have a dialogue with the people and the times in which she exists. This took me quite some time to adjust to and swallow. I use to be very stubborn about the work being exposed in such a way. I held on tightly to Herbert Marcuse's idea of the artists being within her time and yet always separate. To create a classic, one must not always be in agreement or parallel with the time in which she exists. Nowadays, I see how I completely misread this ideology. I was so intent on having me as my artwork's main audience, its main judge. I later realized how wrong I was and how selfish and naïve such an notion sounded.

Whatever ideas I may have or choose to mediate to the viewer will be dependent on his/her interpretation. I cannot change that fact. Truthfully, I mustn't downplay the importance of my making the work and having it exist as an object in this world a la "for the sake of the work." However, I'm trying not to limit it to an idea in my head. The fact that I made it and it is a part of this world is a gift really and I should cherish it, but I shouldn't discount or run away from the life the work begins to have once it enters the arena of public consumption and discourse. Interesting things happen there and much can be learned from it. I'm slowly getting to understand that now.

There is no denial that your work is politically inclined. Do you think art can change the world?

Yes...and no. In a capitalistic system, creating objects which are a part of that system, inevitably, make it hard to pragmatically change the world. However, the beauty of art's purpose, I think, is when it can transform ideas which directly change how people enact laws, systems of commerce, etc. The strength of art lies in its capacity to evoke strong empathy. This can be utilized for good or ill, depending on who you ask. My work is political; again this is something that took me a while to adjust to. It's obvious to me now, the political angle of the work, but, for a while there, I was so intimately consumed with making the work, with creating these images which I felt needed to be created, I didn't

really stop and question how these works are perceived in the context of which they are being made. I make portraits that explore Blackness—as a conceptual, formal and decolonizing agent. This may sound rather naïve, but I began drawing in this heavily detailed and darkened style of mark-making because I wanted desperately to create images of subjects whom I could identify with—subjects who looked like how I felt about my skin, my selfhood. Essentially, I wanted to create the embodiment of what Blackness felt like to me. I wanted the blackest of the black to show full of light, not in contrast or comparison, but a lightness that is within, that is an inextricable part of it. I suppose what I'm trying to say is, I wanted to present a Black figure as something more than Other, something that is vulnerable yet dignified, strong as well as instantly fragile. I wanted to capture me: "I am not this narrative that has been written about me, flattened and archetypal, I am my own person, a land that I now wish to take back. Here, I will show you. Do not omit me or render me invisible to the night. I am here, I will not be erased or smudged out. I am as vast and wondrous as the night sky." That sort of thing. And that is very political. To demand a presence, to demand a voice, a visibility and rights to a new sort of dialogue is something that has always been there, it just took me awhile to see it for myself.

I am honored when people tell me how much the work impacts them, how connected they feel to the narratives of my subjects and it truly is heartfelt and I am most appreciative. This work came from somewhere deep within me that is very personal and to see that it speaks to a stranger in an equally, if not more, personal way, is quite overwhelming and I am honored to share that connection. The politics of the work are multifaceted (dealing with agency of womanhood and the hybrid postcolonial female identity) in a indirect way, I think. However, there is much artwork in the world that is very direct, very inspiring and impactful. There are multiple ways to create change through art, some are more intimate and personal than others. I feel my work deals with the emphasis of the individual within an essentialist collective and how best to mold one's sense of place within that vast and flattened landscape. When there is a person who can be transported by my work—just one person—that is truly awe inspiring to me. That is change, to me.

What do you think is the greatest misconception people in the West have about Africa and about African artists?

Capitalism's push towards globalization has caused nomadic, flux states to become facts of living now. More and more migrations are taking place not only between Post-Colonial and Western nation states, but within these nation states at an alarming rate. I've read that just within US recent history, it used to be that a couple generations ago people were born in a specific local and remained there for most of their lives—living, working, contributing to that place. Nowadays, that is becoming increasingly rare. People are moving around more and, in so doing, an exchange begins to take place; a transmitting of cultures and information becomes the norm and multicultural spaces begin to form. This is very exciting for a number of reasons: 1) for it allows for more visibility of minority groups in otherwise less diverse or generally homogeneous communities; 2) it allows for mixture to occur, meshing culture, language, economies, politics and the arts, to name a few, which in turn create new, thriving identities; 3) it makes the most basic human

commonalities among us more visible. To be sure, there are bad sides to this as well. I think of a resonating excerpt from Zadie Smith's White Teeth (2001):

“But it makes an immigrant laugh to hear the fears of the nationalist, scared of infection, penetration, miscegenation, when this is small fry, peanuts, compared to what the immigrant fears – dissolution, disappearance.”

This particular quote has haunted me for some time and has been my primary concern involving the misconceptions of Westernized views of Africa as a continent as well African artists specifically. There is a disappearance that happens when Africans travel across the oceans and seas into the West. We get lumped together, become a singular entity. The multitudes of identities, tongues, richness and variety, get clumped into a continental country. We are made into something Other, dark, mysterious and always, always foreign. Even in America, amongst the African American community, there is a discord, an impenetrable disconnect. It's incredibly frustrating. A Ghanian is not the same as a Somalian, nor is a Kenyan the same as a Zimbabwean. To quote another writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who brilliantly pin-pointed this problem of the Westernization of Africans in her essay, “The danger of a single story.” In it, she cuttingly illustrates this problem, which she presented in a TED lecture in 2009:

“Years later, I thought about this when I left Nigeria to go to university in the United States. I was 19. My American roommate was shocked by me. She asked where I had learned to speak English so well, and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language. She asked if she could listen to what she called my "tribal music," and was consequently very disappointed when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey. She assumed that I did not know how to use a stove.

What struck me was this: She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning, pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa. A single story of catastrophe. In this single story there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her, in any way. No possibility of feelings more complex than pity. No possibility of a connection as human equals. I must say that before I went to the U.S. I didn't consciously identify as African. But in the U.S. whenever Africa came up people turned to me. Never mind that I knew nothing about places like Namibia. But I did come to embrace this new identity. And in many ways I think of myself now as African. Although I still get quite irritable when Africa is referred to as a country. The most recent example being my otherwise wonderful flight from Lagos two days ago, in which there was an announcement on the Virgin flight about the charity work in 'India, Africa and other countries.'

Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story, and to start with, "secondly." Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have and entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story.

All of these stories make me who I am. But to insist on only these negative stories is to flatten my experience, and to overlook the many other stories that formed me. The single story creates stereotypes. And the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.

I've always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar."

In sum, the beauty of the human landscape lies in the similarities we share as human beings more so than our distinct differences. I cannot emphasize enough how important it is for us to not forget this fact, even though we get caught up in our specialized personas. As Adichie eloquently states, we are all made up of a variety of stories, each and every one of them integral to our selfhood and important to make known, to make visible. However, it is when we use this variety to separate ourselves, to create hierarchies and distance in when we create tragic circumstances for ourselves, no doubt world history has shown us. In this increasingly nomadic, flux state we are living, where everything novel and instantly enacted, to self-dislocate, seems like suicide. Sure, this all sounds very utopian in the insular, conglomerated systems in which we inhabit, but I believe it is this which contributes to the greatest misconceptions about Africans in the Western mindset: that we are one large and Other group of people who are somehow a part of the human landscape but always separate. Disappearance and reinvention of identities are fundamental processes of the human narrative; however, when only certain, very specific narratives overtake others and dominate—intentionally so through the use of power—that is when people get left behind and the human landscape, with all it variety and terrain to explore, appreciate, cultivate and share, becomes not simply more bland, but incomplete.

Where do you stand in regards to the relation between artwork and curatorial text? Do you believe that the one complements the other or rather that "good art" would not require the latter?

It depends, really. This goes back to the question I answered earlier about the need for an artist to have a public forum for her/his work, even if the audience may or may not agree with the work or see conceptually along the same lines as the artist's intentions. Supplementary text to works of art can be helpful as they can easily be detrimental. I, myself, find it very difficult to voice my work in any sort of literary way. Even to respond to these questions has taken days. I have to try and seriously consider how to translate a visual, non-finite language (and idea) with a literal one. It's a very strange process. But who I am to deny the brilliance of a keen critic or astute art historian who is able to partake in this translation. Whether the writer is spot on or not, the attempt is a triumph in an of itself, for it shows there is a possibility for artwork, which exists in a very ambiguous world, to be understood in another. If it works in the artists favor? Wonderful! If not? At least they tried. Since commencing my studies in grad school, I've become increasingly suspicious of the phrase "good art." I don't even know what that means anymore. Everything in this world is opinion based, nothing is really set in stone.

Give a person a few decades and some revised texts and lectures and you are studying an entirely new body of works.

What is it then that matters, if all is relative?

What seems to matter most is if the work resonates with a diverse group of people. The more universal the work proves itself to be, as opposed to being more esoteric and too stoically faithful to a specific time and place, the more likely it will be deemed a classic. There are aesthetic considerations, definitely, but that again can be reinterpreted and realigned with time and energy if the artist's work is deemed worthy of it. There are so many great works of art out there that we have never heard of and probably will never see. I used to fear that my work would fall under this category, so I applied to school and migrated to a center where I believed my work could reach a larger audience. I'd only hoped that with this new forum the work would find new life in the discourse and I've been very fortunate that it has. For a score of artists that doesn't happen. Whether or not their works will be accompanied with curatorial texts could bring them from the drudges of death to new life and beyond, inspiring a new generation of image-makers, is a beautiful story that only happens to a select few. Then again, there could be a well established work that can be brought down six-feet under with the slightest scribble of a writing pen or from the feverish tappings of a keyboard. With the internet everything is becoming more egalitarian. Everyone is a curator now. So the texts seem to be less important and the image itself is taking more precedence. I don't know where this shift will lead, but I'm not discounting how exciting this time is. When the appreciation of art becomes more democratic, what happens with the elitist systems of separation? I don't mind reading the texts which accompany artworks, sometimes I seek them out. But the image is the image and in the end, it should, at the very least, be granted the opportunity to stand on its own..if only for a moment, to see if it can speak for itself.

You have mentioned how you see yourself as an intersection of a self-taught and formally trained artist. Do you think that quality-wise there is a difference between self-taught and formally educated artists?

Again, it's all relative. I mean, it's all personal opinion. I have a very specific aesthetic that I'm attracted to, I am drawn to a certain mode or taste. Whether these attractions are affected by my schooling or my own personal self-development as an artist is questionable. There are trained artists from very prestigious schools who make work that is aesthetically coined “outsider art” or akin to childish scribble, and there are self-taught artists who can beautiful craft a masterpiece on par technically with a David or a Botticelli. What annoys me is when schooling takes precedence over independent student and craft. What do we do as artists? Most of it is spent alone in a studio or whichever place we choose to work, honing our skills, experimenting, expanding our technical capabilities.

So you don’t really believe in the concepts and methods of ‘art school’?

I'm not discounting the importance of a guide, a professorial hand to help us through the process, however I cannot overlook the plethora of artists who make equally (if not more)

complex and engaging work that have never stepped foot in a foundational arts class. Creative impulse is the common string that drives us regardless of our training. I think when we get caught up in entitlement, whether self-taught or specifically trained, is when problems arise. If we get set with very specific movements and aesthetics, we loose touch with variety. Like the misconception of Africans question I answered earlier, it's a limitation and it is self-inflicted to only focus on artists who are only self-taught or on the opposing side, trained. In the end both groups are making work to be be viewed to be appreciated and to ruminate on. One should not overtake the other. There is one thing that I feel is needed on both sides that I never thought of until recently, and that is the importance of reading about art. I know this is all very out of turn, especially after the response I gave just before. But I truly believe I have benefitted immensely from having access to philosophical and theory-based texts since commencing art school. It helps you understand the importance of the sources of your work. This goes back to the "art for art's sake" comment. It's all well and good to make work for the pure need to have it be made, I welcome that notion, however, one must understand why: Why are you making the work? Why is it important? Why is it important now? Why is it needed? Why does it matter? Then you can move on to the how and, in turn, the "what" comes more visible and understandable for the artist. So if the audience cannot understand the work, at the very least the artist can.

Who are your favorite artists?

There are so many! I am constantly inspired by the works of a number of artists. Namely, I have been consistently obsessed with the following: Glenn Ligon, Kerry James Marshall, Hank Willis Thomas, Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, Julie Mehretu, Roni Horn, Laylah Ali, Marlene Dumas, Amy Adler, Claudette Schreuders, Kara Walker, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Toba Khedoori, Barkley L. Hendricks, Kimsooja, Adrian Piper, Jeff Sonhouse, Mauricio Lasansky, Zhang Xiaogang, Ursula von Rydingsvard, Mark Bradford, Frida Kahlo (mainly her self portraits, not so much her dreamscapes), Robert Longo, Viviane Sassen, John Singer Sargent, and Egon Schiele.

If you could literally exhibit anywhere in the world (not even necessarily a museum/gallery), where would that be?

Japan. In a space that is meant for healing and exchange. Since I was very little, I've been utterly transfixed by Japanese culture. I really don't know where it all started or where exactly it stemmed from, but since then I've always had a soft spot for the country's unique history and people. Recent tragic events really brought that fact to me hard. If I had the opportunity to exhibit anywhere I would be honored to do so there, to help bridge a gap and create a connection. I'm not sure how I would ever do it, but if ever I was given the chance, I'd sure as hell try to make that a reality.

What do you plan on doing after you graduate?

Working in my studio. Wherever that will be is uncertain, but it needs to happen if I am to function.